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NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Poll

Sex Education in America

The debate over whether to have sex education in American schools is over. A new poll by NPR, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government finds that only 7% of Americans say sex education should not be taught in schools. Moreover, in most places there is even little debate about what *kind* of sex education should be taught, although there are still pockets of controversy. Parents are generally content with whatever sex education is offered by their children's school (see box below), and public school principals, in a parallel NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School survey, report little serious conflict over sex education in their communities nowadays. Nearly three-quarters of the principals (74%) say there have been no recent discussions or debate in PTA, school board, or other public meetings about what to teach in sex ed. Likewise, few principals report being contacted by elected officials, religious leaders or other people in their communities about sex education.

However, this does not mean that all Americans agree on what kind of sex education is best. There are major differences over the issue of abstinence. Fifteen percent of Americans believe that schools should teach only about abstinence from sexual intercourse and should not provide information on how to obtain and use condoms and other contraception. A plurality (46%) believes that the most appropriate approach is one that might be called "abstinence-plus" — that while abstinence is best, some teens do not abstain, so schools also should teach about condoms and contraception. Thirty-six percent believe that abstinence is not the most important thing, and that sex ed should focus on teaching teens how to make responsible decisions about sex.

Advocates of abstinence have had some success. Federal funds are now being made available for abstinence programs; in his State of the Union address President Bush called for an increase in the funding. And in spite of the fact that only 15% of Americans say they want abstinence-only sex education in the schools, 30% of the principals of public middle schools and high schools where sex education is taught report that their schools teach abstinence-only. Forty-seven percent of their schools taught abstinence-plus, while 20% taught that making responsible decisions about sex was more important than abstinence. (Middle schools were more likely to teach abstinence-only than high schools. High schools were more likely than middle schools to teach abstinence-plus. High schools and middle schools were equally likely to teach that abstinence is not the most important thing.)

In many ways, abstinence-only education contrasts with the broad sex ed curriculum that most Americans want — from the basics of how babies are made to how to put on a condom to how to get tested for sexually transmitted diseases. Some people thought that some topics were better suited for high school students than middle school students, or vice versa, but few thought any of

the topics suggested were inappropriate at all. The most controversial topic — “that teens can obtain birth control pills from family planning clinics and doctors without permission from a parent” — was found to be inappropriate by 28% of the public, but even there, seven out of ten (71%) thought it was appropriate. The other most controversial topics were oral sex (27% found it inappropriate) and homosexuality (25%). (See Table 1.)

Table 1

| Topic | Appropriate | | | | Not Appropriate |
|---|-------------------|---------------|-------------|------|-----------------|
| | Total Appropriate | Middle School | High School | Both | |
| STDs other than HIV/AIDS | 99 | 9 | 15 | 75 | 1 |
| HIV/AIDS | 98 | 9 | 11 | 78 | 1 |
| How to talk with parents about sex | 97 | 12 | 8 | 77 | 2 |
| Basics of how babies are made | 96 | 14 | 13 | 69 | 3 |
| Waiting to have intercourse until older | 95 | 10 | 12 | 73 | 4 |
| How to get tested for HIV and other STDs | 94 | 5 | 33 | 56 | 4 |
| Birth control | 94 | 8 | 29 | 57 | 5 |
| How to deal with the emotional issues and consequences of being sexually active | 94 | 7 | 23 | 64 | 5 |
| Waiting to have sexual intercourse until married | 93 | 8 | 13 | 72 | 7 |
| How to talk with a girlfriend/boyfriend about “how far to go” sexually | 92 | 6 | 23 | 63 | 6 |
| How to make responsible sexual choices based on individual values | 91 | 9 | 21 | 61 | 8 |
| How to use and where to get contraceptives | 86 | 5 | 37 | 44 | 12 |
| Abortion | 85 | 5 | 30 | 50 | 13 |
| How to put on a condom | 83 | 5 | 38 | 40 | 15 |
| Masturbation | 77 | 8 | 22 | 47 | 19 |
| Homosexuality and sexual orientation | 73 | 5 | 24 | 44 | 25 |
| Oral sex | 72 | 4 | 29 | 39 | 27 |
| That teens can obtain birth control pills from family planning clinics and doctors without permission from a parent | 71 | 3 | 40 | 28 | 28 |

Don't know/refused responses are not shown.

Interestingly, in a separate question about what schools should teach about homosexuality, only 19% said schools should not teach about it at all. For the most part, Americans want teachers to talk about homosexuality, but they want them to do so in a neutral way. Fifty-two percent said schools should teach “only what homosexuality is, without discussing whether it is wrong or acceptable,” compared with 18% who said schools should teach that homosexuality is wrong and 8% who said schools should teach that homosexuality is acceptable.

A majority of Americans (55%) believes that giving teens information about how to obtain and use condoms will not encourage them to have sexual intercourse earlier than they would have otherwise (39% say it would encourage them), and 77% think such information makes it more likely the teens will practice safe sex now or in the future (only 17% say it will not make it more likely).

