

# Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education

Authors: Eva S. Goldfarb, PhD and Lisa D. Lieberman, PhD

School-based sex education plays a vital role in the sexual health and wellbeing of young people. Little is known, however, about the effectiveness of efforts in addition to pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention. The results of [Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education](#) found that sex education has the potential to impact so much more.

Support for early, scaffolded, and multigrade approaches	Appreciation of Sexual Diversity
Promotion of Healthy Relationships	Dating and Intimate Partner Violence Prevention
Child Sex Abuse Prevention	Expanded Understanding of Gender/Gender Norms
Media Literacy	Social Emotional Learning

- The authors examined studies from over three decades of research on sex education and found **“evidence for the effectiveness of approaches that address a broad definition of sexual health and take positive, affirming, inclusive approaches to human sexuality.”**
- The extensive review found that in addition to helping to prevent teen pregnancy and STIs, sex education can help **prevent child sex abuse, create safer school spaces for LGBTQ young people, increase healthy relationships, reduce relationship violence, improve social-emotional learning, and increase media literacy.**
- The new research—published in the Journal of Adolescent Health—identified a wide variety of benefits of comprehensive, quality sex education beyond pregnancy and STIs, including improved school success, mental health, and safety.

## Key Takeaways

- **Support for early, scaffolded, and multigrade approaches.** Several studies provide ample support **for teaching that builds on previous lessons and/or grades and for programs of longer duration, given how time limited sex education tends to be. As with all other areas of curriculum,** building an early foundation and scaffolding learning with developmentally appropriate content and teaching are key to long-term development of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that support healthy sexual development.
- **Sex education across the curriculum.** Sex education efforts can also succeed in classrooms outside of the health education curriculum—Given that most schools have limited time allotted to health or sex education, **a coordinated and concerted effort to teach and reinforce important sexual health concepts throughout other areas of the curriculum is a promising strategy.**
- **Child Sex Abuse Prevention.** Effective child sex abuse prevention in elementary schools show significant **increases in knowledge** across programs, **improved self-protective skills,** particularly among older elementary students, and **gains in self-esteem, self-efficacy, and feelings of safety** and significant **improvement in knowledge of appropriate and safe touch.**
- **Appreciation of Sexual Diversity.** Evidence of success was found from **individual classroom** efforts, as well as from **inclusivity across the curriculum,** in promoting a **more accepting and welcoming environment for sexual minority youth.**
- **Lower Homophobia and reduced homophobic bullying.** Efforts to **reduce homophobic bullying and harassment** and to **increase appreciation for sexual diversity** can **improve the school climate for all students** and create a **safer environment** that is more **conducive to learning,** and to **better mental health** for sexual minority students.

- **Expanded Understanding of Gender/Gender Norms.** Using that literature to engage students in discussions, relating gender-based bullying and harassment to harassment and oppression of other marginalized populations, and using a critical literacy approach helped young children to expand their views of gender, gender expression, and gender norms.
- **Recognition of gender equity, rights, and social justice.** The use of social justice and rights-based frameworks in designing and teaching topics related to sexuality and sexual health is related to increased knowledge, awareness and appreciation of gender equity and sexual rights, and awareness of discrimination and oppression based on gender and sexual orientation from preschool through high school.
- **Promotion of healthy relationships.** Curricula that addressed communication within relationships resulted in improved communication skills and intentions, including increased intentions to discuss relationships and/or sex within relationships and with parents and medical providers.
- **Dating Violence (DV) and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Prevention.** School-based efforts have the potential to play an important role in reducing DV and, in many cases, have shown to have positive long-term outcomes. There is strong evidence that programs can increase knowledge, change attitudes, and improve skills to reduce DV and IPV and can actually reduce the incidence of both DV and IPV.

## Purpose and Methods

- The authors undertook the research because of the glaring lack of research that had examined the impact of sex education on all aspects of sexual health, rather than the more limited scope of pregnancy and STI prevention.
- The authors conducted a systematic literature review of three decades of research on the effectiveness of school-based programs to explore a range of outcomes associated with comprehensive sex education.

## Recommendations for Schools and Educators

- Sex education programs should span multiple grades, scaffold topics introduced previously, and begin during early elementary school years. There are multiple benefits of this approach to sex education both during elementary school and to the health and wellbeing of students as they grow and develop.
- Pay careful attention to the language used and keep it developmentally appropriate. Avoid using terms like “good touch” and “bad touch”, since it can be confusing to young children and bring out feelings of shame if the bad touch made their body feel good. Instead use terms like safe and unsafe touch. In addition, remove any “stranger danger” language from your sexual abuse lessons since 93% of child abuse survivors know their perpetrator.<sup>1</sup>
- Starting in kindergarten and scaffolding lessons thereafter through Grade 12, young people should receive lessons that explore their ideas and understanding of gender, gender expression, and gender norms in learning about social equity, power and privilege, and healthy relationships.
- Schedule LGBTQ speakers in your classroom to share their life experiences around coming out, dealing with bullying and homophobia, overcoming stereotypes and lifting up LGBTQ role models. Don’t just do one lesson on sexual orientation and gender identity expression but include sexual orientation and gender identity and expression as a part of all the lessons you teach throughout the year.
- Normalize IPV prevention as a priority at the elementary school level, keeping it solid throughout the remaining school-age years and increasing in complexity as students age. Be comprehensive and repetitive; allow lessons to proceed over multiple sessions and across multiple grades, whenever possible.
- Sex education should include lessons to help young people identify the characteristics of healthy relationships as well as those of unhealthy relationships. These lessons can focus on different types of relationships--not just those that are between intimate partners. Lessons should address communication within relationships and provide students opportunities to practice and build their communication skills.
- **The Professional Learning Standards for Sex Education** can help educators to identify areas where they may need professional development to successfully teach this content. Links to professional development programs can be found at <https://sexeducationcollaborative.org/offerings>.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement (2000).