

# WOMAN NEWS

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## Some schools put emotion into sex education

By Marya Smith

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Parents are the primary sex educators of their children, and that happens whether parents are conscious of it or not," says Michael McGee, acting vice president for education of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. "How a parent answers [questions about sex] is less important than the attitude that goes with the words."

Sex education may begin at home, but most adults (according

to a recent Harris Poll) want some kind of backup in the schools. However, the issues of what should be taught and at what grade level are still hotly debated. As a result, sex-education programs vary widely from community to community, and even within school districts. Where you live largely determines what your child will learn in the sex-ed classroom.

Schools and parents have tough competition.

"We live in a culture saturated by sexual messages," says Leslie Kantor, director of special projects

for the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, "so it's not a question of whether young people know about sexuality, but will we only let them learn it from the media, from television and movies."

With even young children exposed to confusing media messages about sex, many parents and educators are seeking to present wholesome messages about sexuality even before puberty. Sex-education classes, particularly those designed for grade-school and middle-school students, often focus on the building blocks to self-respect

and healthy relationships.

Sunset Ridge School District 29 in Northfield, for example, recently updated its 5th-to-8th-grade sex-education program, adding social and emotional components to a science-based curriculum.

"We don't talk about sex in the early grades, but things like how to deal with problems with friends," explains Sharon Kahn, a parent member of the curriculum committee. "In fact, most of what we've added has nothing to do with sex but with how students can

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make the right decision when inundated with false, flashy information as well as how to handle peer pressure and how to understand the world around them."

Linda Vieth, assistant superintendent for District 29 and principal of Middlefork School in Northfield, adds: "When we surveyed the students from past years, they said, 'It's a great biology course but something is missing.' It's the social/emotional realm where students need help."

Students in neighboring districts agree.

"Sex ed in our junior high was so clinical, it just ignored the whole emotional side," says a Chicago-area high school senior and Youth Board member of LINKS-North Shore Youth Health Service, a non-profit organization offering medical, counseling and educational services focused on adolescent sexuality. "It's so much more complex than passing around a bin of condoms and having everyone giggle. What we need to hear about are the emotions."

Emotions and social skills are the focus of the new sex-education curriculum for 10-to-12-year-olds at Oliver Wendell Holmes Elementary School on the South Side.

"I start the classes by talking about self-esteem and self-respect," says Dora Fogelman, health coordinator and school nurse. "I go around the room and say, 'Tell me one positive thing about yourself,' and this helps create a positive atmosphere of respect and comfort. We go on to talk about basic values like equality, honesty, promise-keeping."

Role playing is another major component of the Holmes School curriculum.

"The students are not playing themselves, but a role, with a script," Fogelman explains. "The role-playing exercises teach them the skills to say no, things like, 'Why don't we go to a movie instead,' when they're feeling pressured. Or to say, 'I really like you, but I don't want to do this right now.' It also teaches the other person to accept the no."

"Many adolescents are pressured into sexual activity," says John Payton, a health-education specialist for the Chicago Public Schools who trains teachers in sexuality education, "so it's helpful to give students the message that it's OK to say no to sexual advances and to give them the life skills to translate what they know

into action. We're dealing with relationships young people value. They want to know how to say no and still keep the door open to the relationship."

Except for the last class session, Fogelman teaches boys and girls together at Holmes School. "This creates a certain level of tension, depending on the group," she says, "but I deal with the tension because we want them to learn to talk about their feelings to each other. However, all [written] questions are anonymous so no one is embarrassed. And almost all of them write questions.

"There is no problem holding the children's attention. I have the subject every student is interested in, even the ones who are usually the worst behaved. It's better to have an outsider like me teach this subject matter, someone separate from the rest of the children's school day. We want them to be open, and that's easier when they don't have to deal with me later in the classroom situation."

Outside counselors are also a key component of District 29's updated sex-education program. The consultants meet with parents and hold separate discussion sessions for students.

"When I'm called in, it's not for the basic plumbing of sex education," says Al Ross, an Evanston therapist and one of District 29's outside consultants. "I spend time with the kids looking at attitudes and beliefs, where their ideas of being male and female come from, and the impact those ideas are already having on them.