When it comes to the *general approach* to teaching sex and sexuality in the schools, Americans divide almost evenly. Respondents were asked to choose which of two statements was closer to their belief: (1) “When it comes to sex, teenagers need to have limits set; they must be told what is

acceptable and what is not.” Or (2) “ultimately teenagers need to make their own decisions, so their education needs to be more in the form of providing information and guidance.” Forty-seven percent selected the first statement; 51% selected the second. Parents of seventh and eighth graders were more likely to choose the first statement (53%) than the second (45%); parents of high school students were evenly divided. Conservatives were much more likely to choose the first statement over the second (64% to 32%), as were evangelical or born-again Christians (61%

to 35%). Liberals and moderates were more likely to choose the second statement over the first (61% to 37% for liberals and 56% to 42% for moderates).

Parents Approve

Although there may be some disconnect between the breadth of sex education Americans want taught and what is actually taught in many places, parents whose children have taken sex ed generally like their school’s program. The vast majority (93%) say the program has been at least somewhat helpful to their child in dealing with sexual issues; 42% say it has been very helpful, and 51% say somewhat helpful. Three out of four say they are at least somewhat confident that the program teaches attitudes and values similar to the ones they teach at home (26% very confident; 49% somewhat confident). Moreover, parents of children who have taken sex ed are much more likely than parents of children who have not taken it to say that sex ed is better today than it was when they were in school (79%-42%). Eighty-three percent of parents say they are more open with their children about sex and sexual issues than their parents were with them. More than three out of four parents of children who have taken sex ed (77%) say they are at least somewhat familiar with sex ed programs in their community’s schools, although only 24% say they are very familiar.

Historically, the impetus for sex education in schools was teaching children about avoiding pregnancy and keeping them safe from sexually transmitted diseases, but many parents say they are more worried about the effects of sexual activity on their child’s psyche. Asked what concerns them most about their 7th-12th grade children ever having sexual intercourse, 36% of parents said “that they might have sexual intercourse before they are psychologically and emotionally ready.” That compares with 29% who said their biggest concern was disease (23% said HIV/AIDS and 6% said other sexually transmitted diseases) and 23% percent who said

pregnancy.

Moreover, given a list of problems teens might face, nearly half (48%) of all Americans chose as the biggest problem “use of alcohol and other illegal drugs,” which was double the number who chose any sex-related problem (9% said unwanted pregnancy, 8% said getting HIV/AIDS, and 4% said getting other STDs).

Just as the initial impetus for sex education in schools came from health advocates, the historical impetus for abstinence education has come from evangelical or born-again Christians. In general, evangelical or born-again Christians have very different views from other Americans about sex and sexuality. Eighty-one percent of evangelical or born-again Christians believe it is morally wrong for unmarried adults to engage in sexual intercourse, compared with 33% of other Americans. Likewise, 78% of evangelical or born-again Christians believe that sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects; 46% of other Americans believe this. Moreover, such Christians are much more likely to believe that school-age children should abstain from almost any kind of arousal: 56% include passionate kissing among the activities they should abstain from; 31% of the rest of the population say that. (See Table 2.)

Table 2

| Include abstaining from ... | Total | Evangelicals | Non-evangelicals |
|-----------------------------|-------|--------------|------------------|
| Sexual intercourse | 95 | 96 | 95 |
| Oral sex | 89 | 93 | 87 |
| Intimate touching | 63 | 78 | 56 |
| Passionate kissing | 40 | 56 | 31 |
| Masturbation | 44 | 61 | 36 |

Don’t know/refused responses are not shown.

Evangelical or born-again Christians also have different views on many questions about sex education. Twelve percent of them say sex education should not be taught in schools — a small number, but three times the percentage found among non-evangelicals (4%). Moreover, more than twice as many evangelicals as non-evangelicals (49%-21%) believe the government should fund abstinence-only programs instead of using the money for more comprehensive sex education. And on what should be taught in sex ed classes, evangelicals are much more likely than non-evangelicals to think certain topics are inappropriate. (See Table 3.)

Interestingly, there are some differences between white and non-white evangelicals — not on questions about sex or sexuality, but on questions about sex education. On some sex education questions, non-white evangelicals are closer to non-evangelicals than they are to white evangelicals. For instance, while 23% of non-Latino white evangelicals believe it is inappropriate for sex ed classes to teach where to get and how to use contraceptives, only 13% of non-white evangelicals believe this, compared with 8% of non-evangelicals. (The other items in Table 3 were asked of half-samples of the survey, and there were not enough non-white evangelicals in the half-samples to make accurate comparisons.) Likewise, asked about the best method to teach sex ed, 27% of non-Latino white evangelicals prefer abstinence-only. Fewer than half as many non-white evangelicals (12%) prefer abstinence-only, which is in line with non-evangelicals (10%).

