



## Why Sex Education in the United States Needs an Update and How to Do It

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The best way to help adolescents make responsible decisions about their sexual activity and health is to give them comprehensive sex education. I study sex education and am myself a community sex educator. Although most of my students are already sexually active, most have never had a proper sex ed course. Their information about sex comes usually comes from peers and from social media and sexually explicit content on the internet. The students I teach frequently express concern about their lack of basic knowledge – and similar deficits in U.S. education about sexual health have been well documented in research studies.

Nearly 750,000 teenagers in the United States will become pregnant this year; and half of the 20 million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases will be diagnosed in young people ages 15 to 24. The United States ranks first among developed nations in rates of teenage pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted infections and diseases. Only 38 of America's 50 states have sex education laws, and 30 of those curricula promote the ideal of abstinence until marriage. Only eight include all components of a comprehensive sex education.

### Sex Education in the United States

There are three main sex education curricula employed in the United States: Abstinence-Only, Abstinence-Plus, and Comprehensive curricula. "Abstinence-Only" and Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs are sometimes called Sexual Risk Avoidance Programs, and teach abstinence as the only morally sound trajectory for teenagers. These curricula do not provide information on the use of contraception or condoms to prevent diseases, much less unintended pregnancies. "Abstinence-Plus" Education includes information about contraception and condoms, but promotes abstinence until marriage. "Comprehensive Sex Education" teaches youth that sexuality is a normal and healthy part of human life. This curriculum discusses abstinence as the most effective way for teens to avoid unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases and infections, but also equips students to make their own decisions from an informed perspective. Without invoking shame, the Comprehensive curriculum covers a wide variety of shame-free topics such as human development, relationships, interpersonal skills, sexual expression, sexual health, and the ways society and culture influence understandings of sexuality.

Research sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that abstinence-only curricula did not result in positive outcomes for the sexual health of U.S. adolescents. Since 1996, over \$1 billion in state and federal funding has been allocated for abstinence-only education, despite evidence showing this approach is ineffective. The sex education that U.S. students receive is often not evidence-based or values-neutral. Millions of children have participated in federally funded abstinence programs; but after reviewing the most commonly used curricula, the 2004 Waxman Report found that 11 out of the 13 curricula  
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were inaccurate, containing unproven claims, subjective conclusions, or outright falsehoods regarding reproductive health, gender traits, and beginning of life. More than four of every ten high schools fail to include in sex ed information about the correct use of condoms.

Comprehensive sex education, on the other hand, helps young people delay sexual intercourse, increases condom and contraceptive use, and reduces the number of partners. When teens do choose to become sexually active, this curriculum decreases the likelihood and frequency of unprotected sex. Furthermore, students who learn from a version of comprehensive sex ed that includes gay, lesbian, and transgender issues report a safer school environment with less bullying and harassment. Despite all of the advantages just summarized, only 38% of U.S. high schools and 14% of middle schools teach all 19 of sexual health topics considered essential by the Centers for Disease Control. Those topics include how to create and sustain healthy and respectful relationships, information on how sexually transmitted infections are spread, and tips about ways partners can communicate to prevent pregnancies or infections.

## **Funding Sex Education**

The Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations generously funded abstinence-only curricula between the mid 1990s and early 2000s. President Barack Obama's administration was the first to shift away from abstinence-only-until-marriage programs toward more comprehensive education under that administration's Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative. However, President Donald Trump's administration undid that programming and allocated \$75 million to abstinence-only curriculum.

There have been troubling declines in formal instruction about sex education in recent years, particularly for young women and young people in rural areas. Parents and guardians are not filling in the gaps at home as much as many assume. In light of this, a 2014 poll found that 94% of parents support sex education in middle school, while 96% of parents support sex education in high school. However, because instruction at school is often lacking or insufficient, community partners and non-profit organizations like Planned Parenthood and Advocates for Youth are themselves offering comprehensive sex education. Planned Parenthood's Teen Peer-Led Sex Ed initiatives spread knowledge and know-how that can be spread by peers in schools, especially in states like Utah, that refuse to disseminate this sometimes life-saving information. In these programs, young people are encouraged to educate one another and their community about safe and healthy relationships of all forms.

## **Ways Forward**

The United States was the last developed country to create national standards for sex education, but instruction is often left to underfunded non-profit groups. Mandated, federally funded comprehensive sex education should include people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, socioeconomic backgrounds, levels of pre-existing health literacy, and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. According to the United Nations, understanding one's own body is a human right. To ensure that U.S. youth are not deprived this right, legislators, youth service providers, and advocates should work to develop, fund, and implement comprehensive sex education curricula for all American students.