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# Postponing Sexual Involvement

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SENIOR SEMINAR  
RESEARCH  
PROJECT

POSTPONING  
SEXUAL  
INVOLVEMENT

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Fall 2002

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Senior Seminar  
Professor Dobles  
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## Postponing Sexual Involvement; An early intervention approach to teen pregnancy prevention

“At our age,  
It’s okay to think about sex,  
It’s okay to talk about sex,  
It’s okay to develop feelings and attitudes about sex,  
But it’s NOT okay to have sex!”  
(The PSI Motto)

Postponing Sexual Involvement, a peer mediation program, fosters a learning environment where teens learn to exercise the mindset and courage to resist the present teen culture of such early tendencies towards sex. Postponing Sexual Involvement is a program that has undertaken the goal of reducing and preventing teen pregnancy in Hartford. The program was implemented in Hartford in 1996, and is an abstinence-based approach to deter teens from finding themselves pregnant at a young age. “ The primary goal of the PSI curriculum is to help preteens develop healthy attitudes and appropriate skills for managing their sexual behaviors,” (Pamphlet from Postponing Sexual Involvement).

## A Historical Perspective and Significance of Research

Teen pregnancy has been of great concern in Hartford for a significant number of years in response to the 1994 statistic that Hartford had the highest rate of Teen Pregnancy in the United States, (PSI Pamphlet). In today's society, students are becoming sexually active at an earlier age. As children enter into the phase of puberty, there is a significant increase in ones curiosity about sex. At this age, peer pressure plays a greater role over ones own thinking, therefore it is important for us to help preteens learn how to manage these confusing feelings. With this in mind, we can encourage children to resist becoming sexually active before they are ready. "PSI gives pre-teens a chance to discuss sexual health issues and rehearse their developing skills before facing a real-life challenge." (PSI pamphlet). Students have their hands on more information than one is conscious of, through the internet and siblings. Unfortunately a lot of what they hear is incorrect information and myth. It is therefore important that someone takes proactive measures to reach the students before they hear it from others, or at least provide them with the correct information. In the year 2000 the actual number of births to teens in Hartford was 458, so there is obviously a problem in Hartford, and it is important that someone reaches these students before they find themselves falling into the same pattern as those that came before them. With a concern that there is a lack of communication at home, it is important to enter into the school classroom and reach the students in an educational environment. With all of this in mind I decided to investigate what measures

Hartford is taking. I came up with a research question;

*Research Question*

How is the program 'Postponing Sexual Involvement' playing a role in preventing and educating students on the issue of teen pregnancy?

Hartford's Strategic Plan

The citywide campaign Breaking the Cycle was first begun in 1995 in reaction to the high percentage of birth to teens, one of the highest in the Nation. It soon became Hartford's strategic plan after responding to The Hartford Action Plan of Infant Health who presented signs of concern for the City. Breaking the Cycle is a community partnership of the City of Hartford, the Hartford Action Plan on Infant Health, and the Hartford Public schools. The project in essence focuses its efforts towards four categories; Youth, Adult, Community Outreach, Public Awareness. The campaign organizes specific programs to encourage prevention of pregnant teens. With such a variety of programs reaching diversely different audiences, I decided to focus on one of the categories, the Hartford Youth. The citywide campaign follows these four goals.

- To intensify community determination to end teen pregnancy
  - Eliminate births to adolescents younger than 15 by the year 2005
  - Reduce births to adolescents ages 15-17 by 50% from 1999 to the year 2005
  - Reduce births to adolescents ages 18-19 by 25% from 1999 to the year 2005
- ( Postponing Sexual Involvement Curriculum, Pg 5).

If the city of Hartford is able to meet these goals, then Hartford will weigh up

closer to the national average. It is important to make reliable information available to local communities in order to reach these goals. Breaking the Cycle is responsible for a number of outreach programs to facilitate communication between parents, youths and the community. One of their important programs which reaches the Hartford youth in schools is their program Postponing Sexual Involvement.