"Sometimes I show them magazine ads and ask them to guess what is being sold. A typical provocative ad in a teenage magazine showed a model with a lot of cleavage and the line, 'the sport Italians love best.' It was an ad for shoes, but the students couldn't guess. They never can. But they pick up quickly on the objectification of women. I encourage them to think critically, and they begin asking difficult questions of themselves and others."

"Our kids need other adults in their lives to answer some of their questions," says Kathy Corona, a parent member of the District 29 sex-education curriculum committee. "A child can ask and get an honest answer to a delicate question from a professionally trained adult. It shows a respect for confidentiality and for the child's need to know."

It doesn't work that way in every school district, not even the ones next door.

"We got three weeks of sex ed,

and the only reason we went was to skip gym class," says a high school senior from a neighboring north suburban school district. "It would be nicer in a much smaller group and with somebody besides your regular teacher. Nobody wants to ask a question in a large group, and I was not going to ask my teacher anything. It could maybe be someone I'm not going to see at school every day or a person your parents aren't going to run into at the store."

Programs like the ones in District 29 and Holmes Elementary School are rare. Only 5 to 15 percent of public schools across the country have comprehensive sex-education programs, says Deborah Roffman, a faculty member of The Park School in Baltimore and a human-sexuality consultant who works with children and teachers nationwide.

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"Most teachers are very aware of the needs of students, but their hands are tied by what school boards and administrators see as opposition in the community," she says. "The vast majority of parents support sex education but keep quiet while others speak up loudly and have clout.

"Parental concerns [about sex education] are pretty predictable and very important. Parents are concerned with age appropriateness and values. They sometimes think [sex ed] is a how-to course. There's also a baseline fear that knowing leads to doing. But sex education is not about sex but about sexuality, which is an issue of identity, how we think and feel and act because of our gender. Parents need to find out what is going on, the content of the curriculum, evaluate it and support a comprehensive program."

Many students feel short-changed. Fifty-seven percent of the teenagers questioned in the 1996 Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation Survey of Teens on Sex said the information they received about sex and birth control came too late.

The transition to adulthood is far different for young people today than it was for their parents: according to a report by The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 56 percent of girls and 73 percent of boys today have had intercourse by age 18, compared with 35 percent of girls and 55 percent of boys in the early 1970s.

It is statistics like these that give today's parents worries their own parents didn't have, including the fact that the rate of infection for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is growing fastest among young people, that 3 million teenagers a year acquire a sexually transmitted disease and that the United States still has the highest incidence of teenage pregnancies in the industrialized world.

Still, Roffman cautions, "our goal should not be to get our children through their teen years pregnancy- and disease-free but to support them in becoming sexually healthy adults."

"Regardless of teen pregnancy and [sexually transmitted diseases], puberty is a natural, healthy process," adds Kantor, "but the complicated social and body changes of adolescence are often negotiated without responsible assistance."

Schools and parents often work together to provide that responsible assistance.

"We wanted a program tailor-made to our school, so we sent out questionnaires to the entire community and really went over the responses," Kahn says. "We wanted to hear from all the parents so we wouldn't just be shooting from the hip. [Our new program] tries to teach our children to think about who they are, who their families are, what their values are."

With the same goal of a family-school partnership, Payton encourages Chicago public schools to hold parent nights to discuss the school's sex-education curriculum. He also recommends "homework that opens up communication between students and their parents."

To help parents initiate discussions about sex and to encourage kids to ask questions, Planned Parenthood has designed a home video kit for families with children 10 to 14. "Talking About Sex" (800-669-0156, \$29.95) includes a 30-minute video, a 60-page parent's guide and a 16-page children's activity workbook.

"In families with open communication about bodies and how they work," McGee says, "kids are more likely to postpone intercourse until later, and there's some evidence that when they do have sex, they contracept more effectively. These are good reasons to talk openly with kids, but the bottom line is that sex education should have the goal of helping young people grow into sexually healthy adults."

The responsibility for sex education should be a joint effort, Roffman says. "Parents need to understand the school's role in relationship to theirs. I can't touch in the classroom what parents can do at home. But it's not an either/or situation: Schools and families have different and unique roles and can be mutually supportive."