

Requirement of Comprehensive Sex Education in the United States

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Abstract

When the topic of sex comes up, most Americans shy away and change the subject. This should not be the case. Not addressing questions about sex can be harmful, especially to children. Withholding information about sex, STDs and contraception from children strips them of their fundamental sexual rights. Sex is a natural part of being human and it is essential for children to understand different aspects around sex in order to make healthy decisions. This paper provides a lot of insight from individuals who are professionals or specialize in the field of health and sex education. The history and development of how sex education came to be in the United States and the current policies of mandating sex education are addressed. This paper also explains the pros and cons between sex education and abstinence and whether all schools should mandate sex education in the United States.

Abstinence and Comprehensive Sex Education in the United States

Introduction

Sex is a topic that is seldom talked about around children. A common concern with teaching sex education is that it can skew children's ideas and thoughts about sex and can potentially promote sexual activity rather than prevent it (Masland, 2004). Generally, there are two sides when it comes to teaching children about sex. One side aims to use comprehensive sex education programs to teach children about HIV/AIDS, STDs and different types of contraception, while the other side opts for an abstinence-only based education that teaches children the harmful repercussions of having sex outside of marriage. Abstinence-only organizations such as the National Abstinence Education Association do not agree with how comprehensive sex education programs are normalizing sex and contraceptive use instead of normalizing sexual delay (National Abstinence Education Association, 2015). There are many statistics that show the efficacy of sex education over abstinence-only education. In order to reduce the number of teen pregnancies and birth rates in the United States, all schools should implement comprehensive sex education programs that provide accurate and up to date information.

The Issue

Sex Education Versus Abstinence Education.

There has been much debate over which method is the greatest at reducing teen pregnancies and birth rates, but statistics show that comprehensive sex education is the most beneficial and is directly correlated with lower teen pregnancy rates in the United States (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Most abstinence-only programs primarily teach children that having sex outside of marriage will have harmful effects physically and psychologically, but this kind of information is not beneficial in keeping children from engaging in sex or having safe sex (Bader 2013). Even though comprehensive sex education is proven to be more effective than abstinence-only programs, only 22 states mandate sex education. Compared to other developed countries, the U.S holds some of the highest numbers in teen birth rates and sexually transmitted diseases (Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Differing ideologies are another issue faced with sex education. Depending on where instructors receive training and the values of an organization

where the training was received can produce different beliefs about sex education and the content that is taught in schools. There is a strong need for comprehensive sex education because children are either not learning about sex at all or receiving information from other sources that are unreliable and may harm them in the future.

History of Sex Education

Sex education was first introduced to the United States in the 1900s. Jonathan Zimmerman, a professor of education and history at New York University wrote the book “Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education,” that unveils the evolution of sex education in the United States. In his book, he says that during the 1900s was when venereal disease arose in the U.S, which prompted the start of educating people on the disease in order to treat and prevent the spread of it. Throughout the years, sex education developed into educating people about HIV/AIDS. Soon after, sex education started to become a common part of school curriculum in the early 2000s. Even then, there was caution taken when teaching sex education because it intruded on authority figures such as parents and religious leaders. Zimmerman describes that even when sex education was first introduced, it did not have a strong hold on the citizens of the United States (Zimmerman, 2015).

Dawn Graff-Haight, a health education professor at Linfield College also adds her take on how sex education has evolved throughout her years of teaching. Graff-Haight has been teaching health education since 1973. She says one difference in sex education programs today is that the range of information is much greater than it used to be and is mostly all evidence-based now. The U.S provides comprehensive sexuality education, which offers the best practices for delaying sexual intercourse in high school students. Graff-Haight says that the curriculum is not just about teaching anatomy anymore, but teaching about delay tactics, relationship communication, refusal skills, how to use condoms and select contraception (Graff-Haight, 2015).

