

Study shows more young people are abstaining from sex

By Hannah Boen

Posted March 4, 2011 at 10:39 p.m.

In the midst of budget cuts threatening public school sex education programs and ever-growing concern about teen pregnancy rates, there may be some good news: fewer teens and young adults are engaging in sex.

A recent study released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the percentage of people ages 15 to 24 who have never had sex is increasing.

Bill Albert, chief program officer for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, said the results of the study show that the outlook for teens concerning sex may not be as grim as people think.

"As a general matter," Albert said, "I think when parents consider teens and sex, they think things are terrible, have been getting worse for a number of years and are probably going to get much, much worse in the future."

But the most recent findings reveal that 27 percent of males and 29 percent of females between the ages of 15 and 24 reported never having any sexual contact with another person. In 2002, about 22 percent of people within the age group reported never having sexual contact.

In considering what may be responsible for the change, Albert said the possibilities are almost endless.

"Teens' decisions about sex are a complex brew," he said. "They are a mystery inside an enigma wrapped in a condom."

Although he said there is no single explanation for the decrease, he did offer a few theories.

Albert said that for years, pregnancy has seemed to be a problem only for the girl who got pregnant. As education has shifted to include risks of sexually transmitted diseases, both males and females may have chosen to be more cautious about sexual activity.

In addition, he said, education in general seems to have heightened in recent years.

"Here's the bigger picture," he said. "Americans are very practical by nature. They tend to focus on a problem, carefully consider solutions, then move on to something else. That works if it's polio. That doesn't work on teen pregnancy."

Although rates are down right now, he said the rates of sexual activity, sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancies can change if education is ignored.

"They probably will go back up again if there isn't the time, talent and money to support efforts to prevent teen pregnancy," he said. "We are living that right now."

Like many people who advocate sex education among teens, Albert said he is concerned that budget cuts will affect programs available to youths.

Administrators at the Abilene Independent School District have said that AISD's sex education program, which includes students below the age range in the CDC study, could be among programs eliminated as a result of potential funding reductions from the state, which is facing a budget shortfall of as much as \$27 billion.

However, Kay Durilla, nursing program manager for the Abilene-Taylor County Public Health District, said the agency not only provides health services to teens and young adults, but emphasizes sexual health education.

Durilla said it is impossible to know with certainty whether fewer Abilene youths are engaging in sexual activity because the local health district does not keep track of the number of people within the CDC's study age range who visit the clinic or receive treatment or testing for STDs or pregnancies.

However, she said she and her staff use a variety of measures to encourage the reduction of sexual activity among every age group, so she would not be surprised to know that such efforts are helping to reduce the number of teens having sex.

"We try to do education to tell them they need to use condoms," she said. "But we mostly say abstinence is the best measure because that's the only way to really be sure you won't get anything."

However, she said most teens and young adults who visit the agency are there to obtain birth control, or receive a pregnancy or STD test, which means many of them already have had sex or are planning to do so.

Although AISD's sex education program is instituted at the middle school level, health courses are used to achieve the same goal at the high schools, according to Cooper High School health educator Donna Wise.

Wise said she would guess that the percentage of sexually active young people in Abilene is similar to those nationally.

"The whole crux of my sex education class is abstinence-based," she said, "so I would say it's a success if less teens are having sex."

Although she recognized the percentage of young people who are abstaining from sex isn't particularly high, sex education is obviously working, she said.

"My feeling is that if we can reach one, we've done a good job," she said.

Albert said that regardless of what happens to sex education programs or what local numbers might be for teens having sex, the results of the CDC study should be encouraging.

"I think the report is good news for parents," he said, "and I hope it underscores something that is absolutely critical, and that is that parents need to talk to their kids early and often about things like relationships, sex, contraception and when and under what circumstances it is best to start a family."

Parents underestimate their influence on kids when it comes to setting an example and discussing sex, he said. Research has found that parents most influence their children's decisions about sex.

"They think they've lost their influence to peers and popular culture," he said concerning parents' attitudes toward discussing sex with their children.

"Job one is to convince parents that they really do matter."