

Families Are Talking

This issue

of *Families Are Talking* is designed to give you tools to advocate for sexuality education. It includes information about different types of sexuality education programs, characteristics of effective programs, information about state laws related to sexuality education, tips on how to advocate for sexuality education programs in your community, and stories from parents who are advocates.

What Does It Mean TO BECOME AN Advocate?

Speaking up for something that you care about makes you an advocate. Advocates make a difference by expressing their concerns and desires to friends, family, neighbors, and, ultimately,

the people that have the power to make a change. You can advocate for anything—whether it's after-school activities at the community center, new uniforms for the young people that play in

the local Little League, or a more comprehensive sexuality education program at school. It only takes one person to make a difference!

Get Informed

Find out about the sexuality education program in your local school. Ask your children, teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members about the programs that are being taught in your community.

Contact the maternal and child health program within your state's health department to determine local organizations that have received federal and state funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. (Check the "blue pages" or government pages of your local phone book for contact information.)

Conduct a local poll or organize a focus group discussion to find out how local residents feel about sexuality education.

Join networks that will keep you informed. SIECUS' Advocates Network is one way to keep on top of the critical federal and state developments related to sexuality education and sexual health issues. You can sign up online at www.siecus.org/policy/Advocates/advo0000.html or call SIECUS in Washington, DC at 202/265-2405.

MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN Your Community

It's never too soon to get involved! Advocate early for sexuality education so that your school will have a comprehensive program in place by the time your children are old enough to attend.

To become an advocate for your local sexuality education program, get support, get involved, and get the message out. These strategies can help you support a comprehensive sexuality education program as well as challenge abstinence-only programs in your community.

What Is

SEXUALITY EDUCATION?

One of the most important things parents and caregivers can do is to help their children develop a healthy attitude toward sexuality. While parents and caregivers are

the main ones to teach their children about sexuality issues, school-based programs can supplement what young people learn at home.

Families Are Talking is a quarterly newsletter supported by a grant from The Annie E. Casey Foundation. It contains information to help families communicate about sexuality-related issues.

Get Support

Contact local family planning, teen pregnancy prevention, HIV prevention, and advocacy organizations to find out what groups or coalitions are already working on this issue and how you can participate.

Create a community group that supports school sexuality education programs that are comprehensive. Have parents, caregivers, community members, and students sign a statement or petition of support.

Encourage your local Parent Teacher Association/ Organization (PTA/O) to participate in this issue. Ask them to endorse your efforts. Consider making a presentation on the importance of a comprehensive sexuality education program at their next meeting and bring young people to provide testimonials.

Involve faith-based organizations. Many denominations have affirmed the need for sexuality education both within their own faith and in public schools. Ask religious leaders who support comprehensive sexuality education programs to discuss the issue with their congregation.

What Type of Sexuality Education Is YOUR CHILD Taught at School?

When discussing the type of sexuality education young people should receive there are two distinct schools of thought: comprehensive sexuality education and abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. In reality, most schools in the United States teach programs that fall somewhere between these two ends of the spectrum and are often called by many different names.

Comprehensive education addresses the broadest range

of topics. Other programs that include contraceptive and disease prevention information but that may cover less topics than comprehensive programs are often referred to as:

- abstinence-based
- abstinence-centered
- abstinence-focused
- medically accurate
- responsible

Programs that focus solely on abstinence, do not provide

information on contraception or disease prevention, and may contain fear-based messages are often referred to as:

- abstinence-only
- character education

Many times the names of these programs are deceiving. Therefore, it is important to determine what your children are or aren't learning in their sexuality education class. Contact your children's school and ask to review the curricula and textbook.

COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

This type of program covers an extensive list of topics related to sexuality and provides opportunities for young people to develop skills and learn facts. Comprehensive sexuality education:

- starts in kindergarten and continues through the twelfth grade
- provides developmentally and culturally appropriate information on many topics related to sexuality, such as sexual development, reproductive health, relationships, affection, intimacy, body image, and gender roles
- helps young people develop communication, decision-making, and other personal skills
- helps young people become sexually healthy adults¹

ABSTINENCE-ONLY-UNTIL-MARRIAGE PROGRAMS

These types of programs emphasize abstinence from all sexual behaviors. Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs:

- do not include information about contraception or disease prevention methods
- often provide inaccurate medical information, exaggeration of statistics, and fear- and shame-based messages to encourage young people to avoid sexual activity
- are popular despite the fact that there is no credible, scientifically sound research that supports their effectiveness²

1. National Guidelines Task Force, *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, 2nd Edition, Kindergarten-12th Grade* (New York: Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 1996).

