Abstinence and Safe Sex in Schools

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“Ok everyone,” the teacher calls as she hands out bananas, “today we are going to use these as a way to practice…” This sentence does not have to be finished in order for most of you, as readers, to think about sex, or more specifically, sex education. In many movies and skit, the condom and banana epitomizes the stereotypical sex education class. With this mindset, is sex education worth much of anything? We have future leaders to educate! Couldn’t we be spending time teaching about Algebra, ancient history, the value of literature, rather than how to put on a condom? And, while we are talking about it, why do schools have to teach sex education, where are the parents of these students? Is it the schools’ job to raise children? Unfortunately, this is not the perfect world we all wish we were residing in. There are children who are living in situations where their parents don’t have the time, or are uncomfortable with discussing sex. Many children are learning all their information about sex from the constant bombardment of sex in video games, television shows, magazines, the internet, and the seemingly innocent school playground. While some of this information is likely to make a positive impact on children, at least that same amount is likely to make a negative impact, and without a place to ask questions, nobody can guarantee what a child is going to think about sex as they grow up. Sex education provides a forum for students to ask questions, learn about their bodies, and gain information they can use to make informed decisions about sex, at whatever age or point in their lives they are at when they decide. Isn’t that the point of any type of education, to prepare people for their future decisions, careers and experiences? Unfortunately, the debate regarding sex education does not end at whether or not it is necessary, it continues into the question of how to best teach it, and what is the best method to teach during it. This is where our government has decided to sink its teeth into the matter. Most will agree that sex education in some form or another is a worthwhile endeavor, especially since parents are required to sign permission slips for their child/children to participate. This provides parents with an option, and it maintains the rights of the parents to have a say in how their children their children are educated about sex. However, the question then becomes, “how do you teach sex education in order to make the best impact?” The best impact is normally defined as reducing teenage pregnancies and the amount of teenagers who contract sexually transmitted diseases. There are two main theories on the way to achieve this goal. Theory one is teaching abstinence only, that is, the only way to be safe is to not have sex. Theory two is teaching abstinence first, but contraception otherwise, which is that abstinence is the best way, but if one is going to choose to have sex, there are ways to achieve pretty good protection from pregnancy and disease. Proponents of theory one believe that if you teach anything else, you are going to cause children to have sex, because it will arouse curiosity. They believe that sex should wait until marriage, and that young adults should not need any information on contraception, because they should not be using it. Proponents of theory two believe that obviously, the best way to avoid pregnancy and disease is to not have sex, or to remain abstinent. However, they are also realistic to the fact that junior high and high school students will not always make the very best decisions. For this reason, they support teaching how to correctly use contraception in order to stay as safe from pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases as possible. This debate has not remained a debate among parents, teachers, and administrators, it has found its way to congress, and recently, to the desk of the President himself. The Bush administration has recently proposed doubling the spending on abstinence-only programs that will not allow any discussion of birth control or condoms, unless to indicate how fallible they can be (O’Keefe 26). Along with this proposal for spending, Bush has also proposed moving control over the program to the Health and Human Services Department, which sort of makes sense, until one realizes the same
department oversees religious-based programs and Bush’s proposal to promote marriage (“Bush” 54). It is an interesting idea to put an educational program under the control of the department that oversees religious programs. However, that is not the main concern over the proposal, it is the increased spending for abstinence-only programs.

Currently, in the United States, funding for abstinence-only programs is already three times higher than funding for contraception campaigns (O’Keeffe 26). In addition, around 35 percent of the school districts in America have switched to an abstinence-only program (O’Keeffe 26). With this huge push towards abstinence-only education, an important question needs to be asked, “Is abstinence-only going to protect our children from the potential dangers of unmarried sex?” Unfortunately, the overwhelming answer to this question is NO. Abstinence is best, but not the only way to protect people, and this is the vast problem with an abstinence-only campaign.

Like any other debate, both sides have ample evidence to support their side. Abstinence-only is currently being supported by the President himself, who is saying that, “Abstinence for young people is the only certain way to avoid sexually transmitted diseases” (“Bush” 54). At this point, the proponents of this view are waiting for their studies to be finished in order to prove that abstinence-only is the best way to teach sex education. At the moment, the strongest argument is that teenagers are currently inundated with sex from every angle and that the only way to overcome all the talk about sex and prevent the consequences of sex out of wedlock is to encourage only abstinence (“Bush” 54). Bush’s statement above is obviously correct, we all know the only way to be sure about your safety from sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy is to not have sex, but he does not really explain why it is the best way to teach sex education.

The contraception side typically feels that sex is something that is so inviting to young people that they will engage in it no matter what the consequences are. For this reason, they advocate teaching children how to best protect themselves from all the sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. This argument does have a realistic point. Education should be preparing students for the rest of their lives. At some point, students will not be living in their parents’ house, and they will have to make their own decisions. More than likely, at some point, the students will be making the decision to have sex, and there is a good chance that at least some of the students will be having sex outside of marriage. By educating students on contraception at a young age, they will have the knowledge to make the safest choices whenever they decide to have sex with someone. The flaw with this argument is that abstinence often gets ignored as the safest option because the educators want to sufficiently teach their students what the safest kinds of contraception are.

The most frustrating thing about proponents for both sides is that often they refuse to see that the best way to educate our youth about sex is to teach them about both abstinence and contraception. Realistically, there are going to be students who at some point choose to have sex out of marriage. There are also going to be some students who are going to see the merits of waiting to have sex until they get married. Without offering education and information on both sides, the students really have not received any sex education. There is ample evidence to support this compromise. It was found in a study in Minnesota that sexual activity doubled in junior high students who were participating in an abstinence-only program (“Bush” 54). The researchers in this study recommended that the school expand the program so that it includes information on contraception (“Bush” 54). In addition, the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention has concluded that sex education programs should focus on both abstinence and contraception (“Bush” 54). If this was not convincing enough, it has also been found that condoms do not prevent the spread of diseases such as the human papilloma virus which causes genital warts and some cancers (O’Keeffe 26). Unfortunately, teaching contraception only will not prevent diseases like this. Lastly, in Uganda, they have introduced a campaign called ABC, which stands for Abstain (from sex), Be Faithful (together), Condom Use (every time), and it has reduced the HIV rates more than 10% (O’Keeffe 28). This is yet another example of how encouraging abstinence, but providing information on contraception, produces positive change.
Regardless of your opinion on sex before marriage, it seems like most everyone would agree that avoiding sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies is a very good thing. In order to achieve this in our youngsters, we have to educate them on how to protect themselves. This is best achieved through sex education in the public school system, and it is also best achieved by teaching both abstinence and contraception as ways to be safe if participating in sexual activity.
References:
