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# Peppermint Patty: A Mint or a Vagina

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# Peppermint Patty: A Mint or a Vagina

*Sex education is a subject that all adolescents inevitably encounter. Abstinence-only and comprehensive sex educations are the two core foundational curricula that are being taught to most high school students in the United States. On the surface, both of these methodologies teach conflicting information about sex which perpetuates gender inequality and rape culture. Abstinence-only programs' emphasis on women's purity stigmatizes teens through heterosexual normative teachings and misleads teens and young people on the logistics of sexual health. Conversely, comprehensive sex education does not teach "real" sex education because it includes very basic understandings of human sexuality rather than teaching about men's and women's sexuality equally. Analyzing the flaws in both teachings can be a step forward in decreasing adolescences' pregnancy rates, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, rape culture, and gender inequality.*

## Introduction

When I think back to sex education in my high school and middle school years, it is all a haze. What sticks out in my mind are the marquee events of sex education: traumatizing pictures of several STDs to discourage premarital sex, watching a video of a woman giving birth, and learning how to put condoms on bananas. I did not truly have a grasp on human sexuality until I went away to college and began learning through my own personal experiences. Unfortunately, millions of teens across the country are

contracting STDs and getting pregnant because sex education in America is vastly inconsistent. Due to the lack of “real” sex education in American schools, many adolescents have conflicting or no discourse about sexuality and sexual health, which perpetuates gender inequality and rape culture.

### **Basic History of America’s Sex Education**

Sex education was initiated when education systems and the government began to distinguish adolescence as a separate and legitimate stage of life (Schwarz, 2007). Industrialization extended the initial age of marriage and employment beyond the teen years and subsequently the amount of time between sexual maturation and marriage increased significantly. The effort to include sex education in America’s schools first functioned as an initiative to encourage sexual restraint during the extended period of time between sexual maturation and marriage. During the twentieth century, educators remodeled sex education to discourage sex before marriage and also to prevent venereal diseases. During this time period, sex education was to be considered “highly prescriptive and moralistic” (p. 119). The health needs

of American soldiers during World War I and World War II, as well as changing demographics and sexual practices, swayed the development of sex education beyond chastity and disease (Schwarz, 2007). Towards the end of the twentieth century, sex education began to branch out beyond abstinence to public health concerns which created a slightly more expansive view of sexuality in the United States.

The federal funding of abstinence-only sex education programs began in 1981, under President Ronald Reagan. Within the year, abstinence-only programs received just under four million dollars; that figure radically increased over the course of thirty years. The Adolescent Family Act (AFLA) was the first major achievement for abstinence-only advocates, which was signed into law in 1981. This act was signed into law as Title XX of Public Health Act to encourage sexual restraint and self-control through a family-positive methodology. In 1996 abstinence-only supporters succeeded in gaining another source of funding by having Title V, Section 510 (b) of the Social Security Act, also known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or welfare, contribute money (Schwarz, 2007). The largest federal abstinence-

only funding resource is the Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE). This regulation was enacted in October 2000 and started funding in 2001; by 2007 CBAE collected \$20 million (SIECUS, 2013). The intense influence and financial support of the Republican administration made abstinence-only education common throughout the nation. Unlimited amounts of money and support gave abstinence-only education programs leeway to teach youth what they wanted and believed they should know about sexual activity. Unfortunately, this also denied important information to teens who became sexually active despite an abstinence-only approach to sex education. Before 2010, the federal government did not dedicate funding for comprehensive sex education. For almost thirty years, one and half billion dollars of tax payers' money went to abstinence-only programs; mostly under the George W. Bush administration (SIECUS, 2013). In 2004, Representative Henry A. Waxman requested a comprehensive assessment of the content of the abstinence-only education used by grantees in the Special Programs of Regional and National Significance Community-Based Abstinence Education

(SPRANS) (Waxman, 2004). Through SPRANS, the Department of Health and Human Services provides grants to community organizations that teach abstinence-only education to young people. The curricula used in SPRANS and other federally funded programs are not reviewed for accuracy by the federal government (Waxman, 2004). The Waxman Report proved that abstinence-only programs contain false information about the effectiveness of contraceptives. For example, one curriculum said that "the popular claim that 'condoms help prevent the spread of STDs,' is not supported by the data" (p. i). The Waxman Report also found that the curricula included false information about risks of abortion. For example, one curriculum falsely claimed that five percent to ten percent of women who have legal abortions will become sterile and that premature birth is increased following the abortion of a first pregnancy (p. 13). The Waxman Report also showed that abstinence-only curricula mix religion and science. For example, it portrays the belief that life begins at conception as a scientific fact without scientific data to back it up (p. 15). Additionally, the Waxman Report found that abstinence-only education treats stereotypes about girls and boys as scientific facts. Examples

include telling youth that women need financial support while men need admiration and that women get their happiness and judge their success on their relationships while men's happiness and success hinge on their accomplishments (p. 16-18). The Waxman Report also showed that abstinence-only programs contain medical errors. For example, one abstinence-only curriculum erroneously listed exposure to sweat and tears as risk factors for HIV transmission (p. 19).

