

MTV May Be Partially Responsible For The Lowest Teen Pregnancy Rate In U.S. History, Plus 14 People On What Sex Ed Never Taught Them

While the state of sex education in the United States is nothing short of abysmal, recent data from the National Center for Health Statistics shows that the rate of teen pregnancy is at an all-time low in the U.S.. Another recently released report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which looked at the 2013-2014 school year, found that only half of high schools (and less than one-fifth of middle schools) “are teaching all of the sex education topics recommended by the [CDC].”

Additionally, the CDC report explains, the least likely topic to be covered was how to obtain and properly use condoms. So, since our nation’s joke of a sex ed curriculum certainly can’t take all the credit for this decline in teen pregnancies, what is affecting this change? Surprisingly, many advocates are looking toward MTV and its programs like *Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant* as one of the factors helping to reduce unplanned pregnancies among teenagers.

The data from the National Center for Health Statistics, which studied information between the years 2013 and 2014, found that the birthrate among youths aged 15-19 dropped 9 percent. That comes out to 24.2 births per every 1,000 women — the lowest numbers that we’ve ever seen. This data looks at teenagers from all races. Bill Albert of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy told BuzzFeed, “The majority of adults think it’s going up, rather than going down. This is the greatest story never told.” Albert continued to explain, as BuzzFeed reports, “that a combination of both contraception and abstinence teaching has shifted behavior. He also credited the MTV shows *Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant* with exposing teens to the unglamorous reality of teenage pregnancy. ‘Young people tell us that these shows are far more sobering than salacious,’ he said.”

As Mic reports, researchers and advocates in 2014 previously found connections between a drop in teen pregnancy rates and these MTV programs. The National Bureau of Economic Research found a 5.7 percent decrease in the US teen birthrate in the subsequent 18 months after the *16 and Pregnant* premiere. EJ Dickson writes for Mic, “While correlation does not equal causation, there might be a grain of truth to the idea that the show is scaring away teens from having unprotected sex.”

The fact that less young people than ever before are having to face the struggles of unplanned pregnancy is certainly fantastic news, but we can’t discuss any successes without also discussing the horrific sex education provided to our youth (if they are even provided with any sex education at all). We should not have to rely on MTV or a student’s access to cable to make up for our lacking national curricula. For starters, only 22 states and Washington DC are mandated to have sexual education in their public schools, and of that, only 13 states are required to present “medically-accurate” information to their students. (?!?!?!?) 39 states are mandated to include abstinence-only education in their lessons, despite study after study revealing the absolutely ineffective and harmful nature of this kind of education. In 2008, The University of Washington, Seattle “found that teens who received comprehensive sex education were 60 percent less likely to get pregnant or to get someone pregnant.”

When the National Center for Health Statistics released their data about declining teen pregnancy rates, they also specified that Alaska, Montana, Hawaii, Maine, Vermont, North Dakota and Wyoming showed little to no changes in the teen pregnancy rate within their states. Dickson writes for Mic, “Five of these states have sex ed curricula that stress or cover abstinence, either alone or in tandem with contraception education, while Wyoming and Alaska do not require that sex ed be taught in schools at all.” What a coincidence!

Yes, things are slowly improving, and this declining teen pregnancy rate is certainly evidence of that. But the road ahead of us is long. Teen pregnancy isn’t as frequent now, but what about STIs? The CDC says that, yearly, “half of all new STIs in the country occur among young men and women.” Lynn Barclay, President of the American Sexual Health Association, previously told Bustle, “When we finally give in and help our young people and all people be healthy, we, as a nation, will be better off. We will get there, but how long will it take?”

I asked 14 people about their experiences in high school sex education classes, and what information they didn’t get to learn about pregnancy and contraception.

1. Susan, 23

Since it was a Catholic school, we were only informed about abstinence. We were left completely in the dark about birth control options. I found this ridiculous since it was very obvious that a majority of the class was, in fact, sexually active. We had a new teacher who was too embarrassed to talk about the required book *Sex has a Price Tag* (I believe this was a “wait until marriage” kind of book), so we had to watch *Juno* instead. I only wish that while we were at a religious school, they didn’t try to stay ignorant of the fact that people needed to be informed of certain things from a credible source. In the end, I learned everything from the internet. Regardless of the accuracy of the information, it was all I could really rely on.

2. Ariel, 23

I didn’t have sex ed in high school, but in middle school, my sex ed teacher glued two pieces of different colored construction paper together and pulled them apart in front of us. Little pieces of paper were stuck to each side. She told us that this is what happens when we have sex with someone: we are permanently connected to them. No matter how hard we try, we would never be able to pick ourselves clean of the other person. I’m still not exactly sure what she meant by this... I wish I had been told that as long as I use birth control, it is a perfectly safe and legitimate choice to have sex before marriage.

