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Sexual Education in the United States

Sexual education in the United States is controversial based off of moral and religious ideals and the reality of sexual activity and the concerns of health that go along with it as well. In the mid 1970’s the World Health Organization, aka WHO, defined sexual health as the,

integration of the somatic, emotional, intellectual, and social aspects of sexual being, in ways that are positively enriching and that enhance personality, communication, and love. Fundamental to this concept are the right to sexual information and the right to pleasure…

Thus the notion of sexual health implies a positive approach to human sexuality, and the purpose of sexual health care should be the enhancement of life and personal relationships and not merely counseling and care related to procreation or sexuality transmitted diseases (Knowles, 1).

This definition of sexual health sparked the consciousness of sexual health as well as sexual education. Before the 1960s and the 1970s, moral activists focused on preventing sexually transmitted diseases, teaching the immorality of masturbation and prostitution, and believed in abstinence until marriage (Knowles, 1). However, when the 1960s came around, schools around the United States started being more proactive towards sexual education. Schools gained support nationwide. Later on, in the 1980s, schools started teaching about contraceptives and included abstinence-only programs. During this time, there were two beliefs:

One was based on the belief that medically accurate and comprehensive information about sexual health would *decrease* risk-taking behaviors among young people. The other was based on the erroneous belief that medically accurate, comprehensive information would *increase* risk-taking behaviors among young people (Knowles, 1).

Now, research shows that that comprehensive approach to sexual education has reduced risk-taking behavior sexually in teenagers and young adults.

Planned Parenthood is widely known and used throughout the United States by teenagers and young adults. “Dr. Mary Calderone, medical director for Planned Parenthood Federation of America, founded the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States” (Knowles, 1). The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, AKA SIECUS, was created for the concern of young adults lacking the knowledge of sex, sexual health and sexuality. SIECUS then created the National Guidelines Task Force which assisted, “young people in developing a positive view of sexuality, provide them with information they need to take care of their sexual health, and help them acquire skills to make decisions now and in the future” (Knowles, 2). SIECUS has also done research on abstinence-until-marriage programs. They found that, “Over the past 25 years, Congress has spent over $1.5 billion on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs” (SIECUS). However, these programs have not been effective at all. In fact the programs have shown that they do not impact teen sexual behavior positively; it negatively impacts young adult’s sexual health. It has been found that “virginity pledges” are getting popular in schools and communities throughout the States. Those who have participated in these pledges were identified to be delayed on the, “onset of sexual intercourse for an average of 18 months… [and] one-third less likely to use contraception when they did become sexually active than their peers who had not pledged” (SIECUS). Pledgers are in danger of conforming to the pledges because they underestimate contraceptive use when they do become sexually active. It was also found that sexually transmitted disease rates were, “8.9% compared to 5.5% in communities with few pledgers” (SIECUS). Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs don’t teach teenagers and young adults the consequences of sex without condoms and/or contraceptives. Therefore, there is higher risk for STDs and pregnancy in these people that participate in virginity pledges. The Advocates for Youth stated that:

We cannot ignore realities: 70 percent of young people will have sex by the age of 19; 95 percent of people will have sex before they are married; most couples now wait until will into their 20’s to get married; and same-sex couple still cannot legally marry in most states in the country. Abstinence-only-until marriage programs are unethical, harmful and stigmatizing. Young people deserve better.

In Salt Lake City, Utah, the Utah Legislature passed a bill in 2012. Bill HB363 defines sex education in the state of Utah as, “abstinence-only and bans instruction on sexual intercourse, homosexuality, contraceptive methods and sexual activity outside of marriage” (Wood, 1). The actual bill has a general description of, “This bill modifies requirements for health instruction, including human sexuality instruction” (Rep. Bill Wright). This bill seems to come off beneficial towards young adults and teenagers learning safe sex guidelines. However, the bill

requires human sexuality instruction or instructional programs to teach and stress: the importance of abstinence from all sexual activity before marriage and fidelity after marriage as the only sure methods for preventing certain communicable diseases; and personal kills that encourage individual choice of abstinence and fidelity. (Rep. Bill Wright)

Because this bill has been passed by the legislature, there is obviously heavily restricted teaching on the topic of sexual education. This leads to teenagers and young adults having higher risks of pregnancy, inheriting sexual transmitted diseases, and even teen bullying to those who are pregnant or have STDs as a teenager. If the state of Utah were to change it’s conservative belief of abstinence-only-until-marriage, it would be noticeable that rates of pregnancy and STDs would decline.

Personally, I have to completely disagree with Bill HB363 for many reasons. I started having sex at an early age and unfortunately, I didn’t know how to take care of my body or how to deal with the “effects” of sex. It resulted in infections that could have easily been avoided and mental health issues that could have been avoided as well. Since Utah schools are only allowed to teach abstinence-only, I never had the opportunity to learn about sex in a positive way. Sex is a pleasure but I believe that it could have been more of a pleasure for me, personally, if I had had more education on the topic. Having better sex education programs would also provide information to those high school boys that are “players” or “fuckboys”. These teenage boys are more focused on partying, getting laid, and trying to look good for everyone all the time than they are with healthy relationships they could be having. Because these boys are having a lot of sex with a lot of different girls, they have more risk of inheriting and/or transmitting sexual diseases. However, they don’t seem to care about it at all. Girls would like to enjoy sex and not have to worry about getting pregnant or inheriting STDs, but these boys only care about reaching their climax and not letting the girl enjoy the time spent. Another phrase for this is called “hit it and quit it”, which, unfortunately, a lot of guys I know live by this phrase. With a better sexual education, “players” and “fuckboys” would have a better understanding of sex and its consequences. They would also probably treat girls better than what they do now. Instead of treating them like an object that is something good to look at, like jewelry or food, boys would look at girls like another human being that deserves to be treated with respect. I have gone through experiences where boys keep on pushing me and pushing me to have sex with them, even after saying no over and over again to them. It personally makes me feel bad about myself in the sense that I’m just a body that is only able to please and do nothing else. It is very degrading.

I feel that the main reason Utah has that abstinence-only-until-marriage policy for sexual education, is for religious reasons. Utah, being religiously Mormon with conservative ideals, gives more risk to unwanted pregnancies and STDs to teenagers and young adults. As a teenager, the body is changing rapidly and hormones are very high. This leads to teenagers wanting to experiment with each other and curiosity towards sexual behavior. I once read a story of a Mormon, teenage girl that became pregnant. She wanted to experiment and she explained the reason she got pregnant is, “no one told me how good it would feel.” I agree with her, no one does tell you how much of a pleasure sex and other sexual behaviors are. The Mormon church attempts to hide this from teenagers which doesn’t end well for teenagers of this generation.

I would like Utah schools to teach about sexually transmitted diseases. I know nothing about them and it actually scares me that I have no knowledge on what the possibilities are of my body reacting to sex. Boys would be more understanding to the risks, consequences, and the fear of them towards young women. Girls would be more self-conscious and persistent on the use of condoms as well. It would also be nice to learn about both the male and female bodies and how they act during sexual intercourse, how hormones act in both bodies, and especially the female bodies before and after losing their virginities. A lot of teenagers and young adults lack the knowledge of our own bodies and seem to be careless about them. With these examples of sexual education, today’s younger generation would have a safer and more pleasurable time with learning and experimenting with sexual behavior.

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