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News Release

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Formal Virginity Pledges Don't Reduce Teen Sexual Activity, Study Shows

But private promises to oneself can be effective

BERKELEY, CA -- Adolescents who take public virginity pledges are no less likely to engage in various forms of sexual activity than adolescents who do not take these pledges, a recent study of teen behavior found. The study, carried out by the Prevention Research Center of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in Berkeley, California, was based on a survey of 870 12- to 16-year-olds in the San Francisco and Los Angeles areas of California, with follow-up surveys six months and one year later. The results of the study are reported in the May issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

“Programs that attempt to promote abstinence among teens should focus on the personal beliefs of the young people and help them to understand and believe that they will benefit from delaying

(more)

sex,” said Melina Bersamin, the study author. “This can increase the likelihood that they will make a personal commitment – which seems to be more important than making a public pledge.”

The survey respondents were asked: “Have you ever taken a public pledge (written or spoken) to wait to have sexual intercourse until you are married?” Seventeen percent of the young people surveyed reported they had made a formal, public pledge while 74 percent of the respondents had made a private virginity pledge; that is, made a promise to themselves to wait to have sexual intercourse until they were older and/or married. Ninety-five percent of the respondents who had made a formal public pledge had also made a private pledge, but only 23 percent of those who had made a private pledge had also made a formal public pledge.

When the study authors controlled for other relevant variables, they found those young people who had made a formal virginity pledge were just as likely to start engaging in sexual behaviors as those who had not made a formal pledge. On the other hand, the young people who had made an informal promise or commitment to themselves to wait to have sexual intercourse until they were older were less likely to start sexual activities such as oral sex and sexual intercourse during the one-year period covered by the survey.

Study authors suggested that formal pledges may be successful if they strengthen teens’ personal commitment to wait to engage in sexual behavior. Formal pledges may fail if adolescents are simply responding to external pressures, for example, from parents or teachers. Private pledges, resulting from the adolescent’s personal beliefs, are more likely to withstand external pressures from peers.

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