

# TIME

## Why Schools Can't Teach Sex Ed

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In spring 2014, parents in the normally progressive Bay Area city of Fremont, California, started a campaign to get a book removed from the 9th grade curriculum for the five district high schools, arguing it was inappropriate for their 13 and 14-year olds. They hired a local lawyer and put together a petition with more than 2500 signatures.

Their target: *Your Health Today*, a sex-ed book published by McGraw Hill. It offers the traditional advice and awkward diagrams plus some considerably more modern tips: a how-to for asking partners if they've been tested for STDs, a debate on legalizing prostitution. And then there was this: "[One] kind of sex game is bondage and discipline, in which restriction of movement (e.g. using handcuffs or ropes) or sensory deprivation (using blindfolds or masks) is employed for sexual enjoyment. Most sex games are safe and harmless, but partners need to openly discuss and agree beforehand on what they are comfortable doing."

"I was just astounded," says Fremont mom Teri Topham. "My daughter is 13. She needs to know how boys feel. I frankly don't want her debating with other 13-year-olds how well the adult film industry is practicing safe sex." Another parent, Asfia Ahmed, who has eight and ninth grade boys, adds: "It assumes the audience is already drinking alcohol, already doing drugs, already have multiple sexual partners...Even if they are experimenting at this age, it says atypical sexual behaviors are normal."

But school board members contend that 9th grade students have already been exposed to the contents of the book—and much, much more. They argue that even relatively modern sex ed has even not begun to reckon with what kids are now exposed to in person and online.

The singer Rihanna, for example, has legions of young fans. Her music video for the song *S&M*—viewed more than 57 million times on YouTube so far—shows the artist, pig-tied and writhing, cooing "chains and whips excite me." It then cuts to her using a whip on men and women with mouths covered in duct tape.

"I think denying that [sex] is part of our culture in 2014 is really not serving our kids well," says Lara Calvert-York, president of the Fremont school board, who argues that kids are already seeing hyper-sexualized content—on after school TV. "So, let's have a frank conversation about what these things

are if that's what the kids need to talk about," she says. "And let's do it in classroom setting, with highly qualified, credentialed teachers, who know how to have those conversations. Because a lot of parents don't know how to have that conversation when they're sitting next to their kids and it comes up in a TV show. Everyone is feeling a little awkward."

But the Fremont parents aren't budging. "Any good parent monitors what their child has access to," says Topham. "We don't say, 'they're going to drink anyway, let's give them a car with bigger airbags.'" The parents note that the book was actually written for college students, and refers to college-related activities like bar crawls. (While acknowledging this, the book's author Sara L. C. Mackenzie, believes it's appropriate for high schoolers; her children read it at 13.)

The book has been shelved, at least for this year. But the problem isn't going away. The Fremont showdown is a local skirmish in what has become a complicated and exhausting battle that schools and parents are facing across the nation. How, when, and what to tell kids about sex today? TIME reviewed the leading research on the subject as well as currently available resources to produce the information that follows, as well as specific guides to how and when to talk to kids on individual topics.

### Overexposed Teens

The average American young person spends over seven hours a day on media devices, often using multiple systems at once. Studies show that more than 75% of primetime TV programs contain sexual content, and the mention of sex on TV can occur up to eight to 10 times in a single hour. And that's the soft stuff: A national sample study of 1,500 10 to 17-year-olds showed that about half of those that use the Internet had been exposed to online porn in the last year.

How do you learn appropriateness and consent in a culture where Beyoncé's song about pleasuring a guy in a car is championed by some as feminist and others as lewd? Or where Robin Thicke's *Blurred Lines* can refer to violent sexual acts in a music video viewed on the web at least 36 million times? Or where, in a major news story, it becomes apparent that wholesome girls from teen adventure movies send naked photos. Or where primetime TV shows—the kind you often watch with your family—not infrequently make reference to anal sex?

Uncensored media is not harmless. Longitudinal studies suggest exposure to sexual content on TV and other media in early adolescence is linked to double the risk of early sexual intercourse, and young people whose parents limit their TV time are less likely to partake in early sexual behavior. Other studies have found that 10% of young women who had their first sexual experience in their teenage years say it was not their choice, and the younger they were, the more likely this was the case. While the vast majority of primetime programming contains sexual content, only 14% of sexual incidents mention the risks or responsibilities associated with sexual activity according to research from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

And that's just the media teenagers consume. There's a whole different set of issues raised by the other ways they use tools of communication.

