

Raising awareness

Class teaches kids about STDs, abstinence

By KRISTA PIERCE
Item Staff Writer

"If you knew better, you'd do better," Stephanie McMichael tells a classroom full of eighth-grade girls at Bates Middle School. It's a phrase that is often repeated in this abstinence and sexually transmitted disease education class presented by Heritage Community Services in schools across the state.

Firmly rooted in the belief that sex is meant for marriage and that abstinence is a key to success, Heritage teachers use a curriculum based on character education to get their point across.

"We want to communicate to everyone the importance of having good character," McMichael tells the class. "We want to help the people we love avoid risky behavior."

Spreading the word about abstinence and facts about STDs is something the students in McMichael's class were excited about last week as they created posters designed to educate their



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From left, Bates Middle School students Crystal Gonzalez, Jordan Maloney, Lauren Chapura and Cassandra Chatmon create a poster on sexually transmitted disease awareness as physical education teacher Stephanie McMichael looks on.

ABSTINENCE

FROM PAGE 1A

peers during STD Awareness Week at the school.

"My ultimate goal is to become an interior decorator," one girl says when McMichael asks members of the class to list their goals, boundaries and values. "My values are to respect myself as a person and I want to have a reputation as a respectful person. My boundaries are that anything that is covered by a bathing suit is off limits."

That, McMichael said, is very encouraging to hear. After spending 10 class periods talking about abstinence and the consequences of "risky behavior," it seems the lesson has gotten through. Another 16 class periods will focus on character education, the basis of the Heritage Method, which encourages sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders to wait until marriage to have sex.

McMichael said she wishes she could reach all children before they step into the very adult world of sexual relationships. Unfortunately, the message comes too late for some students who have already experimented with sex. When McMichael looks out across her classroom, she sometimes sees girls who are pregnant.

"That's when they learn that some of us have made mistakes, but we don't have to make the same mistake twice," McMichael said. "I've had girls come and thank me for teaching them these things they didn't know. They thank me for caring." Currently, Heritage Community Services representatives are teaching classes in three Sumter School District 17 schools. Based in Florence, the district office sends educators into 13 schools in four counties, teaching more than 4,000 students. The instruction is usually held as a supplement to health or physical education classes. A female educator is brought in to facilitate a class of girls, while a male instructs a class of boys.

Anne Badgley, president and chief executive officer, established Heritage Community Services in 1995. Based in Charleston, Heritage operates in five regions of the state, serving more than 12,000 students. Heritage also has programs in place in four other states, including Kentucky and Florida.

"We go into the classroom to introduce abstinence education to impact their thoughts about their sexuality," said Elizabeth Lang-Arthur, regional director of Heritage Community Services. "We teach them primarily that sex is for marriage. We teach them to base their decisions on being educated on the risks and con-

sequences of having sex outside marriage."

The program is rooted in the belief that students who set goals for the future, identify physical boundaries and stick to a core value system are less likely to participate in risky behaviors, ranging from sex to drug use.

"Beginning at age 10 and 11, children are beginning to experience adolescence, which I think is the most difficult stage of growth that an individual goes through," Lang-Arthur said. "Their bodies and emotions are speaking a different language from what they've been accustomed to. Those changes form patterns of behavior for the future. Sixth-graders at that particular stage make decisions with the emotional part of their brain, not the logical part."

Lang-Arthur said it is easy for children at this age to misinterpret the "touchy-feely" part of a relationship.

This, she said, puts them at high risk for teen pregnancy and leaves them vulnerable to a multitude of sexually transmitted diseases. Children are very receptive to the program, Lang-Arthur said.

"If we could get parents to be as receptive to teaching kids about abstinence as the kids are about learning about abstinence, that would decrease pregnancy statistics and STD statistics," she said.