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Comprehensive Sex Education Protects Teens

In his poem “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” Thomas Gray ends with the notorious line, “No more; where ignorance is bliss, / Tis folly to be wise” (99-100). Though this riveting statement has challenged the English-speaking world to contemplate the consequences of knowledge, it is unfortunately poor advice. As teens become more and more dependent on MTV, *Cosmopolitan*, and commercials featuring Kim Kardashian to educate them on social acceptance, abstinence is not a priority. In order to counteract the influences of sexual images, teens must be taught how to interpret those images and decide for themselves the morality of their decisions. The most important basic body of knowledge, an understanding of the human anatomy and the consequences of unprotected sex, plays a fundamental role in convincing teens to consider the importance of using protection when engaging in sexual activity. However, those of low socioeconomic status may never be granted the opportunity to learn basic health information and, consequently, fall victim to serious consequences. As teens are increasingly influenced by mass media and socioeconomic status, comprehensive sex education is the most effective technique in ensuring that teens understand the severe consequences of sexual activity.

In Keith Brough’s article “Sex Education Left at the Threshold of the School Door,” he defines comprehensive sex education as simply, “the state providing information to youth in order to reduce harm” and “up-to-date information, aimed at

protecting the United States' youngest citizens from pregnancy and STDs" (411). However, comprehensive sex education also manages to transcend the barriers that have been created by advocates of abstinence-only education. According to Brough, challengers of comprehensive sex education believe that providing teens with information on STDs and contraceptives encourages them to be sexually intimate at a younger age and results in "moral harm," as well as "practical harm" (411). On the contrary, after learning of the severity of the possible consequences of sex, many students chose to refrain from having sex. In fact, when surveyed on the effectiveness of comprehensive sex education, thirty-four of thirty-eight students ranging from ages seventeen to twenty-one stated that comprehensive sex education deterred them from engaging in sexual activity. Unlike those surveyed, teens who do not receive comprehensive sex education are not taught to use discretion when exploring the concept of sexuality.

As her freshmen year of high school began, fifteen-year-old Sarah was ready to embark on what she hoped would be the best four years of her life. Sarah was an extraordinary student who was considered to be an exemplary role model for her peers. "I was raised in a very involved Catholic household in which daily decisions were made according to our Catholic beliefs," Sarah said. Sarah's parents remained involved in her academic and moral education as they attempted to prepare her for life as an adult in society. However, neither Sarah nor her family was prepared for what was to come. At the end of her freshmen year, Sarah was diagnosed with the STD Chlamydia. Unfortunately, Sarah's high school did not offer a sex education program, and the only education she received was from her parents from whom she was taught, "premarital sex is punishable against God's will." Sarah exclaimed, "I was so angry at my parents! I had

no idea what condoms were or how to use them. I didn't even think that something like this could happen on the first time." Sarah's lack of sex education has resulted in years of medical treatment and the "shame of having to tell future boyfriends" of her condition. As she reflected upon the importance of comprehensive sex education, Sarah said, "I might have been able to have a normal high school experience if I understood why my body felt the way it did and what I could have done to protect myself. At the time, abstinence didn't even cross my mind."

Sarah's poor judgment can be explained by Kristin Luker's book, *When Sex Goes to School*, in which she illustrates how teens who are taught abstinence-only are unaware of the development of their bodies and "often have trouble interpreting the strong sexual impulses that accompany pubescent growth" (249). These misunderstandings often result in hasty decisions to engage in sexual activity, causing abstinence to lose its importance.

Unlike abstinence-only instruction, comprehensive sex education elaborates on the possibilities of conceiving or contracting an STD during the first experience with sexual intercourse. Luker further explains that abstinence-only also "rejects the core principle on which the harm-reduction model is based: that each individual should decide for himself or herself what is proper sexual behavior" (245). Abstinence-only advocates continue to "substitute a single value for everyone, namely no sex outside (heterosexual) marriage" which propels teens to rebel against abstinence (Luker, 245).

