Comprehensive Sexual Education: The Need for Sexual Education in School

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Children need every tool to protect themselves in the world, especially knowledge. Not all children and teens across the United States of America receive the same critical knowledge in school or from their parents. This knowledge could help them to protect themselves from life changing situations they are not ready for and life altering diseases. Schools in America are varied in their sexual education courses, ranging from abstinence-only education to comprehensive sexual education based on the choice of the school or district. Abstinence only education teaches avoiding all sexual activity is the only way to protect against any dangers that may accompany sex, whereas comprehensive sexual education teaches the physical, emotional, and social aspects of human sexuality at age appropriate levels for students K-12. Schools should be required to teach comprehensive sexual education to students because providing sexual education to young audiences lowers the risk of unwanted pregnancy as well as reduces the risks of spreading HIV and STDs, and teaches adolescents about bodily autonomy.

Teaching comprehensive sexual education in school reduces the risk of unwanted pregnancy. Teens who engage in sexual activity without proper knowledge risk not using contraceptives correctly or not using them at all. When comparing teens who had received comprehensive sexual education and abstinence-only education, there was a 50% lower risk association with those who received comprehensive sexual education (Kohler, Manhart, & Lafferty, 2008, p.344-351). The risk of teen pregnancy is significantly reduced when using contraceptives, and it is important for youths to know their options before the time comes when they are involved in sexual activity. Adolescents who were educated on contraceptives and other risks prior to engaging in any sexual experiences were more likely to use contraceptives than those adolescents who received sexual education during or after they were first sexually active (Frost & Darroch, 1995, p.188-195). Teenage pregnancy is a problem because of the number of teens who feel and act upon sexual urges. Addressing sexuality as a natural part of teenage life and development will help teens access real and true information in addition to high-quality reproductive care that will allow for them to express their sexuality safely. Lower

pregnancy rates will follow because of education and care, rather than avoidance (Planned Parenthood, 2013, 7). Pregnancy is not the only danger that can be prevented with correct information on the use of protection in sexual situations.

Knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and how to protect against them offers adolescents a variety of options for protecting themselves against STDs and HIV. In an experiment where comprehensive sexual education programs were implemented, 15 of 24 participants (62%) used a combination of preventative behaviors such as increased use of condoms and contraceptives, engaging with fewer sexual partners, and reduced frequency of sexual activities to protect themselves from sexual risk (Kirby, 2008, p.23). Education for options successfully encouraged these youths to take protective measures by offering several different options that could be used in combination to safely express themselves sexually. In another experiment implementing comprehensive programs it was found that half of the studies measuring the impact of perceived HIV risk were effective at increasing the perceived risk of HIV, therefore people were more aware of the risk it poses (Kirby, Laris, & Rolleri, 2007, p.211). Sexual education is encouraged by the government to reduce the spread of diseases and protect the American people. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention calls for all Americans to be educated on HIV to reduce its spread, and aide in the universal integration into the American education systems (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, para. 5). Knowledge about the diseases, the risks posed by them, and prevention tactics is important to protect the physical wellbeing of Americans. Implementing courses in a learning environment where students are predisposed to absorbing information as well as at an age where they are more likely to adopt safe sex practices offers options for safety from the physical problems. There can also be harm beyond physical problems, and comprehensive sexual education can help with these as well.

Comprehensive sexual education educates youth on the emotional aspects of sex as well as empowers them to stand up against sexual assault. Sex is a very intimate situation for many people, and it is important to understand the “destructive emotional and spiritual effects” that are possible when uncommitted adolescent parties become sexually involved (Lickona, 1993, p.84-89). Emotional aspects extend into educating youths about sexual assault as well. Comprehensive sexual education provides a platform for learning about bodily autonomy from a young age, so that adolescents have knowledge to identify sexual assault, understand it is not acceptable, and receive resources if they have been sexually assaulted (Bridges & Hauser, 2014). A prime example for the effects of sexual assault on youths is Elizabeth Smart, who was a victim of human trafficking, and was repeatedly raped. This treatment, along with her abstinence-only education in high school, taught her that she should, and did, feel dirty as well as used to the point where her life had no value. She described it as feeling like a piece of gum that was already chewed, and no one wanted to chew a piece of gum after it had already been used (Anusha, 2013). The emotional aspects that are entwined with sexual actions, especially violent sexual acts, can expand to other struggles of an adolescent’s life. Sexual vulnerability is often linked to other types of vulnerability such as racism, drugs/alcohol, gender inequality, and violence in the home, all of which a child or teen may need aide in dealing with (Gordon, 2010, p.182-183). The emotional tags on sexual relationships, violent or mutual in nature, are a complex issue but one that needs addressing in sexual education to provide knowledge and resources for adolescents.

Some adults are concerned that teaching comprehensive sexual education in the class room is the same as teaching how to preform sexual intercourse itself. Worried about the innocence of children, there is concern about what comprehensive sexual education teaches children, the main concern being that adolescents are taught benefits of abortion, promiscuity, and LGBT rights rather than the health risks of sexual activity (Family Watch International, para. 1). While comprehensive sexual education courses are more in-depth regarding ways to practice safety, the curriculums do not include material encouraging adolescents to have intercourse. Instead the curriculums assume that most will become sexually active or have sexual inclinations at some point in their lives, and prepare the students to face those situations safely. Generally sexual education curriculums are not what most would chose for some light reading, and therefore there is a lot of confusion over what these programs teach. Teaching adolescents about sexuality and protection throughout school via age-appropriate curriculum is essential to be educated about the real world, as well as be prepared in the future to understand sexual activity.

Abstinence, or not engaging in sexual activity at all, is indisputably the best way for people to protect themselves from the dangers that accompany sex. Teaching abstinence-only sexual education, however, is not the most effective way to protect adolescents. To some it may seem that teaching protective measures gives the go-ahead to any sexual activity at any age if protective measures are used, and therefore abstinence is the only way to protect young children or teens from having sex (Kim & Rector, 2010). Abstinence-only education is dangerous for young people because they are not equipped with the proper education for when they make the choice to engage in sexual activities, putting themselves at risk for STD/HIV, unwanted pregnancy, and other problems. Teaching abstinence is one component of comprehensive sexual education, as it is an option and does benefit young adults in protecting themselves if they choose that path. At some point throughout their lives many people will choose to engage in sexual activity, and it is essential to prepare them to protect themselves and their partner sooner rather than later, so no matter what age they make that choice they are knowledgeable already.

To reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies, increase knowledge to reduce the spread of STDs/HIV, and educate adolescents on the emotional aspects of sex as a human action it is important for schools to include a comprehensive sexual education course. Without teaching these real-life risks in a learning environment and making sure youths have access to resources for these subjects, adolescents will fall prey to their own lack of knowledge. Without proper education, they run the risk of not knowing of contraceptives or protection, resulting in unwanted pregnancy and STD/HIV complications, as well as not being educated about bodily autonomy.

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