



The Media Project

A Program of Advocates for Youth

School, Sex, and Secrets: How Do We Score?

Summarized Transcript

KATE FOLB - INTRODUCTION

Welcome everyone to *School, Sex, and Secrets: How Do We Score?* I'm Kate Langrall Folb, Director of the Media Project. Many of you know us, but for those of you who don't The Media Project is a free resource to the entertainment industry on all issues surrounding sexuality and reproductive health. We are here to support you, television's writers and producers, by offering free, up-to-date information, research, storyline ideas and referrals to experts on the medical, legal and psychosocial aspects of human sexuality and reproductive health. We sponsor briefings like these a couple of times a year, as well as the annual SHINE Awards – which are coming up soon – and we can hold private briefings and meetings with your show's creative team on special issues tailored to your program's needs.

We are a partnership of Advocates for Youth and the Kaiser Family Foundation; both organizations have representatives here today whom you'll meet later on.

Before we begin let me introduce and thank the Media Project staff, Robin Smalley, Renee Rideout, Gina Bolton and Sean Wiener for helping to make today's discussion a success.

Today's topic, Sex Education, conjures up all kinds of responses and attitudes, many of which we will explore today.

One approach to sex education today is based in the belief that young people need to be given all the facts about sex and birth control so that if and when they become sexually active, they will have the means to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy and disease. This is called *comprehensive sex education*. Programs that adopt this approach usually teach about human development, pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease, abstinence, contraception, condoms and healthy decision-making.

Another approach taken by many involves the belief that "if you teach kids about sex and birth control, it's like giving them permission to go out and have sex." This belief is based in the idea that young people should be given only one message and that is *abstinence-only-until-marriage*. Under this approach, young people need no other information about birth control, condoms or abortion, because they shouldn't be having sex anyway.

There have always been abstinence-based sex education programs, but recently, the government has begun supporting the *abstinence-only-until-marriage* approach by allocating additional funds to schools who adopt this type of curriculum. Some of the more important elements stressed are that

- 1) abstinence until marriage is the only acceptable standard for young people,
- 2) sex outside of marriage will cause physical and psychological damage,
- 3) no information on contraceptive methods should be given, or if it is given, the failure rates must be stressed.

The Media Project has put together a short video to explain more clearly the status of abstinence-only-until-marriage, or abstinence-only programs in this country today. Take a look.

ROLL VIDEO

I would like to add, however, that when surveyed, about 40% of teens, who became sexually active at a younger age, wish that they had waited. And, that virginity is viewed as a positive attribute by many teens today.

Our moderator today is currently a correspondent for ABC's *World News Tonight*, *20/20*, and *Nightline*, and a regular commentator for NPR's *Morning Edition*. She has covered such well-known stories as the O.J. Simpson trial and the Columbine tragedy. In the past she worked in local radio in Princeton, New Jersey, and Denver Colorado, and as a reporter and commentator for the CBS Radio Network. And, she tells me she once was a high school teacher! Author of a fabulously funny autobiography, Now This she is also the winner of many journalism awards and the mother of two daughters. Please welcome, Judy Muller.

JUDY MULLER

On my last book tour I ran into my old 8th grade sex ed teacher who was gorgeous and all the girls had crushes on. I recall how he told us "sex is one of the wonderful things you can experience with someone you respect and love." And I remember thinking "and I love you!" (laughter) I also remember the girl in that class who fainted over the word "clitoris."

It's a wonderful topic for today's briefing because it's so controversial. You here have such a powerful influence and the topic has had so much heat and so little light.

I want to have today's speakers introduce themselves...

INTRODUCTIONS

Deb Hauser, Advocates for Youth

Brian Wilcox, University of Nebraska

Tina Hoff, Kaiser Family Foundation

Lucy, Florida high school teacher

Linda, California high school teacher

Sarah, Linda's daughter who took abstinence-only *Sex Respect* program

Various teen participants introduce themselves

DEB HAUSER

In 1996, the government allocated 138 million dollars to prevent teen pregnancy through programs that promoted contraception through Title X and Medicaid. Then everything changed in the summer of 1996 when welfare reform legislation was passed by conservatives and allocated \$250 million over five years to teach that sex outside of marriage is morally wrong. States had to match the funding so a total of ½ billion dollars would be spent on abstinence programs. This was disconcerting because there was no evidence that abstinence-only programs works to delay sex for any length of time. This was the first time that the government actually defined abstinence-only programs as teaching that: abstinence until marriage is the only acceptable form of behavior. Never mind that 70% of kids have sex and that gay and lesbian youth can never marry legally. Also, these funds cannot be supplemented to teach contraception, other than their failure rates. Thirdly, this money empowered some conservatives to censor information. For example, in Michigan, communities ripped pages right out of books that taught about family planning and abortion. Last year Rep. Ishtook requested an additional \$20 million for 2001 and last month Congress appropriated \$30 million more for 2002. These allocations were passed without much discussion because it is politically unviable for a Congressperson to vote against abstinence. Yet we all know that to censor information young people need about sexuality is dangerous and naïve in an era of HIV. This leaves young people with no right to accurate information.