Current Status of Sex Education in the U.S

Sex education has changed a lot since it was first introduced in the United States. Currently, the United States only mandates sex education in 22 states. Even so, only 13 of those 22 states require the

information to be medically accurate (Siebold, 2013). It can be difficult to determine what programs provide the best information to prepare children, but the Connecticut State Department of Education offers a set of components that make up a strong and affective sex education program. Some points that are covered are the fundamental principles of sex education, effectiveness of different approaches to teaching sex education and support for sex education (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2013). There are many programs that can provide safe sex information to teenagers as well as programs that parents and teens can take together. Video and interactive computer programs are available to help children gain more knowledge about safe sex practices and diseases as well as clinic-based programs. There are also books that offer insight into what an affective sex education program consists of and how to determine if a program is the right fit for a child. Douglas Kirby, a senior research scientist at Education, Training and Research Associates wrote “Emerging answers 2007: New research findings on programs to reduce teen pregnancy,” to provide information about teen pregnancy rates and how to reduce sexual risk behaviors. His book acts more as a guide than a curriculum to teach. In his book, he talks about how teenagers have different responses to comprehensive sex education and abstinence-only programs. Topics such as STDs, HIV/AIDS, pregnancies and contraceptives each have their own guidelines for what a proper program should include and cover in an actual sex education program. He presents information about the high levels of sexual activity that teenagers are engaging in and states how this can affect a child’s life negatively. Kirby also provides factors that can influence a teenager’s engagement in sex such as peer pressure and level of maturity. His book addresses programs that focus on sexual and nonsexual factors and comprehensive and abstinence-only programs as well (Kirby, 2007). One state that is currently recognized for its excellence on providing sex education is Oregon (Sanders, 2015). Having access to basic and essential sex education information is crucial to helping children stay safe and learn to live a healthy life.

Sex Education Should Be Mandatory

Steve Siebold, an author and professional speaker on mental toughness training for Fortune 500 sales teams says it is important to educate students in middle and high school about precautions to take

when deciding to have sex. In the U.S today, children are exposed to many sexual images. What Siebold questions is while there is so much sexual content out there being exposed to children, why is the United States still lacking in educating children about sex? Children have little education about sex and grow up learning to believe that having sex before marriage is immoral. He also says that the human sex drive is a powerful force, so instead of trying to repress that drive, sex education programs can help to reduce risky sexual behaviors in children by providing information on how to have safe sex (Siebold, 2013).

Sex is something that is a natural part of being human and should not be pushed aside because Americans are too afraid to address it (Emmerson, 2013). Emily Bridges and Debra Hauser who both work at the institution Advocates for Youth say that children should have the right to know and understand proper sexual health in order to safely explore their sexuality and live a healthy life (Bridges & Hauser, 2014). It is also important to take what children already know about sex and correct them on any misinformation they may have received from outside sources such as friends or the Internet (Avert, 2014). Magazines at the checkout line in grocery stores and even at public libraries are places where there is a lot of unrealistic sexual imagery that can reach children (Masland, 2004). By educating students on the repercussions of having unsafe sex can reduce the number of teen pregnancies and birthrates in the United States.

Support Toward Sex Education

At Washington Middle School located in Seattle, Washington, children from sixth to eighth-grade are provided a two-week segment on sex education. Speakers from health organizations come in on occasion to help teach children more about the human body and other topics such as STDs and different types of contraception (Washington Middle School, 2015). In Oregon, Yamhill County public health nurses travel to different school districts to help support health classes with additional information that the county wants students to know. Nurses will address topics such as birth control and condoms and prepare demonstrations of how to properly put on condoms. This kind of information is useful to children even if they are not sexually active (Hinthorn, 2015). According to the Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, pediatricians are a good source for children to receive an accurate and comprehensive sex

education as well. Pediatricians develop relationships with families and children overtime, so they are able to educate children on topics such as sex through their own personal knowledge and experiences. This provides more in depth knowledge about safe sex because it is geared toward a single child's own knowledge of what they already know about sex. (Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2001). Parents are another source for information about sex. According to Gladys Martinez, Joyce Abma and Casey Copen, both male and female teenagers were equally likely to confront their parents about how to prevent diseases (Martinez, Abma & Copen, 2010).

