



Eye on Culture



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Sex, Lies and Bias

The media assault on abstinence education.

By Kristen Fyfe

The Left does not like abstinence education. And what the Left doesn't like, the media don't like either.

That's why, despite ample evidence that abstaining from sex until marriage is one of the most responsible decisions a teenager or young adult can make, the media go out of their way to discredit abstinence programs.

In a review of coverage by major newspapers, broadcast and cable news over the past 11 months, The Culture and Media Institute has found that the media, both news and entertainment, have attacked abstinence education repeatedly.

More than 200 stories in major newspapers and on cable and broadcast news programs have reported questionable information about the supposed failures of abstinence education programs while ignoring reliable data that support the programs.

The networks' entertainment divisions have helped promote an anti-abstinence message. Prime time television programs have long promoted casual sex. A recent study by the [Parents Television Council](#)¹ showed sexual content on broadcast prime time television increased 22 percent in the last six years. During the Fall 2007 season, however, ABC and CBS's 'entertainment' divisions have taken direct shots at abstinence education:

¹ PTC Study: Broadcast TV Family Hour Fare Filthier Than Ever,
<http://www.parentstv.org/PTC/publications/reports/familyhour/exsummary.asp>

- The October 9 episode of ABC's *Boston Legal* featured a storyline in which an HIV-positive teen sues her high school because she was taught in her abstinence-only sex ed class that condoms were ineffective, so she didn't use them.
- On September 30, CBS's *Cold Case* featured Bible-quoting teens in an abstinence club who turn out to be sexually active hypocrites. The club members try to keep their sins secret by stoning a girl to death. The episode also strongly suggests that abstinence-only education keeps kids ignorant about sexual issues, and committing to abstinence can even harm them. For example, the group's leader eventually marries but is unable to consummate her union.

Taking Their Shots

The news media don't denounce abstinence in such graphic terms – they can't – but they are on board with the progressive agenda to get rid of it. The attacks have coincided throughout the last year with debates on Capitol Hill about funding for abstinence education, also called Title V.

The first salvos were fired last December when the Guttmacher Institute, a sexual issues think tank with ties to Planned Parenthood, released a study that said the vast majority of Americans have sex before they are married. In reporting the story, both Associated Press (December 19) and UPI (December 20) quoted study author Lawrence Finer saying the study's findings call “into question the federal government's funding of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.”

In a December 19 report on the study's findings, [USA Today](#) quoted Heritage Foundation fellow Pat Fagan, who rightly predicted that “a major congressional battle...to get rid of abstinence funding” was coming in January when the Democrats took control of Congress.

To NBC, the idea of sexual purity is apparently controversial. On March 16, NBC's *Today Show* ran a segment on the Purity Ball Movement. While the piece was reported fairly, the producers chose to slap a graphic reading “Controversy” over the story

The real media barrage against abstinence education came in April, when Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. released a flawed study claiming that abstinence education did not have a significant impact on teen sexual behavior. The federally funded Mathematica study was covered coast-to-coast by major newspapers:

- April 14 *Washington Post*: Study Casts Doubt on Abstinence-Only Programs
- April 14 Associated Press: Study: Abstinence Programs No Guarantee
- April 16 *USA Today*: Abstinence Teaching Ineffective
- April 16 *New York Times*: Abstinence Classes are Found Ineffective

Broadcasters weighed in, too. ABC *World News* anchor Charles Gibson reported on April 13 that the study was “raising doubts about the effectiveness of government-funded programs promoting abstinence until marriage.” ABC’s *Good Morning America*, CNN, and National Public Radio ran similar stories.

Despite giving the Mathematica study heavy coverage, the mainstream media failed to report its significant flaws:

- The study looked at only four programs, all obscure.
- In those programs, the teaching of abstinence ended in middle school, rather than being reinforced in high school, when it really counts.
- All four programs were designed in the early days of abstinence education. The programs do not reflect current curricula, which have matured significantly.

The media also failed to consult pro-abstinence experts, such as the National Abstinence Clearinghouse, though they did seek comment from representatives of the far-left Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, which opposes abstinence education and promotes “comprehensive” sex education. SIECUS was launched by the Kinsey Institute and Planned Parenthood in 1964 to promote acceptance of all forms of sexuality, including child sexuality.

