



Advocate's Tool No. 2: Comprehensive Sexuality Education

The Issue

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, many conservative groups and leftist governments continue to restrict access to comprehensive sexuality education for adolescents. Many governments will mandate or only fund abstinence programs which are scientifically proven to lead to poor health outcomes. SRHR advocates, armed with facts and evidence, can work against these groups to legislate for compulsory, comprehensive sexuality education.

The Facts

The effects of poor sexual and reproductive health are devastating, ranging from psychological damage, poor general health, morbidity and disease, and, at worst yet not uncommon, mortality. Yet there is clear evidence of how to prevent and solve these problems – comprehensive sexual health education, which instructs youth on how to protect themselves and how to modify their behaviors to make healthy choices. Sex education programmes grounded in evidence-based approaches can reduce risky behaviors by at least a third. Youth and adults who do not have the necessary tools and information are unable to protect themselves. On the other hand, youth who are well-informed and empowered can make significant behavioral changes and can have a global impact on reducing STIs, AIDS, and teen pregnancy.

The impact is clear...

Country	Comprehensive sexuality education	Abstinence-only or otherwise deficient program	Teenage birth rates (per 100,000 females 15-19)
Sweden	✓		7.7
Netherlands	✓		8.2
Germany	✓		12.5
Poland		✓	21.1
Lithuania		✓	36.7
Bulgaria		✓	49.6
US		✓	54.4

The Questions

Does comprehensive sexuality education encourage teenagers to initiate sexual activity earlier, engage in more sexual activity, or have more sexual partners?

No. Comprehensive sex education delays sexual initiation, especially if introduced early. It has been shown that adolescents who have completed comprehensive sexual education are more likely to wait to have sex until they are ready, and to use condoms and other appropriate forms of contraception if and when they do decide to engage in sexual activity.

Does abstinence education lead to more abstinence?

No. A recent large scale case control study evaluating US federal funding for abstinence education found that, compared to students who did not partake in any sort of sexual education programme, youth who participated in an abstinence only education programme reported almost identical rates of abstinence (49% for each), age of sexual initiation (14.9 for both groups), number of sexual partners (75% less than three for both), and levels of knowledge about risks and consequences. A similar study in 1990 found that of the eighth grade students (approximately ages 13-14) who participated in a comprehensive sexuality education programme, only 4% engaged in sexual activity, compared to 20% of youth who did not complete the program.

Does comprehensive sexuality education contravene family values and education?

No. Comprehensive sexual health education should not replace family conversations and values discussions, but rather should open doors to talking about personal issues and provide factual information.

What are the benefits of compulsory, comprehensive sexuality education?

- Comprehensive sexuality education delays sexual initiation and activity
- Sexuality education reduces HIV, other STIs, and unwanted teen pregnancy
- Sexuality education increases gender equality

ASTRA Recommendations

- Disseminate evidence-based factual information about the harms of deficient sexuality education and the benefits of comprehensive sexual health education.
- Work with community leaders, key stakeholders, government officials, and youth groups to develop guidelines and policies for compulsory comprehensive sex education
- Talk to youth about what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. Engage with youth in the development, execution and operation, and monitoring and evaluation of all comprehensive sexuality education programmes in order to respect the rights of youth to participate in the realization of their own health and well-being
- Monitor sexuality education programmes and policies and ensure that they provide factual information and do not promote myths, fears, or misconceptions.

For more information...

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