

If/Then

***If You Care About Access to Contraception,
Then You Should Care About Sex Education***



UNDERSTANDING THE STAKES: EDUCATION, CONTRACEPTION, EQUITY

Quality sex education is crucial to our communities. Among many benefits, it ensures that young people learn about all contraceptive options, their benefits, purposes, and risks, and how to access care and resources. This kind of education empowers young people with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about their reproductive well-being, including knowing which contraceptive option is best for them, assessing their personal readiness for intimate relationships, and how to communicate effectively with partners and healthcare providers. Contraception and comprehensive sex education are inextricably linked, ensuring that young people have the information and skills needed to navigate their reproductive health, make informed choices about pregnancy, and access reliable healthcare. Furthermore, access to contraception and access to comprehensive sex education are overwhelmingly popular among the majority of Americans regardless of their political affiliation¹.

Despite broad public support for contraception and comprehensive sex education in the United States, both remain under constant attack. Mis- and disinformation have long shaped restrictive laws and policies, from the Comstock Act of 1873—which classified contraceptives as "obscene" and banned their distribution—to more recent efforts to defund Title X and promote abstinence-only programs. While landmark Supreme Court decisions in the 20th century, such as *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972), and *Carey v. Population Services International* (1977), gradually expanded access to contraception, progress has been hard-won and uneven. The *Dobbs* decision in 2022 has only intensified attacks on reproductive rights, with contraception increasingly in the crosshairs. These ongoing legal and policy battles underscore the persistent influence of anti-reproductive health actors in shaping a landscape that undermines bodily autonomy and access to essential care. Contraception is not just a personal health tool—it is foundational to reproductive freedom, gender equity, and public health, enabling people to decide if and when to have children and to pursue their life goals.

WHAT IS CONTRACEPTION AND SEX EDUCATION?

Contraception refers to various methods used to prevent pregnancy and, in the case of condoms, STI transmission. There are a wide variety of contraceptive methods available including abstinence (not having sex); hormonal options like birth control pills, patches, and injections; barrier methods such as condoms and diaphragms; and long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCSs) like intrauterine devices (IUDs)—some of which contain hormones and some of which do not. For a complete list of contraceptives check out [Bedsider's Contraceptive Method Explorer](#).



Comprehensive sex education (CSE) is an evidence-based, developmentally-appropriate approach to teaching about human sexuality that goes beyond abstinence to provide medically accurate information on a wide range of topics. It includes discussions on anatomy, reproduction, contraception, consent, healthy relationships, gender identity, sexual orientation, and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Unlike abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, evidence-based CSE empowers individuals with the knowledge and skills they need to make informed decisions about their bodies and relationships. Over 30 years of research shows that CSE leads to better health outcomes, including reductions in dating violence, improved mental health outcomes, delayed sexual initiation, reduced rates of unintended pregnancy and STIs, and increased use of contraception. Additionally, by fostering open, inclusive, and judgment-free discussions, CSE promotes bodily autonomy, respect, and the overall well-being of young people, equipping them with the tools necessary for a healthy and fulfilling life.

Access to contraception and comprehensive sex education work together to empower individuals with the knowledge of different contraception options available and how to access them leading to informed decision making as well as increased contraceptive use. When young people receive comprehensive sex education in a safe space without fear of punishment they are empowered to get the information and resources they need to make decisions about their sexuality throughout their lives.

Contraception and Sex Education go Hand-in-Hand

It is imperative that we advocate for contraceptive access when fighting for sex education and vice versa. When we separate them, there are significant public health consequences, leading to higher rates of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), particularly among young people. Studies show² that individuals who receive abstinence-only education—without information on contraception—are more likely to engage in unprotected sex when they become sexually active, increasing the risk of unintended pregnancies and STIs. Furthermore, restricting access to contraceptive education exacerbates existing inequities in reproductive health, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities, including low-income individuals and people of color³ who already face barriers to accessing health care. Without comprehensive sex education that includes contraception, people are denied the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions about their reproductive health – undermining their bodily autonomy and well-being.

A major component of this is the continued promotion and funding of abstinence-only-until-marriage instruction (sometimes referred to by abstinence advocates as sexual risk avoidance instruction), which spreads misinformation and fails to provide young people with the tools they need to prevent unintended pregnancies and STIs. These harmful programs often exaggerate the failure rates of contraception, misrepresent the effectiveness of condoms, and promote fear-based messaging that discourages contraceptive use⁴. Research consistently finds that such programs do not delay sexual initiation and instead leave young people unprepared to make informed choices when they do become sexually active⁵. **The exclusion of contraception from sex education not only misinforms students but also reinforces stigma, making it more difficult for individuals to access and use contraceptive methods effectively when needed.**

BARRIERS TO ACCESS BOTH CONTRACEPTION AND CSE

Despite the overwhelming popularity and proven benefits of contraception and comprehensive sex education, access to both remains under constant threat. Social and cultural stigma play a significant role in the pushback against implementing sex education, with opposition often rooted in cultural, religious, or political beliefs. This stigma not only fuels resistance but also influences the inclusivity and comprehensiveness of the education provided. Addressing these disparities requires combating stigma surrounding sex, sexuality, and contraception.

