

Girls Inc. is committed to advancing the rights and opportunities of girls and young women, with a particular focus on the needs of girls from underserved communities, girls of color, and LGBTQ+ girls. Informed by the voices of girls and working alongside them, we advocate for policies and practices that combat systemic racism, sexism, and other social and economic barriers to girls' success.

ABOUT THE ISSUE

Comprehensive Sex Education is Essential for All Youth

Girls Inc. believes that all youth deserve the knowledge and resources they need to take ownership of their health, which in turn allows them to exercise more control over their lives— including their education, relationships, careers, and overall economic security. We believe in giving girls and all youth access to information and tools to make decisions that are best for them.

Supporting comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is important to the health and wellbeing of girls and all young people.

Sex education that is age-appropriate, culturally informed, and non-judgmental empowers youth by providing them the tools they need to make informed decisions about their own health. This education must be inclusive of all gender and sexual identities and address important topics like consent and healthy relationships. Access to CSE reduces girls' vulnerability to contracting sexually transmitted infections, experiencing an unplanned pregnancy, or missing the signs of an unhealthy relationship.

WHY IT MATTERS

Improved Health Outcomes

CSE has been proven to help youth avoid negative health consequences. Each year in the United States, about 750,000 teens become pregnant, and up to 82% of those pregnancies are unintended. Youth ages 15-23 also account for 25% of all new HIV infections in the U.S. and make up almost one-half of the over 19 million new STD infections per year.¹ However, **research shows that CSE, when taught in an age-appropriate way to all grades and embedded in supportive school environments, can improve the sexual, social, and emotional health of young people and their academic outcomes.** Students who avoid early pregnancy, STIs, sexual abuse, interpersonal violence, and harassment are more likely to experience academic success, which is fundamental to a bright future.²

Healthier Relationships

Eight percent of high school students report that they have been forced to have intercourse, and one in ten reports having committed an act of sexual violence.³ **Youth who receive healthy relationship and consent education are less likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence and engage in sexual harassment. CSE teaches youth how to understand, value, and feel autonomy over their bodies, and how to respect others' right to bodily autonomy.**⁴

Healthy relationship education also teaches positive communication, conflict management, and negotiating decisions around sexual activity, so youth will learn strategies to avoid or to end unhealthy relationships.⁵

DID YOU KNOW? AS OF FEBRUARY 2023

- **Only 25 states and the District of Columbia mandate both sex education and HIV education.**
- **Only 17 states require sex and HIV education program content to be medically accurate.**
- **33 states do not require sex education to be medically accurate.**
- **Only 10 states require sex education programs to be appropriate for a student's cultural background and not biased against any race, sex, or ethnicity.**
- **Only 9 states have policies that include sex education instruction on LGBTQ+ identities or discussion of sexual health for LGBTQ+ youth.**
- **Six states explicitly mandate that teachers negatively portray LGBTQ+ people in sexual health education instruction, or prohibit teachers from mentioning LGBTQ+ people at all.**¹⁰



1. Sexuality Education (Advocates for Youth, 2018). <https://www.advocatesforyouth.org/resources/fact-sheets/sexuality-education-2/>.

2. Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education (Journal of Adolescent Health, 2020). [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(20\)30456-0/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(20)30456-0/fulltext)

3. Ibid, see 1.

4. Ibid, see 1.

WHY IT MATTERS

LGBTQ+ Inclusivity

Similarly, if sex education is not LGBTQ+ inclusive, students who identify as LGBTQ+ will not be equipped with the tools to learn how to protect their bodies in a safe, judgment-free zone. Giving young people access to the information they need helps them feel comfortable in their bodies and make decisions about their health.

Evidence also suggests that LGBTQ+ inclusive sexual health curricula are successful in reducing homophobic attitudes, reducing homophobic bullying and harassment, and increasing safety for LGBTQ+ students in schools.⁶ And according to a research study, each episode of physical or verbal harassment or abuse directed at LGBT youth increases the likelihood of self-harming behavior by 2.5 times on average.⁷ Not surprisingly, there is a significant difference between LGBTQ+ students' feelings of peer acceptance in schools with or without inclusive and affirming curricula (68% versus 36%).⁸

As one Girls Inc. girl explained, her school classroom provided sex education, but in a censored, limited way that made her feel shame and guilt about her sexuality. After that, she began contemplating self-harm and suicide, but participating in Girls Inc. Healthy Sexuality programming changed that. She said: **"Girls Inc. allowed me to be myself and gave me the bravery to say, 'Yes, I am questioning my sexuality and I'm still proud.'" A staff member from her local Girls Inc. affiliate noted, "[Inclusive] sex ed saves lives, including in ways that we did not entirely realize."**

Harms of Abstinence-Only Education

Millions of dollars of federal funding have been squandered on Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage sex education programs, which are ineffective and harmful.⁹ **These programs withhold important sexual health information from youth and provide medically inaccurate information that compromises young people's healthy sexual development.** They often promote gender stereotypes associated with negative sexual health behaviors, and they fail to provide pertinent sexual health information to sexually active adolescents and those already pregnant or parenting. These programs also stigmatize sexually active young people by implying that those who have sex are less worthy than their abstinent peers.

Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage sex education marginalizes and systematically ignores the needs of sexual minority youth, including LGBTQ+ adolescents. When sex is presented as taboo or abstinence is taught as the only way to avoid teen pregnancy and STIs, survivors of sexual assault feel uncomfortable coming forward and reporting the incident. Because they fear being shamed for reporting the abuse, some survivors suffer in silence and do not seek the support they need to heal.

WHAT POLICYMAKERS CAN DO

Girls Inc. Healthy Sexuality programming assists girls in understanding and embracing sexuality with a positive, empowered approach that is built on a foundation of accurate information, cultural sensitivity, and values of inclusiveness and respect. At Girls Inc., girls acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to take charge of and to make informed, thoughtful decisions about their sexual health.

Policies and funding—even at the Federal level—should support access to CSE for youth.

- Congress should establish a **dedicated federal funding stream** to give youth access to truly comprehensive sex education and sexual health services, and should **stop funding abstinence-only sex education.**
- **States can mandate the teaching of CSE** in their schools, or at least allow it, and can fund it and incentivize school districts to offer it.
- **School districts should offer comprehensive sex education** where permitted, and can partner with community-based organizations to do so.



5. Ibid, see 1.

6. Ibid, see 2.

7. Facts about suicide (The Trevor Project, 2017). <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/preventing-suicide/facts-about-suicide/>.

8. Ibid, see 2.

9. Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs Are Ineffective and Harmful to Young People, Expert Review Confirms (Guttmacher Institute, 2017). <https://www.guttmacher.org/news-release/2017/abstinence-only-until-marriage-programs-are-ineffective-and-harmful-young-people>.

10. All statistics above are retrieved from Sex and HIV Education (Guttmacher Institute, 2022) <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education> and Sex Ed State Law and Policy Chart (SIECUS, 2022) <https://siecus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2022-Sex-Ed-State-Law-and-Policy-Chart.pdf>.