

AMERICA’S TEEN SEX EDUCATION: CAN PARENTS REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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America’s children’s sexual health and sexual education has been declining in recent years. With the lack of leadership from public school’s sex education, parents need to step up and have more discussions about sex with their children. When parents lead discussions that are more adaptable according to the child’s needs, consistently frequent during adolescence, and equally discussed by each parent to each child, America’s adolescents’ sexual health can improve exponentially.

“G et ready for love, laughs, [and] lube.” This is how *Netflix* advertised its new show “Sex Education,” that started streaming January 2019 (Sex Education | Official Trailer | Netflix, 2019). The show’s premise—inexperienced teens teaching other teens about sex. “Channeling his Sex Therapist mother, inexperienced teen Otis decides to set up [an underground] Sex Therapy clinic at school for the [other] hopeless students” (Sex Education | Official Trailer | Netflix, 2019). And with 40 million viewers just within the first month, this *Netflix* TV show accurately illustrates the current “hopeless” situation of teenagers and sex, especially in America (Porter, 2019). America, even with all its worldly advances, currently has by far the highest percentage of teenage pregnancies in the world (Sedgh, Finer, Bankole, Eilers, & Singh, 2015). In just a year, almost a quarter of a million new mothers were teenage girls, half of which would not graduate high school—and these statistics are not including any of the teen girls who had miscarriages or abortions (Perper, Peterson, & Manlove, 2010). During the hundred years that American public schools have taught sex education, what and how much to teach has continually been disputed, with many different voices calling for it to

be taken away, improved, or simply kept (Cornblatt, 2010). While some say that public schools are best for teaching teenagers about sexual health to lower their pregnancies, promiscuity, and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), others say that parents need to improve their sex discussions with their children to accomplish this (Cornblatt, 2010; Flores & Barroso, 2017). And with recent research indicating that perhaps parent-child sex communication is the main source of children's sexual knowledge and health, it supports the claim that parents need to take the lead and be involved in their children's sex education rather than simply leaving it up to the public schools (Flores & Barroso, 2017). Examining the current public-school sex education program reveals that more can be done to increase children's sexual health and safety, including more parent involvement and leadership. A solution that could have an immediate impact is the way parents choose to lead sex communication with the children—discussions that are more comprehensive according to the child's current needs, more consistently frequent during adolescence, and more equally discussed by each parent to their child.

In 1918, America started to feel the need for improved sex education to supplement the traditional parental leadership in parent-child sex discussions. After a huge spread of STIs during WWI, the U.S. government funded sex education for the first time to teach American soldiers, with public schools adopting it shortly thereafter (Cornblatt, 2010). This sparked the debate that has lasted over a century regarding who should lead these sex discussions. While some say that public schools' teaching of sex is perfectly adequate, some argue that the schools are leading too much, and others debate that the schools aren't leading enough. This debate was illustrated by statistics at the 2019 National Conference of State Legislatures, where it was reported that currently only 24 states require sex education to be taught, and that it does not always have to be "medically accurate" (Blackman & Scotti, 2019). "Medically accurate" is a term that has been in the mix of the sex education debate since the beginning, primarily within the religious community, with the conference also reporting that "35 states and the District of Columbia allow parents to opt-out [of any sex education offered] on behalf of their children" (Blackman & Scotti, 2019).

These statistics show one reason why public schools' sex education cannot be relied on as the sole provider of information teens receive. It can

be deduced that public school sex education in the United States is inconsistent and possibly inaccurate, with modern research substantiating this claim—simply, schools are not the best leaders for sex education (Blackman & Scotti, 2019). A 2016 study done on sex education in the United States found that the only thing that has remained consistent in public-school sex education is its decline in the past decade and it appears that this will continue to decrease in frequency over the next few years (Lindberg, Maddow-Zimet, & Boonstra, 2016). Another recent study performed in 2017 further strengthens the unreliability and validity of public-school sex education. In evaluating public-school sex education effectiveness, it was discovered that the schools that do teach sex education, most often only teach abstinence (Denford, Abraham, Campbell, & Busse, 2017). In a further evaluation and analysis of the effectiveness of school sex education, the study also found that the current teaching of abstinence was highly ineffective in improving teen sexual health and extremely “weak” in lowering risky teen sex (Denford et al., p. 33). It would appear that public school sex education is not only inconsistent in its consistency, but also in its effectiveness. And with 70% of the United States allowing parents to deny their children access to public-school sex education, this further reveals the great need for parental leadership in sex discussions (Blackman & Scotti, 2019).