While trumpeting the Mathematica study, the liberal media consistently refused to report about research supporting abstinence education. A Nexis search revealed the mainstream media ignored the March 2007 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services “[Abstinence Education Evaluation Conference](#)”², which assessed 10 peer-reviewed studies of abstinence-only programs. Nine of these studies found abstinence-only programs to be effective in delaying sexual activity. The media also ignored the Institute for Research and Evaluation’s June 2007 report rebutting the Mathematica study. IRE cited studies finding that abstinence education

²Conference compendium, 2007 Abstinence Education Evaluation Conference, http://www.abstinence.net/pdf/contentmgmt/2007_Abstinence_Education_Evaluation_Conference_Compndium.pdf

programs “can reduce teen sexual activity by as much as one half for periods of one to two years.”³

Mathematica released its study shortly before Congress was due to vote on funding for Title V abstinence education. In June, the Senate Appropriations Committee cut abstinence funding for the first time in five years.

The House took up abstinence funding in July. Interestingly, the [10th Anniversary Children’s Report](#)⁴, a compilation of findings from more than 20 federal agencies issued by the National Center for Health Statistics, came out just days before the House debate. The media happily reported one finding from the report—that condom use was up for teens having sex. More significantly, however, the report showed a measurable drop in the number of teens having sex. In reporting that finding, liberal media outlets did not use the word “abstinence” or “abstaining.” Not CNN. Not the Associated Press. Not *The New York Times*. Not *USA Today*. Not MSNBC/*Newsweek*.

On July 18, the day the House held its debate, *The New York Times* carried a feature on abstinence programs in Texas under the headline “Abstinence Education Faces an Uncertain Future.”

Ignoring the SCHIP Bill’s Trojan Horse

And then came SCHIP, the State Children’s Health Insurance Program, which has been all over the news—more than 800 stories in major newspapers, broadcast and cable new programs over the last eleven months.

The original House version of the SCHIP bill, which received press coverage in August, would have allowed states to divert funds earmarked for abstinence education to “additional methods” of pregnancy prevention education—in effect, a state could kill abstinence education. This Trojan horse provision was completely unreported by the liberal press, despite a press release put out by Rep. Terry Everett (R-Alabama) on August 6. Only conservative organizations like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council and press outlets like *The Washington Times* (“Bill’s loophole upsets abstinence program backers,” August 11, 2007) raised this issue.

³ “Abstinence” or “Comprehensive” Sex Education, The Institute for Research and Evaluation, Salt Lake City, Utah, June 8, 2007, http://www.lifesite.net/ldn/2007_docs/CompSexEd.pdf

⁴Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. “America’s Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2007,” Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, July 2007. http://childstats.gov/pdf/ac2007/ac_07.pdf

While remaining silent on SCHIP's implications for abstinence education, the liberal media engaged in pro-SCHIP demagoguery, parading sick children through their storylines and casting President George W. Bush as an anti-child villain for opposing the bill.

Congress eventually passed the SCHIP bill, which President Bush vetoed on October 3. The vetoed version of the bill did not contain the provision threatening abstinence education. However, anti-abstinence language may be reinserted in the bill in future negotiations between the White House and Congress.

And while Title V funding has been extended just until the end of the year through a bill passed on Sept. 28, its future is far from certain. Rep. Charles Rangel (D-New York) is on record saying he wants abstinence funding opened up to include comprehensive sex education (light on abstinence, heavy on contraception), the preferred curriculum of Planned Parenthood and SIECUS.

Piling On, Entertainment Style

Which brings the circle back to prime time television. Two days after Congress passed the extension for Title V funding, the storyline on *Cold Case* centered on Bible-quoting teens in an abstinence club who were in reality sexually active, murdering hypocrites. The gratuitous slaps at abstinence-only education began in the opening scene, which featured a high school "health" teacher telling her class, "Now if school policy allowed me to do so, I would tell you how these methods of birth control can be used and what they do. But I cannot. I would be fired."

Less than two weeks later, ABC added its voice to the chorus with the *Boston Legal* episode about the litigious HIV-positive girl. In the trial scene everyone touts the virtues of condoms and blames Christian "activists" for her condition.

The media have been in lockstep with opponents of abstinence education over the past year. With funding for Title V very much in jeopardy, Americans can expect more of the same in the weeks and months ahead.

The liberals don't like abstinence education. And what the liberals don't like, the media won't cover fairly.

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