



## The Need for Sexual Risk Avoidance Education: Helping Youth Flourish During Adolescence & Thrive into Adulthood

Sex education is offered in most schools across the United States but only 10% of all federal sex education funding is devoted to Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education. This approach, however, is both relevant for teens and supported by an increasing number of communities. As CDC data shows, a majority of teens have not had sex, with the numbers surging to almost 70% among ages 15-17. They deserve the knowledge and skills needed to reinforce this positive choice. SRA education is an effective approach uniquely designed to increase and sustain the positive choices teens are making now while paving the way for continued health and well-being as adults. It is important that the validity of such programs are recognized and supported in public health promotion so that communities can effectively and confidently provide them to the youth they serve.

### Scope of the Problem: It's About More Than Teen Pregnancy

Over the past twenty years, teens have chosen to avoid sex at increasing numbers. However, they continue to be inundated by a 24/7 media culture that glamorizes and normalizes teen sex as an expected rite of passage. According to the CDC, "nearly half of the 20 million new STDs each year were among young people, between the ages of 15 to 24."<sup>1</sup> This epidemic of STDs has recently increased - a concern that can have a serious impact on both the individual and society as a whole. And while teen pregnancy rates are at their lowest in recorded history, the serious possible consequences of teen sex far exceed the physical complications of pregnancy and STDs.

There are significant benefits to the individual who delays sexual debut. Most of these benefits are more difficult to be realized by teens who become sexually active, but use contraception as a risk reduction method. The research is compelling – and continues to grow – that delaying the age of sexual debut is associated with a variety of protective benefits. There is an increasingly strong and positive association between sexual initiation and other health and relational risk behaviors that often persist beyond adolescence and far into adulthood – if not for the entire span of one's life. The research does not support the argument by some that teen sexual activity is healthy

– so long as each partner consents, protection is used and no pregnancy ensues. On the contrary, research reports increasing advantages for teens the longer they wait to begin having sex, with most optimal outcomes realized for those who wait until after they are within a committed, marriage relationship. Teen sex is risky behavior. And waiting for sex, preferably until marriage, improves the prospect for positive future outcomes. Specifically, the research reveals that when teens have sex, the following results are more likely to occur, often persisting into adulthood:

- Less likely to use contraception.<sup>2</sup>
- More likely to experience STI.<sup>3</sup>
- More concurrent or lifetime partners.<sup>4</sup>
- More likely to experience pregnancy.<sup>5</sup>
- Lower educational attainment (and not necessarily linked to pregnancy.)<sup>6</sup>
- Increased sexual abuse and victimization.<sup>7</sup>
- Decreased general physical and psychological health, including depression.<sup>8</sup>
- Decreased relationship quality, stability and more likely to divorce.<sup>9</sup>
- More frequent engagement in other risk behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, and drugs.<sup>10</sup>
- More likely to participate in anti-social or delinquent behavior.<sup>11</sup>
- Less likely to exercise self efficacy and self regulation.<sup>12</sup>
- Less attachment to parents, school and faith.<sup>13</sup>
- Less financial net worth and more likely to live in poverty.<sup>14</sup>
- Early sexual behaviors set a pattern for later ones.<sup>15</sup>

And waiting for sex, preferably until marriage, appears to have the opposite result. Youth who are not sexually active are more likely to enjoy more positive outcomes than their sexually active counterparts. The research is abundantly clear that optimal health expectations move individuals closer to that goal than they would be without the information, skills and encouragement they receive to wait for sex. This is the focus of SRA educational programs. Optimal Health. For all students.

