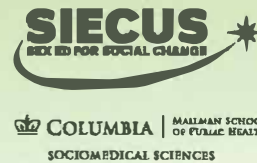


If you care about **sexual assault prevention...**

Then you should care about

**SEX ED**



## 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.<sup>1</sup>

According to the National Sex Education Standards, young people should learn about sexual assault, how to protect themselves, and how to identify sources of support in addition to learning about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and pregnancy prevention. Research shows that sex education when taught in alignment with the National Sex Education Standards, sometimes referred to as Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE)\*, can help prevent sexual assault.<sup>2</sup>

## 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 rape<sup>3</sup>

Anyone can experience sexual assault—regardless of their gender identity, sexual orientation, age, or any other identifier. The 2019 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that, among high school students nationwide, 16.6% of girls and 5.5% of boys reported experiencing sexual violence. Additionally, 9.0% of heterosexual high school students reported experiencing sexual violence compared to 21.5% of students who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

\* "Sex education" is defined as human sexuality education that is comprehensive, age-appropriate, evidence based, culturally responsive, and conforms to the National Sex Education Standards. This kind of education may still be referred to as "comprehensive sex education" within scientific literature.

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%**) or 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.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO. [International technical guidance on sexuality education](#)

<sup>2</sup> Journal of Adolescent Health. [Three decades of research: The case for comprehensive sex education](#)

<sup>3</sup> RAINN. [Sexual assault](#)

<sup>4</sup> CDC. [High school risk behavior survey](#)

<sup>5</sup> Association of American Universities. [Report on the AAU campus climate survey on sexual assault and misconduct](#)

<sup>6</sup> Harvard Graduate School of Education. [The talk: How adults can promote young people's healthy relationships and prevent misogyny and sexual harassment](#)

## 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 when it aligns with the framework in the [National Sex Education Standards](#). Sex education can help prevent sexual assault by:

- Addressing sexual assault perpetration. Sex education 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.<sup>7</sup>
- Teaching sexual refusal skills. Sex education also includes the teaching of sexual refusal skills, which helps young people stand up for themselves. A 2018 study showed that girls who received this type of instruction in high school were half as likely to be sexually assaulted in college.<sup>8</sup>
- Addressing dating violence and nurturing healthy relationships. Sex education 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.<sup>9</sup>
- Dismantling rape culture. Sex education programs have been proven to reduce myths and victim blaming, promote understanding of sexual assault, encourage bystander intervention, and inculcate gender equity. This goes a long way to make communities safer and more caring, and empowers young people who have experienced sexual assault to come forward.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Sage Journals. [Comprehensive sexuality education as a primary prevention strategy for sexual violence perpetration.](#)

<sup>8</sup> National Library of Medicine. [Does sex education before college protect students from sexual assault in college?](#)

<sup>9</sup> Journal of Adolescent Health. [Three decades of research: The case for comprehensive sex education.](#)

<sup>10</sup> Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights. [Sex-ed: Preventing violence and increasing safety.](#)

<sup>11</sup> SIECUS. [Teen dating violence: Sex ed is a prevention strategy.](#)

<sup>12</sup> Columbia Mailman School of Public Health. [Abstinence-only education is a failure.](#)

<sup>13</sup> Guttmacher Institute. [US adolescents' receipt of formal sex education.](#)

<sup>14</sup> CDC. [School health profiles: Characteristics of health programs among secondary schools.](#)

<sup>15</sup> SIECUS. [2022 sex ed state law and policy chart.](#)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. [Does sex education before college protect students from sexual assault in college?](#)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> SIECUS. [Why we need better sex ed: Talking points for meeting with your policymaker.](#)

## The current state of sex education

Despite evidence that sex education 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.<sup>11</sup>

Decades of research show that these programs do not work and can actually harm young people.<sup>12</sup>

- Adolescents were less likely to report receiving sex education on key topics in 2015–2019 than they were in 1995.<sup>13</sup>
- Only 44.6% of high schools and 24.1% of middle schools in the U.S. provide instruction on all of the CDC's 22 minimum essential sexual health topics.<sup>14</sup>
- As of July 2022, only 29 states and the District of Columbia mandate sex education be taught at all.<sup>15</sup>
- Only 21 states require sex education, HIV/STI education, or healthy relationships education to be medically accurate.
- Only 13 states plus D.C. require instruction on consent.<sup>16</sup>

## Policy recommendations

- Advocate for pre-college sexual assault prevention, including collaborations with families, K–12 educational institutions, and religious communities.<sup>17</sup>
- Adopt age- and developmentally-appropriate sexual assault prevention programs offered in all grade levels to teaching young people about healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships before college.<sup>18</sup>
- Ensure implementation of quality sex education, aligned with NSES, 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.”<sup>19</sup>
- Enact legislation mandating instruction to protect students against child sexual abuse such as [Erin's Law](#) and providing funding for assault prevention education via comprehensive sex education programs through the [Real Education and Access for Healthy Youth Act \(REAHYA\)](#).

