



Tennessee State of Sex Ed



Current Requirement: Tennessee requires sex education (family life education).

- Curriculum must be medically accurate.
- Curriculum must emphasize abstinence and not encourage “gateway sexual activity”. Educators who violate this may face punitive measures.
- Curriculum must instruct on STI prevention and contraception
- Curriculum must include “fetal development” instruction, including the viewing of “Meet Baby Olivia”.
- Curriculum is not required to include instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Curriculum is not required to include instruction on affirmative consent but does cover healthy relationships.
- Parents and guardians may opt their child out of family life education. This is called an “opt-out” policy. However, for instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), parents must provide consent beforehand. This is an [“opt-in” policy](#) for this specific instruction.

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Recent Legislation Shaping the State Landscape

Advocates in Tennessee continue to face countless coordinated attacks on sex education. In the 2025-2026 legislative session, lawmakers pushed [Senate Bill 471](#) which was signed into law and now requires “success sequencing” to be taught as a part of family life education. This theory is yet another rebrand of “abstinence only until marriage” instruction. It insinuates

that students won't succeed or have good outcomes later in life if they do not wait to marry and then have kids. Not only is this theory not evidence-based, but it is also stigmatizing to youth, shaming them for their decision-making. Tennessee also enacted [House Bill 1527](#) during this session, which requires child trafficking awareness and prevention instruction to be provided in grades K-12 through health education instead of family life education. This is likely to address the passage of [House Bill 996](#) in the 2023-2024 legislative session, which prohibits instruction on “sexual activity” in grades K-5 and had a chilling effect on sexual health instruction, including sexual assault and abuse prevention, under which child trafficking prevention instruction would have been provided. While it does allow for critical instruction in trafficking prevention to continue to be provided, it does so at the cost of indirectly stripping away foundational concepts from family life education in Tennessee, indicating lawmakers' intent to restrict access to sex education further.

The interconnected attacks on abortion and sex education culminated in the 2023-2024 legislative session with the passage of [House Bill 2435](#), a “[Baby Olivia](#)” bill that requires the viewing of the anti-abortion propaganda “Meet Baby Olivia” video developed by Live Action - an extremist group known for its deceptive and manipulative tactics. These efforts will only increase misinformation about abortion and perpetuate abortion stigma in a state that is already a restrictive state for abortion access.

Advocates in Action

Advocates can take action to ensure young people in Tennessee receive shame-free, quality family life education. After contacting their local school board, advocates can determine whether or not abstinence-only versus abstinence-plus instruction is being taught and what topics are missing from the current instruction, such as instruction on contraception, STI prevention, and healthy relationships. They can then vocalize the importance of advancing sex education requirements in their community beyond focusing solely on abstinence.

Further, advocates can contact their representatives to discuss the need for repealing harmful “success sequence” and “Baby Olivia” instructional requirements and push for a statewide comprehensive sex education mandate that is not centered on “sexual risk avoidance” in Tennessee. Advocates are encouraged to use the [Community Action Toolkit](#) to strengthen local organizing efforts. For additional guidance, advocates can contact the SIECUS Policy team by emailing info@siecus.org or join the Sexuality Education Policy Action Council (SEPAC) using our [interest form](#).

More on sex ed in Tennessee...

State Law: A Closer Look

[Tennessee Code Section § 49-6-1301](#) defines family life education as:

“an abstinence-centered sex education program that builds a foundation of knowledge and skills relating to character development, human development, decision making, **abstinence, contraception and disease prevention**”

And further defines “abstinence-centered” as

“an approach that **promotes sexual risk avoidance**, or primary prevention, and teaches vital life skills that empower youth to **identify healthy and unhealthy relationships**, accurately understand **sexually transmitted diseases** and **contraception**, set goals, make healthy life decisions, and build character;

Abstinence-centered education is a holistic approach that addresses the physical, social, emotional, psychological, economic, and educational consequences of nonmarital sexual activity.

Tennessee law (§ 49-6-1302, 49-6-1304, and 49-6-1305) requires local education agencies to develop and implement a family life education program. These programs must promote “sexual risk avoidance” as their primary goal, and instruction that promotes “gateway sexual activity” is prohibited.