### Teen Prevention Program

Postponing Sexual Involvement is a national curriculum produced by Dr. Marion Howard of the Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics at Emory University School of Medicine, in cooperation with Marie E. Mitchell, R.N. of the Teen Services Program at Grady Health System in Atlanta, GA. The program was first developed in 1983, ( Abbey). The PSI curriculum has been used widely across the country and was found to be extremely effective in Atlanta when first placed within the school system. (Anderson) The curriculum was widely accepted there, and had a positive impact in the area. "Births were reduced by about one-third by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade, according to Marion Howard, a professor at Emory University, although she said the study was small and generalized," (Anderson). The curriculum was first designed to be implemented in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, however it was reorganized for the 5<sup>th</sup> grade Hartford school system.

When first implemented in Hartford in 1996, the program was used in 10

elementary schools. Now it has spread to all 26 of them, with confidence that it is having a positive impact over the children in the Hartford School system, (PSI Pamphlet). The program is run by Breaking the Cycle, in cooperation with Hartford Hospital and St Francis Hospital and Medical Center, the Hartford Action Plan, Hartford Public Schools and the City of Hartford. PSI as stated previously, is an abstinence based program that has been designed to be implemented in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. The program is taught by teen role models, referred to as PSI Teen Leaders, who are from the Hartford-area high schools, Bulkeley, Weaver and Hartford Public. The Teen Leaders are placed through an intensive training course to learn how to conduct sessions with the 5<sup>th</sup> graders and be active role models and resources for the students. The PSI program is broken up into a 5-week educational series and provides guidance on issues such as puberty, curiosity about sex, social pressures, healthy relationships, physical affection in relationships, and how to say "no" to peer pressure. The Teen leaders enter into the classroom once a week for five weeks and take over the classroom for the period. The classroom becomes a forum for the 5<sup>th</sup> graders where they can ask questions and discuss sexual issues. "The program helps them develop specific skills to feel confident that they can say "no" and have the "no" accepted." (PSI pamphlet).

## Goals for PSI

“Preventing teen pregnancies benefits the teens themselves and helps them delay having children until they can offer the children a more promising future. Preventing teen pregnancy also makes good sense for society, which spends an estimated \$6.9 billion annually on teen births,” (Best Practices Brief).

In order for the program to work and successfully impact the 5<sup>th</sup> graders, specific goals have been specified to keep in mind as the program is in effect. The PSI program aims to provide guidance to the preteens in handling their curiosity about sex and help them develop healthy attitudes. It is important to reach the students before it is too late, hence the decision to design a program to be implemented in elementary school. The program attempts to take a proactive hand at preparing students for what they will experience in Middle school and High School. Rather than allowing them to become sucked in by the pressures in our society, PSI takes the initiative to start communication before it falls upon them. They aim to provide the students with the resources to know where to go if they need help or to talk to someone. It is important that they are aware of who it is safe to talk to, and where they can go to ask health concerns. As mentioned earlier, it is important to learn how to deal with peer pressures, and in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students are beginning to enter into the stage where peer influences become extremely influential. At such a stage, there is a strong desire for peer approval. This is why PSI makes it their goal to reach the students before it is too late, and they are already making choices about sexual behaviors without fully understanding the consequences.



## Methodology

Bulkeley High School runs a program of PSI, and this year has trained 22 High school students under the leadership of Gretchen Levitz to be PSI Teen Leaders for the program. Gretchen Levitz who is a coordinator of Adolescent prevention programs for Women's health at Hartford Hospital became involved with PSI in 1996 at Bulkeley High School. At the time she felt the desire to talk to kids and take another stand on women's health issues. It was her desire to be a part of a proactive measure, rather than only concentrating on what happens after the pregnancy occurs. Gretchen wanted to make a difference in the minds of the students before their choice was made, with a strong belief that PSI can have a positive impact over the consciousness of 5<sup>th</sup> graders. With the intention to investigate the PSI program, I was given Gretchen Levitz's name at Bulkely and made contact with her at the office. I was invited in to talk with her, and become familiar with the program. It was from there that I was given the opportunity to begin my non-intrusive observation work at Fox Elementary with the PSI program. I was invited into the classroom at Fox along side the Teen leaders to sit in the back of the classroom and observe the lessons that were held for the 5<sup>th</sup> graders. I had the opportunity to observe 3 of the lesson planned sessions held in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. Visiting the classroom sessions enabled me to observe and understand the methods and exercises being used to increase education in

