



Americans Support Responsible Sex Education

One of the most striking disparities between public opinion and public policy relates to “abstinence-only” programs. The public overwhelmingly supports age-appropriate, comprehensive sex education, yet anti-choice policymakers promote restrictive abstinence-only programs that censor information about contraception and STD/HIV prevention strategies. For instance, federal abstinence-only programs received more than \$1.5 billion in taxpayer dollars between 1996 and 2009.¹ Thankfully, Congress and President Obama ended two of the three federal “abstinence-only” programs and for a short time the third program sunsetted as well, but unfortunately, anti-choice lawmakers succeeded in reviving it in the health-care-reform law. This focus on “abstinence-only” programs is in direct contradiction to parents’ wishes, the clear majority of whom want their children to have medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education.

Americans Overwhelmingly Support Sex Education

- The vast majority of Americans has consistently supported sex education in schools:
 - A 2012 survey revealed that 93 percent of adults and 87 percent of teens think it’s important that young people receive information about both abstinence and contraception.²
 - A 2004 poll revealed that only seven percent of Americans believe teachers should not provide sex education in schools.³
 - A 2002 study revealed that 90 percent of the “engaged” public supports age-appropriate and medically accurate sex education for all students beginning in the early grades and continuing through high school.⁵
- Nine out of 10 Latinos think it is important for sex education to be taught in middle and high schools. Latinos also believe a comprehensive range of topics should be included in sex education, including abstinence, birth control, healthy relationships, and sexual orientation.⁶
- Ninety-nine percent of Americans believe it is appropriate for young people to have information about STDs, and 94 percent of Americans think it is appropriate to teach young people about birth control.⁷

Did you know?

A 2008 Zogby International poll of parents in Washington, D.C., the U.S. city with the highest HIV and STD rates, showed an overwhelming 93 percent of parents in support of age-appropriate comprehensive sex education that includes information about both abstinence and contraception.⁴

- More than eight in 10 Americans believe that young people should be taught how to use and where to obtain contraceptives (86 percent). Americans also want schools to cover “real-life issues,” such as how to deal with the potential consequences of having sex (94 percent) and the emotional consequences of being sexually active (94 percent).⁸

Americans Oppose “Abstinence-Until-Marriage” Programs

- Most recent available data indicate that seven in 10 Americans oppose the use of federal funds to promote “abstinence-only” programs that censor information about condoms and contraception.⁹
- Most Americans support comprehensive sex education over “abstinence-only” programs. Eighty-two percent support programs that cover both abstinence as well as ways to prevent pregnancy and STDs.¹⁰
- Only 14 percent of Americans think that schools should teach “abstinence-only” programs and withhold information about condoms and other types of contraception.¹¹
- A 2006 study concluded that Americans, regardless of political ideology, favor a more balanced approach to sex education, compared to “abstinence-only” programs.¹²

Americans Across Party Lines Support Sex Education

- Americans from diverse political backgrounds support sex education, when such programs are comprehensive in scope:
 - Seventy-six percent of Independents and 62 percent of Republicans believe the government should support sex-education programs that provide information about abstinence, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases.¹³
 - Two-thirds of Republicans and Independents prefer a candidate who supports comprehensive sex education over a candidate who supports “abstinence-only” programs.¹⁴

Americans Recognize the Public-Health Needs for Sex Education

- More than 80 percent of Americans believe that comprehensive sex-education programs, which emphasize abstinence but also encourage condom and contraceptive use, should be implemented in school.¹⁵
- A majority of Americans believes that giving young people information about how to get and use condoms will not encourage them to have sex earlier than they would have otherwise and 77 percent think such information makes it more likely the teens will practice safe sex now or in the future.¹⁶

- Americans want schools to cover “real-life issues,” such as how to deal with potential consequences of having sex and the emotional consequences of being sexually active.¹⁷

Leading Medical and Educational Organizations Support Responsible Sex Education

- More than 140 national organizations support comprehensive sex education, including: American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American Medical Association, American Public Health Association, National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, National Education Association, National Medical Association, National School Boards Association, and Society for Adolescent Medicine.¹⁸
- The National Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Medicine has criticized funding of abstinence-only programs, stating, “[I]nvesting hundreds of millions of dollars of federal and state funds over five years in abstinence-only programs with no evidence of effectiveness constitutes poor fiscal and public health policy.”¹⁹
- In October 2006, the United States General Accountability Office (GAO) served notice to the Bush administration that per an existing law, literature distributed by federally funded abstinence-only programs must contain medically accurate information about the effectiveness of condoms in preventing sexually transmitted diseases. In a letter to Michael Leavitt, secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), the GAO dismissed a baseless Bush administration claim that materials provided by such programs did not fall within the scope of the law, which was passed in 2000. The GAO recommended “that HHS reexamine its position and adopt measures to ensure that, where applicable, abstinence education materials comply with this requirement.”²⁰
- In 2001, then-U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher endorsed responsible sex education that includes information on both abstinence and contraception. Recognizing that abstinence-only programs have not been proven effective, the Surgeon General concluded that programs covering both abstinence and contraception have demonstrated positive results in delaying sexual activity and increasing contraceptive use.²¹

January 1, 2017

Notes:

¹ SIECUS. State Profiles: A Portrait of Sexuality Education and Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs in the States (2010), at <http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&PageID=1263> (last visited on Oct. 17, 2015). U.S. Dep’t of Health & Human Services (HHS), *FY 2009 Budget in Brief*, at 6 (2008); Office of Management & Budget, *FY 2009 Budget of the U.S. Government*, at 66 (2008).