This situation changed dramatically when a Democratic administration took over. Finding that abstinence-only programs were not effective and were in fact harmful for American adolescents, President Obama eliminated two-thirds of abstinence-only funding from CBAE and AFLA (SIECUS, 2013). Presently, the federal government has three separate funding sources for comprehensive sex education. In December 2009, President Obama signed the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2010, which followed the President's Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative (TPPI) and now receives \$110 million a year (SIECUS, 2013). In March 2010, President Obama signed the health care reform legislation, the Patient

Protection and Affordable Care Act which led to creating the Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP), which now receives \$75 million a year to help reduce teen pregnancy and HIV/STD rates among American teens (SIECUS, 2013). Finally, in 2011, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) started funding \$40 million a year to help build the infrastructure for HIV/STDs and sex education (SIECUS, 2013). All of the data from the Waxman Report became public knowledge and shed light on the ways in which abstinence-only education approaches youth. This data showed problems in the way sex education was approached in abstinence-only teaching and recommended that America realign sex education priorities and resources to ensure that sexual health information presented to impressionable adolescents is reliable.

### **Abstinence-only**

Abstinence-only sex education curricula promote abstinence as the only feasible option for America's adolescents. All federally funded abstinence-only programs are obligated to follow the federal definition of abstinence education under Title V of the Social Security Act (Appendix A).

This includes teaching adolescents that the only way to avoid premarital pregnancies and STIs is to be completely abstinent. They also teach youth that any sexual activity outside of marriage will have harmful psychological and physical effects on the individuals engaging in premarital sex. Also, abstinence-only stresses that babies born “out-of-wedlock” hurt the infants, the parents, and society as a whole (Schwarz, 2007). The three major concerns with abstinence-only sex education programs are that they stigmatize millions of teens, provide inaccurate information to these teens, and perpetuate gender stereotypes.

Given this, it is difficult to see how an abstinence-only sex education curriculum can provide a healthy foundation for American youth regarding their intimacy and sexual health. Abstinence-only advocates use intimidation, fabrication, and manipulation to scare impressionable and vulnerable adolescents away from sex. This reinforces sexual activity as negative, which leads to a host of additional obstacles constructed around sexual inhibitions among otherwise healthy teens, many of whom do become sexually active.

The lessons of abstinence-only programs stigmatizes millions of teens.

Fifty-six percent of teens between the ages of 15-17 and 85 percent of teens and young adults between the ages of 18-24 have been sexually active; nearly half of all high school students and 80 percent of all college students have engaged in sexual intercourse (SIECUS, 2013). Based on these statistics, it is important to realize that it is unreasonable to suggest that marriage is the only context in which sex occurs in America. Procreation, intimacy, and sexuality happen between humans outside of marriage. Policing sex as only acceptable within marriage suggests that most people who have sex outside of marriage, a large percentage of people as the above statistics show, are corrupt. Teaching that marriage is the only socially acceptable venue for sexual intimacy further stigmatizes millions of teens and young people such as teens who are born to unmarried parents, those who have engaged in sexual activity, those who have been sexually abused, and teens who identify in the LGBTQ community. Each year, almost 750,000 women aged 15-19 become pregnant. According to the Guttmacher Institute (2013), two-thirds of all teen pregnancies occur among older teens aged 18-19. U.S. teen pregnancy rates continue to be the highest in the developed world. In

2006, 68 to 1,000 American teens, aged 15-19, became pregnant. The low end of this American statistic is considerably higher than the 28 to 1,000 pregnancies among Canadian teens and the 31 to 1,000 pregnancies among Swedish teens. Although 15-24 year olds stand for only one-quarter of the sexually active population, they count for nearly half of the 18.9 million new cases of STIs each year.

