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Condoms: How Young is Too Young?

More Bay Area Middle Schools Making Them Available to Students

Available in a vast array of eye-catching colors and even candylite flavors, condoms are increasingly being distributed to teenagers to drive home a message about safe sex. But the question for many on both sides of the condom conundrum is: How young is too young?

The San Francisco Unified School District made waves earlier this week for its decision to approve the distribution of condoms to middle schoolers -- not en masse but to individuals who meet certain criteria. The move riled some parents and abstinence-preaching advocacy groups who maintain that school isn't the place for sixth-graders to be furnished with the means to practice safe sex -- or any kind of sex.

But San Francisco isn't alone. Oakland Unified School District adopted a similar policy in June 2014, and although the vast majority of school districts don't offer condoms to middle schoolers, some 25 school-based health centers in Contra Costa County do, without requiring parental consent.

"There wasn't pushback, and it wasn't controversial at all when the policy was passed ... because most parents want their kids to have the resources they need," said Mara Larsen-Fleming, the director of health and wellness for the Oakland district. Larsen-Fleming pointed out that about 8.5 percent of Oakland Unified seventh-graders surveyed as part of the California Healthy Kids Survey in the 2014-15 school year reported being sexually active.

Although there are no national or statewide statistics on the issue, San Francisco Unified participated in a 2013 survey that found about 5.4 percent of its middle schoolers have had sex, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

At the same time, there has been a historic decline in teen pregnancy during the past two decades. Since peaking in the early 1990s, teen pregnancy rates have declined 51 percent and teen births are down 61 percent, said Bill Albert of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

"There has been significant progress in all 50 states and among all racial and ethnic groups that is driven by the magic formula of less sex and more contraception," he said. "More teens are delaying sex, and those that are having sex are using contraception more consistently and carefully."

Still, nearly 2 in every 10 girls in this country will get pregnant by age 20, many from high-poverty areas, he said. And if you consider that just 22 states and Washington, D.C., require that public schools teach sex education, let alone provide young people with access to contraception, "it seems safe to say that the effort S.F. has undertaken is one that few other school districts have," Albert said.

But some parents said the whole idea of making condoms available to someone as young as 12 fills them with unease.

"Whoa, in middle school? I can't even imagine," said Shannon Urrutia, a Martinez resident who has a son in middle school in Pleasant Hill. "Sure, you hear about condoms in high school, but in middle school? On one hand, you know it's happening out there, and it's better that kids are safe, but it just seems too young -- and it goes against our religious beliefs."

At 25 school-based health centers -- four in middle schools -- that serve the West Contra Costa, Mt. Diablo, Pittsburg, Antioch and John Swett school districts, all run by Contra Costa County Health Services, students 12 years and older can access primary health care and reproductive health services, which can include being given condoms, said Contra Costa County Health Services spokeswoman Victoria Balladares. That's in accordance with California laws that require health clinics to offer the services -- no parental consent or notification required.

Likewise, San Jose Unified doesn't provide condoms to its students; however, two school-based health centers at the north end of the district in downtown San Jose, which are run by the Santa Clara County Public Health Department, will offer condoms to students ages 12 and older, consistent with California law.

"It's consistent with the practices of other school-based health centers in other counties," said Jason Willis, the district's assistant superintendent of community engagement and accountability.

Oakland's decision came about when staff from the district's school-based health center partners expressed concern that although they were allowed by school policy to provide condoms to high school students, they were prohibited from giving them out to middle schoolers even though they were seeing a number that were at risk, Larsen-Fleming said.

“The numbers of students were few and far between, but the ones that need them are at really high risk for sexual exploitation, STDs and pregnancy, and there are a lot of compounding risks,” she said. “(The clinicians) really felt their hands were tied in helping these students, so they asked us to relook at the policy.”

Similar to the policy adopted in San Francisco, at Oakland’s school-based health centers, “no one who just comes in and asks for condoms just gets condoms and walks out,” said Joanna Bauer, who supervises a clinic in East Oakland. Instead, middle schoolers also get referrals to resources, counseling and health education. They must undergo a pre-screening and psychosocial assessment by a school nurse or another licensed health professional, said district spokesman Isaac Kos-Read. San Francisco and Oakland do not allow parents to opt out of their programs, nor do the programs require parental consent.

Albert said the research is absolutely clear that providing condoms to young people doesn’t encourage them to have more sex or at younger ages. But Camille Giglio, director of California’s Right to Life committee and spokeswoman for the No to Irresponsible Sex Education Coalition, said that she was troubled by the new policy.

“It’s sending the wrong message to students,” she said. “It is saying that your body is a playground for someone else, ... and a lot of kids don’t have enough discipline to continue using them or other types of contraception.”

Lupe Rodriguez, a spokeswoman from Planned Parenthood in Mar Monte, said the move to offer condoms to middle school students at school-based health centers, where nurses, counselors and trained professionals can help students make more responsible decisions, is more important than ever.

“Young people are being exposed to more sexually charged content through social media and YouTube these days at a younger age,” she said.

Nicole Peters, who has a fifth-grader at Hidden Valley Elementary in Martinez, recalled it was in middle school that many of her own friends started to become sexually active, so why be in denial about it?

“I’m one of those parents that believes in being open with my kids,” she said. “It comes down to parents to teach their kids values and morals -- and to do all we can to prepare them to make the right decisions.”