Despite these facts, some believe that public school sex education is still perfectly adequate and the best authority in lowering their children's sexual activity. It is true that in the past 6 years, the rate of American teen sex dropped by 4% (Padilla-Walker, 2018). However, the main concern is the sexual health and safety of America's children, not just the amount of their sexual activity. Even as the rate of teen sex dropped, the rate of risky unprotected teen sex increased by 6% (Padilla-Walker, 2018). It can be inferred from these statistics that although teenagers are having less sex, when they do choose to have sex, they have a higher chance of getting pregnant and receiving STIs. This debunks the claim that the current public-school sex education is the best authority for sex education and further illustrates the need for parental leadership in parent-child sex education and discussions, with recent research showing that parents can substantially decrease the amount of risky sex their children have with these parent-child discussions (Widman, Noar, Choukas-Bradley, & Francis, 2014).

The need for improved parental leadership in parent-child sex discussions is underscored in a study from the University of Pennsylvania. It found that parents (out of all the other modern resources) are the primary and best source for their children's sexual knowledge (Flores & Barroso, 2017). This suggests the same sex education discussion held in school would have a much greater impact on the sexual health of the children if led by parents, and multiple recent studies strengthen this inference. Two different studies conducted in the past five years showed that parent-led sex discussions are associated with teenagers lowering their amount of unprotected sex, STIs, and even sexual partners (Flores & Barroso, 2017; Widman et al., 2014). Conducting one of these studies, Dr. Barroso from the Medical University of South Carolina writes, "Parent-child sex communication results in the transmission of family expectations, societal values, and role modeling of sexual health risk-reduction strategies" (Flores & Barroso, 2017, p. 532). In essence, this research suggests that sex discussions led by parents to their children have the power to change society by improving a teenager's sexual health. Research suggests that even a few sex discussions led by parents can prevent their children from participating in risky sex. In one specific study, it found that just one conversation about sex between a mother and a daughter lowered the amount of unprotected sex the daughter had for up to three months (Hutchinson, Jemmott, Jemmott, Braverman, & Fong, 2003).

Some parents say their current sex conversations with their children are adequate and frequent enough to improve their children's sexual health. However, recent research suggests that parents think they are doing better than they actually are. One 2015 study from the State University of New Jersey found that parents claim to talk to their children about sex more than they actually do (LaSala, 2015). This indicates how unaware parents are regarding the sexual knowledge and health of their children, and further shows the need for more frequent parental-led sex discussions. The University of Pennsylvania's previously mentioned study revealed that many parents are unwilling to talk to their children about sex and that almost all parent-child sex discussions are simply an uncomfortable "birds and the bees" talk that occurs only once in the child's life (Flores & Barroso, 2017). With parents being the "primary" source of their children's sexual knowledge, this research conveys the

need for improved parent-child sex conversations. A 2016 study indicates this further, discovering that parent-child sex communication has not improved at all in the past few decades (Lindberg et al., 2016). All this recent research advocates for the need of more frequent and improved parent-led sex discussions in America. Fortunately, the research also illustrates how this can be accomplished.