In addition to noting the high pregnancy rate among teens, the Waxman Report (2004) found that abstinence-only programs teach inaccurate medical and sexual information. The Report showed that 80 percent of the curricula had forged, deceptive, or unclear information about effectiveness of contraception, the transmission of HIV, and risks of abortion (SIECUS, 2013). By fabricating information about HIV and STDs, these programs expose teens to greater risk of STD infection as they promote ignorance of the risk of STD transmission through non-coital sexual activity. This is evident in the fact that HIV infection rates have remained constant in teens while their pregnancy rates have lowered (Schwarz, 2007).

Abstinence-only education contributes to sexual stereotypes by obsessing over women's sexual purity,

which it treats as the sole determinant of their worth (Valenti, 2009). Friedman & Valenti (2008) introduce the idea of the purity myth, which is "the lie that sexuality defines how 'good' women are and that women's moral compasses are inextricable from their bodies" (p. 299). Most abstinence-only programs propagate "male pleasure and female shame, male recreation and female responsibility, male agency and female passivity, and male personhood and female parenthood" (Schwarz, 2007, p.117). The message that both girls and boys get from any abstinence-only lesson is that women's sexuality is defined and policed by educators, legislators, and media makers, not by women (Friedman & Valenti, 2008). Because the federal government successfully funded abstinence-only programs across the country and made it mainstream, it is difficult to undo the damage this biased ideology of adolescent's sexuality did to America's culture.

### **Comprehensive Sex Education**

Comprehensive sex education betters abstinence-only education by including materials on contraceptives, sexual development, and reproductive health. Comprehensive sex education varies, but the programs have a common goal

which is to take a “multi-faceted approach to adolescent reproductive health” (Schwarz, 2007, p. 118). The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States structured a national task force that put together four primary goals regarding comprehensive sex education programs. The gist of this program is to guide teens on values and provide information to promote good decision-making regarding intimacy and sexual activity (see Appendix B).

The comprehensive sex education approach to educating America’s youth on sexual activity directly opposes abstinence-only teaching. Many kids have a difficult time speaking with their families or support systems about the topics of sex and sexuality. Schools that practice comprehensive sex education advocate for adolescents who do not receive any sexual knowledge from their parents to figure out their emerging sexuality. The comprehensive sex curricula has done well with presenting accurate medical information by not having a biased opinion of what is being presented to these adolescents. The more youth can talk and learn about human sexuality in a healthy educational setting, the better opportunity they have to learn different perspectives about sexuality and how to

be safe and healthy with their bodies. The four goals under SIECUS have a recurring theme of legitimately educating young people about their physical and emotional sexuality.

While comprehensive sex education provides adolescents more substantial sex education information when compared to an abstinence-only approach, there is definitely room for improvement. Comprehensive sex education absolutely needs to be more regulated and funded by the federal government. Having the federal government mandate and regulate standards for comprehensive sex education across the nation will create a more cohesive curriculum. This is desirable because while the goal of comprehensive sex education is to be unbiased and completely medically accurate, having lenient regulations on this education can create leeway for educators to turn this program back into abstinence-only education and repeat the cycle of depriving youth with sexual knowledge.

One major flaw in comprehensive sex education is that it does not truly teach “real” sex education. According to Kulwicki (2008), “Real sex education requires, in addition to teaching about protection, teaching sex as a normal and healthy part of life that is carried in

