Abstinence-Only Education vs. Comprehensive Education:

What Do We Teach Our Teenagers?

Sex education. Those two words strike fear and discomfort among parents across the country. When (and what) do you tell your son or daughter about “the birds and the bees”? With rising rates of new STD infections and HIV/AIDS diagnoses among teenagers, parents and schools need to take a hard look at what needs to be taught. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2006 that the age group 15-24 acquire nearly half of all new STDs” (CDC). Abstinence is the only method 100% effective in preventing pregnancy and transmission of STDs. However, abstinence-only education is ineffective because there is no discussion of other behaviors and topics that require education, such as sexual orientation and peer pressure. Teenagers are engaging in other risky sexual behaviors and contracting STDs at high rates. There should be a national curriculum of comprehensive information—including abstinence, dating and relationships, contraceptives, STDs, and sexuality—taught to students.

It seems that in today’s world, you have to start when the child is in the “tweens”—the age group between childhood and adolescence. If parents think that is too soon to be discussing sexuality to children, consider this: in 1998, an article in the Washington Post reported that almost a dozen girls ages 10-12 were performing oral sex on two or three boys throughout the year in one middle school (Stepp 1). Laura Sessions
Stepp, author of *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both*, laments, “How did they come to believe that offering their services to guys they barely knew ‘was no big deal’?” (1)

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, sex education in American schools were based on ideas such as sexually transmitted diseases were punishment for immoral behavior (Lee). Throughout the twentieth century, several organizations, such as the American Medical Association, worked with the National Education Association to put together information on sex education to be taught in schools (Lee). Gia Fenoglio points out that since the Adolescent Family Life Act of 1981—which teaches women about pregnancy, childcare, and adoption—the federal money has given money to abstinence education (Fenoglio).

In 1996, the Welfare Reform Act was put in effect, containing a section that lists criteria for federal funding for abstinence-only programs (Ballaro). Some of the criteria of the legislation are the following: abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage is the expected standard for all school-age children; abstinence of sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems (Ballaro). With all the legislation that has been written and discussions from several organizations, there has been no agreement on what should be taught nationally in the classroom. Until this is resolved, there will continue to be an increase in sexually active teenagers, new cases of STDs, and unplanned pregnancies.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that only forty-six percent of teenagers in high school had sex in 2001, compared to fifty-four percent in 1991 (Rosenberg 67). Even though more teenagers are being abstinent, many are still
participating in high-risk sexual activities. According to Jodie Levin-Epstein, twenty-five percent of college students surveyed believe that someone can have anal sex and still be a virgin (Levin-Epstein). In a survey conducted by Seventeen, a magazine for teenage girls, 289 out of 723 people agreed that “oral sex did not count as ‘sex’” (Levin-Epstein). Because of these opinions, a detailed, accurate curriculum needs to be taught to teenagers.

In comprehensive education, abstinence is the first choice. Several organizations, including Sexuality Information and Education Council (SEICUS), agree that abstinence should be taught as the first choice, but should also teach how to reduce risks if someone decides to have sex (Rosenberg). No contraceptives or methods—“withdrawal”, rhythm method are examples—can guarantee 100% percent effectiveness against pregnancy and STD transmission like abstinence. Nonetheless, teenagers need to know what to do to minimize the chances of pregnancy and contracting a STD if they decide not to abstain. “We value abstinence, but not at the exclusion of potentially life-saving information,” states William Smith, director of public policy at SEICUS (Fenoglio).

Abstinence-only programs do not prevent those who choose not to abstain from engaging in high-risk sexual behaviors. Researchers Hannah Brueckner and Peter Bearman tracked kids who took a virginity pledge and kids who did not and found the following information:

The estimated odds for contraceptive use for pledges are about one-third lower than others … pledgers are less likely to be prepared for an experience that they promised to forego … pledging does not work for adolescents at all ages … (Levin-Epstein)
Not only is it alarming that teenagers are not keeping the pledge, but they are engaging in harmful and ill-advised sexual activities. Since they are not educated on contraceptives, STDs, and pregnancy, they are more likely to put themselves and others at risk.

According to Barbara Ballaro, advocates of abstinence-only education believe that comprehensive education teaches teenagers that “condoms provide foolproof pregnancy and disease protection … it also promotes promiscuity” (Ballaro). This is inaccurate because comprehensive education curriculums firmly assert that abstinence is the only guaranteed way to prevent transmission of STDs and unplanned pregnancy. Giving teenagers thorough, detailed, and accurate information on abstinence, STDs, and other topics will help them make smart and informed decisions about their sexuality.

Some advocates of abstinence-education argue that students should not learn about sex, contraceptives, and STDs because premarital sex damages their self-esteem and values (Fenoglio). There is a definite need to teach teenagers about sexuality. “Tweens” and teenagers are beginning to learn and understand their developing bodies, their sexual orientation, potential peer pressure, plus several other issues. Human Rights Watch researcher Rebecca Schleifer and other colleagues contend that if only abstinence before marriage is taught, several students will feel alienated (Rosenberg 67). How would a girl who is a victim of sexual abuse feel if she believes is her fault that she is not a virgin? Would a boy who identifies himself as gay disregard the information because he knows he will not get married? Since human sexuality covers a wide range of issues, it is critical that students have an open, honest dialogue with accurate, up-to-date information. It is necessary for them to have a discussion to prevent confusion, fear, and engaging in unhealthy sexual behaviors.
Parents do not want their children to have sex at an early age. Nevertheless, with all the sexual innuendos, imagery, and depictions in today’s media, how can a child not see or possibly engage in sexual behaviors? According to Gia Fenoglio, advocates of abstinence-only education and comprehensive education agree on two points: there is too much sexual images, ideas, and instructions in the media, and it has a major impact on teenagers. (Fenoglio) In spite of the constant messages from the media, how you teach students about sexual responsibility? The best way to promote knowledge and awareness is to have a truthful, fact-based curriculum that teaches several topics, including abstinence, contraceptives, and sexual health.

Patrick Delaney, associate director of public policy education for American Life League, recommends that “the federal government should not provide one dime for sex instruction, ‘family planning,’ or even abstinence education” (Fenoglio). Mr. Delaney’s statement is one of the worst positions to take on sex education. It would be irresponsible to ignore the current statistics and assume that no child will have premarital sex. If educators, lawmakers, researchers, and parents do not agree on what should be taught, and ultimately disregard this issue, we are putting our children’s health and future in very grave danger.

Human sexuality is one of the most difficult topics to have an open, honest, and frank dialogue. Due to differences in politics, morals, values, and cultural beliefs, opinion will vary on what needs to be taught to students in schools. Parents, educators, administrators, and politicians must put discomfort aside and come to a common agreement on an effective, organized, and researched national curriculum on sex education. All parents want to believe that their children are not having premarital sex.
According to Jodie Levin-Epstein, “It is wildly naïve to think that all or even most unmarried people will refrain from having sex” (Levin-Epstein). As everyone knows, knowledge is power: give students detailed, precise information and tools to make a well-informed decision about their sexuality. Otherwise, teenagers will find other avenues to gain information, and jeopardize their physical, social, emotional, and mental health and well-being.
Works Cited