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## The Holistic and Positive Emphasis of SRA Education

The term “sexual risk avoidance” is a holistic approach that helps youth thrive and succeed. The term clarifies and better contextualizes the benefits of sexual delay in order to reflect public health priorities and emerging social science research. SRA programs inspire youth with skills to help them escape poverty and build strong future families as they also learn to avoid all the consequences of sexual activity. It empowers youth to build healthy relationships as they personalize the “success sequence”<sup>16</sup> in their own lives. In addition to the personal benefits, SRA education is:

- **Health-based rather than Faith-based.** SRA is committed to giving youth the skills they need to achieve optimal sexual health. The fact that the major world religions also value sexual restraint does not diminish the superior and proven health benefits to all youth, regardless of their faith perspective.
- **Effective.** Twenty-five research studies of SRA programs show significant behavioral changes in improving teen outcomes. Compared to their peers, students in SRA education programs are: much more likely to delay sexual initiation; if sexually active, more likely to discontinue or decrease their sexual activity; and no less likely to use a condom if they initiate sex.<sup>17</sup>
- **Realistic.** Among those teens usually targeted for sex education, (15-17 year olds), 66% of boys and 70% of girls have never had sexual intercourse, punctuating the need to reinforce sexual delay.<sup>18</sup> In the past 20 years, abstinent behavior among teen girls, aged 15-17 has increased 28%.<sup>19</sup> In the past 20 years, abstinent behavior among teen boys, aged 15-17 has even more. However, even more encouraging is that the percent of black teens who have not had sex increased 178%, but the increase for black males was 246% between 1991 and 2015.<sup>20</sup> This shows that the SRA message is a realistic message for the teens.

SRA education is driven by the science-informed reality that all youth - regardless of their sexual experience, regardless of their demography, regardless of their sexual orientation – deserve the information, skills, and compassionate encouragement toward optimal sexual health and a flourishing future.

SRA education helps youth contextualize their choices surrounding sex and other negative risk behaviors by casting a vision for their future aspirations – and then helping them realize that healthy habits today increase their chances for attaining a more optimistic future. The SRA message is optimistic, inspiring students who are currently engaged in unhealthy behaviors to make healthier choices beginning today. Changing course can make their futures brighter. This message is unique to the SRA approach and is of utmost importance as too many teens may feel that no one believes

they can succeed. In fact, the universally transferable principles taught within an SRA program reinforce the inherent dignity and value of every student by helping all teens understand:

- that avoiding sex protects their sexual health;
- how to build healthy relationships reminding them that they are defined more than merely affirmative sexual consent
- that no one deserves to be targeted or victimized by sexual violence or abuse
- the importance of setting personal boundaries and learning practical refusal skills
- that the best protection against pregnancy and STDs (including sexually-transmitted HIV) and the best opportunity for future thriving is by reserving sex for a monogamous marriage relationship.
- that irrespective of current or past realities, students who implement the success sequence in their lives greatly increase their chances for escaping or avoiding poverty and thriving as adults.
- that contraception can decrease the risk of pregnancy, but only avoiding sex can eliminate all sexual risk.

The fact that the percentage of teens who have not had sex has increased by 28% over the past two decades accentuates how relevant is the SRA approach. But independent research on SRA programs also point to their effectiveness. Compared to their peers, students who participate in successful SRA programs are more likely to wait for sex, but if they are sexually active, they have fewer partners and are no less likely to use a condom. They are also more likely to eschew other risky behaviors and excel in school. In addition to fitting within the public health priorities for best health outcomes, the holistic SRA approach is relevant and resonates with youth.

## Improving the Health of the Nation

- **Public Health Priorities.** Even today, public health risk priorities (almost) consistently focus on risk avoidance education to the broad population in order to encourage optimal health outcomes. The anti-smoking public health campaign is an apt example: “Don’t smoke – and if you do – stop.” Advertising and educational campaigns provide skills and encouragement for Americans to make the healthiest choice regarding tobacco consumption.
- **SRA Education Adopts Public Health Priorities to Sex Education.** The CDC refers to teen sex as a risk behavior for a reason. Teen sex is risky. SRA education uniquely focuses on helping teens understand the benefits of waiting for sex and helping them successfully navigate adolescence by avoiding this health risk.

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- <sup>3</sup>Scott, M., Wildsmith, E., Welti, K., Ryan, S., Schelar, E., Steward-Streng, N. (2011). Risky Adolescent Sexual Behaviors and Reproductive Health in Young Adulthood. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*. 43(2):110–118,
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