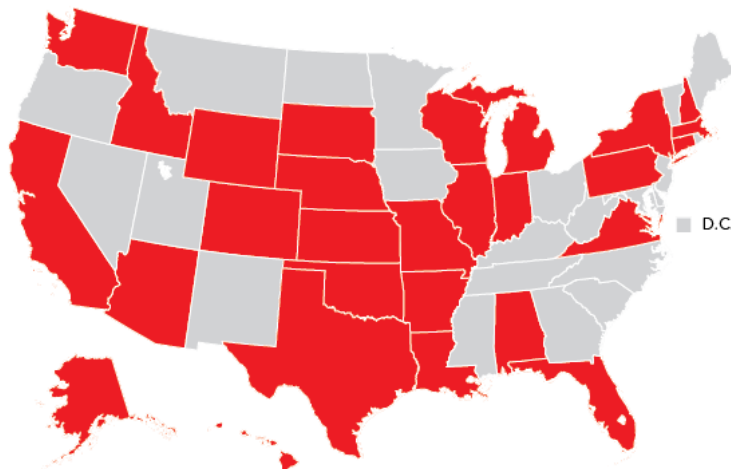


terms of both preferred partners and preferred acts” (p. 305). What comprehensive sex education consists of now is necessary and consistent but there are some additional forms of sex education knowledge that should be included. For example, the clitoris needs to make more of an appearance throughout sex education. According to Kulwicki (2008), comprehensive sex education can present a scientifically precise and sensible description of birth control, condom use, vaginal intercourse, and other sex education topics without discussing the clitoris. When the clitoris is removed completely from the curricula, it presents that area of a woman as unimportant and invisible. Comparatively, in any discussion of intercourse and pregnancy, there is no escaping a male orgasm (Kulwicki, 2008). “Real” sex education can promote smarter sexual choices. Teaching that sexuality is natural and varied underscores the fact that there is sexual activity other than heterosexual intercourse. For example, masturbation, mutual masturbation, oral sex, and many other sexual acts can help lower the risk of pregnancy or STDs and also convey the understanding that sex is for sexual pleasure as opposed to solely for

procreation (Kulwicki, 2008). Sex is often taught as being a technical, reproductive process through certain discourses like teaching a child the ‘Birds and the Bees’ (Jones, 2011, p. 140). Teaching a child this discourse on sexuality educates about how people procreate but maintains the image of innocence and purity by using a bee pollinating flowers and the fertilization of bird eggs (Jones, 2011).

Also important, real sex education would help support anti-rape education. Preventing sexual violence is not spoken about enough in adolescents’ lives. The expectation of female consent, rooted in heterosexual reproduction as the outcome, leads many women to slowly walk into a society where rape culture is the norm as young adults step into sexual activity (Friedman & Valenti, 2008). If both boys and girls learn that sex is gratifying for both genders, not just for boys, and that it is not just for reproduction, they will be less affected by the sexual stereotypes of purity and female submissiveness that can contribute to sexual violence (Friedman & Valenti, 2008). The following maps helps depict how dire of an issue sex education is in this country:

## States That Don't Require Sex Education



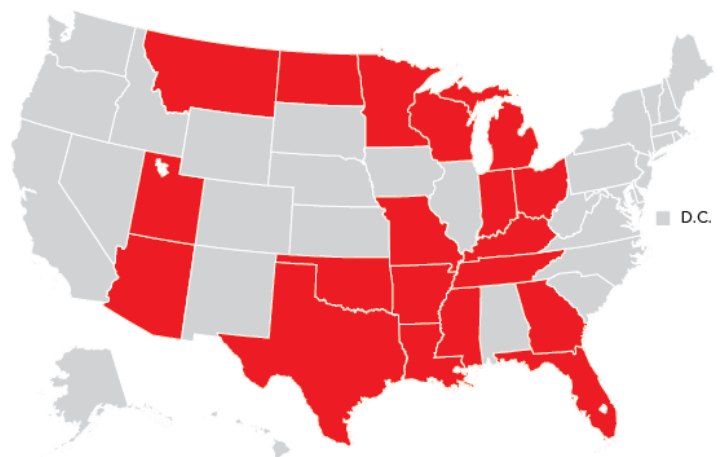
Klein (2014)

Note: Sex education typically includes discussion of STIs. In Illinois, sex education is not mandatory, but health education is required, and it includes medically accurate information on abstinence. In Mississippi, localities may include topics such as contraception or STIs only with permission from the State Department of Education. In Tennessee, sex education is required if the pregnancy rate is at least 19.5 or higher per 1,000 teen women ages 15-17.

Sources: Guttmacher

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## States Where Sex Education, If Provided, Must Include Information On Abstinence, But Not On Contraception