"I was sexting and sending pictures to a guy older than me because he told me he loved me and i believed him and he showed everyone my picture and i had everyone asking me for photos and making fun of me and calling me a slut."

"me n my girlfriend have been datin a year an almost 2months, she has sent me naked pics of her and she asked me to send her some of me naked, but i dont want too and i dont want to lose her either."

"My girlfriend will text me good morning, if i dont respond right away she will send a question mark with a question, then a few more question marks, then call me. If i don't respond she gets really upset and angry. is this abuse? what do i do?"

Young people now engage in relationships increasingly via technology, which means they're able to connect in a variety of ways and at a speed and frequency not known to prior generations. They also appear to be more comfortable showing skin. A 2014 survey published in the journal *Pediatrics* among over 1,000 early middle school students found 20% reporting receiving sexually explicit cell phone text or picture messages (more colloquially known as "sexts") and 5% reporting sending them.

While many parents think that explaining the consequences of sending out explicit images will get teens to stop, they may be missing the point. "There's a pressure that people feel to send a sext as a digital currency of trust," says Emily Weinstein a Harvard University doctoral student who collected the texts above from an online forum run by MTV, for a study on the digital stress of adolescence. "It's a way to say to someone, here is a thing that could destroy me, I trust that you won't use it."

### **Sex Ed is Not Keeping Up**

On paper, the United States is checking all the right boxes of managing teen sexual behavior. The national pregnancy rate is at a record low and it appears teens are waiting longer to have sex, and those that are sexually active are using birth control more than previous years. But these numbers only tell a tiny snippet of the story.

"Sex education in the U.S. has only gotten worse," says Victor Strasburger, an adolescent medicine expert and distinguished professor of pediatrics at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine. "Most of the time they don't talk about contraception, they don't talk about risk of pregnancy, STIs [sexually transmitted infections]—certainly not abortion. At some point you would think adults would come to their senses and say hey we have to counteract this."

Strasburger says the U.S. shouldn't base success on its teen pregnancy numbers: "Everyone else's teen pregnancy rate has gone down too. Before we pat ourselves on the back, we should acknowledge that we still have the highest rate in the Western World."

Not only does sex education still virtually not exist in some areas of the country, but school programs that do teach kids about what used to be called the facts of life start too late. A recent CDC study showed that among teens ages 15-17 who have had sex, nearly 80% did not receive any formal sex education before they lost their virginity. Or, if they did, it was only to discourage them from being sexually active. "Parents and legislators fail to understand that although they may favor abstinence-only sex education (despite the lack of any evidence of its effectiveness), the media are decidedly not abstinence only," reads a 2010 American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement.

"I had sex with my older boyfriend at 16," says Ashley Jones, 22, a young Georgia woman. "Suddenly my dad wanted to talk about the birds and the bees. I was like, what? It's too late!" (The Kinsey institute puts the average age that kids have first have sex at 16.9 for boys and 17.4 for girls.)

Current sex education, where it does exist, often teaches the basic plumbing, but it's not answering the questions young people really have when it comes to sexuality: What should I do when my girlfriend/boyfriend is pressuring me to have sex? What on earth was happening in that video I probably shouldn't have clicked online? What do I do when my best friend tells me they're gay—or I think I am?

School-wide sex education largely ignores gay men and women. "I think the Internet is one of the most commonly used sources for young LGBT folks to gain information," says Adrian Nava, 19, who says his question about same sex relationships in his Colorado high school sex ed class that was shot down by the teacher. "In some ways it's great because online forums tend to be supportive and positive. But there's so much misinformation that reinforces negative feelings."

Sex ed courses tends to hyper-focus on the girls. "Girls are the ones who have babies," says Victoria Jennings, director of the Institute for Reproductive Health at Georgetown University, whose research has shown there are globally more programs developed to help young girls navigate their sexuality than to help boys. Given the fact that recent CDC literature shows 43.9% of women have experienced some form of unwanted sexual violence that was not rape, and 23.4% of men have experienced the same, public health experts agree both sexes need education on appropriate behavior.