Opposition Toward Sex Education

Although children can learn from comprehensive sex education, each state that requires it does not have the same outcome of reducing teen pregnancy and birth rates. Genevra Pittman (2012) says this is because race, socioeconomic status and crime levels in each state are not accounted for. States of low income and high crime rates result in higher rates of teen pregnancies. When it comes to religion, more conservative states go about teaching sex education in a less effective way than liberal states. This means that teens living in a more conservative state are likely to have a higher pregnancy rate. Different policies on sex education vary from state to state and each school district has its own policies and decides what kinds of content should be taught (Lippman, 2000). Even though children may have sex education programs in their schools, different policies and regional location can be a hidden factor of the number of teen pregnancies on the rise that are unaccounted for.

According to Greg Toppo (2015), sex education programs in the U.S are ineffective toward children. He poses the question of what should be taught to children about sex, and also what the purpose of educating children on such an intimate topic was that is supposedly so forbidden. A majority of Americans also say that sex education programs are normalizing sex and contraceptive use instead of normalizing sexual delay, which is not something that is favorable to those who say that abstinence is the best way to preventing pregnancies and the spread of other sexually transmitted diseases. (National Abstinence Education Association, 2015).

Abstinence-only Education Is Ineffective

There have been countless surveys and statistics that show how abstinence-only education is ineffective and could be potentially harmful, both physically and psychologically (Schubach, 2014). According to Emily Gardner most middle and high schools that teach abstinence provide little to no information about birth control and STD prevention. Some abstinence programs can be as extreme as having students pledge their virginity and abstain from having sex until marriage. Even though abstinence is a way to prevent unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, it is an unrealistic approach to reduce teen pregnancies (Gardner, 2015). With sex education programs, children are able to receive proper knowledge about sexuality and understand how their bodies will change as they grow up and the potential risks that come with engaging in sex. Although some may disagree with teaching this content to children, it is the most effective way in reducing teen pregnancies and birthrates. Abstinence programs have been found to be ineffective and provide children with false, distorted information. Teaching abstinence can do more harm than good to developing teenagers because they could grow up with false knowledge about sex (Alford, 2007). Children's fundamental sexual rights are also compromised because abstinence-only programs prohibit any sexual activity before marriage and do not let children explore their own sexuality naturally. A study conducted by Emily Gardner showed how sexual education classes that teach about using protection and contraceptive use have been a more effective strategy in preventing unplanned pregnancies and STDs than teaching just abstinence (Gardner, 2015). Teen birthrates are essentially higher in states that teach abstinence compared to states that teach comprehensive sex education (Toledo, 2011). Without sex education, people would be uncomfortable talking about sex and would be less likely to address issues that could arise from it. Sex is a natural part of developing and growing up, so being educated on it is important for children to understand (Emmerson, 2013).

Not Having Sex Education Is Harmful

The issue with not teaching children about sex is that when they are not exposed to this kind of information they will be less likely to ask questions about it because they are too embarrassed to bring it up (Schubach, 2014). Most Americans try and pretend that sexuality is not a large part of being human and it is something that is not commonly embraced (Toppo, 2015). Withholding information about

relationships, abortion and contraception can be harmful to children in the long run because they will not have the knowledge and understanding of the risks of having sex and the actions to take if ever becoming pregnant or wanting to reduce the risk of pregnancy (Schubach, 2014). Children will not know how to take the necessary precautions of reducing their chances of contracting sexually transmitted diseases or preventing the spread of them.