Regardless of the use of abstinence-only or comprehensive sex education, the media is an inescapable influence on the impressionable minds of teens. The glorification of mass media consequently effects teens' ability to make rational decisions about sex. For example, the sexy bikini model and the chiseled men surrounding her on the cover of

Cosmopolitan are strong images that speak to teens who are desperate for attention from their peers. Sex is used in the mass media in order to grab the attention of viewers, so teens are conditioned to think that becoming sexually active is the easiest way to achieve popularity and abstinence is the easiest way to remain invisible. An article by Molly Masland of MSNBC acknowledges that teens are surrounded by this sexual imagery and are consequently faced with a bombardment of “confusing messages.” In fact, an article written by Christine Lagorio of CBS News provides worrisome statistics that show that “12- to 14-year-olds exposed to sexual content in movies, music, magazines, and on television are 2.2 times more likely to have sexual intercourse” within a two- year period. The fact that 66% of American high school students have had sex by the time they graduate and that 65% of all STDs contracted infect people under the age of twenty-four serves as evidence that teens are not making a conscience effort to remain abstinent. Implementing comprehensive sex education in schools is the only way to encourage teens to use protection as they begin to become more sexually active at a younger age (Masland 1).

Unfortunately, there are some teens who are not only heavily influenced by the mass media but also come from low socioeconomic status households in which a lack of parental involvement and financial support prevent children from being educated on the dangers of unprotected sex. *American Foundations of American Education*, written by L. Dean Webb, Arlene Metha, and K. Forbis Jordan of Arizona State University, emphasizes “The socioeconomic distinctions among the social classes, specifically the existence of poverty, affect not only lifestyles, patterns of association, and friendships, but also patterns of school achievement and attainment” (195). The caretakers of children

living in poverty often work many jobs at inconvenient hours and have limited time to become involved in their children's education. According to an article published by the Resource Center for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and written by several doctors, including Nancy Brener, Ph. D., "Lower socioeconomic status (SES) negatively influences adolescents' health by limiting their social and educational opportunities and access to health care (1). The only way to ensure that these teens are receiving some form of education on how to protect themselves from STDs or pregnancy is to present the subject matter to them at their public high schools.

The economic effects of sexual ignorance among teens are also overwhelming in that they affect not only the pregnant teen but also society as a whole. It has been proven that low-income female students who do not receive sex education in their public schools are 3.1 times more likely to experience teen pregnancy (Jordan et al., 196). This statistic is frightening considering that teen mothers are also more likely to live in poverty. As Jordan et al. describes, teen pregnancies seriously affect the economy as the mothers often experience many health problems before and during birth, which results in heavy reliance on the social service system (248). Also, Jordan, Metha, and Webb speculate that teen mothers are more likely to drop out of school, resulting in dependence on welfare and unemployment pay which leads to the fact that the annual cost to tax-payers of births to mothers ages seventeen and younger is at least \$9 billion annually or \$1,430 for each child born to a teenage mother. The need for some form of education on basic health issues is becoming more evident as the number of teen mothers and the amount of money spent supporting them increases. These statistics prove that a large percentage of children of low-income families are not given any information at home regarding the

consequences of sex and do not see abstinence as an option. Presenting these teens with sex education in the secure environment of their school allows them the opportunity to save their futures and break the repeating pattern of sexual ignorance.

As uncontrollable factors such as mass media and socioeconomic status remain predominant in influencing teens, teens will continue to engage in sexual activity at an earlier age. Though some disagree with the implementation of comprehensive sex education in public schools because it disregards personal morality, it has been proven time and time again to be the only method that encourages teens to protect themselves against the inevitable teenage impulses of sexual desire. Unlike comprehensive sex education, abstinence-only completely disregards scientific explanations for teens' desires to have sex and remains oblivious to the fact that they should be in control of their own decisions. With testimonies like Sarah's, it is hard to imagine that anyone would oppose educating teenagers on forms of STD and pregnancy prevention. In opposition to Thomas Gray's belief, ignorance is not and will never be bliss.

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