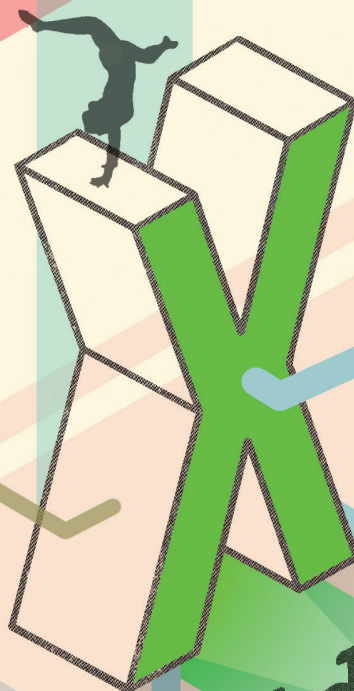
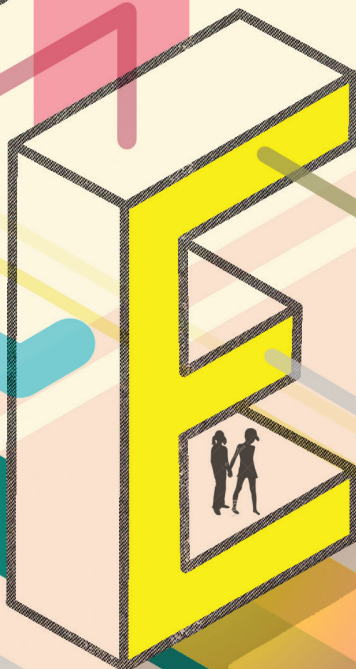
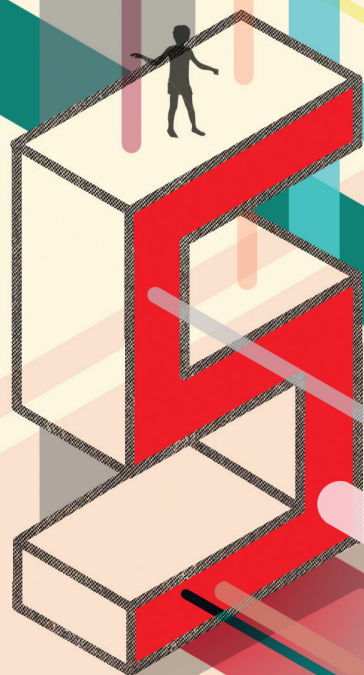


The New



Ed.

BY ALICE PETTWAY ILLUSTRATION BY MARK MILLER

Educators and parents agree: It's time to move beyond the abstinence-only model.

SEXUALITY EDUCATION.

Those two words are enough to fill educators and parents alike with uncertainty and even dread. That negativity shouldn't be surprising: Three decades of abstinence-until-marriage education have left generations of Americans with limited information and skills for speaking frankly about healthy sexual decisions and relationships.

The good news is the abstinence-only era is slowly coming to an end.

Last October, California passed new legislation requiring all schools to offer comprehensive sexuality education. And California is just one of many states moving toward a more comprehensive approach: 18 states and the District of Columbia now require sex education curricula to include discussion of contraception, and nine states mandate curricula be LGBT inclusive.

This move toward comprehensive sex education is supported by parents. When asked if federal funds should be used to support comprehensive sex education programs, 72 percent of parents of junior high school students and 65 percent of parents of high school students said yes on a survey conducted by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Kennedy School of Government.

What's wrong with abstinence only until marriage?

On the surface, abstinence-until-marriage programs might seem beneficial: Not having sex does mean zero percent chance of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STIs), right?

But contrary to what advocates have hoped, abstinence-only sex education has been shown to be completely ineffective at reducing teenage pregnancy and STI transmission. A University of Washington study found that abstinence-only programs are not associated with a reduced risk of teen pregnancy when compared with no sexuality education, and they

do not delay the age at which teens report vaginal intercourse.

The term *vaginal intercourse* points to another reason abstinence education is under scrutiny: It hinges on the idealization of straight, gender-stereotypical relationships. Basing a curriculum on such a narrow definition of sex sustains problematic views of gender and leaves LGBT kids un-included and uninformed, says Jesseca Boyer, vice president for policy and interim president and CEO of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS).

Research conducted by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) supports Boyer's stance. In a 2014 study, they found that only 5 percent of middle and high school students reported that their health classes included positive discussions of LGBT-related topics. This isn't surprising given that eight states still prohibit the inclusion of LGBT content in sex education classes; four states mandate explicitly negative messages about LGBT identities. The effects of this exclusion are devastating: Students who report high levels of victimization and discrimination at school based on their gender expression or sexual orientation are at much greater risk than

Break Out of the Binary

Having trouble getting students or colleagues to see identity spectrums? Try discussing intersex identities first. Missy Mae Sturtevant, founder and director of MaeBright, says because most people already understand the concept, it can be a great starting point.

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their peers for missing school, low GPA and depression.

Understanding Comprehensive Sex Education

SIECUS defines comprehensive sex education as including “age-appropriate, medically accurate information on a broad set of topics related to sexuality including human development, relationships, decision-making, abstinence, contraception and disease prevention.” For many educators, understanding this comprehensive definition starts with becoming familiar with two of the pieces that have been most conspicuously absent from previous decades’ sex education curricula: consent and LGBT inclusion. To help bridge the knowledge gap, Future of Sex Education (FoSE) created the National Sexuality Education Standards. The standards cover concepts from decision-making and interpersonal communication to identity and advocacy and have become the bar for sex education curricula across the country. Read the standards at t-t.site/sexedstandards.