Sex education is vital to understanding physical changes in the human body that can affect health and well-being. HIV/AIDS is something that affects more than 1.2 million people in the United States with a majority of those people being unaware that they are living with the virus (Centers for Disease Control, 2015). Thomas Davis, a gay African-American male living with HIV says that he did not know he had the virus until his last year of high school. Davis did not know how to react when being diagnosed because he had no knowledge of what the virus was or how it affected him. The state of Colorado where Davis grew up does not mandate sex education, which is why he had no knowledge of what HIV was. After seeing countless doctors, he had learned all that he could about HIV/AIDS and created his own organization called The Poz+ Life. This organization brings together people living with the virus where they can share their stories and ways to live a positive life with HIV. Davis also speaks nationally about how most sex education classes provide children with inaccurate information about HIV/AIDS. He says that the topic of HIV/AIDS do not get as much attention in classrooms as other topics in sex ed such as birth control and STDs.

Not mandating sex education in all schools in the U.S has negatively affected people such as Davis by not providing vital information that concerns human sexual health. Most Americans believe that if they start talking about sex to children they will most likely engage in it at an earlier age, which is a false misconception. It is more harmful to not educate children about sex. If children do not value themselves as a sexually active person, they can only make choices based off of the values that others give them. Children need to be educated in order to make positive decisions for themselves (Davis, 2015).

Other Useful Topics In Sex Education

Preparing children for romantic relationships is just as important as providing them with information on how to stay safe. Richard Weissbourd, Amelia Peterson and Emily Weinstein say that teaching self-respect and communication skills are essential for children to learn. Learning to communicate is important so children who are in relationships can talk with their partner about issues without getting into unwanted situations such as abuse (Weissbourd, Peterson & Weinstein, 2013). According to Dr. Nargund, a reproduction specialist says that children should learn about fertility as well in sex education programs. Instructors have been effectively teaching children about how to delay sexual intercourse and not get pregnant, but now, it is just as important to teach children about fertility. Most women educated or not, are unaware of their own fertility window. Age has a large impact on fertility and so educators should start implementing fertility into children's sex education programs. Just as it is important for children to not engage in sex at a young age, it is important to learn about when to have sex later on in life when thinking about wanting to start a family. This way, children can understand both sides of when to get pregnant and when to prevent it (Weale, 2015).

Adolescents is the time when children should be learning about sex because at that time and age, children are figuring out who they are and developing and making personal decisions about who they identify as. Providing positive role models to children are important, as is the inclusion of a positive representation of lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Information about LGBT people is neglected in most sex education curriculum and especially in abstinence-only programs. Abstinence-only education programs have a specific approach in ignoring information about LGBT people. This neglect is harmful to children and their learning experiences because they are not being informed on non-heterosexual relationships or people who are transgender. Without this information children may not become accepting of LGBT people and people who identify, as LGBT may not feel connected with their school community. By informing children about LGBT people, it will give them a better understanding of who they are and provide more contexts about identities (McGarry, 2013).

Conclusion

By having sex education in schools, children will have the knowledge of sexual health and development that is pertinent to living a healthy life. Children need to understand the important aspects surrounding sex such as the different options of contraception and information on STDs and HIV/AIDS. It can be harmful to withhold information that is important to a child's growth and well-being because they will not know how to live a healthy sexual life as they grow up. Sex education also allows parents to release the burden of trying to explain to their children about the different topics of human sexuality. Parents may not have full knowledge of information about sex that trained instructors might. But even so, the U.S is lacking on providing accurate comprehensive sex education information to students across the country. With holding some of the highest numbers in teen birth rates and pregnancies, the government must mandate sex education in all schools in the U.S. But with such high numbers, the requirement for sex education remains quite low. Sex is a natural part of being human and children have the right to access information that is vital to their health and well-being. Most people tend to think that learning to abstain from sex will prevent STDs and lower teen birth rates, but that is inaccurate. Abstinence-only education programs strip vital information about sex to children that can be harmful to them as they develop into adulthood. Americans tend to shy away at the topic of sex, but rather than push it aside, they should embrace it. People will engage in sex sometime in their life and when that time comes, it is better to be prepared and know how to have safe sex and prevent pregnancies and diseases than to be uninformed and risk the repercussions.

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