BRIAN WILCOX

I didn't get sex ed at school, I got it at home. I remember I had a friend whose family told him that sex is a four letter word that shouldn't be discussed. When he questioned that and said it actually had only three letters, he was grounded!

Sex ed is a lightning rod in the community. Ten years ago, sex education was more open. There have been many claims...some say that exposure increases pregnancy and sexual activity. Sex ed is not a single entity and there is little consistency in the United States. Curricula and guidelines are minimal and teachers use only one small sheet that they are provided with. Most of the attention in these classes is given to anatomy and the rest to diseases. Absent is discussion of the positive aspects of sexuality. The focus is only on negative consequences. There is no attention paid to sexual behavior, and abortion is rarely covered. The one thing missing from these sex education classes is sex.

The question is, does sex ed hasten the onset and frequency of intercourse? Does it put ideas in kids' heads? These are the questions that are being asked at every school board meeting that has to do with sex education. The answer is an unequivocal no. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy says it doesn't. Studies show some comprehensive sex education programs delay the onset and frequency of sex. On the whole, the programs that accomplish these goals are few.

Sexuality education is not the same as pregnancy prevention. A handful of studies have looked at abstinence-only programs and have found that they don't delay intercourse and suggest that kids who participate in them may be less likely to protect themselves when they do begin sexual activity. There is no evidence that abstinence-only programs have a positive influence on kids.

TINA HOFF

Now that you've heard a bit about the policy and politics of sex education, I thought I would share with you some of what we've heard from those, literally, at ground zero: students, themselves.

Today, I'm going to share with you what our and other's research have found when it comes to the role of sex ed in young people's lives today...including some preliminary findings from a soon to be released major study from the Foundation on sex education. When it comes to where teens are getting information about sexual issues, sex education is an important source. It is named by teens by two out of five, 44%, as one of their most important resources; only their peers are named more frequently by 61% of teens. Of particular interest for this audience: sex education is almost on par with entertainment media, which is named by 40% of teens, as an important resource for information about sex.

So, what are teens learning in sex education? According to public secondary school principals, most sex ed is "comprehensive," meaning covering a broad set of topics that typically includes messages about abstinence as well as information about safer sex and birth control as opposed to presenting abstinence as the only option. Something that most parents favor, 82% support comprehensive vs. abstinence only, and about half (56%) also think condoms and other birth control should be offered to students who ask for them in school.

Still, messages about abstinence, encouraging young people to wait to have sex, is not only a part of most sex ed today, (94% of principals say it is taught in their school's sex ed) but it is something that both parents and students say *should* be taught in schools *along with* information about birth control for those who are sexually active. Most schools include HIV and STD information. Condoms and birth control are mentioned less frequently.

In spite of the prevalence of sex education today and its importance as a resource for teens, many teens do not know basic facts that can help protect them...such as that birth control can be obtained without parental permission or about emergency contraception and confidential family planning services.

- More than one in two teens don't feel fully prepared to use birth control if they were to have sex, including one in four who say they are not very or not all prepared to do so.
- Half don't feel fully prepared to talk with a boyfriend or girlfriend about sexual health issues.
- And six in ten don't feel fully prepared to talk with their parents.

Relatedly, and not surprisingly, upwards of one in two teens, including many who have not yet had sex say they need basic information about HIV and other STDs, as well as help knowing how to talk about sexual issues with partners. **The number one issue they say they need to know more about is sexual violence.**

LUCY (FLORIDA HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER)

My high school does not have sex ed except for one unit in the school's health ed curriculum. Teachers are extremely hesitant to mention any information in health class. Even the *Human Growth and Development* syllabus was abstinence-based. The school felt abstinence should be presented as a positive message and that any contraceptive information undermines the positive message of abstinence. Contraceptive information can only be given when a student demands answers but there are always restrictions. Only certain information can be given to students and only up to a certain point. Any information that goes beyond the restricted point has to be sanctioned by parents' permission of the individual student. Furthermore, any contraceptive information that is given to any student has to be given with all the possible

negative scenarios from not abstaining from sex, i.e. abortion, suicide, depression, STDs, HIV, AIDS, etc. Also, contraceptive failure rates must be stressed.