If such family life education programs are provided, they must:

1. Emphatically promote only sexual risk avoidance through abstinence, regardless of a student's current or prior sexual experience;
2. Encourage sexual health by helping students understand how sexual activity affects the whole person, including the physical, social, emotional, psychological, economic, and educational consequences of nonmarital sexual activity;
3. Teach the positive results of avoiding sexual activity, the skills needed to make healthy decisions, the advantages of and skills for student success in pursuing educational and life goals, the components of healthy relationships, and the social science research supporting the benefits of reserving the expression of human sexual activity for marriage;
4. Provide factually and medically accurate information;
5. Teach students how to form pro-social habits that enable students to develop healthy relationships, create strong marriages, and form safe and stable future families;
6. Encourage students to communicate with a parent, guardian, or other trusted adult about sex or other risk behaviors;
7. Assist students in learning and practicing refusal skills that will help them resist sexual activity;
8. Address the benefits of raising children within the context of a marital relationship and the unique challenges that single teen parents encounter in relation to educational, psychological, physical, social, legal, and financial factors;
9. Discuss the interrelationship between teen sexual activity and exposure to other risk behaviors such as smoking, underage drinking, drug use, criminal activity, dating violence, and sexual aggression;
10. Educate students on the age of consent, puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, sexually transmitted diseases, including but not limited to HIV/AIDS, and the financial and emotional responsibility of raising a child;

11. Teach students how to identify and form healthy relationships, and how to identify and avoid unhealthy relationships;
12. Notwithstanding § 49-6-1302(a)(1), inform students, in all LEAs, concerning the process of adoption and its benefits. The state board of education, with the assistance of the Department of Education, shall develop guidelines for appropriate kindergarten through grade twelve (K-12) instruction on adoption, what adoption is, and the benefits. The guidelines shall be distributed by the Department of Education to each LEA by the start of the 2015-2016 school year;
13. Provide instruction on the detection, intervention, prevention, and treatment of child sexual abuse, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation of a minor;
14. Provide instruction on preventing dating violence.

Further, the statute states that family life curriculum must NOT:

1. Promote, implicitly or explicitly, any gateway sexual activity or health message that encourages students to experiment with noncoital sexual activity;
2. Provide or distribute materials on school grounds that condone, encourage, or promote student sexual activity among unmarried students;
3. Display or conduct demonstrations with devices specifically manufactured for sexual stimulation; or
4. Distribute contraception on school property; provided, however, that **medically accurate information about contraception and condoms** that is consistent with public policy may be provided so long as the information is:
 - a. Presented in a manner consistent with this part and that clearly informs students that while such methods may reduce the risk of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases or becoming pregnant, only abstinence removes all risk;
 - b. Reviewed and approved by the local board of education or charter school governing body, prior to the information being used by the LEA or public charter school in a family life curriculum, to ensure that it is:
 - i. Medically accurate;
 - ii. Age appropriate;
 - iii. In compliance with this part; and
 - iv. Aligned to academic standards in this state; and
 - v. Provided, upon request, to a parent of a student attending a school in the LEA or charter school, to allow the parent to review the information and to opt the parent's student out of receiving the information as part of a family life curriculum, without penalty.

As a result of [House Bill 2435](#) (2024), [Tennessee Code Annotated, Section 49-6-1304\(c\)](#) also requires the inclusion of:

“a high-quality, computer-generated animation or high-definition ultrasound of at least three (3) minutes in duration that shows the development of the brain, heart, and other vital organs in early fetal development, such as "Meet Baby Olivia," a high-quality, computer-generated animation developed by Live Action that shows the process of fertilization and the stages of human development inside the uterus.”

Additionally, [House Bill 996](#) (2024) was signed into law and amends the same section by adding subsection (d), which prohibits sex education in grades kindergarten through fifth except for child sexual abuse prevention.

As a result of [Senate Bill 471](#) (2025), Tennessee Code Annotated, Section 49-6-1304(a) requires family life education to instruct on “positive personal and societal outcomes associated with the success sequence”.

[Tennessee Code § 49-6-1305](#) allows students to be removed from sex education classes upon written request from their parent or guardian. This is called an “opt-out” policy. However, parents must “opt in” or sign a parental consent form for their child to receive any instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity, as outlined in [Tennessee Code § 49-6-1308](#).

Lastly, [Tennessee Code § 49-6-1306](#) establishes civil penalties and course disciplinary action against teachers who promote “gateway sexual activity,” including a fine of \$500.

State Standard

The [Tennessee Health Education Standards](#) include instruction on puberty in elementary school. Beginning in grade 6, the standards expect students to learn about human reproduction, anatomy, pregnancy, and STI prevention. The [Tennessee Lifetime Wellness Curriculum Standards](#), which students must complete to graduate high school, mandate a section on sexuality and relationships. The standards describe abstinence as a “positive choice” but also include instruction on contraception.

Youth Sexual Health Data

The CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) tracks [adolescent health behaviors](#), including sexual health behaviors. **To learn more about Tennessee's 2023 YRBS results, [click here](#).** The CDC's [School Health Profiles](#) measure school health policies, practices, and the sexual health topics taught in schools. **To view Tennessee's results from the 2024 School Health Profiles Survey, visit CDC's [School Health Profiles Explorer](#) tool.** Visit the CDC's [School Health Profiles](#) for additional information on school health policies and practices.

The quality of sex education taught often reflects funding available for sex education programs. To learn more about federal funding streams, [click here](#).