

Our View: Improve sex education

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— It's never been surprising news, nor will it ever be that a good share of teens have sex.

The 2007 Minnesota Student Survey results back that up, citing that 45 percent of males in grade 12 and 46 percent of females in grade 12 in the Mankato school district said they've had sexual intercourse.

A new study released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last week should cause parents and educators to open their eyes even wider.

At least one in four teenage girls has a sexually transmitted disease.

And yes, that means they're having sex. Unprotected sex. And that means abstinence-based sex education, which many school districts teach, including Mankato's, is obviously not doing the job. In Mankato 32 percent of female 12th-graders who said they are sexually active said they rarely or never use a condom.

Teaching abstinence is not a bad thing. But it doesn't anticipate real behavior of many teenagers and it is only part of the big picture when it comes to discussing choices.

There's no ignoring the fact some teens think if they avoid intercourse and choose to participate in sexual touching or oral sex instead, then they are playing it safe.

The CDC study found the most common sexually transmitted disease, one that can be spread through skin-to-skin contact or oral sex, is the human papillomavirus. HPV can cause cervical cancer and is the second most common cause of infertility. Many STDs have no symptoms, complicating the detection and delaying treatment.

This new information should jump start all parents to discuss immunizing their daughters against HPV. The new vaccine isn't an endorsement for girls to have sex; it's protecting them from the possibility of not suffering serious or deadly consequences because they may make what is obviously a fairly common teenage decision as revealed by the CDC study.

Sex education needs to start early and be more thorough, and parents play a crucial role. A 2007 report on programs to reduce teen pregnancy and STDs says, "There is increasing evidence that programs for parents of adolescents can lead to greater parent-teen communication about sexual behavior and to actual changes in adolescent sexual behavior, especially if the adolescents are also involved in the programs."

That's why programs for parents about sexual development and behavior offered by Mankato's Council for Health Action and Promotion are so important.

The same 2007 report, done by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and funded by the CDC, says more than 80 percent of U.S. adults believe comprehensive sex education programs, which emphasize abstinence but also encourage condom and contraceptive use, should be implemented in schools.

Along with parents and schools, the medical community needs to take a part in teaching youth about sexuality. Medical experts should share their knowledge about sexual development and the consequences of risky sexual behavior just as they teach young patients about nutrition and exercise. The American Academy of Pediatrics supports confidential teen screening, which would allow doctors to test teens for STDs.

Many parents, of course, like to think their children will make smart, safe decisions when it comes to sexual behavior. But there are many factors that determine why teens act the way they do, and this newest study is solid proof that risky behavior is taking its toll on our youth.

Unless parents, educators and the health-care community take an active role in offering teens comprehensive information, it's not likely the figures in the next survey are going to improve.