Unmarried students (teen mothers) are allowed to return to school after they've given birth but they are placed back in the abstinence-only program. It is stressed in the health education guide that unmarried teen parents should be encouraged to return to an abstinence-only lifestyle. They are discouraged from bringing their babies to school. Counseling, contraceptive information, information on abortion, clinic referrals, or contraceptive prescriptions are absolutely prohibited in regards to the teen mothers. Any employee that is found guilty of going against the stringent rules is automatically dismissed.

I took it upon myself, to conduct an informal survey with some of my students. I interviewed about twenty students and promised them complete confidentiality; they assured me they would be honest with me but if anything they said was repeated they would vehemently deny everything. I agreed to those terms. Out of all the questions asked, the one that seems to be the most important to me and whose answer was almost unanimous was: Where do you get most of your information about sex? The majority of students [18 out of the 20 students interviewed] said, "Television."

LINDA (CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER)

I should begin by saying that I am opposed to the abstinence-only program. About ten years ago I noticed an atmosphere that became very prevalent in our community. I began to notice newspaper articles stating that homosexuality was being taught in our children's classrooms. An organized hysteria was incited within our community that began a movement to get sex education expunged from our schools' curricula. The *Sex Respect* Program (an abstinence-only program) was introduced out of this movement. School board members had ties to the Christian Coalition and the feeling that overcame our community was one of zealotry. Thusly, I began a movement to combat the abstinence-only crusade. The aggression that came after me was unbelievable. I was not prepared for what ensued.

Rumors began to circulate within my community that I was a lesbian. That didn't bother me and I wasn't concerned because I knew my kids were secure as well as my husband. But when a rumor was started that I was having an affair with my best friend's husband, I knew things had gotten out of hand. I was told to back off my teacher colleagues [who were in support of all my efforts]; I was told to leave my neighbors and friends alone. My family was harassed. I received hate mail. Despite all of this, several parents and I formed a group to combat the abstinence-only crusade and we even filed a lawsuit. We began negotiations to offer AIDS education; we were told we could not mention sex. Inaccurate information, particularly erroneous information regarding the transmission of AIDS through saliva was being taught in our children's health ed classes.

My colleagues and I were labeled immoral. We were called the Anti-Christ. It was an unbelievable time for my family and especially difficult for my daughter who was in junior high where the abstinence-only program was being taught.

SARAH (LINDA'S DAUGHTER)

I had the abstinence-only program while my mother was going through this. Classmates told me that they thought my mother was the devil. I got hate mail in school. I was called names and mistreated. I believed my Mom believed in what she was doing but it wasn't until I got to college that I realized how wrong all the information I got in that class was. It was only after I got accurate information in college that I truly realized how messed up my abstinence-only class was.

JUDY MULLER

Abstinence-only should be a *choice*....

DR. DREW

American history has shown us all of the different epidemics of sexually-related diseases. As soon as the epidemic was under control, the disease was no longer a priority. This is the only country in the world that teaches teens not to have sex...as opposed to other countries that educate their teens regarding sex and the choices available.

TOM NUNAN (UPN PRESIDENT)

Spoke about his commitment to UPN's sexual health PSA campaign this fall. He encouraged other networks to follow his example and praised The Media Project's role in helping the PSA campaign become a reality.

PATRICIA TRUJILLO (OUTREACH COORDINATOR, PLAZA COMMUNITY CENTER)

Introduced along with her head teen counselor, Claudia.

CLAUDIA

We don't focus on teen pregnancy although teen pregnancy is a critical problem in our community. We focus on positive choices and solutions. The girls at the center are educated on birth control pills and STDs as well as the choice of abstinence.

DIANA (PLAZA COMMUNITY CENTER STUDENT)

I was forced to have sex when I was thirteen years old; I never had a choice in the matter. Through the *Teen-Smart* Program at the high school that I'm in, I finally received information that has helped me in my life and Ms. Trujillo is going to help me get the counseling I need. My parents are very strict and extremely religious. They would never talk to me about sex so anything I learned I learned in the street. I think the most important thing for everybody here to understand is that teens are going to have sex, so teaching them that if they have sex they are going to die, is so unrealistic.

LAURA (HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT)

I appreciate the abstinence-only message as a choice. I wish someone had taught me about abstinence when I was younger. No one talked to me about the positive aspects of waiting. There are a lot of teens that are virgins but they are embarrassed to admit it.