3. Molly, 23

My experience was focused more on scaring me into abstinence (examining photos of STDs, watching videos of home births, etc.) then giving me practical knowledge of how to have sex in an emotionally and physically safe and responsible way.... I was not shown how to put on a condom. There was no mention of how to put on a condom or about oral contraceptives. No mention of UTIs, which are so common among women, especially when they first begin to have sex. There was no discussion of sex that wasn’t between a straight man and a straight woman. And I went to a public school in the supposedly liberal city of Los Angeles. Who knows what was taught elsewhere.

4. Elliott, 30

I’m sure we are a long ways from changing the following aspect of sex ed, but I wish that it wasn’t so sterile. It was discussed like we were learning how plants were pollinated. I think consent was discussed somewhat, but without much sophistication. There was no discussion, it was all lecture, with a lot of what I’d consider vaguely archaic terms like “heavy petting.” There wasn’t much information on probabilities for STDs either, as opposed to statements like “you can get”, which I think discourages risk management. Also, they kind of implied that sperm were some kind of comandos that could cause pregnancy even from “grinding.”

5. Evelyn, 23

It would’ve been good to learn about all the different forms of female birth control and their pros and cons.

6. Delia, 26

I actually can’t remember having sex ed in high school.

7. Jill, 23

I wish my health class had explained each method of birth control — how to use it, how to obtain it, and how effective it was. Health was one semester, and the teacher had to cover many other parts of “health” including “sexual health.” Not only was curriculum space likely an issue, but I went to a Catholic high school. Probably because of conservative values and religious philosophy, health classes did not include many explicit details about sex or ways to prevent pregnancy in the event someone did actually have sex. My teacher never said “abstinence is the ONLY moral and right way to prevent pregnancy” but it was implied that abstinence was the most effective (probably true) and most preferred (not by everyone...) way. We seemed to have plenty of time to learn about STIs and the dangers of having sex, but again, we did not receive much information about birth control.

8. Ali, 24

I feel like there weren’t a lot of contraception discussions (i.e. options). I wish I would have learned more about what it takes to actually get pregnant. I feel like most classes just say protect yourself or else! Learning about ovulation times would have been helpful.

9. Jessica, 25

My sex ed class consisted of a Christian zealot telling me that I would go to hell if I had sex before marriage. And also that the only way to keep from getting pregnant and contracting AIDS was to completely abstain from sex. No methods of contraception, safe sex, or safe/healthy relationships were discussed. As my sex ed class covered no valid information at all, I wish it had covered methods of safe sex, methods of contraception, and had approached it from a scientific and medical standpoint, rather than a religious one. To be frank, religion should have no part of a sex education class. The religious aspect should be a private endeavor taken on by the individual student and the individual student’s family.

10. Melissa, 25

While I got to see a condom demonstration and I learned about The Pill, I had no idea how many other contraceptives existed (which would incidentally end up being so much safer for me) until I was years out of high school.

11. Ingrid, 24

Catholic school = no real sex ed. We knew how babies were made and that you could get STDs. That's pretty much it when it comes to an education. I feel like all the sex ed was ~under the radar~. I was in a special "health careers" program, and our teacher was very into the science part of it. So like, when telling us about condoms, and even when talking about birth control, it was only a "Here's what it does to your body" type of talk. Sex ed in Catholic school is weird in the sense that it doesn't really exist. And so, two girls were pregnant when I graduated...

12. Calista, 26

I had abstinence-only sex ed. It was like a week long and we got bracelets that said "I'm worth the wait." We had a series of speakers come in and talk about how sex ruined their lives and so now they're waiting until marriage.

13. Jenny, 33

I feel like actually they just gave us zero specific information? Like, I think they kept it vague so no one's parents would get mad. They never mentioned that you can get pregnant pretty easily from a sloppy pull-out, which I would think would be the first thing you'd want to tell teens.

14. Jackie, 28

Basically, we had abstinence and condoms put forth as a form of birth control and family planning, but we definitely weren't instructed on how to actually DO anything but abstain. I don't even think we were shown a condom IRL. Overall, I think I was relatively lucky. What I was taught was medically accurate, if incomplete. There was definitely some squeamishness about explaining the nitty-gritty of sex, and sexual politics, and things like "how do you use a condom?" or "what other kinds of birth control exist?" Pregnancy was just regarded as "don't do that." They had the whole "carry around this crying doll for awhile" experiment, but it was only extra credit and I think everyone sufficiently got the point.