A 2017 study about sex education in America suggested one way parents can make a difference in leading their children's education towards sexual health. It discovered the reason why school sex education has been largely ineffective in its leadership of changing risky sex behaviors with teenagers—its current curriculum is based solely on abstinence sex talks. However, the study also showed that comprehensive sex conversations with children that targeted STIs, specifically HIV, were very effective in intervening and lowering risky and unprotected sex among teenagers (Denford et al., 2017). Since research already shows they are the most effective source and lead for their children's sexual knowledge, parents are the ones who can have these comprehensive sex discussions with their children (Flores & Barroso, 2017). With the importance of these comprehensive sex discussions being evident from this research, and other recent research indicating that parents are the best choice for providing this information to their children, it is suggested that comprehensive parent-child sex discussions would be highly effective in lowering teen pregnancies, STIs, and their overall sexual health.

Another 2017 study discovered one reason why parents are the primary providers of sexual knowledge for their child is because parents can start answering their children's questions about sex from an early age (Flores & Barroso, 2017). The study also suggests that if parents were consistent in leading these discussions throughout adolescence, it would greatly lower the amount of risky, unprotected sex and STIs had by their teenagers. This indicates the more consistently parents talk about sex with their children, the better sexual health their teenagers will have. A study from a Brigham Young University researcher found that as parents stayed consistently frequent in leading their sexual health discussions with their children, it not only decreased the amount of unprotected sex

their children had while teenagers, but also decreased the amount of unprotected sex and sexual partners their children had as young adults (Padilla-Walker, 2018). Dr. Padilla-Walker, the study's author, wrote, "This should increase the urgency that parents feel to have conversations with their children about sex, and educators and pediatricians should encourage parents to initiate conversations at least as soon as early adolescence, and with increasing frequency over time" (Padilla-Walker, 2018, p. 757). This suggests that parent-child sex discussions are more important than most other sex discussions—that even schools should encourage parents to have more sex discussions with their children—and that parents are the leaders in sex education that children need. The research indicates that the more consistently children have parented discussions about sex, the more consistently sexually healthy they will be.

While research suggests that parent-child sex conversations can be improved with further comprehensiveness, frequency, and consistency, research also suggests the need for more parent-child sex discussions by each parent to each child. Research from the University of Oklahoma provides evidence for this claim. Dr. Wisnieski found in her 2015 study that almost all parent-child sex discussions are done by the mother, and are almost always only given to the daughter (Wisnieski, Sieving, & Garwick, 2015). This indicates the need for more sex discussions given by fathers, and to sons—although both parents are needed in parent-child sex discussions—as it was a quarter of a million boys that participated in getting those girls pregnant ("About Teen Pregnancy," 2019). Perhaps fathers currently do not talk to their sons about sex because their own fathers never did. Since research already shows the great effectiveness of mother-daughter sex discussions in lowering chances of the daughter's risky teen sex, it follows that the impact would only increase if both parents were involved in and led the teaching their children, regardless of the gender (Hutchinson et al., 2003). With research showing the lack of, and also, the importance of father's leadership in parent-child sex discussions, it is suggested that increasing father-son sex discussions will lower teen pregnancies, promiscuity, and STIs, and improve their overall sexual health.

“Get ready for unprotected sex, STI scares, and lube” is perhaps what more adequately describes the new *Netflix* show “Sex Education.” What is ironic is how the show also adequately shows where teens are currently getting most of their sex education and knowledge—not from schools or parents, but from their friends. The popularity of this TV show illustrates how many teens in America truly have a desire to be educated about sex. Children born in 2018 from those quarter of a million teenage parents are more likely to drop out of high school, face unemployment, be incarcerated, and become a teen parent (“About Teen Pregnancy,” 2019). It is a cycle that could continue on for generations. Conversely, generations will be changed for the better as parents become involved with and lead their children’s sex education. Children in America will continue to receive STIs from multiple partners, give birth to children while being children, and keep America with the world’s highest teen birth rate if current trends continue—if parents do not step up. However, the research suggests that if there is an improvement in parental leadership in parent-child sex discussions, this trend could be slowed and even reversed. With parents leading sex discussions that are more sexually comprehensive, more consistent and frequent during adolescence, and more equally discussed by each parent to each child, more parents will begin to see the great difference they can make, and their children will reap the benefits from their leadership.

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