

Contributing writer Dawn Eden sheds light on the truth of abstinence data reporting

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Contributing writer Dawn Eden is author of [The Thrill of the Chaste: Finding Fulfillment While Keeping Your Clothes On](#) (Thomas Nelson) and an internationally recognized speaker on chastity. During the past year, her writings on culture-of-life issues, faith, and popular culture have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Sunday Times* of London, the *National Post* of Canada, and *First Things*.

H.G. Wells once observed, in light of media pronouncements by “expert” economists, that to style oneself as an expert is “proper enough in a hairdresser or a fashionable physician, but indecent in a philosopher or a man of science.” More than a century later, the cult of the expert retains its hold over the newsroom—and never more so than in coverage of abstinence-education programs. With their vigorous efforts to put forth a crew of experts whose mainstream-media credibility far exceeds those of abstinence advocates, Planned Parenthood, SIECUS, and their allies effectively control the debate. Planned Parenthood’s experts earn particular respect because in the newsroom—where, according to [a 2005 Annenberg Public Policy Center survey](#), self-identified liberals outnumber conservatives 3-to-1—Margaret Sanger’s organization is not seen as being ideologically driven. Rather, the vast majority of reporters and editors see abortion as a fundamental right. Because of that inherent bias—so ingrained in them that they see it as “the way of the world” rather than an ideology in itself—members of the media accept unquestioningly Planned Parenthood’s claim to being a “reproductive rights” advocate whose sole interest is the public health. Those who oppose the organization are thereby seen as uncaring ideologues wishing to force their narrow, religiously-based views on the population at large.

In fact, Planned Parenthood's own views, as expressed in its ["White Paper" on "Adolescent Sexuality,"](#) prove to be every bit as subjective as the most faith-based arguments of the so-called religious right, and far outside the American mainstream.

The “White Paper” notes that “[t]he initiation of sexual intercourse during adolescence is a recognized pattern of behavior in the U.S.” This is known as the “everybody’s doing it,” or “50 Million Elvis Fans Can’t Be Wrong,” school of psychology. Several paragraphs further into the report, some sort of switch goes off in PP’s anonymous author’s head, and the organization's real agenda emerges (emphasis theirs): “One of the most misguided and destructive messages that endangers adolescent health and life during this age of AIDS emanates from a vocal minority bent on suppressing or willfully ignoring the truth about sexual activity among adolescents in America. Under the guise of protecting our youth they declare, inaccurately, that premarital sex among adolescents is a relatively new and corrupt social phenomenon. They are not content to teach the benefits of delaying intercourse as one element of reasonable, responsible, and medically accurate sexuality education curricula. They say that society should tolerate no sexual



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1413 K Street NW
Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
Tel: 202-289-2500
Fax: 202-289-2502
info@culture-of-life.org
www.culture-of-life.org

activity among adolescents."

That leads to the heart of Planned Parenthood's message (in the author's cloying bold type again): "We believe that those who seek to legislate or otherwise compel abstinence-only sexuality education, and who uniformly condemn, on so-called 'moral' grounds, all adolescent sexual activity—and, indeed, any non-marital, non-procreative sexual activity at any age—have ceded the moral ground by denying the realities of adolescent development, basic human needs and behavior, and healthy sexual expression."

Note the aside about "indeed, any non-marital, non-procreative sexual activity at any age."

At *any* age? At age 4? With an adult? Planned Parenthood's author doesn't say. The paper simply leaves the suggestion dangling and continues complaining of Planned Parenthood's opponents' "ahistorical, fear-ridden, repressive approach." As blogger Jeff Miller (The Curt Jester) [observes](#), "PP seems to have no problems with providing us with measurements along the way of the slippery slope. What was laughed at yesterday as an outrageous claim now becomes a white paper hawking adolescent sex. There are no boundaries since boundaries would come under the heading as they put it 'so-called "moral[s]"' Yes, now even the word 'moral' gets scare quotes."* * *While the pro-life blogosphere is well aware of the biases of Planned Parenthood and its allies, the mainstream media's seemingly willful ignorance may be seen in its response to the release last November of "Emerging Answers 2007." That study, funded by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, found "no strong evidence" for the effectiveness of abstinence education. Twice within the first three paragraphs of its story on "Emerging Answers," the Associated Press referred to the study's sponsor as a "nonpartisan group"—implying a lack of a political agenda. Absent from the AP story and from all mainstream-media coverage of the study was the fact that the National Campaign's board of directors includes Dr. Vanessa Cullins, vice president of medical affairs for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. It also includes numerous past and present Planned Parenthood supporters, such as Sara Seims, director of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Population Program, which has given millions to PPFA as well as the International Planned Parenthood Federation. Not a single board member of the campaign represents a pro-life advocacy group. Only in the tenth paragraph of the AP account of "Emerging Answers" could readers gain a hint of the National Campaign's bias: ETR Associates, which employs study author Douglas Kirby, "developed and markets several of the sex education curricula reviewed in the report." The article then went on to acknowledge that "[s]everal of the previous studies that were reviewed [in 'Emerging Answers'] also were written by Kirby." Given the mainstream media's track record, it is hard to believe that such obvious conflicts of interest would have been so buried had the story been about a study showing that abstinence education is effective.

Indeed, such a study was released only one week after "Emerging Answers." It was conducted by Dr. Stan Weed, who is on the Effective Programs and Research Task Force, which reviewed "Emerging Answers" in early 2007. As Ruben Obregon of the pro-life No Room for Contraception Web site noted, "Being on this task force



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should give Dr. Weed an equal standing and equal credibility in the media. After all, if he wasn't a credible researcher, he wouldn't be on the task force along with Dr. John Santelli, who is the Department Chair of the Population and Family Health department at Columbia University, would he?"

Apparently not, judging by the AP's silence on Weed's study. The report, now available in the January/February 2008 issue of the *American Journal of Health Behavior*, tracked the behavior of seventh-graders in five different Virginia schools, concluding that those students receiving abstinence education were about one-half (45.7%) as likely to initiate sexual activity as students who did not receive abstinence education. Neither is Weed's study the first promising peer-reviewed study of an abstinence-education program to escape mainstream notice. University of Virginia sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox Ph.D. of the University of Virginia, in his as-yet unpublished "Scientific Review of Abstinence and Abstinence Programs," identifies nine credible peer-reviewed articles and one unpublished study indicating that particular abstinence education programs or initiatives connected to public schools have positively influenced teenagers' sexual behavior. Such successes of abstinence education may yet make it onto the nightly news. For that to happen, however, parents who support such programs will need to convince reporters and editors that they represent mainstream values, while Planned Parenthood and its allies, for all their talk of "reproductive rights," represent an ideology that jeopardizes the next generation's health. As G.K. Chesterton wrote in his 1905 classic *Heretics*—after quoting H.G. Wells' observation on "experts"—"The modern man says ... 'Neither in religion nor morality, my friend, lie the hopes of the race, but in education.' This, clearly expressed, means, 'We cannot decide what is good, but let us give it to our children.'"* * *

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