MANDY (HIGH SCHOOL DROP-OUT)

I only have one friend that is a virgin. Abstinence-only is not realistic. Most of my friends have been having sex for years and years. Abstinence is a great choice but to have that as the only thing that's taught is soooooo unrealistic. Education on STDs is a better method of influencing teens on their sexuality. Oh...and most TV shows are corny.

ANNA (TEEN WHO WORKS IN A PROGRAM CALLED TEEN LINE)

I came to *Teen Line* very educated about sex. The one thing that continues to amaze me, though, is how much guilt teens experience over their sexual activity. I am amazed that abstinence-only is such a movement today in the year 2000. Education on birth control would be so much more realistic; it would make sense. Programming can be so confusing. Sex is everywhere, it's rampant; yet, abstinence-only is being taught. Teens, of course, are confused. Television is such a big part of our lives; we get so much of our information from what we see on television. Television shows us that sex is beautiful yet this program teaches us that we will die if we have sex before we are married. Meanwhile, we are flooded with images of unmarried people constantly having sex. It's only natural that we'd be confused.

DAWN

Apologized to Linda and Sarah for the [so-called] Christian movement that maligned and mistreated them.

"From all my years of counseling I've learned that sexual addiction has nothing to do with sex; it is an escape. I have five daughters and they are all virgins. I am in total support of the abstinence-only program. I teach my girls that dating leads to divorce; courting leads to long-lasting marriage."

JUDY MULLER

Wouldn't you want your daughters to be educated?

DAWN

Yes, I want them to be educated but I strongly support that teens wait until marriage to become sexually active.

SEAN (TEEN)

During the teenage years, we question parents and authorities. You can teach a kid about diseases without using scare tactics. I look at my friends and they don't have huge bleeding ulcers or anything so talking about how sex is so terrible makes the threat seem far off and not real...it's counterproductive.

JUDY MULLER

It comes down to the teacher. If s/he believes in dogma, how can s/he teach it?

BRIAN WILCOX

A lack of pluralism underlies the abstinence-only programs. I have a 14-year-old son who came home from school with an abstinence pledge that said “I promise to abstain from sex until (blank).” He filled it in with “until I’m emotionally ready.” The form was sent back from school marked incorrect! I contacted the school about it. There’s more than one set of beliefs. Most people don’t get married until they’re 26 or 27 and very few wait until then.

JUDY MULLER

I asked my daughters what shows they thought were the most realistic about sex and they said, “My So-Called Life.”

DR. DREW

There is a long term side effect to all of this. I can trace the fact that kids don’t want to talk about marijuana because of the hypocrisy of “Reefer Madness.” There could be a similar downside to sex ed.

BRIAN WILCOX

Successful programs are skill-based and include conversation, refusal skills and rehearsal. They don’t focus on slogans. Then they provide them with information. Teens see the b.s. in these programs...they know that sex does not equal death...so they dismiss all the other valid information. Accuracy is terribly important to them, coupled with very concrete skills.

DR. DREW

You should see what lengths kids will go to to avoid intercourse.

TINA HOFF

One in two teens engage in oral sex which is a much higher rate than intercourse. When we talk to teens about what information they need, sexually active kids don’t know where to get contraception as well as kids who aren’t sexually active.

KATE FOLB

Here, if you ask kids who are having oral sex if they’re sexually active, they’ll say no. In Europe, they’ll say yes.

DEB HAUSER

I’m so struck by the sense of guilt we all carry about being sexual and that translates into our ability to plan for sex. If you can’t plan for sex, you can’t protect yourself. In Europe, so many young people carry condoms and believe sexuality is a normal part of developing. Here we give so much guilt that they carry for a long time.

BRIAN WILCOX

Openness doesn’t lead to wanton sex. In the Netherlands, teens wait longer to initiate sexual activity for the first time and there are fewer pregnancies and abortions.

DEB HAUSER

At a hearing on sex education in Washington, I actually heard a Congressman’s staff person say, “I don’t care what works, I care about what’s right!”

DR. DREW

It’s not guilt, it’s shame.

JUDY MULLER

I knew a guy who carried a condom in his wallet for four years just to make himself look good!

ANNA

What’s missing is communication between kids and adults. Things would be different and there wouldn’t be so much guilt and shame. Having sex isn’t wrong if you’re ready for it.

JUDY MULLER

That’s a good last word.

KATE FOLB

There are several reasons we chose this subject: First, it makes a great story and is a very hot issue right now. In your packet are articles on sex ed from all around the country. In addition to a potential storyline, we wanted to let you know the lack of information young people are getting in their schools so that anything you do in your shows about sexual health and healthy relationships will be of benefit. We have both a hotline and a Web site that you can use to help you as well. Thank you to our panelists and teens and Judy.