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Changes in Formal Sex Education: 1995-2002

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CONTEXT: Although comprehensive sex education is broadly supported by health professionals, funding for abstinence-only education has increased.

METHODS: Using data from the 1995 National Survey of Adolescent Males, the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and the 2002 NSFG, changes in male and female adolescents' reports of the sex education they have received from formal sources were examined. Life-table methods were used to measure the timing of instruction, and t tests were used for changes over time.

RESULTS: From 1995 to 2002, reports of formal instruction about birth control methods declined among both genders (males, from 81% to 66%; females, from 87% to 70%). This, combined with increases in reports of abstinence education among males (from 74% to 83%), resulted in a lower proportion of teenagers' overall receiving formal instruction about both abstinence and birth control methods (males, 65% to 59%; females, 84% to 65%), and a higher proportion of teenagers' receiving instruction only about abstinence (males, 9% to 24%; females, 8% to 21%). Teenagers in 2002 had received abstinence education about two years earlier (median age, 11.4 for males, 11.8 for females) than they had received birth control instruction (median age, 13.5 for both males and females). Among sexually experienced adolescents, 62% of females and 54% of males had received instruction about birth control methods prior to first sex.

CONCLUSIONS: A substantial retreat from formal instruction about birth control methods has left increasing proportions of adolescents receiving only abstinence education. Efforts are needed to expand teenagers' access to medically accurate and comprehensive reproductive health information.

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