Chapter 1. My Voice Counts!
The Campaign for Youth’s Right to Reproductive & Sexual Health Information & Services

What Is the My Voice Counts! Campaign?

My Voice Counts! is a national campaign, created by and for young people, demanding our right to sexual health information and services. We are working to secure:

- Improved access to emergency contraception—including access without a doctor’s prescription;
- Comprehensive sex education in America’s schools;
- Realistic global HIV prevention programs; and
- U.S. funding for international family planning.

The Campaign brings together youth working in the field of sexual health, creating a coordinated movement to fight at local, state, and federal levels. Through the Campaign, Advocates for Youth supports youth activists from all over the country and encourages organizations to sponsor youth and to participate in grassroots activities to bring youth’s reproductive and sexual health information and services to the forefront of the nation’s agenda.

Advocates Philosophy—Rights, Respect, Responsibility® (3Rs) What Does It Mean?

In Europe, I saw how kids are taught what we call the three Rs—rights, respect, and responsibility. Parents trust their children to make the right decisions. In America, teens are often told they’re “too young” to deal with sex. Instead of avoiding the issue, I think we should help kids understand when they aren’t ready to have sex, and, if they’re going to do it, to do it safely. “Safer sex or no Sex” should be everybody’s motto, worldwide.

Melissa Harris, former student reporter for Teen People

Advocates for Youth envisions a society that views sexuality as normal and healthy and that treats young people as a valuable resource. In such a society, communication and partnership within the family will be the norm, and communities (families, schools, religious institutions, and health care professionals) will fulfill their responsibilities by providing young people with accurate and complete sexual health information, the confidential health services youth need to protect their health and save their lives, and a secure stake in the future.

Advocates’ vision is informed by lessons learned during annual study tours that explore how Germany, France, and the Netherlands achieved significant reductions in teen pregnancies, births, abortions, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In these countries, governments and society view accurate information and confidential sexual health services, not merely as needed by youth, but as their right. Addressing youth’s right to information and services, in turn, depends upon society’s accepting adolescents’ sexual development as normal and healthy. The Dutch, Germans, and French spend far less time and effort than Americans in trying to prevent young people from having sex and more time and effort in educating and empowering young people to behave responsibly when they eventually decide to have sex. Educators, health care providers, and parents collaborate in providing accurate and complete sexual health information. Parents’ most imperative message is, not that teens’ sexual development is a problem, but instead that sexual intimacy should occur only when youth are ready for it and then should occur only within a caring, mutually respectful relationship.

Rights, Respect, Responsibility® (the 3Rs) are core values that guide the work of Advocates for Youth and animate its vision of such a society.

• RIGHTS: Youth have rights to accurate and complete sexual health information, confidential reproductive and sexual health services, and a secure stake in the future.
• **RESPECT:** Youth deserve respect. Today, young people are largely perceived as part of the problem. Valuing young people means they are part of the solution and participate in developing programs and policies that affect their well-being.

• **RESPONSIBILITY:** Society has the responsibility to provide young people with the tools they need to safeguard their sexual health, and young people have the responsibility to protect themselves from too early childbearing and from sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.

As part of the campaign to promote the 3Rs vision, Advocates has created a Youth Activist Network ([http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/youth/advocacy/yan.htm](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/youth/advocacy/yan.htm)) of young people in the United States and developing countries, encouraging them to become leaders for improved reproductive and sexual health policies and services in their communities, states, and nations.

**What Can Youth Activists Do?**

As youth, you are the ideal spokespersons to raise concerns about adolescent reproductive and sexual health issues. You bring a unique voice to the debates around these issues. You know what your peers are worried about. You know what works with youth in your community, and what doesn’t. You are also probably far more concerned about the well-being of youth around the world than are some U.S. policy makers.

The rates of teenage births, abortions, and STIs are significantly lower in countries where sexual health information is widely available, where young people are encouraged to use contraception, and where youth are valued. Young people have the right to sexual health information and services. You have the right to sexual health information and services! You can educate your peers and speak out as an advocate for youth.

Learn more about the politics of adolescent reproductive and sexual health by visiting My Voice Counts! Campaign’s Web site at [http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/myvoicecounts/](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/myvoicecounts/). Specifically, here are some things you can do on the Campaign’s Web site:

• Sign petitions demanding your right to reproductive and sexual health information and services.
• View Advocates’ electronic public service announcements (ePSAs) and send them on to your friends so they can sign the petitions.
• Send e-mails to the President, Congress, and other politicians demanding your right to reproductive and sexual health information and services.
• Join up with other youth activists through the Youth Activist Network.
• Write a letter to the editor of your local or state newspaper.