

The Truth about Sex Education: What's Actually Taught and When

The Future of Sex Education (FoSE) initiative—a partnership of Advocates for Youth, Answer, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change—believes that sex education should include a wide variety of age-appropriate social, mental, and sexual health topics, which build on each other like blocks as kids go through K-12 education. Here's what that can look like.

Included in this chart are a range of the topics covered in sex education, as outlined in the National Sex Education Standards (NSES). The below is not a fully comprehensive list, but is instead a selection of topics. Some topics may also be replicated at higher grade levels. If you are interested in viewing the complete National Sex Education Standards (NSES), which outlines the foundational knowledge and skills students need to navigate sexual development and help them to grow into sexually healthy adults, please visit: <https://www.advocatesforyouth.org/resources/health-information/future-of-sex-education-national-sexuality-education-standards/>

LOWER ELEMENTARY (K-Grade 2)

ANATOMY & PUBERTY



Using medically accurate names for body parts and understanding what they do

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS & CONSENT



How to be a good friend

Different kinds of families and the importance of showing respect for them

Consent and personal boundaries

PERSONAL SAFETY



Identifying uncomfortable or dangerous situations (e.g., bullying, sexual abuse)

How to seek help from a trusted adult

SEXUAL HEALTH



How all living things may have the capacity to reproduce

GENDER IDENTITY & EXPRESSION



Gender, gender identity, and gender stereotypes

How to be yourself and not be pressured to act a certain way because of your gender

UPPER ELEMENTARY (Grades 3-5)

ANATOMY & PUBERTY



The physical, social, and emotional changes of puberty

All bodies are normal

Relationship between sex and reproduction

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS & CONSENT



Identifying trusted adults, including parents/caregivers

The importance of consent

Understanding boundaries and respecting the boundaries of others

PERSONAL SAFETY



Defining child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and domestic violence

Steps to take when you or someone you know is being sexually abused or harassed

SEXUAL HEALTH



Defining STIs and correcting myths about them

Different ways people can have babies (e.g., sex, IVF, adoption)

GENDER IDENTITY & EXPRESSION



The varied ways people identify and express their gender

How to show people of all gender identities dignity and respect

Gender identity and that it may differ from sex assigned at birth

SEXUAL ORIENTATION & IDENTITY



Sexual orientation and that we all have one

How to show dignity and respect for people of all sexual orientations



MIDDLE SCHOOL (Grades 6-8)

ANATOMY & PUBERTY



How pregnancy can happen

Identifying medically accurate sources of information about puberty and personal hygiene

Sexual and reproductive systems and their functions

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS & CONSENT



Healthy vs. unhealthy relationships

How to end an unhealthy relationship

Using social media safely, legally, and respectfully

Sexual consent and why power differences, like age, matter

PERSONAL SAFETY



What to do if you see bullying or violence

Understanding sexual violence and why a victim/survivor is never to blame

What sex trafficking and abuse really look like

SEXUAL HEALTH



Defining sex and what people should consider to decide if and when they're ready

How to prevent unintended pregnancy and STIs/HIV, including abstinence, birth control, and condoms

How alcohol and drugs can impact decision-making

What options are available when someone is pregnant

How racism and inequality can impact sexual health

GENDER IDENTITY & EXPRESSION



How families shape beliefs about gender

How to communicate respectfully with people of all gender identities

Differences between sex assigned at birth, gender identity, and gender expression

SEXUAL ORIENTATION & IDENTITY



How to communicate respectfully with people of all sexual orientations

Understanding common sexual orientations

HIGH SCHOOL (Grades 9-12)

ANATOMY & PUBERTY



How bodies and emotions change in adolescence

How peers, media, and family influence self-esteem and body image

How biology and hormones play a role in sex and pleasure

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS & CONSENT



Healthy vs. unhealthy relationships

How to end an unhealthy relationship

Using social media safely, legally, and respectfully

Sexual consent and why power differences, like age, matter

PERSONAL SAFETY



How to help someone who is being harassed or abused

Identifying and avoiding strategies used by sex traffickers and sexual predators, in-person and online

SEXUAL HEALTH



How to talk with a partner about using birth control/condoms

How to access sexual and reproductive health care

Laws related to sexting, health care for minors, parenting, abortion, and sexual violence

Defining reproductive justice and analyzing the impact of racism and bias on sexual health

GENDER IDENTITY & EXPRESSION



How media, society, and identity can impact beliefs about gender, gender roles, and gender identity, expression, and stereotypes

How trans and gender expansive teens benefit from family and school support

SEXUAL ORIENTATION & IDENTITY



Differences between sexual orientation, sexual behavior, and sexual identity

How LGBTQ+ teens benefit from family and school support