² Press Release, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, *Teens Say Parents Most Influence Their Decisions About Sex* (Aug. 28, 2012) at <https://thenationalcampaign.org/press-release/teens-say-parents-most-influence-their-decisions-about-sex> (last visited Oct. 17, 2015).

- ³ National Public Radio, Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard Kennedy School of Government, *Sex Education in America* (February 2004) at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1622610> (last visited Oct. 17, 2015).
- ⁴ Scott Swenson, *New Poll: Parents Overwhelmingly Support Age-Appropriate Comprehensive Sex Ed*, RH REALITY CHECK, Oct. 2, 2008 at <http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/blog/2008/10/02/new-poll-parents-overwhelmingly-support-ageappropriate-comprehensive-sex-ed> (last visited October 17, 2015).
- ⁵ The Othmer Institute, *Mobilizing Support for Sex Education: New Messages & Techniques* (June 2002 presentation, National Coalition to Support Sexuality Education meeting, June 13, 2002).
- ⁶ Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the Center for Latino Adolescent and Family Health at the NYU Silver School of Social Work. (2013). "Latino Opinions on Teen Pregnancy Prevention." Conducted by GfK Custom Research, LLC., March 22-April 2, 2013.
- ⁷ National Public Radio et al., *Sex Education in America*, General Public/Parents Survey (Jan. 2004).
- ⁸ National Public Radio et al., *Sex Education in America*, General Public/Parents Survey (Jan. 2004).
- ⁹ Press Release, Advocates for Youth & SIECUS, *Public Support for Sexuality Education Reaches Highest Level: New Poll Reveals Public Health Issues Compel Overwhelming Majority of Americans To Support Sexuality Education That Includes Abstinence and Contraception Information* (June 2, 1999).
- ¹⁰ *Few Americans favor abstinence-only sex ed*, MSNBC at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15603764/ns/health-sexual_health/t/few-americans-favor-abstinence-only-sex-ed/#.UIbjm-HJe0 (last visited Oct. 17, 2015).
- ¹¹ Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., "Memorandum: Application of Research Findings," Planned Parenthood Federation of America and National Women's Law Center (July 12, 2007).
- ¹² Amy Bleakley, PhD, MPH, Michael Hennessy, PhD, MPH, Martin Fishbein, PhD, *Public Opinion on Sex Education in US Schools*, 160 ARCH PEDIATRIC ADOLESCENT MEDICINE 1151 (2006).
- ¹³ Press Release, The National Women's Law Center, *Opinion Survey Shows Broad Support Among Republicans and Independents for Reproductive Health Care Agenda* (Jan. 30, 2009) at <http://www.nwlc.org/press-release/opinion-survey-shows-broad-support-among-republicans-and-independents-reproductive-hea> (last visited on Oct. 17, 2015).
- ¹⁴ Press Release, The National Women's Law Center, *Opinion Survey Shows Broad Support Among Republicans and Independents for Reproductive Health Care Agenda* (Jan. 30, 2009) at <http://www.nwlc.org/press-release/opinion-survey-shows-broad-support-among-republicans-and-independents-reproductive-hea> (last visited on Oct. 17, 2015).
- ¹⁵ Kirby, Douglas, Ph.D., *Emerging Answers; Research Findings on Programs To Reduce Teen Pregnancy*, THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY (November 2007).
- ¹⁶ National Public Radio, Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard Kennedy School of Government, *Sex Education in America* (February 2004) at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1622610> (last visited Oct. 17, 2015).
- ¹⁷ National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation/Kennedy School of Government, *Sex Education in America; General Public/Parent Survey* (Jan. 2004).
- ¹⁸ SIECUS, *The National Coalition to Support Sexuality Education*, at <http://www.ncsse.com/index.cfm?pageid=932> (last visited Oct 17, 2015); National Education Association (NEA), *NEA 2000-2001 Resolutions, B-39. Sex Education*; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *Resources and Briefs: Teen Pregnancy Prevention*

Programs, at <https://thenationalcampaign.org/resource/briefly%E2%80%94policy-brief-key-points-about-teen-pregnancy-prevention> (last visited Oct. 17, 2015).

¹⁹ Committee on HIV Prevention Strategies in the United States, Institute of Medicine, *NO TIME TO LOSE: GETTING MORE FROM HIV PREVENTION* 119-20 (Monica S. Ruiz et al. eds., 2001).

²⁰ Letter from Gary L. Keppinger, General Counsel, United States General Accountability Office, to Michael O. Leavitt, Secretary, United States Department of Health and Human Services, *Abstinence Education: Applicability of Section 317P of the Public Health Service Act*, (Oct. 18, 2006).

²¹ The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior (July 9, 2001), at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK44216/> (last visited Oct. 17, 2015).