

The Facts on Education

How Effective is Sex Education?

Most research on sex education targets teenagers, a group that wants and needs accurate, complete and unbiased information about sexual activity, given that a significant proportion of adolescents engage in sexual activity. In 2005, 43 percent of Canadian teens aged 15 to 19 reported that they had had sexual intercourse at least once. Eight percent of teens reported having had sexual intercourse before they were 15 years old.

The effectiveness of most sexual health interventions is not evaluated. The research also has relatively weak research designs, such as poor use of control groups. However some conclusions are:

- Adolescents who receive comprehensive sex education have a lower risk of pregnancy than those who receive abstinence-only or no sex education. Comprehensive sex education includes information on birth control and on prevention of sexually transmitted diseases as well as abstinence messages.
- Programs that focus on abstinence without discussing safer sex behaviours do not seem to reduce HIV risk. Some abstinence-only programs can decrease teens' sexual behaviours, although the effects are modest and short term.
- Sex education programs often ignore the subject of non-heterosexual orientations (i.e. homosexual, bisexual, transgendered).
- Many students with disabilities receive poor sex education services or may be excluded entirely.
- Studies have found that self-esteem and adolescent's sexual behaviour and attitudes are not related, so self-esteem should not be the main focus of sex education.
- Using peers to deliver sexual health education to young people does not seem to increase condom use or reduce the odds of pregnancy or of having more partners.

Parents can support their children at home through open discussion of information about sex, and by reinforcing messages about condom use and other forms of birth control as well as around the risks of – and social pressures related to – sexual behaviour. Role-playing hypothetical situations can be a useful strategy. If the child is not comfortable talking to his or her parents or vice versa, finding someone the child can talk openly with would be a good alternative.

For online resources on sex education as well as the research references that inform this issue, please visit:

www.cea-ace.ca/facts-on-education

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