

When Should Kids Start Learning About Sex and Consent?

Some sexuality educators say the sooner the better.



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Late last year, California became the first state to [require affirmative-consent education](#)—education about consent that teaches “yes means yes” versus “no means no”—for public high schools that require a health class before graduation. Advocates applauded the move as a huge step in the right direction. Such education, they hoped, would help reduce the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses and elsewhere.

But education initiatives that home in on issues of consent in high school or college may not be enough—and may be coming too late in teenagers’ lives. A recent

analysis shows that, while teen dating-violence prevention programs have been shown to increase knowledge and change student attitudes, they **do not actually reduce dating violence**.

Many sexuality educators thus feel conflicted about the focus in the media and in the public conversation in general on affirmative consent. “I think it's a positive step. It's acknowledging that young people might want to say yes [to sex], and it's giving them more space to say yes,” said Eva Goldfarb, a sexuality educator and public-health professor at Montclair State University. “But what do parents and administrators expect to happen afterward if consent is all children know and are prepared for? We're spending so much time on the conversation of gatekeeping,” Goldfarb continued. “It still sets a sexual dynamic that's adversarial. Everyone wants to keep people safe, but it's still about avoiding danger rather than exploring positive aspects of sexuality.”

Elizabeth Schroeder, a sexuality educator at both Montclair State University and Widener University, feels similarly. In zeroing in on a single problematic issue such as consent, she thinks both parents and administrators are missing the point: that unhealthy sexual behaviors can have their origins in insufficient early education, and that a more holistic approach to sexuality education can eventually lead to healthier attitudes toward sex and relationships.

Both educators believe that children would be better off with a more comprehensive understanding of sexuality, beyond just the issue of consent—one most effectively taught at a younger age as part of a larger curriculum that includes teachings on boundaries, personal autonomy, relationships, and other aspects of sexual health. This attitude reflects **a growing movement** among sexuality organizations and educators to advocate for comprehensive sex-education programs that begin as early as kindergarten, to provide students with age-appropriate and medically accurate information that acts as a foundation for later lessons on consent.

And adults aren't the only ones pushing for more extensive sexuality education—teens appear to be hungry for this information as well. In a Girls' Attitudes Survey published by Girlguiding in 2015, researchers showed girls aged 11 to 16 a list of

topics in order to get an idea of what they have been taught versus what they felt they should be taught. Among the findings, researchers learned that there were some topics—especially relationships, pornography, consent, and violence against women and girls—in which education offerings fell far short of what girls wanted and needed. Similarly, a report released by the World Health Organization showed that young people felt there was a need for less information about pregnancy and STIs—which they already knew about—and more information on relationships and consent.

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Both Schroeder and Goldfarb—both of whom have acted as consultants and co-authors on curricula released by major health and sexuality organizations—see all of this as proof that school districts need to adopt comprehensive sex-ed curricula, and that they need to start incorporating it at younger ages. Kindergartners, for example, would learn about their bodies, about boundaries, and about the different types of families that exist, while first graders would then move on to lessons about friendship and gender roles. By fifth grade, students would be ready to learn about puberty, sexual and reproductive anatomy, and sexual orientation. By following this timeline, high-school seniors would have a firm infrastructure in place in order to be ready for more complex lessons on reproductive and sexual rights, STD testing, and the human sexual response cycle. This entire body of knowledge would provide the necessary support for a greater understanding of issues such as consent.

Most parents seem to agree that such an educational structure makes sense. A number of studies show widespread parental support for comprehensive sex ed, including one from 2014 finding that the [majority of parents in the U.S.](#) support the teaching of human anatomy and reproductive information, gender and sexual-orientation issues, and more starting in elementary school. A full 40 percent of parents supported comprehensive sexuality education in general.

Lisa De La Rue, one of the authors of the aforementioned paper that showed underwhelming results from teen dating violence programs, agrees that early education can only help. “Don’t pretend these behaviors or relationships aren’t happening [among young people],” said De La Rue, who works as an assistant professor in the counseling psychology department at the University of San Francisco. “Getting more comfortable with it, understanding what it looks like, and being able to have those conversations with your children is going to set them up with a long-term outlook on what healthy dating should look like. Early intervention is key.”

Still, a more vocal [minority](#) have pushed back against this latest push for comprehensive sex ed, shocked by the thought of exposing young children to the topic of sex, and convinced that teaching about sexual activity is the same as endorsing it.

“The comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) agenda is very deceptive,” Sharon Slater, the president of the family policy advocacy group [Family Watch International](#), told LifeSiteNews just last month while promoting her new documentary *The War on Children: Exposing the Comprehensive Sexuality Education Agenda*. “CSE encourages children to engage in sexual experimentation and high-risk sexual behaviors.”

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Slater also launched a new website, created to “[warn parents and policymakers](#) of the serious harms of explicit comprehensive sexuality education programs.” This site contains information on how CSE harms children, and frames this form of education as one with a scandalous history and an agenda aimed at changing the gender and sexual norms of society and establishing rights for children as sexually autonomous beings.

Similarly, Miriam Grossman, a psychiatrist who regularly lectures on the topic of sex education, argues that abstinence-based education is essential to protecting children from sexually irresponsible behavior, and has published [two books](#) that explore the dangers of CSE.

Those in favor of CSE, on the other hand, are critical of abstinence-only education because of the ways in which it only teaches children about the dangers of sex and sexuality. Which is why organizations such as the American Public Health Association (APHA) have released statements in support of CSE [starting in Kindergarten](#), asserting that “all young people need the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to avoid HIV, other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and unintended pregnancy so that they can become sexually healthy adults.” The authors of this statement cite a plethora of studies in support of CSE, including those that show that introducing this type of knowledge early on can actually [protect our children from childhood abuse](#).

“If we're really doing our jobs as parents and educators from the time children are young, tying all of this in with the relationships we have with one another,” Goldfarb said, “consent education becomes unnecessary or, hopefully, it becomes less necessary as they get older.”

A number of curricula already exist that lay out age and developmentally appropriate materials starting in kindergarten and spanning all the way through high school. There are the [Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education](#), developed by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, for example, or the [Our Whole Lives](#) program, released by the Unitarian Universalist Association and intended for use by parents. More recently, Advocates for Youth released [Rights, Respect, Responsibility](#). These curricula—and many more—recommend lesson plans to help kindergartners understand their bodies, to help sixth-graders learn more about gender roles and expectations, and to help high-school seniors learn more about their reproductive rights and about STD testing. The missing ingredient in many cases, according to De La Rue, is funding.

Many schools also struggle to foster an environment in which unhealthy sexual behaviors aren't tolerated.

“I think we should teach [sexuality] the way we teach every other topic in school,” says Schroeder. “Start basic. Build that scaffolding in a way that is age and developmentally appropriate.” Both Schroeder and Goldfarb give as an example the way schools approach math education. “My son is learning algebra now in the eighth grade,” says Schroeder, “but it's not the first time he's getting math. It's antithetical that we wouldn't do the same with sexuality.”

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