

Fact Sheet - Sex Education and Teenage Sexuality
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TEEN SEXUALITY

Sexual activity is common among American high school students.

- Approximately half of all American high school students have had penile-vaginal intercourse.ⁱ
- In a nationally representative study of 1,800 youth by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2002),ⁱⁱ high school students reported pressure to have sex, especially if they had a steady boyfriend or girlfriend. Furthermore, over half of the respondents ages 15 to 17 admitted that “waiting to have sex is nice but nobody does.”
- A majority of respondents (73% of boys, 84% of girls) believed that a girl was likely to lose her boyfriend if she did not have sex. Only slightly more than half of both girls and boys thought the same was true for boys who wished not to have sex.

High school students expect that many teenage girls as well as boys will be sexually active. However, a persistent double standard means that women who demonstrate readiness risk their reputations.ⁱⁱⁱ

- In a national survey of 512 15 to 17 year-olds by Seventeen Magazine and the Kaiser Family Foundation (2002),^{iv} more than 90 percent of respondents believe that girls’ reputations are negatively affected by having sex, but only about 40 percent think the same for boys’ reputations.
- Over 70 percent of these students thought that a girl who carries a condom looks “easy.” Less than half condemned a boy who carries a condom.
- Another two-thirds say that boys and girls have equal decision-making power as to whether to have sex, but boys are the initiators for most sexual behavior. According to these students, girls are the partner to say “no” to sex at least two-thirds of the time (three-fifths, though, say that it is easier for girls to say “no” than boys).
- The responsibility for ensuring safe sex also falls disproportionately on girls. About 50 percent of respondents say girls bring up STDs compared to about 10 percent who say boys do. About 40 percent of the respondents say girls bring up condom use compared to about 20 percent who say boys do, while over half say girls ensure that a condom is used and just over a third of girls and a quarter of boys say both do it equally.

Though they desire to be powerful, young women often tell stories of powerlessness and difficulty controlling the progression and nature of their sexual encounters.

- Being sexually assertive (whether to pursue sex, reject sex, or insist on a condom) is incompatible with rules of femininity that call for passivity, a desire to please, and a lack of sophistication about sex.^v
- Many girls will acquiesce to a particular heterosexual encounter (its incidence and its progression) to protect her relationship.^{vi} There is “a longstanding tradition of girls being more preoccupied with the boy wanting her, and with what he wants, than with what she wants.”^{vii}
- Many sexually active teen girls report a desire for sexual pleasure but difficulty achieving it.^{viii} Sexual education targeted at girls focuses primarily on reproduction and presents females as victims of heartbreak, disease, unintended pregnancy, coercion, and violence. However, boys’ sexuality is generally overtly linked with pleasure, for example, the insistences of the male sex drive, wet dreams, and orgasm in the context of reproduction.^{ix}

CONCEPTUALIZING TEEN SEXUALITY

The sex lives of today’s teens pose a challenge to a definition of “real sex” as penile-vaginal intercourse.^x To better understand the realities of teen sexuality, sex needs to be re-conceptualized as a field of activity instead of as one point at which a sex threshold has been crossed (and a person loses his or her virginity) or a continuum in which intercourse is the end.

- First, research has found significant amounts of sexual activity among “virgins” (defined as those who have not had penile-vaginal intercourse).^{xi} Among 15 to 24 year olds, 27 percent of virgins report “being with someone in an intimate or sexual way.”^{xii}
- Second, teens do not restrict their sexual expression to opposite sex behavior. Studies report that between three and 25 percent of high school age students have had same-sex sexual “experience.”^{xiii} These studies also indicate that many students who are experimenting with same-sex sexual behavior are also engaging in heterosexual behavior.
- Third, there has been a rise in the incidence of oral sex prior to and with the loss of virginity. Research suggests that young people imagine oral sex to be less intimate than sexual intercourse and preferable in that they believe it eliminates the risk of pregnancy and the transmission of STDs.^{xiv}

- Kaiser (2003)^{xv} found that among 15 to 17 year-olds, 40 percent of men and 32 percent of women have had oral sex. Among 18 to 24 year-olds, it rose to 73 percent for men and 58 percent for women. Among those 15 to 17, 54 percent of men and 38 percent of women claim that oral sex is not a “big deal” compared to intercourse and 18 percent of men and 33 percent of women report using it as a tactic to avoid intercourse.

SEX EDUCATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITIES

Contemporary debates over sex education occur between proponents of comprehensive sex education and abstinence-only sex education.

