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Last month, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) announced that the teenage birth rate, which has edged downward every year since 1991, now stands at its lowest level in 60 years.

No, this is not simply the result of more contraceptives and more abortions. The CDC also reports a 28 percent decrease in teen abortions during the '90s, and a 9 percent decrease in teen pregnancy. "Teenagers frankly are more conservative sexually," says Bill Albert, spokesman for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Most significant of all, more teens are simply avoiding sexual activity altogether. Data from the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey show the proportion of high school males who have had sexual intercourse declined from 57.4 percent in 1991 to 52.2 percent in 1999. Among girls, the decline was from 50.8 percent to 47.7 percent. Overall, a majority of U.S. high school students are now virgins, and very large majorities are currently abstinent.

"Abstinence has exploded over the last ten years," says Peter Brandt of Focus on the Family. Numerous formal programs to teach abstinence to teens have sprouted since Congress established a small office to support such efforts at the same time it passed welfare reform. More than 80 percent of all school districts now require their sex education programs to emphasize abstinence. Fully a third require abstinence-only programs. Only 14 percent of all school districts now pre-

sent "safe sex" contraception-centered programs.

Abstinence education can succeed with even the most difficult teen populations. Elayne Bennett's "Best Friends" program—which was launched in inner-city Washington, D.C. public schools with very high poverty rates and very low rates of intact families—has shown that 40-50 percent of the sexually active girls who enter its doors discontinue their activity. Sexual abuse levels are also reduced by about two-thirds during the year, and drug use is cut in half.

A 1999 report, "The Declines in Adolescent Pregnancy, Abortion, and Birth Rates in the 1990s: What Factors are Responsible?," commissioned by the Consortium of State Physicians Resource Councils, representing doctors in 13 states, found that the decade's improvements cannot be credited to increased contraceptive use. Among teens who *are* sexually active, the study found, out-of-wedlock births and other problems actually

continued to rise. Our overall national progress, the authors suggest, is accounted for in largest measure by a 12-fold increase in the number of teens reached by abstinence education.

Indeed, the massive National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health reveals the two most important influences on teenage decisions about sexual behavior today are (1) "a virginity pledge" of the sort many abstinence programs now encourage, and (2) "perceived parent disapproval of adolescent contraception." So maybe teenagers aren't as untamable as fruit flies after all.

MORE THAN ONE CHOICE

"More than one choice" is the unofficial mantra of Feminists for Life (FFL). It brings to mind slogans early feminists employed to win the vote for women, and refers particularly to FFL's College Outreach Program, which provides pregnant college women—who procure roughly 200,000 abortions per year (a fifth of the national total)—the resources to choose life.

Feminists for Life hopes to tell anyone who will listen—in the most cooperative, conciliatory way possible—that not all choices are equal, that the "pro-choice" mentality (in which the "choice" is frequently abortion) does not genuinely affirm womanhood. Present-day feminists often assert that a woman should have control over her own body. Yet the decision to abort is, more often than not, about deferring to others' wishes, especially those of a boyfriend or parent(s).



The influence of college on women's abortion views is reflected in a 1996 Gallup poll:

- 47 percent of high school women are pro-life, versus 37 percent who are pro-choice.
- 59 percent of women who have attended but not completed college are pro-choice.
- 73 percent of women who have completed college are pro-choice.

The College Outreach Program provides college women with life-affirming resources, including "Pregnancy Resource Forums" which assess university resources for on-campus housing and child care, maternity coverage in student health care plans, free help at pregnancy care centers, and paternity establishment. The program also offers communications tools—compelling speakers, publications, and advertisements.

Operating on a budget one-thirtieth the size of Planned Parenthood's own college outreach program, or roughly \$1 per abortion performed on college-aged women, Feminists for Life gamely soldiers on in the fight to win yet another basic right for women.

—Mary Claire Kendall is a writer living in Bethesda, Maryland.