Table 3

| Topic (percentage saying it should not be taught at all) | Evangelicals | Non-evangelicals |
|---|--------------|------------------|
| That teens can obtain birth control pills from family planning clinics and doctors without permission from a parent | 42 | 20 |
| Oral sex | 41 | 20 |
| Homosexuality and sexual orientation | 37 | 18 |
| Masturbation | 27 | 13 |
| How to put on a condom | 26 | 9 |
| How to use and where to get contraceptives | 21 | 7 |

Don't know/refused responses are not shown.

Here are some other interesting findings from the survey:

Adult Americans define abstinence broadly. The survey asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage is the expected standard for all school-age children.” Sixty-two percent of Americans agreed with the statement, which is a principle that must be taught in federally funded abstinence education programs; 36% disagreed. Regardless of respondents’ answer to that question, they then were asked how they were defining the word abstinence when they answered it. Did they include abstaining from sexual intercourse? Oral sex? Intimate touching? Passionate kissing? Masturbation? A large percentage of Americans said yes to all of those, with 63% thinking abstinence included abstaining from intimate touching, 40% thinking it included abstaining from passionate kissing, and 44% thinking it included abstaining from masturbation. (See Table 2.) As suggested earlier, born-again or evangelical Christians (of all races) were more likely to say yes to the last three than other Americans.

Parents think their daughters are better prepared to deal with sexual issues than their sons. In the course of this survey, parents of children in grades 7 through 12 were asked a number of questions about one of their children (if they had more than one in that age group, the child was chosen randomly). One of those questions was, “How well prepared do you feel your (x-grade)

child is to deal with sexual issues — very prepared, somewhat prepared, not very prepared, or not at all prepared?” Sixty percent of parents said their daughter was very prepared; only 36% said the same of their son. Interestingly, fathers (60%) were as likely as mothers (59%) to say their daughter was very prepared. However, fathers (23%) were much less likely than mothers (45%) to say their son was very prepared. (Whether the child had attended sex education in school made no difference in parents’ assessments.) In answering the question about what worries parents most about their child ever having sexual intercourse, parents of girls (41%) were more likely to place psychological well-being as their top concern than were parents of boys (31%). Parents of girls were *not* more likely than parents of boys to choose pregnancy or disease.

There is no double standard regarding how long Americans think boys or girls should wait to have sex, but adults don’t think either boys or girls will actually wait that long. Forty-seven percent think girls should wait until they are married to have sexual intercourse, and 44% think boys should wait until they are married; the difference is not statistically significant. Nearly nine out of ten (89%), though, don’t think girls will wait that long; the number is similar for boys (91%). The responses were similar when people were asked about oral sex; they said boys and girls should wait, but probably won’t. Again, there was little difference between people asked about boys and those asked about girls. About one out of six people said that boys (16%) and girls (18%) should never experience oral sex, but they also were likely to say that it was not a realistic expectation.

Methodology

The NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School survey Sex Education in America is part of an ongoing project of National Public Radio, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Representatives of the three sponsors worked together to develop the survey questionnaire and to analyze the results, with NPR maintaining sole editorial control over its broadcasts on the surveys. The project team includes:

From NPR: Marcus D. Rosenbaum, Senior Editor; Susan Davis, Associate Editor; Ellen Guettler, Assistant Editor.

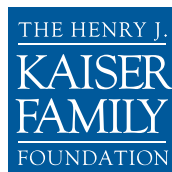
From the Kaiser Family Foundation: Drew Altman, President and Chief Executive Officer; Matt James, Senior Vice President of Media and Public Education and Executive Director of kaisernetwork.org; Mollyann Brodie, Vice President, Director of Public Opinion and Media Research; and Rebecca Levin, Research Associate.

From the Kennedy School: Robert J. Blendon, a Harvard University professor who holds joint appointments in the School of Public Health and the Kennedy School of Government; Stephen R. Pelletier, Research Coordinator for the Harvard Opinion Research Program; John M. Benson, Managing Director of the Harvard Opinion Research Program; and Elizabeth Mackie, Research Associate.

The results of this project are based on two nationwide telephone surveys: a survey of the general public and a survey of school principals. The survey of the general public was conducted among a random nationally representative sample of 1,759 respondents 18 years of age or older, including an oversample of parents of children in 7th through the 12th grade, which resulted in interviews with 1001 parents. Statistical results for the total survey were weighted to be representative of the national population. The margin of sampling error for the survey is plus or minus 3 percentage points for total respondents and plus or minus 4.7 percentage points for parents. The survey of principals was conducted among 303 principals of public middle, junior, and senior high schools across the country. Schools were randomly and proportionally selected from a national database of public schools by type of school (middle, junior, and senior high). Statistical results were weighted to be representative of public middle, junior, and senior high schools in the United States based on geographic region and type of residential area (urban, suburban, non-metropolitan). The margin of sampling error for the survey is plus or minus 6 percentage points for total respondents. For results based on subsets of respondents the margin of error is higher.

Princeton Survey Research Associates conducted the fieldwork for both surveys between September and October, 2003. Note that sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error in this or any other public opinion poll.

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