

Sex education as sexual assault prevention

Sex education is essential to ensure that young people have the information they need to make healthy decisions. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the primary goal of sex education is to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to make responsible choices about their sexual and social relationships.¹

In addition to learning about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies, young people should learn about sexual assault, how to protect themselves, and how to identify sources of support. Research shows that comprehensive sex education (CSE) can help prevent sexual assault.²

What is sexual assault?

The term sexual assault refers to sexual contact or behavior that occurs without a person's explicit consent. Some forms of sexual assault include:

- Fondling or unwanted sexual touching
- Forcing or coercing a person to perform sexual acts, such as oral sex, against their will or without their consent
- Attempted or forced vaginal, anal, or oral penetration, also known as rape³

Anyone can experience sexual assault--regardless of their gender identity, sexual orientation, age, or any other identifier. The 2017 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that, among high school students nationwide, 15.2% of girls and 4.3% of boys reported experiencing sexual violence. Additionally, 7.9% of heterosexual high school students reported experiencing sexual violence compared to 22.2% of students who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.⁴ As for college-level sexual assault rates, national surveys show that 25.9% of women, 6.9% of men, and 22.8% of transgender or gender nonconforming students report being sexually assaulted during college.⁵

While people of all identities and ages experience sexual violence and harassment, one national survey found that a staggering **87%** percent of women ages 18-25 reported having experienced at least one of the following during their lifetime:

- being catcalled (**55%**)
- touched without permission by a stranger (**41%**)
- insulted with sexualized words (e.g., slut, bitch, ho) by a man (**47%**)
- insulted with sexualized words by a woman (**42%**)
- having a stranger say something sexual to them (**52%**)
- having a stranger call them "hot" (**61%**)

Yet, most of the respondents reported **never** speaking with their parents or educators about issues related to consent and sexual harassment.⁶

1. https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/ITGSE_en.pdf
2. http://www.womennc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2015-WomenNC-ResearchPaper-Effects-ofSexEduc-on-PreventSexAssault_Dana-Raphael0415.pdf
3. <https://www.rainn.org/articles/sexual-assault>
4. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/2017/ss6708.pdf>
5. https://www.aau.edu/sites/default/files/AAU-Files/Key-Issues/Campus-Safety/Revised%20Aggregate%20report%20and%20appendices%201-7_01-16-2020_FINAL.pdf
6. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b7c56e255b02c683659fe43/t/5bd51a0324a69425bd079b59/1540692500558/mcc_the_talk_final.pdf
7. https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/doi/full/10.1177/1524838018772855?utm_source=summon&utm_medium=discovery-provider

How can sex education prevent sexual assault?

While sex education has been traditionally designed, implemented, and evaluated to reduce STIs, unintended pregnancies, and the health risk behaviors that lead to these outcomes, it holds the potential to prevent sexual assault, especially when it is comprehensive. CSE can help prevent sexual assault by:

- **Addressing sexual assault perpetration.** CSE includes social and emotional learning that adheres to best practices of effective prevention programs, which have been widely cited in literature. Most importantly, it begins to address the risk factors for perpetration behavior long before the onset of that behavior.⁷
- **Teaching sexual refusal skills.** CSE also includes the teaching of sexual refusal skills. A recent study showed that girls who received this type of instruction in high school were half as likely to be sexually assaulted in college.⁸
- **Addressing dating violence and nurturing healthy relationships.** CSE provides young people with the information and skills they need to understand and address dating violence. It supports young people in developing strong, respectful, healthy relationships and talking openly about power dynamics to nurture more equality in relationships—a key strategy for preventing sexual assault.⁹

The current state of sex education

Despite evidence that CSE has the potential to prevent sexual assault, the U.S. federal government continues to fund abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, which provide shaming, inaccurate lessons to young people.¹⁰ Decades of research show that these programs do not work and can actually harm young people.¹¹

- Between 2006 and 2013, the proportion of young people receiving formal sex education decreased.¹²
- Only 42.8% of high schools and 17.6% of middle schools in the U.S. provide instruction on all of the CDC's 20 minimum essential sexual health topics.
- As of August 2020, only 29 states and the District of Columbia mandate sex education be taught at all.
- Only 15 states require sex education to be medically accurate.
- Only 9 states plus D.C. require instruction on consent.¹³

Policy recommendations

- Advocate for pre-college sexual assault prevention, including collaborations with families, K-12 educational institutions, and religious communities.¹⁴
- Adopt sexual assault prevention programs that include a life course perspective, teaching young people about healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships *before* college.¹⁵
- Ensure implementation of CSE that discusses topics related to consent, violence, and sexual assault without shaming, stereotyping, or stigmatizing.
- End funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, also called “sexual risk avoidance education.”¹⁶

8. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/pmc/articles/PMC6235267/>

9. <https://www.actioncanadashr.org/resources/sexual-health-info/sex-ed/sex-ed-preventing-violence-and-increasing-safety#:~:text=Sex%2Ded%2C%20when%20done%20right,way%20to%20keep%20them%20safe.>

10. <https://siecus.org/teen-dating-violence-sex-ed-is-a-prevention-strategy/>

11. <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/public-health-now/news/abstinence-only-until-marriage-programs-and-policies-are-failure>

12. <https://siecus.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Teach-Them-Talking-Points.pdf>

13. <https://www.gutmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education#>

14. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/pmc/articles/PMC6235267/>

15. *Ibid*

16. <https://siecus.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Teach-Them-Talking-Points.pdf>