

# The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education: Healthy Relationships

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.

**Efforts focused on healthy relationships were a foundation for adolescent sexual health and emphasized communication skills, ethics and social justice, and social-emotional learning.**

Programs specifically designed to reduce dating and interpersonal violence often had broader healthy relationship concepts among their measured outcomes.

## Increased knowledge, attitudes, and skills

- Two important studies **demonstrated improvements in knowledge and attitudes related to healthy relationships.**
- One study demonstrated **significant improvements in healthy relationship knowledge and dating skills**, as well as improved relationship skills for parent-adolescent relationships, both at post-test and 1-year follow-up. Importantly, the study found that **knowledge in one relationship context has the potential to translate to other types of relationships.**
- Another study demonstrated **strong improvements** among ninth graders **on knowledge and attitudes about healthy relationships.**

## Improved communication skills and intentions.

- Curricula that addressed communication within relationships resulted in **improved communication skills and intentions, including increased intentions to discuss relationships and/or sex within relationships and with parents and medical providers.**
- A program that focused on **the importance of talking about taboo and difficult subjects**, demonstrated **improved communication skills** in these subjects and **increased self-efficacy and intentions to discuss difficult subjects**, including romance, sexuality, and threatening or unpleasant topics.
- Rigorous evaluations found **significant increases in communication skills** for middle and high school students.

## Recommendations for Schools and Educators

- Sex education should include lessons to help young people identify the characteristics of healthy relationships as well as those of unhealthy relationships. These lessons can focus on different types of relationships--not just those that are between intimate partners.
- Lessons should address communication within relationships and provide students opportunities to practice and build their communication skills.
- Communications lessons should including skills-building exercises to help students talk about difficult topics. Such topics might include naming body parts, discussing romance, sex and sexuality, establishing wants and boundaries, requesting or providing consent, disclosing harassment or abuse, among others.
- **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/offering>.

## 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>