Developing and implementing effective policies to expand access to sex education and contraception is an ongoing challenge. Barriers include inconsistent funding, policy restrictions, and widespread misinformation. Many policymakers and communities lack accurate information about contraception, which hinders the creation of well-informed, evidence-based policies. Additionally, attacks on reproductive health care—such as cuts to Title X funding—have further obstructed efforts to ensure comprehensive sex education and contraceptive access.

These barriers are compounded by deep-rooted inequities in reproductive health access. In the U.S., reproductive freedom is not recognized as a fundamental human right, and access to contraception is shaped by racial, geographic, and socioeconomic inequities. A recent national survey of people with childbearing capacity showed that 88% of respondents experienced at least 1 barrier to contraceptive access as an adolescent, and 55% reported that these barriers prevented them from obtaining a prescription for birth control⁶. Additionally, youth report that they need more help accessing contraception, while only ¼ of young people have the information they need to assess what contraceptive method might be the best for them according to the data from Power to Decide's YouR HeAlth Survey of 2024⁷. Stats like these depict how crucial it is to have comprehensive sex education that provides extensive, inclusive information on contraception.

CONCLUSION

Contraception and comprehensive sex education go hand in hand when it comes to achieving broader reproductive health goals. It is crucial to recognize what barriers different communities are facing in accessing contraception and comprehensive sex education. Advocating for healthy, empowered and equitable communities starts with advocating for contraception and sex education. Policymakers, educators, and advocates must prioritize comprehensive approaches to reproductive health that integrate both contraception and sex education.

If You Care About Access to Contraception, Then You Should Care About Sex Education

QUALITY SEX EDUCATION WORKS



Sex education plays a critical role in addressing health inequities by empowering young people with information and tools to make informed decisions about their bodies, relationships, and sexual and reproductive health.



Without sex education, some young people who already face barriers to accessing necessary health care, like abortions, and other resources face exacerbated health harms.



Utilizing sex education to accurately teach about STI symptoms, prevention, and treatment helps reduce serious complications and long-term health consequences.



Sex education affirms young people's right to bodily autonomy and reproductive decision-making by teaching young people about pregnancy options including abortion, adoption, and parenting.



For young people who continue their pregnancies, comprehensive sex education fights back against stigmatization.

IF YOU'RE AN ADVOCATE



Advocate for comprehensive, medically accurate, inclusive, non-stigmatizing, and culturally competent sex education programs at the state and local level. And at the federal level, advocate for the passage of the Real Education and Access for Healthy Youth Act (REAHYA).



Champion increased funding and robust program integrity for essential initiatives like Title X, the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP), and the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program (TPPP).



Support the expansion of Medicaid and protect the program from harmful cuts that would reduce benefits or limit access for those who rely on it.



Ensure minors have confidential, youth-friendly access to the care and information they need to make informed decisions about their health.



Support efforts to expand contraceptive access by eliminating unnecessary restrictions and promoting multi-month dispensing, over-the-counter availability, and pharmacist prescribing.

|Sources

1. "Parents' views on sex education in schools: How much do Democrats and Republicans agree?", July 2017, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0180250>.
2. Abstinence and abstinence-only education, April 2018, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5913747/>.
3. "The Importance of Access to Contraception", July 2023, <https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/adolescent-sexual-health/equitable-access-to-sexual-and-reproductive-health-care-for-all-youth/the-importance-of-access-to-contraception/?srsltid=AfmBOorF5L6Imefc0Cc9IQMcC9RADBF4Kdtg6q4WQxL5qmf8PJG2PGVy>.
4. Id
5. "Abstinence-Only Education Is a Failure", August 2017, <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/news/abstinence-only-education-failure>.
6. "Removing Barriers to Contraceptive Access for Adolescents", "June 2024, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11163908/#:~:text=Data%20from%20a%20recent%20national,a%20prescription%20for%20birth%20control>.
7. "Youth Reproductive Health Access (YouR HeAlth) Survey", 2024, <https://powertodecide.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/Youth%20Reproductive%20Health%20Access%20%28YouR%20HeAlth%29%20Survey%202024%20Data%20Report.pdf>.