the classroom.

### *Session I*

Providing students with the opportunity to recognise developing sexual feelings is an important practice. This first session focuses on talking with preteens about sexual feelings and the normal role that they play in becoming a teenager. It is important that we assist and address questions and concerns about the feelings and thoughts that are racing through their minds so that they learn appropriate ways and methods to express such emotions. We live in a sexually-orientated environment, where teens are being exposed to such media and social influences that spark their curiosity about sex. Here the teen leaders try to address this issue, and attempt to clarify that the messages exposed by the media are not always correct and very few teens are in fact having sex. Preteens curiosity is stimulated through what the media portrays and therefore it is necessary for them to have a chance to talk about it, and for leaders to dispel myths and confusion. This session introduces the students to PSI and explains to them the purpose of such an educational program. "So what is having sex really all about?" one teen leader points out. "The fact of the matter is that most teens are not ready to handle the problems that may arise from having sex," she says. The lesson plan lays out ways in which students can learn how to delay becoming sexually active till after their teen years. The teen leaders acknowledge the fact that curiosity is okay, in fact it perfectly normal. They however point out that

involving in sex is not a way to satisfy the curiosity, but it is better to start lines of communication and find out different ways of learning about and satisfying their curiosity. This session sets the boundaries for the program and right away establishes the safe environment where the preteens learn to feel comfortable discussing issues revolving around relationships and sex. The guidelines are as follows:

- All ideas and thoughts are valuable
- All ideas need to be respected
- Don't speak when others are speaking
- Ask questions if you don't understand
- No personal questions are to be asked and no personal information about self and others is to be given
- Keep "who said what" confidential if you talk outside the group
- You can choose not to respond

(Postponing Sexual Involvement Curriculum)

The next step included the preteens participating in an exercise. The students were placed in small groups and given a piece of paper. On that paper they were asked to write down all of the TV programs, movies, commercials, magazines, books and songs that they knew that contained references to sexual behavior. After the lists were made, a discussion was brought forth about what they are hearing and seeing on TV regarding sex and relationships. Through the conversation the teen leaders were able to bring up the point that although they are hearing a lot about sex, the ideas being presented to them are not in fact all that true with regards to what sex is like in real life. The media does not identify the consequences and responsibility that comes along with being sexually active, and this is where the teen leaders come in. They begin to identify the role that the

media plays, and identify the skewed ideals of the male and female body. This conjured up a discussion of the body, and the changes in physical appearance that these 5<sup>th</sup> graders are experiencing. They talked about what makes a male a man and female a woman. The theme here that they emphasized, is that sex does not make someone grownup, but learning to respect ones own curiosity and the body helps the process of being a man or a woman.

### *Session II*

This session included providing the students with information and exercises relating to the risks of early sexual behavior and handling curiosity about sex in healthier ways. The session allowed students the opportunity to identify reasons why teens decide to become sexually active and why perhaps they should take a step back and wait. The teen leaders focus on increasing the students awareness about the risks that are involved. The aim is to help them figure out how their curiosity and needs can be satisfied without turning to sex. The goal is to identify for the elementary students just how significantly the consequences of early sexual involvement outweigh the positive ones. I particularly observed how the teen leaders focused on providing the 5<sup>th</sup> graders with resources to handle their curiosity.