The standards offer an important framework, but implementation is key. Missy Mae Sturtevant, director and owner of MaeBright, an organization that helps schools and other groups improve the services they provide to LGBT people, says the first step toward true LGBT inclusion is creating an atmosphere where diversity is acknowledged. “I like to talk

about how we all hold identities that are complex and identities that are simple, and ... to acknowledge that for some people gender identity is super simple, for some people it’s more complex,” she says. “Same thing with sexual orientation. To allow people to hold all of that and to do less comparing, that ‘This is my experience; it must be everyone’s experience.’”

What’s Your pronoun?

Inviting your students to share their preferred pronouns the first day of class is a great way to start building respect.

This kind of inclusive thinking is important, says Sturtevant, because a lot of LGBT teenagers aren’t connecting in sex education classes when there are simple changes that could make them feel included. Saying, for example, “Without hormone treatment, people who have uteruses and fallopian tubes usually menstruate” instead of “Women get their periods and men don’t” speaks to the reality of many cisgender and transgender folks, says Sturtevant. “I hear lots of stories about people hearing from queer folks and queer young people in

sex ed saying, ‘You are not saying anything that is speaking to me about me, and therefore I’m not going to listen to anything at all that you’re saying, even the things that I need to know and that are important for my health.’”

Basically, LGBT inclusion should be more than gender-neutral language. It should run throughout sex education curricula, including through discussions of consent—another topic essential in comprehensive sex education.

In the past, education about consent has often been of the “no means no” variety, which places the onus for halting sexual activity on whoever is unwilling to participate. Affirmative consent can be thought of as “yes means yes.” This concept of consent places the responsibility on individuals to only proceed with an activity after all participants have explicitly expressed their desire to participate.

Some sex educators, however, think even affirmative consent fails to fully encompass the complex responsibility that comes with sexual relationships. Sharon Lamb, a professor of counseling and school psychology at the University of Massachusetts Boston and author of *Sex Ed for Caring Schools: Creating an Ethics-Based Curriculum*, advocates for teaching an even higher standard: mutuality. Lamb defines the concept of mutuality as the idea that “you have to know something about the other person to know about consent. That a yes is more or less than a yes at times.”



She gives the example of two friends, one of whom has just gone through a bad breakup and is distraught. The two find themselves kissing. The friend doing the consoling asks if it's OK to have sex. Even if the distraught friend says yes, Lamb says it's the other friend's responsibility to think about context. This person is emotionally distraught and may not be fully thinking about the emotional consequences of having sex. Lamb's conclusion is that, even though it would be OK to proceed using the standard of affirmative consent, the friend should stop if they know proceeding could harm the other person.

Making the Transition

There are lots of educators who are eager to teach a more comprehensive sex education curriculum, but either they are afraid to or don't know where to start. Michaelle Valbrun-Pope, the executive director for student support initiatives for the Broward County School District in southern Florida, has advice for these educators: "Be courageous."

Broward County School District's sex education policy was more than 15 years old when members of their sex education team decided the policy was outdated, inaccurate and failed to meet the needs of Broward's students. Working with existing school committees as well as community organizations, they evaluated available resources and curricula for adherence to FoSE's National Sex Education Standards and for relevance to Broward students' needs.

Once Valbrun-Pope's team had chosen their new curriculum, they set about the process of reeducating their community—including the school board and parents—about what sex education should be. This is the part of the process many would-be comprehensive-sex-education advocates fear. But most of the community was extremely supportive, says

Valbrun-Pope. There were people who opposed various portions of the curriculum, primarily the LGBT-inclusion portions and discussion of contraception at younger ages, but even people who objected to certain topics recognized that comprehensive sex education was a good thing overall.

Broward's school board approved the new curriculum unanimously in May of 2014, and the district is well on its way to successful implementation. Sebrina James, an instructional facilitator on Valbrun-Pope's team, says professional development has been a big part of that process. And while

there's been some pushback from teachers, she says more often than not, when teachers leave training sessions, they say they see the importance of the changes to the school's sex education approach.

It comes down to helping people see that part of being a professional educator is responding to students' needs, says Valbrun-Pope. "We know we're doing the right thing for kids," she says. "We're protecting kids and helping kids protect themselves." ♦

Pettway lives and writes in Bogotá, Colombia.

Sex Ed in Elementary School?

Opponents of starting sex education in elementary school often have misconceptions about content. These National Sexuality Education Standards for K-2 students can help everyone understand the value of talking about consent, relationships and differences from an early age.

- ☺ Describe the characteristics of a friend.
- ☺ Identify healthy ways for friends to express feelings to each other.
- ☺ Explain that all people, including children, have the right to tell others not to touch their bodies when they do not want to be touched.
- ☺ Identify parents and other trusted adults they can tell if they are feeling uncomfortable about being touched.
- ☺ Demonstrate how to respond if someone is touching them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable.
- ☺ Demonstrate how to clearly say no, how to leave an uncomfortable situation, and how to identify and talk with a trusted adult if someone is touching them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable.
- ☺ Use proper names for body parts, including male and female anatomy.
- ☺ Describe differences and similarities in how boys and girls may be expected to act.
- ☺ Provide examples of how friends, family, media, society and culture influence ways in which boys and girls think they should act.
- ☺ Explain that all living things reproduce.
- ☺ Identify different kinds of family structures.
- ☺ Demonstrate ways to show respect for different types of families.
- ☺ Explain what bullying and teasing are.
- ☺ Explain why bullying and teasing are wrong.
- ☺ Identify parents and other trusted adults they can tell if they are being bullied or teased.
- ☺ Demonstrate how to respond if someone is bullying or teasing them.