2. D. Kirby, *Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy* (Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2001).

Get Involved

Locate the health curricula review committee in your school district, county, city, or state. These committees, usually made up of parents, teachers, professionals, and students, are responsible for evaluating sexuality education curricula before they are adopted by

schools. As such, they often have the most powerful influence on sexuality education in their communities. Ask how you can join the committee.

Locate the group or task force in charge of overseeing or monitoring abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in

your state or territory by calling the maternal and child health program in your state's health department. Ask how you can participate as a citizen member of the oversight body. (You may find that there is no such task force. If so, write the governor and ask him or her to create one.)

Get Your Message Out

Contact your governor, state health commissioner, state education commissioner, state representatives and senators, federal representatives and senators, city council members, mayor, municipal officials, school board members, and school superintendents. Let them know your opinion about sexuality education by signing a petition or writing a letter. (You

can usually find contact information for these individuals in the “blue pages” or government pages of your local phone book.)

Get the local media involved in this issue. Find out which reporter writes about school-related or health issues. Call and ask to speak about your concerns. Inform the reporter about the results of your local poll or petition to support sexuality education. Invite the reporter to a sexuality

education class; a roundtable discussion about the topic with youth, educators, and parents; a student rally; or a community group meeting.

Write an article for your local paper’s opinion/editorial section. Determine which local organizations have newsletters or other periodicals that might also publish the article. You can also write a letter to the editor in response to something that the

newspaper published or something that was in the news or happened in the community. You can also respond to other people’s letters to the editor.

Use the Internet to get your message across. Create a web site, message board, or list serv dedicated to comprehensive sexuality education in your area or contribute opinions to those that already exist.

Young People Are Not Getting What They Need

Today’s youth are bombarded with messages from television, music, movies, and the Internet. Yet the high rates of teen pregnancy as well as STD and HIV infections suggest that they are clearly not getting the accurate, unbiased information about sexuality that they need.

Unfortunately, in recent years, the U.S. government has provided

hundreds of millions of dollars for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs that have the exclusive purpose of telling teens not to have sex until they are married. These programs do not provide young people with the basic information and skills to help them deal with challenges that they may face as they grow up. They are also not proven effective.

What Does Comprehensive Sexuality Education Include?

Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten – 12th Grade is a publication that can help you evaluate the program or curriculum at your child’s school. It identifies six key concept areas that are included in a comprehensive sexuality education program. It also provides age-appropriate information and messages for 36 sexuality-related topics.

For a free copy of the *Guidelines*, go to www.siecus.org/pubs/guidelines/guidelines.pdf. A free copy of the Spanish version, *Guía Para Una Educación Sexual Integral Para La Juventud Hispana/Latina: Kindergarten – 12 Grado*, is available at www.siecus.org/pubs/Hispanic-Latino_Guidelines_spanish.pdf. If you don’t have Internet access, call SIECUS at 212/819-9770, extension 0, for order information.

Young People Benefit from Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Many parents and caregivers worry that teaching about sex is an invitation to their teens to have sex. However scientific evaluations of sexuality education, HIV prevention education, and adolescent pregnancy prevention programs have consistently found that these programs can help delay intercourse, reduce the frequency of intercourse, reduce the number of sexual partners, and increase condom and contraceptive use among teens who are sexually active.³

These programs allow students to obtain the information and develop the skills they need to make healthy, responsible decisions about their sexuality throughout their lifetime.

3. D. Kirby, *Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy* (Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2001).

Each State Decides What Young People Will Learn at School

States vary in their approaches to sexuality education. Although they can enact a mandate for sexuality or STD/HIV education courses, most do not. Instead, they let local school districts decide for themselves. In fact, less than half of the states require that some form of sexuality education be taught in the schools.

