

The Kids Could Be Alright: A Call for Comprehensive Sexual Education

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Providing children with education to keep them healthy and safe shouldn't be a partisan issue. It's common sense. And as discussion around the #MeToo movement has shown, it's more important now than ever.

Stories of sexual assault have become daily news in the U.S., but the state of sexual education remains shockingly inadequate. Only 24 states require sexual education be taught, and only 13 states require the information to be medically accurate.¹ Parents (independent of race, income, or party affiliation) overwhelmingly want their children to learn about sexual health in school,² but a chasm remains between what families want and what is actually being taught.

Perhaps most appalling is the fact that only 10 states even mention consent, sexual assault, or healthy relationships in their education standards.³ No matter our political and religious views, we all want to promote healthy relationships and prevent sexual assault. Comprehensive sexual education can do that. It has been shown to reduce

pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections and delay sexual initiation, while abstinence-only education has not.⁴ In fact, abstinence-only education actually correlates with higher rates of teen pregnancy.⁵ While the goal of conservatives to delay sexual initiation is laudable, abstinence-only education is simply not working. Students want information and the opportunity to learn skills that can improve

¹ Maxouris, C., Ahmed, S. "Only 8 states require sex ed classes to mention consent." CNN. (n.d.) <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/29/health/sex-education-consent-in-public-schools-trnd/index.html>

² Kantor, L., Levitz, N. "Parents' views on sex education in schools: How much do Democrats and Republicans agree?" Plos One Open Access, July 2017. Retrieved October 16, 2018. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0180250>

³ Shapiro, S., Brown, C. "Sex Education Standards Across the States." Center for American Progress.

(2018, May 9). Retrieved October 16, 2018. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/05/09/450158/sex-education-standards-across-states/>

⁴ Collins, C., Alagiri, P., Summers, T., & Morin, S. F. (n.d.). Abstinence Only vs. Comprehensive Sex Education., 32.

⁵ Stanger-Hall, K. F., & Hall, D. W. (2011). Abstinence-Only Education and Teen Pregnancy Rates: Why We Need Comprehensive Sex Education in the U.S. PLOS ONE, 6(10), e24658. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0024658>

their relationships for the rest of their lives. Parents want them to be safe, healthy, and respectful of themselves and others. Comprehensive sexual education that includes relationship skills, consent, and accurate information on pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections is desperately needed in the United States. Laws and regulations must catch up.

A few state legislatures are addressing the challenge, and the rest of the country should follow suit. Proposed legislation in Kentucky would require instruction on “the development of relationship and communication skills necessary to form healthy relationships free of violence, coercion, and intimidation.”³ Rhode Island, Missouri, and Maryland are considering bills to include instruction about consent in sex education. Hawaii has already passed standards to require health curricula to “encourage students to communicate...about sexuality” and help them “form healthy relationships that are based on mutual respect and affection.”³ As the text of these bills show, sex education does not need to be a battle over contraception or premarital sex, but rather policy that empowers children to have happy, healthy, and safe relationships, without abuse or coercion.

And such curricula can be implemented successfully, even in conservative areas.⁶

Our country needs sexual education that prepares young people for the real challenges they will face. Unfortunately, 37% of millennials say the sexual education they received in schools was not helpful in their sexual and relationship decision-making.⁷ Adolescents want and need guidance as they navigate these issues in their own lives. However, students commonly feel their sexual health curricula is out-of-touch, too narrow, and delivered too late in their education.⁸ Furthermore, students are not isolated from the numerous reports of sexual violence in the news. At the same time, President Trump’s administration is restricting their access to comprehensive sexual education which would reduce their risk of victimization.⁹

In my own experiences teaching sexual health classes to high-schoolers, teens expressed concern over the numerous cases of sexual assault, harassment, and rape being discussed on tv and online. They shared how it impacted their own relationships and behavior: for example, in discussions with partners and the advice they gave friends. Some of them were unfortunately already survivors of sexual assault and abuse. They were not just interested in avoiding

⁶ Stanger-Hall, K. F., & Hall, D. W. (2011). Abstinence-Only Education and Teen Pregnancy Rates: Why We Need Comprehensive Sex Education in the U.S. *PLOS ONE*, 6(10), e24658. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0024658>

⁷ Jones, R. P., & Cox, D. (n.d.). How Race and Religion Shape Millennial Attitudes on Sexuality and Reproductive Health. Public Religion Research Institute. 2015 Millennials, Sexuality, and Reproductive Health Survey.

⁸ Pound, P., Langford, R., & Campbell, R. (2016). What do young people think about their school-based

sex and relationship education? A qualitative synthesis of young people’s views and experiences. *BMJ Open*, 6(9), e011329.

<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2016-011329>

⁹ Santelli, J. S., Grilo, S. A., Choo, T.-H., Diaz, G., Walsh, K., Wall, M., ... Mellins, C. A. (2018). Does sex education before college protect students from sexual assault in college? *PLOS ONE*, 13(11), e0205951.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0205951>

pregnancy or STIs, but how to communicate better and have healthier relationships—whether they included sex or not. Many had experienced relationship issues with their friends or family and wanted to do better going forward.

I believe that’s what we should focus on—how to do better going forward. There has been much confusion and disagreement among adults over what constitutes sexual assault and how we should teach our children about sex. I can’t help but wonder where we would be if we started by listening to them about what they want to learn. We owe it to our children and adolescents to do better. They’re ready and eager to learn—we have to push our legislators and school districts to let them.

About the Author

Katie Kollars graduated in 2019 with an MPH from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health