

Abstinence Education Yields Poor Results

By PEGGY DREXLER

THE NEWLY PUBLISHED RESULTS OF A CONGRESS-sponsored study on abstinence-only sex education prove once again the delusional power of faith over fact. Pushed by the religious right, the federal government spent more than a billion dollars on public school abstinence programs, only to find out (are you sitting down?) kids don't listen.

The fact that the almost 10-year study of 2,000 diverse adolescents found no connection between abstinence education and teen sex habits is yet another life lesson for an administration that remains convinced that if you're unhappy with the rain, you can demand sunshine.

It's the very same lesson, I'm afraid, being ignored in the rapid spread of purity balls, where the contest between fact and faith may be taking a darker turn.

Purity balls are formal events — usually black tie for the fathers and gowns for the daughters. In elaborate and solemn ceremonies, the daughter signs a pledge to her father to stay a virgin until marriage. The father, in turn, pledges to defend her purity until he gives her away to her husband. Since the father's pledge often includes the crossing of swords, it's presumed he will patrol the ramparts with vigor. Many of the girls are in their teens, some in their 20s, some as young as 10.

This is prime time for fathers and daughters. As girls rush onto the playing fields and into corporate jobs, dad's job description has gone from distant protector to active participant — coach, mentor, buddy, confidant.

But keeper of her virginity? As a psychologist, I see problems that go well beyond the futility of dismissing history and hormones.

I know how closely a woman's sexuality can be entwined with her relationship with her father — with both healthy and harmful results. So when that sexuality crosses wires with a personal pledge to dad to have sex on his timetable and by his rules, you don't have to listen too hard to hear the crackling of conflicting and confusing emotions.

That is especially true when the daughter fails to keep the pledge, which studies show that very few do. In the most comprehensive study of its kind to date, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that more than half of the young women who take the pledge end up having sex within three years. Close to 90 per cent have sex before marriage. Disturbingly, the study also shows a higher incidence of sexually transmitted diseases in communities of pledgers — since it appears that not carrying condoms provides an emotional escape clause: "This was just an accident." Unfortunately, accidents include pregnancy and disease.

It's a setup. When a daughter falls for a man she loves and wants to please, guilt is added to an already boiling mix of emotions. Fears of disappointment become feelings of betrayal. Greatly increasing the odds of failure is the fact that adolescence is a time of rebellion and black and white thinking. The very natural inclination is to do the exact opposite of what parents say. Hard and fast rules, at this age, are doomed to be broken.

There is an almost biblically patriarchal aspect to all of this. First, the father claims dominion over his daughter's sexuality. Then he conveys those rights of ownership to a new husband. Isn't there someone missing in this transaction? When a woman becomes simply a passenger in her own journey of sexual discovery, it robs her of a basic human right in the transition to adulthood. At the very least, her passage becomes strewn with unnecessary conflict and complication.

The emotional bond between father and daughter is a wondrous, complex and powerful thing. When you impose that bond on blossoming female sexuality, there can be consequences that last a lifetime. Treating her as daddy's little girl in this most personal of decisions risks making her daddy's little girl forever — unable to sort out her own wants and needs from those of the men in her life.

There are lines all fathers should approach with the greatest of care. When you stand there amid candlelight and white roses in your impressive tuxedo, to extract a pledge she lovingly gives, but may not be able to keep, you are coming down squarely on this line in your shiny black shoes.

Tread carefully, dad. This is potent stuff.

Dr. Peggy Drexler is a research psychologist who has spent a career studying gender and is currently interviewing women for a book on fathers and daughters. She and her family live in Manahattan and Menemsha.