Whether or not a course mandate is in place, states can dictate content for those sexuality

or STD/HIV education courses that schools choose to teach. For example, content mandates for sexuality education courses in some states require an abstinence-only-until-marriage message. Other states require teaching STD/HIV prevention methods.

To determine if your state has course or content mandates, check the SIECUS web site at www.siecus.org/school/sex_ed/mandate/mand0000.html.

FAMILIES ARE TALKING

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We invite you to visit www.familiesaretalking.org for more information and publications including the Spanish translation of this newsletter, *La familia habla*.

The Spanish Web site www.lafamiliahbla.org is currently under construction.

Join our listserv to receive future *Families Are Talking* newsletters and information. E-mail families_are_talking_subscribe@topica.com to subscribe.

You must e-mail from the address you want to receive the information.

10 Characteristics of an Effective Sexuality Education Program

Research shows that effective sexuality education programs share a number of common characteristics. They:

- 1 focus on reducing small numbers of sexual behaviors
- 2 are based on theories that have been effective in reducing other risky behaviors
- 3 give a clear message about abstaining from sexual activity as well as using contraception
- 4 provide basic accurate information
- 5 include activities that address peer and social pressures related to sex
- 6 allow students to practice communication, negotiation, and refusal skills
- 7 use a variety of teaching methods
- 8 are tailored to the age, culture, and experience of students
- 9 last a sufficient length of time
- 10 are led by teachers who are genuinely interested in the topic and receive adequate training

Adapted from D. Kirby, *Effective Curricula and Their Common Characteristics* (Santa Cruz, CA: ETR Associates, www.etr.org/recapp/programs/effectiveprograms.htm). For more information call ETR Associates at 831/438-4060.

Parents Take Action: Stories from the Front Lines

Fighting Fear-Based Messages

A mother in Bradenton, FL, found out that her daughter attended a presentation at school that featured Pam Stenzel, a national abstinence-only-until-marriage and anti-abortion speaker. The parent believed Ms. Stenzel's presentation provided inaccurate information and was upset that the messages contradicted her own views.

After learning that Ms. Stenzel's program indeed presents fear-based messages, uses inaccurate statistics about STDs, exaggerates condom failure rates, and is biased about abortion, the mom brought the story to the press and local organizations. She also tracked down a Florida policy that requires that all health education, including that provided by guest speakers, provide medically accurate information. Once they were informed of this state policy, the Bradenton School Board assured the parent that they would not invite Ms. Stenzel to speak at their school again.

Starting a Sex Ed Program in San Francisco

Parents of students in an elementary school (kindergarten through fifth grade) in San Francisco found themselves unprepared to answer questions

from their seven-year-olds about sexuality. The parents turned to their children's teacher for guidance only to learn that she, too, felt unable to answer the questions. At this point, they realized the need for a sexuality education program in their school.

After two years of working with the head of the school, the parents formed the *Sexuality & Health Education Curriculum Advisory Committee*. It was carefully planned to include at least one parent from each grade that would have a sexuality education class.

The committee made a number of recommendations about the program. First, it suggested that the program begin in the second grade. It also suggested in-house teachers rather than outside professionals because it felt parents, teachers, and students would be more comfortable.

The committee also set out to find age-appropriate books and curricula for the program and contacted SIECUS and other organizations for suggestions. It decided on *Our Whole Lives*, a comprehensive curriculum. It also selected *It's So Amazing*, an illustrated children's book by Robie Harris. To help parents understand the importance of sexuality education, the committee scheduled a training.

Even though the training was well attended, not everyone supported the program. After one parent opposed the curriculum, a teacher decided not to finish teaching the class because she was uncomfortable with the material.

Using the lessons learned throughout this process, the parents improved the program in 2003. For example, teachers will play a much more integral role in designing the curriculum. To avoid objections from parents after the program has started, the committee will meet with parents in advance to review the curriculum in detail. Eventually, it hopes to provide age-appropriate sexuality education beginning in kindergarten.

Make Your Voice Heard

Support sexuality education by letting your state and federal officials know what you think. For a list of campaigns, go to www.familiesaretalking.org/action.html or contact Amy Levine, SIECUS Family Project Coordinator, at 212/819-9770, extension 303.