The students were given an exercise, and in their small groups were provided them with a piece of paper with 2 titles, Why teens become sexually involved, and Why they believe teens should wait. The lists were then formed on the black

board;

Why teens become Sexually involved

Peer pressure  
Curiosity cause of what others say  
Get sexually aroused  
They think it is going to make them a man  
They think it is fun to lose their virginity  
For money  
They don't think before they do it

Why they should wait

Aids/STS's  
Money-won't have any  
Need a job  
Must have an education  
Cannot support yourself  
They are not mature yet

After writing the lists on the board, the teen leaders brought the students back to the first list. They then began a process of crossing off every reason that the 5<sup>th</sup> graders did not believe was a good reason. Through discussion and communication, every reason was deleted and proven to be not good. They then converted to the second list to see if there were any bad reasons to wait. The 5<sup>th</sup> graders however seemed convinced that none of the reasons could be erased from the list. It was through this exercise that the teens were able to realise that although they saw reasons to have sex, those reasons were not necessarily the right ones. The encouragement and communication that took place was reaching the students. Many of them sat at the edge of their seats, eager to voice their thoughts and perspective. There was young boy who while making the lists about why to have sex said, "Yeah it makes them grownup." A girl sitting at the other table spoke out and said, "Well my 15 year old sister has a baby and she is not grownup." Reaching the students and discussing the social pressures that

they might encounter in school is very important to address.

### *Session III*

The purpose of this session was to increase students awareness of peer pressure and how it can influence their own sexual decision-making. The teen leaders focused the session on providing the preteens with responses and ways to handle the pressure and relationships they might find themselves in. Preteen and teen years are significant times when change is occurring and young people find themselves unaware of how to deal with the pressures from peers. They need guidance in managing relationships and help with how to say "no" when placed in a situation that their own reason is tested. The teen leaders introduced this session by classifying how students must identify the influence that peers can play, both good and bad over their behavior. It is important to increase preteens' awareness of the pressures, and provide them with an opportunity to practice such a situation, so that they do not find themselves lacking the self-confidence if in fact it does occur. The session focused on encouraging the students to remember to stick to their own beliefs, and therefore be able to take responsibility for their own actions. The session was organized around video clips displayed for the students section by section, dealing with issues of peer pressure. One clip revolved around the issue of being pressured to do something in order to fit in with the popular click. The scene is set with a girl

who does not want to go over to Kenny's house when no guardian is present. The pressure from the rest of the girls weighs over her, however, she resists the comments and sticks with her own decision. Social groups and being a member of a click is very prevalent between the ages of 10-12, and therefore necessary to address. By encouraging communication on issues such as this, we can prevent students from finding themselves in situations where they may be forced to consider sexual relations. The process of educating students that it is okay to say "no" is important. The teen leaders share stories about some teens who are having sex, and others who say they are when in fact they are not. The second half of the session revolved around understanding relationships, and encouraging the preteens to consider different kinds of relationships and when it is okay to express physical affection and to what limit. The section focuses on aiding the preteens in determining these limits in expressing affection with other individuals.

### Observation and Analysis

Through my observation, I was able to clearly identify methods used by the PSI program to encourage preteens to delay sexual involvement. The sessions encourage communication, and a time for students to talk with positive teen role models who can share with them certain messages and advice about postponing becoming sexually involved until they are old enough to handle the consequences that can come with such a decision.

