



The Media Project

A Program of Advocates for Youth

Sex Ed 101

DEVELOPMENT

Although the majority of Americans (93%) support providing comprehensive sex education in high schools, sex education isn't taught in every school. Critics say teaching about contraception gives a mixed message, yet research shows that teaching about contraception and condoms helps kids make healthier decisions about sex. **There is no evidence that abstinence-only programs reduce or prevent risky sexual behavior.**

WRITING THE WRONGS

- Half of all mothers of sexually active teenagers mistakenly believe that their children are still virgins.
- The U.S. has one of the highest rates of STDs among adolescents and the highest teen pregnancy rate in the developed world.
- The U.S. government promotes abstinence-only sex education in schools even though there is no evidence that it is effective.
- Abstinence-only programs do **not** teach about contraception or condoms except to report failure rates that are often exaggerated.
- Many schools do **not** teach sex ed. Just 69% of schools even have a policy about sex education of any kind and, of those, only 65% teach about contraception and condoms.
- Critics of comprehensive sex ed say teaching kids about contraception sends “mixed messages” and may make young people take more sexual risks. Research shows no such link; in fact, the evidence proves the opposite.
- Abstinence-only programs show no evidence of delaying a young person's first sexual intercourse or of reducing the frequency of sexual intercourse.

WRITING THE RIGHTS

- Comprehensive sex ed curricula that teach about contraception and condoms don't push kids toward risky sexual behavior.
- In fact, some programs even **decrease** the frequency of sexual intercourse among young people.
- In at least half the comprehensive sex ed programs, after participating in the program, sexually active teens are more likely to use condoms and contraceptives compared to before the program.
- Young people who participate in good, comprehensive HIV education programs are more likely to use condoms. And, they report fewer cases of unprotected sex and less frequent sexual intercourse than those who do not participate.

THE CONFLICT

- Teaching kids about contraception and condoms does **not** encourage risky sexual behavior. Instead, it is more likely to help teens make healthier decisions about sex.

- Most Americans support teaching teenagers about *both* abstinence *and* contraception. Yet, the federal government spends millions promoting abstinence-only programs.

SETTING THE SCENE FOR SEX EDUCATION

- A teacher hands out condoms at the senior prom against school policy.
- A school board debates its sex education policy.
- A parent complains to a health teacher that comprehensive sex ed violates his/her religious beliefs.

SOME SEX ED SCENARIOS

“My kid can learn about sex and contraception in school just like I did.”

Of schools with sex education policies, nearly 35% offer little or no information about contraception, condoms, sexually transmitted diseases, or pregnancy.

“I’ve told my daughter to save herself for marriage and that’s all she needs to know.”

There is no evidence that teaching abstinence-only keeps young people from having sex. But teaching them about contraception and condoms has shown as much as a 55% drop in teen pregnancies and a significant delay in the onset of sexual intercourse.

“If I talk about contraception and condoms, my kids will think I support them having sex before marriage.”

Young people who are taught about both abstinence and safer, protected sex report making healthier decisions about sex, even avoiding unprotected sex or not having sex at all.

IT’S ALL POLITICS

- The United States government has promoted abstinence-only sex education since 1996 to the tune of \$50 million each year. This, combined with matching funds from state governments, brings the total price to over **\$100 million dollars** each year.
- Starting in 2003, President Bush wants Congress to increase funding for abstinence-only programs to over \$135 million dollars each year. With state matching funds the price soars to close to **\$200 million dollars** each year.
- The Institutes of Medicine has called on Congress to rescind its funding of **abstinence-only** programs calling them **completely ineffective**.

THE WRAP

The more good, accurate information a young person has about sex, the more likely he or she is to make healthy decisions about sex. Americans in large part support the idea of presenting teens with as much information as possible. Even many self-identified conservatives agree with a comprehensive approach. But, the federal government continues to support abstinence-only programs. The price of that policy may simply prove too high for young people to handle.

REFERENCES & ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Cloninger D, Pagliaro S. *Sex Education: Curricula and Programs*. [The Facts] Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth, 2002. [<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/factsheet/fssexcur.htm>]

November 2002 © The Media Project

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