

# What Works Clearinghouse



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## WWC Quick Review of the Report “Efficacy of a Theory-Based Abstinence-Only Intervention Over 24 Months”<sup>1</sup>

### What is this study about?

The study examined whether a theory-based abstinence-only education program could reduce sexual behavior over a 24-month follow-up period.

The study recruited sixth- and seventh-grade volunteers from four public middle schools serving low-income African-American communities in a city in the northeastern United States.

The study authors randomly assigned 134 students to an abstinence-only education program and 134 to a general health promotion program targeting health issues unrelated to sexual behavior. Similar numbers of students were assigned to three other sex education intervention conditions (not discussed here).

The primary outcome—whether the student had ever had sexual intercourse—was measured with a survey at the conclusion of the 24-month follow-up period. Other sexual behaviors were measured with five follow-up surveys, spanning the 24-month period.

Effects were estimated by comparing outcomes of students in the abstinence-only education program to those of students in the general health promotion program.

### WWC Rating

***The research described in this report is consistent with WWC evidence standards.***

**Strengths:** This is a well-implemented randomized controlled trial.

**Cautions:** Estimating effects on multiple outcomes increases the possibility that some results may be found to be statistically significant by chance. The authors do not adjust for this possibility in their analysis.

### Features of Theory-Based Abstinence-Only Education

Eight hours of instruction over two Saturday sessions

Designed to increase students’ knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases, strengthen beliefs that abstinence can prevent pregnancy and diseases and foster goal attainment, and increase skills to resist pressure to have sex

Not designed to meet federal criteria for abstinence-only programs; focus on abstaining from intercourse until more prepared to handle its consequences rather than abstaining until marriage

Did not contain inaccurate information, portray sex negatively, or discredit the efficacy of condoms

### What did the study authors report

Of the students who had not had intercourse prior to the intervention, 49% of students in the general health promotion group reported that they had intercourse by the 24-month follow-up, compared with 34% in the abstinence-only group, a statistically significant reduction of more than 30%.

Among all participants, fewer students in the abstinence-only group (21%) than in the health-promotion group (29%) reported having sexual intercourse in the past three months; this difference was statistically significant. There were no statistically significant differences in the reports of having multiple partners or having unprotected sex between these two groups.

<sup>1</sup> Jemmott III, J. B., Jemmott, L. S., & Fong G. T. (February 2010). Efficacy of a theory-based abstinence-only intervention over 24 Months: A randomized controlled trial with young adolescents. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 164(2), 152–159.