
The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education: Early, Scaffolded, and Multigrade Approaches

School-based sex education plays a vital role in the sexual health and wellbeing of young people. The results of [Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education](#) found that sex education has the potential to impact so much in addition to pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention.

Literature review finds substantial evidence that sex education is most effective when begun early and before sexual activity begins.

- Several studies provide ample support **for teaching that builds on previous lessons and/or grades and for programs of longer duration, given how time limited sex education tends to be.**
- **As with all other areas of curriculum,** building an early foundation and scaffolding learning with developmentally appropriate content and teaching are key to long-term development of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that support healthy sexual development.
- Literature on **sexual abuse prevention efforts taught in early grades—K–5 and even in pre-school—**shows strong evidence that young children can develop **self-protective knowledge, skills, and intentions,** including an increased likelihood of reporting sexual abuse and knowing how to respond in a dangerous situation, all **without increasing anxiety.**
- The data strongly indicate that **child sexual abuse-related topics are developmentally appropriate** and produce positive outcomes, **while providing a foundation for future learning on topics like consent and bodily autonomy.**
- Not only are younger children able to discuss sexuality-related issues but that **the early grades may, in fact, be the best time to introduce topics** related to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, gender equality, and social justice related to the LGBTQ community before hetero- and cisnormative values and assumptions become more deeply ingrained and less mutable.
- Children learn gender role attitudes at an early age from observing the people in their families. As they progress through school, these attitudes are further shaped by classmates and school staff, as well as by the biases of teachers, the design of the curriculum, and the school environment. (A school environment is broadly characterized by its facilities, classrooms, school-based health supports, and disciplinary policies and practices. It sets the stage for the external factors that affect students.)
- Given the influence of this early socialization and learning, **it is important to introduce concepts that would disrupt stereotypical and harmful biases related to gender and sexual orientation, during this formative time.**

Sex education across the curriculum

- Many of the positive outcomes and promising approaches that worked toward **creating affirming, inclusive school environments** occurred not in traditional health or sex education classes, but in social studies, English, physical education, mathematics, music, and art. In particular, the vast majority of **successful approaches to LGBTQ and gender norm topics in the elementary school grades** used literature with students as the entry point for learning and discussion, most with the goal of increasing appreciation and acceptance of sexual and gender diversity.
- Topics falling within sex education can be **addressed successfully across the curriculum offering much needed flexibility to schools,** both in terms of available time and talented teachers to tackle difficult and important topics. It also provides an opportunity to explore sexuality-related issues in different contexts and by applying a variety of lenses.

- Given that most schools have limited time allotted to health or sex education, **a coordinated and concerted effort to teach and reinforce important sexual health concepts throughout other areas of the curriculum is a promising strategy.**

Recommendations for Schools and Educators

- Sex education programs should span multiple grades, scaffold topics introduced previously, and begin during early elementary school years. There are multiple benefits of this approach to sex education both during elementary school and to the health and wellbeing of students as they grow and develop.
- To have the best chance of disrupting stereotypical and harmful biases that could lead to rigid gender role stereotypes, homophobic and transphobic beliefs, and future bullying, beginning in kindergarten, schools need to address issues related to people who are LGBTQ and explore understanding of gender norms.
- Programs that focus on child sexual abuse prevention are critical to provide our youngest students with the knowledge and skills they need to identify unwanted touching and accurately report it. It also serves to protect them from predators who intentionally choose victims who don't have an accurate understanding of their body parts and therefore are less likely to report abuse.
- **The Professional Learning Standards for Sex Education** can help educators to identify areas where they may need professional development to successfully teach this content. Links to professional development programs can be found at <https://sexeducationcollaborative.org/offerings>.

Reference

Goldfarb E. and Lieberman L. Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education. Journal of Adolescent Health. 2021; 68, 1: 13--27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.036>