It doesn't help that the two groups are getting quite different messages. "The way we talk to boys is antiquated and stereotypical," says Rosalind Wiseman, educator and author of *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, about teen girls and *Masterminds and Wingmen*, on boys. "There's an assumption that they're insensitive, sex-crazed, hormone-crazed. It's no surprise that so many boys disengage from so many conversations about sex ed."

We teach girls how to protect themselves, adds Wiseman, and their rights to say yes and no to sexual behaviors. But we don't teach boys the complexities of these situations or that they're a part of the conversation. "We talk to them in sound bites: 'no means no.' Well, of course it does, but it's really confusing when you're a 15-year-old boy and you're interacting with girls that are trying out their sexuality," she adds. Data show that boys are less likely than girls to talk to their parents about birth control or "how to say no to sex," and 46% of sexually experienced teen boys do not receive formal instruction about contraception before they first have sex compared to 33% of teen girls.

Yet completely reshaping the sex education landscape is currently almost impossible, not just because of disagreements like the one in Fremont, but because schools lack resources. There's historically large funding for abstinence-only education, but supporters of comprehensive sex education—which deals with contraception, sexually transmitted diseases and relationships—face significant logistical and financial barriers.

Only 22 states and the District of Columbia require public schools teach sex education. Oklahoma and Alabama—two states with the highest teen pregnancy rates—don't require any sex ed. And few states really take a critical look at sexuality in the way kids encounter it, through TV shows, movies, and yes, even pornography. It's like taking a child to a water-park without teaching them how to swim.

This leaves the ball in the parents' court. A recent survey from Planned Parenthood shows that 80% of parents are willing to have "the talk" with their kids, but in order for these conversations to have real meaning, parents need to understand just how much sexual exposure their kids are getting daily and how soon. They also need to overcome the desire to lecture, and kids need to understand that the conversation is less about rules and more about guidance. All of this while having a conversation about what is usually a very private matter.

Some experts believe that many of the obstacles can be overcome by approaching the adolescent in his or her own habitat: using the Internet or cell phones as learning tools.

"Perhaps it's time to fully embrace the power of 21st century communication and direct it toward public health goals more deliberately," wrote Strasburger and Sarah Brown, the CEO of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, in a July report. "Online material and social media could help to fill the gaps in sex education and support for many young people."

Websites like *Bedsider.org* (developed by Brown's group) offer easy to understand facts about contraception in an open-minded and legitimate way. As do other websites like *StayTeen.org*, *GoAskAlice!* and *Sex*, etc. On *Scarleteen.com*, educators answer questions from "How do I behave sexually without someone thinking I'm a slut?" to questions about pubic hair.

For reaching teenagers right where they gather, it's hard to beat YouTube. Laci Green has made a name for herself by providing frank and funny videos that answer common questions young people have and dispel myths. Her approach is not for everyone; two of her more popular episodes are "You Can't POP Your Cherry! (Hymen 101)" and "Sex Object BS."

Texting has also proved to be a surprisingly useful tool. Some health departments and community groups in states like California and North Carolina have established services where teens can text their sex-related questions to a number and receive a texted response in 24 hours, allowing for anonymity. Planned Parenthood offers a chat/text program where teens and young adults can either live text or chat with a Planned Parenthood staffer. Since the launch in May this year, there have been a total of 393,174 conversations.

Should parents really cede sex education to the digital realm? Given that an incredibly high number of young people go to the Internet for information on sex anyway, directing them to quality material that appeals to their age range may be the one of the better ways to circumvent poor education at school. Showing kids a reliable website can't replace a good conversation, but it can complement one.

In Fremont, parents are supplementing their children's sex education in different ways. "I don't just rely on the school to teach sex ed to my children," says Topham. "I told my kids about [sex] when they are in third grade, and open up the dialogue at that point. When we are watching movies together or discussing current events that may touch on this topic, we talk about it."

Not all parents are prepared to go as far as Topham: Her five kids did not get a smartphone until they were 18 and they can't have TVs or computers in their bedrooms. "You can be the best kid possible but we don't want you to have porn in your pocket," she says. To some her views may seem extreme, but when it comes to sex ed, Topham's decided it's better to take no chances. In the age of Innocence vs. the Internet, some parents won't go down without a fight.