

Teens Need Information, Not Censorship

BY LAUREN E. BUSKIRK

James Wagoner, President of Advocates for Youth, recently remarked at a press conference, “every hour of every day, two American young people contract HIV, 96 become pregnant, and nearly 350 more contract a sexually transmitted infection (STI).”

The truth is, these aren’t just numbers. These are our sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, friends and family, and their health and well-being is at risk when they are denied comprehensive sex education.

Abstinence-based sex education concentrates on the benefits of abstinence, while comprehensive education focuses on how to keep both nonsexual and sexually active teens safe. The comprehensive approach teaches not only abstinence, but also informs teens about anatomy, reproduction, relationships, sexually transmitted infections, and contraception. The most effective way to ensure that our youth makes smart and informed decisions regarding their sexual health is through comprehensive sex education.

Today, average high school students are immersed in sexual images. From popular women’s magazines that boast explicit headlines to celebrity sex tapes, sexual imagery is everywhere. These misleading messages give a glamorized impression of sex that may prevent students from making smart decisions about their sexual activity.

Tamara Kreinin, president of Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States poses the following critical questions, “Young people are going to learn about sex and our question has to be where do we want them to learn? From the media? From their friends? Or do we want them to learn from an educated, responsible adult?” According to

Advocates for Youth, the majority of parents, principals, and teachers understand the necessity of teaching the valuable lessons about contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STI).

Not teaching information about contraception and sexually transmitted infections in a sex education program is like “trying to prevent kids from riding motorcycles by forbidding them to wear safety helmets,” exclaims Scott Phelps, a researcher and public speaker with the sex education program Project Reality. Most authorities realize comprehensive sex education is the only realistic way to ensure high school students receive reliable information about sex.

The teaching of comprehensive sex education has decreased and continues to decrease the negative consequences of sex. Therefore, the use of comprehensive sex education is helping keep our youth safe. For example, long-term impacts have included lower STI and pregnancy rates for students taught by these highly effective programs. All sex education programs have a primary goal to promote and teach abstinence, however; there will always be adolescences that already engage in sexual activities or will in the near future. For these students, knowledge about contraception and STI becomes especially crucial.

Comprehensive sex education teaches how to effectively use condoms and other contraceptives, thereby increasing the use of contraceptives and lowering the chances for adolescences to contract a STI or become pregnant. Between 1991 and 2004, the unintended birth rate for American teens fell dramatically. Experts attribute seventy-five percent of the decline in teen pregnancy, to the use of contraception learned from the teachings of comprehensive programs. The knowledge received by students through comprehensive sex education has proven to achieve positive health impacts.

Comprehensive sex education does not increase sexual activity. In a study of sex education programs around the world, the World Health Organization found there is no evidence that comprehensive programs encourage sexual activity. In fact, comprehensive sex education has proven to do the opposite. Many leading health organizations have found that teaching students safe sex practices, in addition to abstinence, helps delay sex for first-time teens. Comprehensive teaching also decreases the frequency of sex for those who already participate in sexual activity and their number of sexual partners. The comprehensive approach has proven to decrease the number of sexually active youths, delay engagement in sexual activity, and minimize the number of sexual partners.

The research is clear. Sexuality education is not an either/or proposition. Instead, the reality is that young people need and deserve information about both abstinence and contraception.

Sex among teens is not uncommon. Almost half of all American high school students have engaged in sexual intercourse. As a consequence, the U.S. has the highest teen pregnancy and STI rates in the industrialized world. In other industrialized countries, comprehensive sex education is more frequently used. Therefore, they have lower teen pregnancy and STI rates than the U.S.

“Young people have a right to accurate and complete information that could protect their health and even save their lives,” said Wagoner. After all, these are our children, and we have a responsibility to give them all the knowledge we can to help keep them safe. “Give young people the tools and, more and more, they will make safe and responsible decisions. Deprive them of critical information, and go the route of fear and denial, and we’ll continue our dubious track record as the least successful nation in the Western industrialized world in dealing with teens and sexuality.”