

Parents as Advocates for Comprehensive Sex Education in Schools

Parental support for school-based sex education is overwhelmingly positive. Over the past 20 years, in survey after survey, local, state or national, 80 to 85 percent of parents indicate they want their children to receive comprehensive, medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education. Parents see such courses and content as supplementing, not supplanting, their discussions at home. They say that their children need both to be taught about delaying the onset of intimate sexual relationships until they are mature and responsible and also given the information and skills they need to use condoms and contraception when they do choose to become sexually active. It's not either/or, but both.

Parents' involvement in school health education committees, as members of school boards, or as advocates during community controversy is vital to making sure that young people receive accurate information and that answers to their questions are not censored. Many curricula and classroom materials exist to meet children's needs and help them grow up sexually healthy. But there are also "education" materials that are discriminatory, inaccurate, biased, and judgmental, and that use shame, fear, and guilt to scare young people about sexual intimacy.

Sexuality education curricula and programs should be reviewed carefully for the following important components:

- Acknowledging that sexuality is a component of each person's personality, character, and life
- Containing age appropriate information, based on physical, emotional, and social developmental stages
- Containing information that is honest, medically accurate, and based upon verifiable scientific and behavioral theories
- Respecting of differences in family, religious, and social values
- Being nonjudgmental and open to all questions and concerns related to sexuality
- Reflecting cultural, social, and ethnic diversity
- Encouraging children/youth to discuss sexuality issues with their parents and to ask them questions
- Providing parental review of all materials used in the classroom
- Avoiding shame, fear, or guilt
- Promoting gender equality
- Including skills for decision making and resisting pressure
- Acknowledging that sexuality and sexual decisions are influenced by family, media, peers, religion, and personal experiences
- Acknowledging both responsibility and pleasure in intimate sexual relationships
- Giving young people opportunities to role play and to practice effective communication
- Acknowledging the diversity of sexual orientation
- Acknowledging that sexual abuse, coercion, and incest occur and offering referrals for counseling and support for survivors

- Promoting responsibility, respect, and honesty in relationships
- Containing materials evaluated by respected researchers and published in credible sources
- Offering reference lists from scientific, professional, peer-reviewed sources rather than personal opinions, newspaper articles, sermons, speeches, or magazine articles.

Finally, the chosen curriculum should be taught by knowledgeable, comfortable, and well trained sexuality educators.

As a Parent You Can Become an Advocate by:

- Learning what your school offers in sex education
- Acknowledging that sex education is a life long process and that parents are only one of the primary sex educators of young people
- Supporting honest, balanced sex education that is comprehensive and that includes education about abstinence and contraception
- Knowing what training your child's teachers have had in sex education
- Knowing the official school system policies on sex education.