- *Comprehensive sex education* (also called abstinence-based) typically emphasizes abstinence but teaches “a broad set of topics related to sexuality and provides students with opportunities for developing skills as well as learning factual information.”^{xvi}
- *Abstinence-only sex education* emphasizes abstinence in the school years or until marriage, refrains from including information about “contraception or disease prevention methods,” and will “...typically present marriage as the only morally correct context for all sexual activity.”^{xvii}
- On the whole, social scientific research reports that comprehensive sex education often delays onset of intercourse (if it begins prior to onset) and increases the chances of contraceptive use but does not hasten onset of intercourse, increase the frequency of sex, or increase the number of partners.^{xviii} In contrast, studies of abstinence-only curricula suggest that abstinence-only programs are not effective in preventing sex, reducing teen pregnancy, or reducing the transmission of STDs/HIV.^{xix}

States are individually responsible for mandating sex education curricula. However, federal funding for sex education requiring an abstinence-only approach has caused a rise in this educational approach since the early 1990s.^{xx}

- Twenty states currently mandate sex education while 37 mandate only HIV/STD education.^{xxi} States often defer to districts, while one-third (33%) of districts defer to individual schools or teachers.^{xxii}
- Of school districts with a policy, 86 percent require that abstinence be presented as the best option and 35 percent of this group teach abstinence as the only acceptable option.^{xxiii}
- Though federal statutes preclude government involvement in prescribing schools’ curricula,^{xxiv} the federal government has allocated millions of dollars to abstinence-only education, effectively manipulating state sex education policies (see the Adolescent Family Life Act 1981 and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act).^{xxv}
- The federal government strictly requires that schools accepting federal money institute a sex education program that has “as its exclusive purpose” the benefits of abstinence.^{xxvi}

While abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education programs are framed in opposition to one another, both share fundamental assumptions about teen sexuality.

- Both kinds of sex education target the individual as a rational decision-maker without constraints of inequality.
- Abstinence-only sex education teaches individuals how to say “no” to sex, but it does not typically give teens the skills necessary to act on their knowledge or be sexual agents, if they so choose.^{xxvii} This is especially problematic for girls in a context of inequality and pressure to engage in sex.
- Comprehensive sex education focuses more on skills and negotiation of sex, but does not adequately address the power deficit that girls face in this negotiation.
- Both kinds of sex education assume that teens will be empowered by the individual acquisition of education (values or information).^{xxviii}
- Both abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education are founded on the idea that sex is penile-vaginal intercourse (a point instead of a field). Abstinence-only focuses on virginity and comprehensive sex education emphasizes condoms as *the* safer sex alternative, both revolve primarily around penile-vaginal intercourse.
- This focus devalues female orgasm (in that it rarely results from intercourse alone)^{xxix} and serves to make same-sex sexual activity invisible (and/or appear to be abstinence).^{xxx}

The fact that the debate about sex education is framed as between proponents of abstinence-only and proponents of comprehensive sex education shapes our ability to think about teen sexuality.

- For example, sex educators and parents were slow to recognize the rate of oral sex among young people and sex education curricula is having a difficult time adapting to new patterns in teen sexuality.

RESISTANCE AND EROTIC EQUALITY AMONG TEENS

Oral sex among teenagers may challenge the privileging of heterosexuality and male orgasm that comes with the focus on penile-vaginal intercourse in sex education curricula.

- If cunnilingus and fellatio are relatively balanced, as some studies suggest,^{xxx1} then the rise in oral sex among teens potentially undermines the rule that “real sex” is what gives men orgasms and makes same-sex sexual activity and gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth visible.
- In this sense, the “hegemony of the coital imperative” and its concurrent androcentrism and heterosexism, can be and is challenged by teenagers,^{xxxii} perhaps placing young people at the forefront of experimentation with erotic gender equality.

IMPORTANT ACTIVIST AND/OR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

- Advocates for Youth (www.advocatesforyouth.org)
- Alan Guttmacher Institute (www.agi-usa.org)
- American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (www.aasect.org)
- Kaiser Family Foundation (www.kff.org)
- Planned Parenthood Federation of America (www.ppfa.org)
- Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (www.siecus.org)

SOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUGGESTED READING

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VIDEO SUGGESTIONS

- Girls Like Us (1991, Women Make Movies)
- It's Elementary (1999, Women's Educational Media)
- Out: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Youth (1995, Filmmakers Library)
- Sex, Teens, and Public Schools (1995, Filmmakers Library)
- Talk 16: Adolescent Girls (1997, Filmmakers Library)
- Teen Sexuality in a Culture of Confusion (1998, Media Education Foundation)
- The Lost Children of Rockdale County (PBS)

