

HHS Fact Sheet

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The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation today released the last report from the multi-year evaluation of Title V, Section 510 abstinence education programs. Begun in 1999, the study was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

Background

Title V, Section 510 programs were among the first abstinence education programs to be implemented under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Nationwide, more than 700 Title V, Section 510 programs receive up to \$50 million in federal funds annually for programs that teach abstinence from sexual activity outside of marriage.

This new report addresses one particular model for school-based abstinence education: a voluntary, character-based program – Life Skills Education – designed to enhance a mandatory core abstinence education component of the (Title V-funded) *Heritage Keepers*[®] Program serving middle and high school youth in Edgefield, South Carolina. The study examines the incremental impact of the Life Skills Education Component on youth already exposed to the other components of the *Heritage Keepers*[®] Program. It does not examine the impact of the full *Heritage Keepers*[®] Program. The study is based on a final follow-up survey conducted with 604 youth, 18 to 55 months after they began participating in the study, in three separate cohorts. It compares youth who had been randomly assigned either to a “Life Skills AE group” that was given the opportunity to participate in all three components of the *Heritage Keepers*[®] Program, or to a “control AE group” that could not participate in Life Skills Education, but were exposed to the remaining two components of the *Heritage Keepers*[®] Program.

Summary Of Major Findings

Findings indicate that the Life Skills Education Component had little or no impact on sexual abstinence or activity. Youth in the Life Skills AE group and control AE group reported similar rates of sexual abstinence, numbers of sexual partners, and ages at first sex. However, youth in the Life Skills AE group were also no more likely than their counterparts in the control AE group to have engaged in unprotected sex (sex without a condom), contrary to concerns that Title V, Section 510 programs might, through their exclusive focus on abstinence, put youth at increased risk of unprotected sex.

The Life Skills Education Component did affect certain potential mediators of teen sex, most notably expectations to abstain and views supportive of abstinence. The Life Skills Education Component also had some impact on knowledge of the risks associated with teen sex. These impacts were driven almost entirely by youth in the 2003 middle school cohort – the youngest cohort at the time of the final follow-up survey and the cohort that had most recently enrolled in

the component. Youth in this cohort averaged less than 14 years of age by the time of the final follow-up survey and were, therefore, excluded from the analyses of impacts on behavior.

The favorable impacts for the 2003 cohort raise the question of whether the Life Skills Education Component might have eventual positive impacts on sexual abstinence for these youth. Without behavioral data on these youth as they reach older ages, there is no way to answer this question, and the timeframe for this evaluation did not allow for longer term data collection for youth in this cohort.

Implications For Abstinence Education

The study highlights the importance of continued research of specific program components, such as the Life Skills Education Component, which aim to enhance the effectiveness of an underlying abstinence education program model. The report shows how programs may evolve over time, and suggests how rigorous evaluation can help programs to assess their ongoing effectiveness and make possible improvements.

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