

Sex Education: Curricula and Programs

The sexual health status of youth in the United States is dismal compared to other industrialized nations. The United States has one of the highest rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among adolescents¹ and the United States' teen pregnancy rate is the highest in the developed world.² Today, controversy rages around sex education in U.S. public schools. Major scientific and medical organizations refute conservative claims that teaching about contraception gives “mixed messages” to young people and that youth should be taught to “just say no.” Research shows comprehensive sex education—programs that teach about both abstinence *and* contraception—to be more effective in assisting young people to make healthy decisions about sex.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education Is Effective, Abstinence-Only Is Not.

- Substantial evidence exists of the effectiveness of comprehensive sex education programs.^{3,4} These programs promote abstinence as the most effective way to prevent pregnancy and STIs while also providing medically accurate facts and clear messages about condoms and contraceptive use.³ Effective, age-appropriate comprehensive programs also provide activities addressing peer pressure and allowing youth to practice skills in communication, negotiation, and refusal.^{3,4}
- Since 1996, the United States government has promoted a different type of “sexual health education.” These programs, known as abstinence-only, teach that “a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity” and that “sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects.”⁵ These programs censor contraceptive information except to provide failure rates, often exaggerated.⁴
- The American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Institute of Medicine (IOM), Office of National AIDS Policy, National Institutes of Health, Society for Adolescent Medicine, and the Surgeon General of the United States all have published research analyses supporting the effectiveness of comprehensive sex education.⁶ The IOM called on Congress to rescind funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage education because there is no evidence supporting its effectiveness.⁷

Comprehensive Programs Do Not Increase Sexual Intercourse or Sexual Risk Behaviors.

- Evaluation of twenty-five studies of comprehensive sexuality and HIV education programs that include discussion of condoms and contraception found strong evidence that such programs do not hasten, and some delay, the initiation of sexual intercourse. Moreover, at least three of these programs decreased the frequency of sexual intercourse.³
- Evaluation revealed that comprehensive sexuality and HIV education programs do not increase the number of teens' sexual partners. Three programs demonstrated a significant decrease in the number of new partners among sexually experienced participants and none showed a significant increase.³
- At least 12 of the programs showed strong evidence of increased condom and contraceptive use among sexually active program participants.³
- The Program Archive on Sexuality, Health & Adolescence (PASHA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found several programs that successfully aid in decreasing sexual risk behaviors among adolescents.^{8,9} Successful comprehensive programs included *AIDS Prevention for Adolescents in School, Be Proud Be Responsible, Becoming a Responsible Teen, Get Real About AIDS*®, *Reducing the Risk, School/Community Program for Sexual Risk Reduction Among Teens, Teen Talk, and Youth AIDS Prevention Project (YAPP)*.

Effective Programs Reduce Sexual Risk Behaviors.

- *Reducing the Risk*, a high school-based program that emphasizes avoiding unprotected sex by being abstinent or using contraception, has been shown to delay the onset of sex and to increase contraceptive and condom use among sexually active participants.⁸
- The school-based *Teen Outreach Program (TOP)* combines life skills and reproductive health education with service learning. In evaluation, participants experienced fewer pregnancies, course failures, and school suspensions than comparison students.¹⁰
- Three HIV education programs—*Be Proud Be Responsible*, *Becoming a Responsible Teen*, and *Safer Choices*—demonstrate success in reducing sexual risk behaviors. Participants reported decreased frequency of sexual intercourse, increased condom use, reduced incidence of unprotected intercourse, and reduced numbers of new sexual partners in comparison to non-participants.³
- The Children's Aid Society offers a long-term, holistic, multi-dimensional program with intensive sex education and youth development components. Evaluation indicates positive effects on birth and pregnancy rates among teenage female participants, especially a 55 percent reduction in pregnancy among those participating in the program for three years.¹¹

Abstinence-Only Curricula Have Not Been Proven Effective.

- In a review of 35 programs, the World Health Organization found that abstinence-only programs were less effective than programs that promoted delaying first intercourse and also promoted safer sex practices, including use of contraceptives and condoms.¹²
- Recent reviews of abstinence-only programs, including *ENABL* [a version of *Postponing Sexual Involvement (PSI)* that lacks the contraceptive component], *Sex Respect*, *StaySMART*, *Teen-Aid*, and *Values and Choices*, found no overall effects on sexual behavior and no evidence that any was effective in delaying first sexual intercourse or in reducing the frequency of sexual intercourse.^{3,13}

The Public Supports, but All School Districts Do Not Provide, Comprehensive Sex Education.

- In a recent poll, 93 percent of Americans supported providing comprehensive sex education in high schools, while 84 percent endorsed providing it in middle/junior high schools and agreed that young people “should be given information to protect themselves from unplanned pregnancies and STIs.” More than 90 percent believed that abstinence should be a topic in sexuality education while 70 percent opposed federal funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage education.¹⁴
- Sixty-three percent of Americans, including 44 percent of those who self-identified as conservative, agreed that adolescent sexual exploration is a natural part of growing up, and that it is best to provide all of the information and resources needed to help young people act responsibly.¹⁴
- Sixty-nine percent of U.S. school districts have a policy to provide sexuality education of some sort in the classroom, while 31 percent leave sex education policy decisions to individual schools or teachers.¹⁵ Among districts with a policy on sexuality education, 65 percent teach about contraceptive effectiveness in preventing STIs and unintended pregnancy (comprehensive sex education). Nearly 35 percent teach only that contraception is ineffective or provide no information about contraception and condoms to prevent STIs and unintended pregnancy (abstinence-only education).¹⁵

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