The teen leaders play a very valuable role in the program, and provide a positive model for the 5<sup>th</sup> graders to follow. The teen leaders are chosen with great care. This year at Bulkeley High School there are 22 peer leaders, and Gretchen Levitz shared with me that the number of interested students have increased year by year. "Levitz equips her office with a sofa and snacks for students who often do whatever they have to including giving up lunch, to participate in Breaking the Cycle's Postponing Sexual Involvement program. In the program's five years, Levitz says, she has seen a change in attitude towards the program and sex. Teenagers are lining up to participate in the program that early on wasn't always so popular. It's becoming cool not to have sex, she says hopefully," (Urbinas). The teens are in a unique position, for whether they themselves have been placed in peer pressure situations, or friends have, they are aware of what is happening in schools. These students place themselves in a situation where they become a positive example for the students of Hartford. As confident individuals, they live by their own beliefs and are trained to share their experiences and guide those younger than them. In an educational program, schools and educators have found that peer teaching has proven to be a successful method of reaching students. The 5<sup>th</sup> graders feel more comfortable asking questions to peers just a few years older, rather than a middle aged health teacher. This is very significant to the program, for the purpose of the program is to reach students and encourage them to think, learn and question. The 5<sup>th</sup> graders look up to the teens, and many sit at the edge of their seats absorbing



every word they utter. High school students are natural role models for younger teens. Their presence in the classroom gives the meaningful message that we care about what happens to the younger generation.

I found the environment in the classroom to have a genuine appeal to the students. The PSI program facilitates a safe environment where preteens feel comfortable and confident, talking about sex and discussing matters of teens sexual curiosity. The safe environment brings about a level of trust and respect between one another. I was amazed at how the students learned to listen to one another and encourage those around them to be a part of the discussion. The students in the classroom were engaged, they raised their hands to answer questions and could be heard discussing the topics in their small groups even after the conversation had moved on. The safe environment was increased through the use of the Question Box. The question box promoted what I was hoping to see, which was communication between the High School teen leaders and the 5<sup>th</sup> graders. Every session the children are given pieces of paper to write down a question they had and then place it in the box, then the peer leaders would go through and answer the questions in front of the class, therefore students could remain anonymous. The questions that were asked were real concerns with regards to sexually transmitted diseases and relationships. They brought up questions on issues that they were curious about, but yet had never had answered for them. This may be due to the fact that they do not talk about sex at home, or are just too timid to confront a grownup.

For many parents, bringing up a conversation on sex is a frightening task, and overwhelmingly impossible. Unfortunately this places teens in an extremely dangerous situation, for if there is no discussion about issues of sexuality, then they are significantly placed at a greater risk of being the one who acts on his or her curiosity. Preteens have many questions and fears, and it is important that someone is there to ask and provide them with this important information. Communication is the key, and the PSI program revolves around this quality and philosophy. The sessions do not revolve around preaching to the 5<sup>th</sup> graders, but they are about developing a path of communication so that the preteens feel comfortable asking whatever is on their mind. This promotes peer support for postponing their sexual relationships.

The program successfully implements experimental learning into the classroom. The learning activities use an interactive, experience learning approach. Actively involving the students increases the learning process, and it has been found that students therefore process more of the information. Students are placed in these small groups, where together they must think about social situations and relationships that they have found themselves in, and question their significance and impact over their thoughts. The students are situated to interact with one another, and question one another's objective. The process of thinking out loud allows students to more fully comprehend certain situations and address the misleading information that quite often is presented to them.

## Conclusion

Through my observation and analysis of the program, I found that PSI stands by the strategic plan of encouraging Hartford's intention of educating students and of postponing their sexual involvement. The program is taking a proactive stance at encouraging students to think for themselves and wait until they are older and more capable of making such a decision that has the possibility of entailing uncertain circumstances. Rather than hoping that such conversations are happening at home, PSI takes the initiative to address all of the issues at hand, and encourage the students to share what they have heard or what they are curious about.

The program encourages communication, for too many children are left believing that sex should not be talked about, because it is not discussed at home. What is overlooked is that families don't know how to address the subject, and so PSI takes it into their own hands to reach the students. This level of communication was lacking before PSI 's implementation. Sex was not being talked about, therefore leading to more experimentation.

Students are leading students, and issues of sexual involvement are being brought out into the open in order to prevent and educate students on relationships and sexual involvement. The program facilitates and encourages when and how to say no, and to confront peer pressures in a responsible manner.

Students need to address how to resist pressure and the PSI teen leaders encourage them to think, and stay in control of their own decisions and life.

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