

Support for Sexual Health Education

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Some recent opposition to sexual health education for students comes at a time when national studies continue to report significant numbers of students having sexual intercourse without taking necessary precautions against pregnancy and disease. It doesn't take much understanding to realize that young people do not begin their sexual activity with a deliberate plan to experience the negative health consequences associated with their decision.

What could be preventing young people from taking greater precautions? Researchers have told us that adults and youth do not openly acknowledge and discuss their emerging sexuality. Consequently, youth often make risky sexual decisions without consultation with their parents, health professionals or trusted adults.

At a Directorate of Agencies for School Health (DASH) "Living School Health Conference", 48 students participated in a youth plenary session titled "Where the Rubber Meets the Road". The students' message to teachers, parents, counsellors, administrators, health professionals and all others was that youth needs must be priorities for everyone involved in health promotion for children and youth. Students want and need to be involved in helping each other make healthy choices about all aspects of life.

Healthy decisions about sex must represent a balance of the needs of self, significant other, societal expectations, and knowledge. Therefore, rather than limiting student access to sexual health education, local School Boards, Boards of Health, and Social Service agencies, in consultation with parents and youth, should:

- develop comprehensive and explicit policies on sexual health which are based on research findings;
- support implementation of a comprehensive health education curriculum;
- ensure that accessible sexual information, as well as referral and counselling services, be readily available to adolescents;
- promote a climate free of harassment;
- involve students and families in the process.

Enlisting Parents' Support

The probability of these actions meeting with success will depend on a community's ability to enlist the support of the majority of parents who quietly support sexual health education for their children. The following are strategies to enlist the support of parents.

Show Respect for Parents' Beliefs. Parents beliefs permeate a young person's whole life and constitute a powerful frame of support. Do not criticize parents' beliefs. It is best to listen respectfully to parents and try positive approaches.

Understand Parents' backgrounds. We live in a pluralistic society with diverse beliefs and values. Remember, every parent will be unique and different.

Take Issues to a Personal level. Remind parents that sexual curiosity and sexual experimentation are part of the growing process. Help parents remember their own childhood, such as where and when they received sexual information. Is it reasonable to expect today's youth to be any different?

Share experiences. Relate common situations parents experience with their own children and sex education topics. This will provide an opportunity for everyone to relate, laugh together, and not feel attacked.

Increase Awareness of the Benefits. Help parents become aware of the benefits of a comprehensive health education program which included sex education. Sexual Health education not only helps children and youth but it helps pocketbooks, too. A recent study done by the Centers for Disease Control in the United States has examined the cost-benefit ratio of an effective school-based sex education program. They first verified that the program had a positive effect on sexual behaviours. The savings in health care costs were then calculated. A conservative estimate was that for every dollar invested in sex education, there is a savings of \$5.69 (US) in related health care costs.

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