**Abstinence Education in Elementary School**

As a mother of three nearly grown children, I have had many occasions to put my sex education teaching theories to the test. Over time, my own parenting experiences and continual professional education have altered many of these theories, but one of them has only grown stronger over the years: That the only way to keep our children truly safe from the consequences of premarital sexual activity is to promote abstinence until marriage as a personal lifestyle.

Personal lifestyles are just that—personal. So it’s no surprise that sex education has been hotly debated in public schools for decades. The debate really began to sizzle in 1996, when the first federal funding for abstinence education was allocated. How should a principal approach the debate on this vital topic that generates so much controversy?

I believe schools should deal with sex education in a manner similar to that in dealing with other health risks. (In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention counts teen sex as an indicator in its biannual Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System.)

In drug education classes, students learn that taking illegal drugs in any form is a danger to be avoided. Nutrition education teaches kids to eat the healthiest foods. Even young students are taught the importance of exercise to prevent obesity and heart disease. So why shouldn’t we include in sex education programs the message that delaying sex until marriage with an uninfected partner is the highest standard for sexual health?

**Start in Kindergarten**

Abstinence education should begin in kindergarten by teaching trust, honesty, respect, fairness, kindness, and patience—character traits that are necessary to delay gratification, honor others, and resist high-risk behaviors. Building within the school a community culture in which all personnel—from administration to maintenance staff—models these vital character-building blocks is crucial.

What is the next step in teaching sexual behavior to elementary students? Keeping in mind that most preteens have an inherent modesty and innocence, sexuality education of any kind must be approached carefully. Fifth grade is a good time to begin teaching about the physical, emotional, and social changes associated with puberty. It is a time when children are naturally curious and ask questions freely.

As important as teachers are at this point, we know from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and other studies that parents are the most important influence in their children’s decisions about sex. So it is vital to include a parent education component in all abstinence education efforts.

**Defining Sexual Behavior**

An intensely personal issue that I would be remiss in not mentioning to elementary school principals is the behavior of oral sex. A 2002 study in the *American Journal of Health Behaviors* found that one of every six 12- to 15-year-old students had tried oral sex. Many principals, parents, and children are unaware that sexually transmitted diseases are spread via oral sex. Furthermore, my experience has shown that most 12- to 15-year-old children do not engage in this type of behavior without coercion or force, and that the emotional devastation that can be a product of forced or consensual sexual behaviors at such a young age cannot be overestimated. That is why it is so important to teach students as early as the fifth grade that the term “sex” means all sexual behaviors, not just vaginal intercourse. This underscores the vital need to include abstinence in all teachings of sexual behavior.

Abstinence education is a combination of subjects, including healthy character formation, healthy relationships, benefits of marriage and, for some, the physical, emotional, social, and...spiritual consequences of sex outside of marriage.”

Linda Klepacki is manager of abstinence policy at Focus on the Family. Her e-mail address is klepaclm@fotf.org.

**Here’s Your Chance to Speak Out**

You just read an article by an authority on sexuality education for programs in elementary schools. She advocates abstinence as a personal lifestyle that will protect children from the consequences of premarital sexual activity. Do you believe this? Does your health education program include abstinence? Let’s have your thoughts and comments at www.naesp.org/speakingout/.