

What is Abstinence Education?

Abstinence education teaches teens that abstinence from sex until marriage is the healthiest choice to make at this point in their lives.

Abstinence education is a much more complex message than "Just Say No!" Founded on medically accurate information, it teaches teens facts and skills to help them remain abstinent or choose renewed abstinence. Classroom lessons teach about the range of consequences of sex that impact teens physically, socially, emotionally and financially. In addition to discussions on the short and long term consequences of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), abstinence education focuses on healthy relationships and how to be involved in romantic relationships without having sex. With a focus on choosing a healthy life, students learn about goal setting, effective communication, healthy decision-making, boundary setting and refusal skills.

Abstinence education supports parents, who are the primary influence on adolescents and their choices about sex. Programs for parents present strategies for talking with their teens about sexual decision-making. Special speakers, teen drama and dance groups, and youth development activities are important aspects of the program for both teens and parents. Media campaigns of TV and radio ads also have reinforced the abstinence message that youth receive in the classroom.

Targeting youth aged 12-18 and their parents, abstinence education is benefiting Arizona teens, parents and their communities. Arizona teen birth rates continue to drop, and based on a 2004 report from the Center for Disease Control, fewer teens nationwide are having sex.

Abstinence education has been around for many years; however, federal funding became available to Arizona from the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, known as the Title V program. State monies further match this federal program. The Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS) has managed the federally funded Abstinence Education program in Arizona since 1998 through contracts with public and private agencies. Curricula are approved by ADHS, and an independent research firm has evaluated the program.

Abstinence education (federal term) is also known as abstinence till marriage (ATM), or abstinence only education. They do not promote condom use and are distinguished from abstinence based, abstinence plus or comprehensive sex education. These other sex education approaches have less content about abstinence and also promote condom use. Arizona Partners for Abstinence Education (APAE) is grateful to the Arizona Legislature, the Arizona Department of Health Services, dedicated agencies, abstinence educators, school administrators and staff, and parents who work hard to bring abstinence education to our communities.