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English IV H

23 January 2019

### Absta-what?

There comes a time in every adolescent's life when they begin to think about a word that parents fear most: sex. And while some are quick to believe that their children are above such temptations, various studies would prove otherwise. In fact, research done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention concluded that the average age at which Americans lose their virginity is 17 ("Sexual Activity"). So if we know it's happening, should we be doing more to adequately prepare children for their first sexual experiences? By leaving them in the dark are we actually exposing them to hazardous consequences?

The truth is that most states have very few guidelines on what needs to be covered in sex education classes. "Only 22 states require that sex education include information on making healthy decisions around sexuality" found the Guttmacher Institute ("Sex and HIV Education"). The gap between state policies is enormous. Studying a CDC report, NPR reporter Mg Anderson found that, "in New Jersey, 9 out of 10 high school students receive the full list of recommended topics. Arizona was lowest in the survey, with fewer than 1 in 5 students." A lack of guidelines for comprehensive sex education might surprise some people, but since the federal government has, for the most part, delegated education matters to the states, the standards vary quite a bit. In fact, only 13 states expressly mandate that information given to students be medically accurate ("Sex and HIV Education"). Even these statistics can't paint the whole picture though, for aside

from the vague instructions that states give, schools are practically free to make up their own curriculum. When John Oliver, host of *Last Week Tonight*, and his team began to research for an episode on sex education, they quickly discovered how much teachings may vary. He reported that “...we essentially have a weird patchwork system that varies widely and not just from state to state but from district to district and even from school to school” (Oliver). If students across the nation receive completely different information on sex, how can we expect them to interact with each other in a mature and educated fashion? A lack of a complete teaching of sexual education in primary and secondary schools leads to women being less confident in taking charge of their own relationships, more susceptible to violence, and ashamed and/or unaware of their own sexuality.

Social norms are important, they helps us all get along better in the public setting, but some social norms are outdated and actually confine the ways in which we interact with one another. From a very young age children are socialized; they’re taught about the different rules to follow when eating at the dinner table and they’re taught about the things they generally can and cannot do. Girls get dolls and cooking toys while boys get race cars and play construction equipment. This may not seem like a big deal, but it’s actually a simple example of the ways we limit girls and boys from exploring. Socialization does not stop after kids outgrow their toys, in fact, it can still be seen when we teach sex ed. Girls are often shown to act as the damsel in distress, to never ask a boy out, never make the first move. As Kate Neuman wrote in her opinion piece for the New York Times, “...I grew up believing that girls were supposed to be wanted, but we were not suppose to want. If we did want, we were never, ever to show it”. Her experience of dating in high school is one many girls can relate to. While we cannot rely on sex

ed classes to teach girls to make the first move, we should be able to teach them that once they enter a relationship, they have to be wary of an unbalanced power dynamic. Without guidance on things like consent, girls can find themselves feeling trapped like a fly on a spider web during their first sexual encounters. If open conversation were promoted from a early age, this could easily be prevented. We should teach girls of the importance of speaking up when they feel any displeasure or when they want their partner to use a condom. In a heterosexual relationship, many girls have reported feeling frozen when their male counterparts did not take initiative in using contraceptives. It's such a common encounter, that there are countless advice columns online about what to do, but women shouldn't have to rely on a Planned Parenthood list of reasons and responses for their partner to use a condom (Kendall). Teaching both boys and girls the importance of contraceptives during high school can help eliminate stigmas that prevent adults young adults the same from participating in safe sex. Men would not fall into common excuses relating to size or comfort problems with condoms, and women would not feel too meek to ask for what she wants. In fact, it's probable that if both partners receive an education that stressed the importance of consent and contraceptives, they'd be equally understanding of the necessity for both.

“Look at the flower in your hand, Jane... Notice how perfect it is. How pure. Now... crumple it up... Now try to make it look new again... That's right. You can never go back. And that's what happens when you lose your virginity. You can never go back” (Urman). The opening scene from the hit T.V. show *Jane The Virgin* can either be shocking or relatable, it all depends on how you were raised. Regardless of whether or not a lesson like this has been taught to you, it's a common practice that girls face. It may not be a flower, as Calah Alexander, a

religion and spirituality blogger, recalls, her friends were shown chewed up oreos, cups full of spit, and broken shoes all in the name of teaching chastity (Alexander). She notes that abstinence education is commonly endorsed by Christians, and while she also belongs to the same religious faith, she provides a unique point of view by dissenting the majority. She maintains that,

The question is not whether or not abstinence-only education is working. [She's] not even sure what proponents of it mean by 'working'. In the incarnation [she's] familiar with, it certainly doesn't seem intended to do much beyond shaming kids into not having sex using the curdest, most psychologically destructive means available. Research is pretty clear that it's not even managing to accomplish that. The only thing abstinence-only education is accomplishing is the entrenching misogynistic, licentious attitudes towards sex in a whole new generation of kids (Alexander).

