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Good news  
on the home front

*Oregon teen-age pregnancy rate  
declined during 2000*

**T**een-agers who have babies are far more likely to drop out of high school, live in poverty and be victims of crime. Their babies are more likely to suffer low birth weight and suffer other lifelong disadvantages. To be sure, there are countless exceptions and success stories. But few dispute the desirability of avoiding teen pregnancy.

So it was great news last week when the Oregon Department of Human Services announced the teen pregnancy rate fell to 14 for every 1,000 girls age 10-17. In 1995, the Oregon Progress Board led by Gov. John Kitzhaber set a goal for 2000 of 15 pregnancies per 1,000, compared with the 1995 rate of 19.2. Thus we are seeing genuine progress.

There are real success stories behind these numbers, many examples of teens making the right decisions, aided by parents, teachers and state and local agencies. The STARS program (Students Today Aren't Ready for Sex) has helped promote abstinence, while other programs improve teen access to birth control.

Clearly, abstinence is the preferable choice. Teens short change themselves in many ways when they prematurely end childhood and launch into the uncharted waters of adult sex. Our society's rampant

messages promoting sexuality, even among teens, makes abstinence more difficult and all the more admirable when it occurs.

Thanks to successful teen decisions and pregnancy programs, about 1,000 fewer Oregon girls became pregnant last year than would have if 1995's rate had remained unchanged. But for 2,653 Oregon girls last year, options and positive reinforcement weren't enough. There still are far too many girls going down the road to emotional, social and financial distress.

There still are plenty of Oregonians who would prefer to ignore this issue, or to deny girls the knowledge and tools they need to avoid pregnancy. There are those in the Legislature who would eliminate funds for STARS and other programs they find politically uncomfortable.

Ordinary Oregonians must unite and stand up for our girls, make sure they know we support them no matter what, and make sure they continue to receive education, counseling and birth control.

At the same time, we need our boys to know that abstinence is the correct choice for them as well, but that if they engage in sex anyway, they share full responsibility for birth control and pregnancy.