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ For a review see Haffner, D. W. 1997. What's Wrong With Abstinence-Only Sex education Programs. *SIECUS Report* 25, 4:9-14; see also Alan Guttmacher Institute. 2003. In Their Own Right: Addressing the Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs of Men Worldwide. [Special Report.]; Anonymous. 1997. Adolescence and abstinence. *SIECUS Report*, 26, 1: 21-23.
- ⁱⁱ Kaiser Family Foundation. 2002. Sex Smarts Survey: Gender Roles. Menlo Park: California.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, Holland, J., C. Ramazanoglu, S. Sharpe, & R. Thomson. 1998. The Male in the Head: Young People, Heterosexuality and Power. London: The Tufnell; Hynie, M. & J. E. Lydon. 1995. Women's Perceptions of Female Contraceptive Behavior: Experimental Evidence of the Sexual Double Standard. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 19: 563-581; Vanwesenbeeck, I. 1997. The Context of Women's Power(lessness) in Heterosexual Interactions. In *New Sexual Agendas*, edited by L. Segal. New York: New York University Press.
- ^{iv} Kaiser 2002.
- ^v Holland et al. 1998; Levine, J. 2002. *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*. Minneapolis, M.N.: University of Minnesota Press.
- ^{vi} Gavey, N., K. McPhillips, and M. Doherty. 2001. 'If it's not on, it's not on'—Or is it? Discursive constraints on women's condom use. *Gender and Society*, 15, 6: 917-934.
- ^{vii} Vanwesenbeeck 1997, p. 177.
- ^{viii} Holland et al. 1998; Levine 2002; Thompson, S. 1989. Search for Tomorrow: On Feminism and the Reconstruction of Teen Romance. In Vance, C. S. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. London: Pandora; Vanwesenbeeck 1997.
- ^{ix} Fine, M. 1988. Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Female: The Missing Discourse of Desire. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58, 1; Holland et al. 1998; Hollway. 1993. Theorizing Heterosexuality. *Feminism and Psychology*, 3, 3; Tiefer, L. 1995. *Sex is Not a Natural Act, and other essays*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press; Tolman, D. 1991. Adolescent Girls, Women, and Sexuality: Discerning Dilemmas of Desire. *Women and Therapy*, 11, ¾; Vance, C. S. 1989. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. London: Pandora; Vanwesenbeeck 1997.
- ^x Holland et al. 1998; Sanders, S. A. & J. M. Reinisch. 1999. Would You Say You 'Had Sex' If...? *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 281, 3: 275-277.
- ^{xi} Kanouse, D. E. 1996. The Sexual Practices of Adolescent Virgins: Genital Sexual Activities of High School Students Who Have Never Had Vaginal Intercourse. *American Journal Public Health* 86: 1570-1576; Schwartz I. M. 1999. Sexual Activity Prior to Coitus Initiation: A Comparison Between Males and Females. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 28, 1:63-69.
- ^{xii} For summaries see Anonymous 1997 and Schwartz, P. & Rutter, V. 2000. *The Gender of Sexuality*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.
- ^{xiii} For a summary see Roberts, E. 2001. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Youth Issues. *SIECUS Report*, 29, 4: 37-43.
- ^{xiv} Remez, L. 2000. Oral Sex Among Adolescents: Is It Sex or Is It Abstinence? *Family Planning Perspectives* 32, 6.
- ^{xv} Kaiser Family Foundation. 2003. National Survey of Adolescents and Young Adults: Sexual Health Knowledge, Attitudes, and Experiences Menlo Park: California.
- ^{xvi} For a discussion, see Anonymous. 2001. Issues and answers: Fact sheet on sex education. *SIECUS Report*, 29, 6: 30-37.
- ^{xvii} Ibid.
- ^{xviii} For a review see Anonymous, 2001; Haffner 1997.
- ^{xix} For a review see Anonymous 2001; see also Anonymous 1997; Kaiser Family Foundation. 2000. *Sex Education in America: A Series of National Surveys of Students, Parents, Teachers, and Principals*. Menlo Park, California; Levine 2002.
- ^{xx} Kempner, M. 2003. A Controversial Decade: 10 Years of Tracking Debates Around Sex education. *SIECUS Report* 31, 6.
- ^{xxi} Anonymous, 2001.
- ^{xxii} Landry, D., L. Kaeser & C. Richards. 1999. Abstinence promotion and the provision of information about contraception in public school district sex education policies. *Family Planning Perspectives* 31, 6: 280-286; Kaiser 2000.
- ^{xxiii} Landry et al. 1999.
- ^{xxiv} Anonymous 2001.
- ^{xxv} For a discussion see Daley, D. 1997. Exclusive Purpose: Abstinence-Only Proponents Create Federal Entitlement in Welfare Reform. *SIECUS Report* 25, 4: 3-8; see also Kaiser 2000; Smith, K. B. 2003. An Influx of Funding for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs Leads to a Decade of Policy Changes. *SIECUS Report* 31, 6.
- ^{xxvi} Anonymous 2001.
- ^{xxvii} Holland et al. 1998.
- ^{xxviii} Ibid.
- ^{xxix} Ibid.: 108; see also Levine 2002; Thompson 1989; Tiefer 2001.
- ^{xxx} Kempner 2003.
- ^{xxxi} Alan Guttmacher Institute 2003; Anonymous 1997; Schwartz 1999.
- ^{xxxii} McPhillips et al. 2001.