Abstinence teachings are an age old practice, and despite this, "the average age for initiating sexual activity has remained around 17 or 18 since the early 1990s," found NPR correspondent Sarah McCammon. This fight is as old as time; religion has always played a role in the realm of reproduction. For example, the Catholic Church was one of the greatest dissenting opinions for abortion in the 1960s (Wittenstein 80-89). It seems that the only thing abstinence-only education is able to accomplish is instilling a sense of shame in girls for having perfectly normal sexual desires. Moreover, teaching girls that they should only have sex after being married implies that their only worth to a man will be the ability to produce offspring, only furthering destructive gender roles. In addition to this wide range impact, victims of sexual assault can feel a deeper burn. In a speech she gave at John Hopkins University, Elizabeth Smart, survivor of a

kidnapping and nine month captivity at age fourteen, noted that because of the abstinence-only education she received, after being sexually assaulted, she felt worthless and dirty (Frumin). Proponents of abstinence education do not see it this way though. Christine C. Kim, a policy analyst, and Robert Rector, a senior research fellow at The Heritage Foundation, remind us of the potential health risks and future impacts that arise when people make the choice of becoming sexually active (Kim). It's true, someone who is sexually active is more likely to get an STD than someone who is not. The problem is the common misconception that comprehensive sex-ed promotes sexual activity. In reality, advocates of a well rounded health course recommend that students be given the information to make education decisions when they need to. There's even evidence to prove that abstinence-only education does a poorer job of preventing the very outcomes it seeks to put a stop to. In an episode of All Things Considered on NPR, Wade Goodwyn reports on a abstinence lecture presented by Aim For Success, a non-profit youth health education organization based in Dallas, Texas. He discovered that the company is one of the most popular health educators in the state and that one of its main goal is to discourage sex before marriage. So how well does Aim For Success do in curbing STD transmissions and teen pregnancies? Well, according to a report by the Center for Disease Control And Prevention, Texas has one of the highest rates of births for females ages 15-19 ("Teen Births"). However, Texas isn't alone; the United States birth rate is among the highest compared to other developed nations (NowThis World). In comparison, countries like Sweden, France, Denmark, and the Netherlands have some of the lowest teen pregnancy rates and some of the most progressive sex education (NowThis World). The research proves that abstinence-only education does not succeed in its goals and does have a lasting harmful impact on girls.

Once again we're missing the big picture. Comprehensive sex education is not a form of advocating for teens to have sex; it's just a way to ensure they have the right information when they inevitably do.

According to Rainn, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network dedicated to anti-sexual violence, "one out of every six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime". The organization believes that this number can be lowered through further education of consent, alcohol safety, and proper responses to feeling pressured. Many states don't even define the word legally (State Law Database). James Warren, an MSNBC analyst and former managing editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, maintains that U.S. law does little to protect sexual assault victims on multiple levels, from lax law enforcement to judges following outdated case precedent. These problems are showing up more and more in our media. The #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have called for action against sexual assault. There have even been efforts to normalize the appearance of sex in mainstream media. In her show *Her Shorts*, Rachel Bloom tries to topics like STDs, rape culture, and vaginas in an informative and comical way (Doxey). This is one way of reaching out to teens, but there has to be more we can do to prevent women from harm. One has to wonder if teaching these things to high schoolers in their sex-ed courses could be a preventative. Crimes of sexual assault often stem from unbalanced power dynamics in a relationship. Maanvi Singh from NPR reported on the idea of "empowered based" sex education that could help kids learn how to communicate with partners helping women feel safe and unafraid to ask for what they want and helping men understand the importance of tenderness and empathy in a relationship. By giving teens an example of what a healthy partnership should look like, they're able to translate the ideas into

their own lives (Singh). Talking about the tools that build wholesome and fulfilling relationships can do more than just giving teens an idea of what to look for and strive to though, many believe that comprehensive sex education could also result in a decrease of sexual harassment and violence. The results of a Guttmacher Institute study, which found that, “including gender and power lessons in sex ed improved health outcomes and healthy behaviors”, is used as one of several reasons why the ACLU advocates for better sex education to lower rates of sexual violence and harassment towards women (Goodman). These practices could help women in one of the areas where they need it the most, college campuses, where, “rape is the most common violent crime” (Buttenwieser). The more this issue comes up the greater the fight against the sex taboo becomes. We’ve even seen some results in state law like New York’s “Enough Is Enough” and California’s “Yes Means Yes” legislation (Governor)(Chappel). Sexual assault does not start on college campuses though, which is why many proponents of comprehensive sex-education advocate for early teachings of consent and healthy relationships. They hope to tackle the issue before it even starts. Yet, until there is actual regulation and enforcement for comprehensive sex education, we can guarantee that nothing will change. Pamela Zimmerman and Katharine Bodde, a non-profit worker and New York Civil Liberties Union employee, respectively, explain, “...policy makers must connect the norms that perpetuate sexual violence with the need to prepare young people to engage in healthy relationships from an early age, which is a core component of comprehensive sex education”. It seems strange that if the obvious link between lower rates of sexual harassment and violence and better sex education exists there is not being more done.

At the end of the day, we know a lot about teen relationships and exploration. As much as

we might not want to think about it, young-adults are engaging in sexual activity, and the reality is that we're not doing enough to protect them. Comprehensive sex education could help address unbalanced power dynamics in relationships, correct practices that are corrosive to girl's self worth, and lower sexual assault and violence rates. The law should to more to address the problem, and we should all fight for teens to have adequate preparation before they embark on new experiences.

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