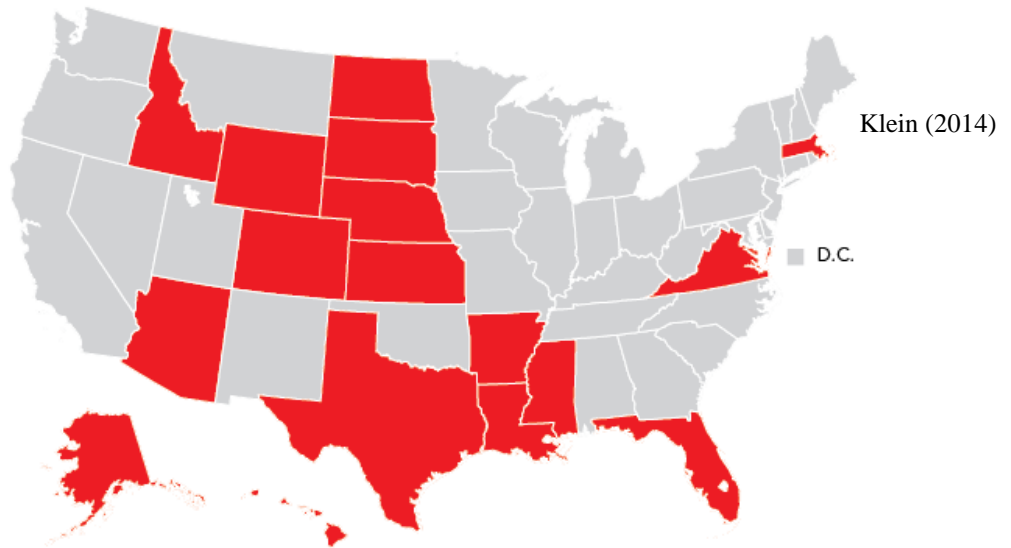
Klein (2014)

Note: Utah prohibits teachers from responding to students' spontaneous questions in ways that conflict with the law's requirements.

Sources: Guttmacher

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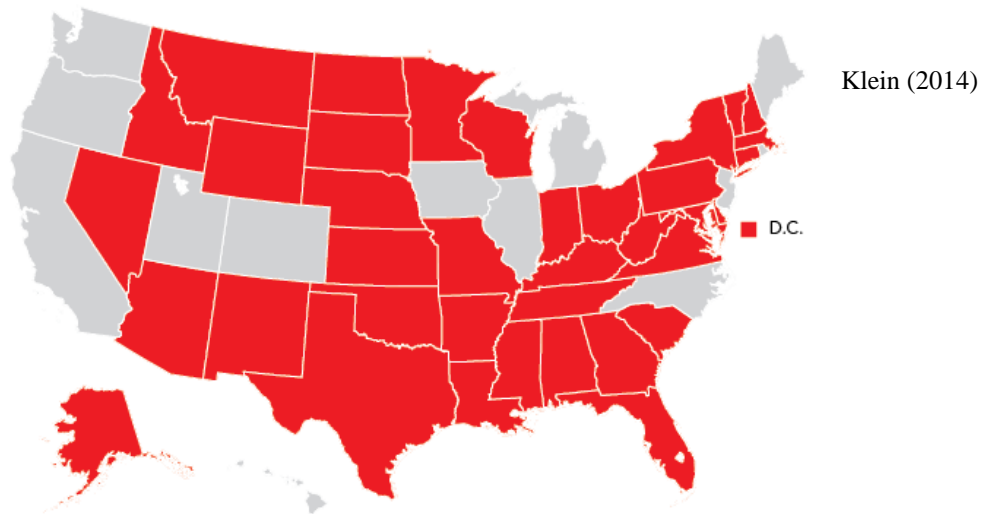
## States That Don't Require HIV Education



Sources: Guttmacher

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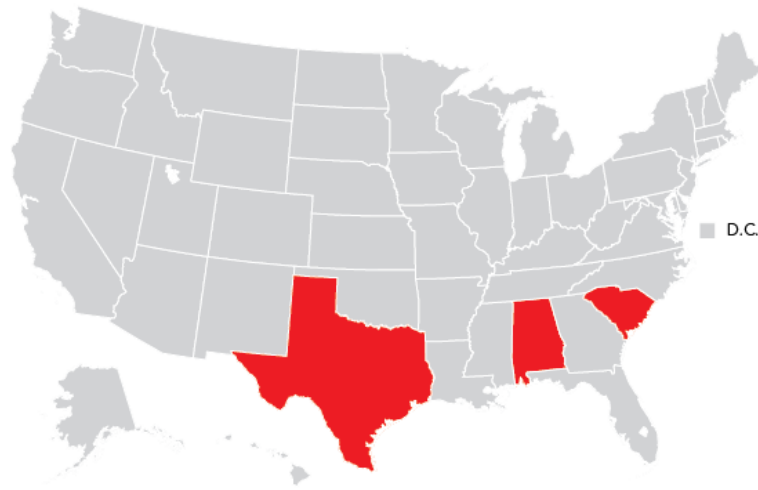
## States Where Sex and HIV Education, If Provided, Don't Have To Be Medically Accurate



Sources: Guttmacher

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## States Where Sex Education, If Provided, Must Include Only Negative Information On Same-Sex Relationships



Sources: Guttmacher

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### The Gap: Rape Culture and Gender Inequality

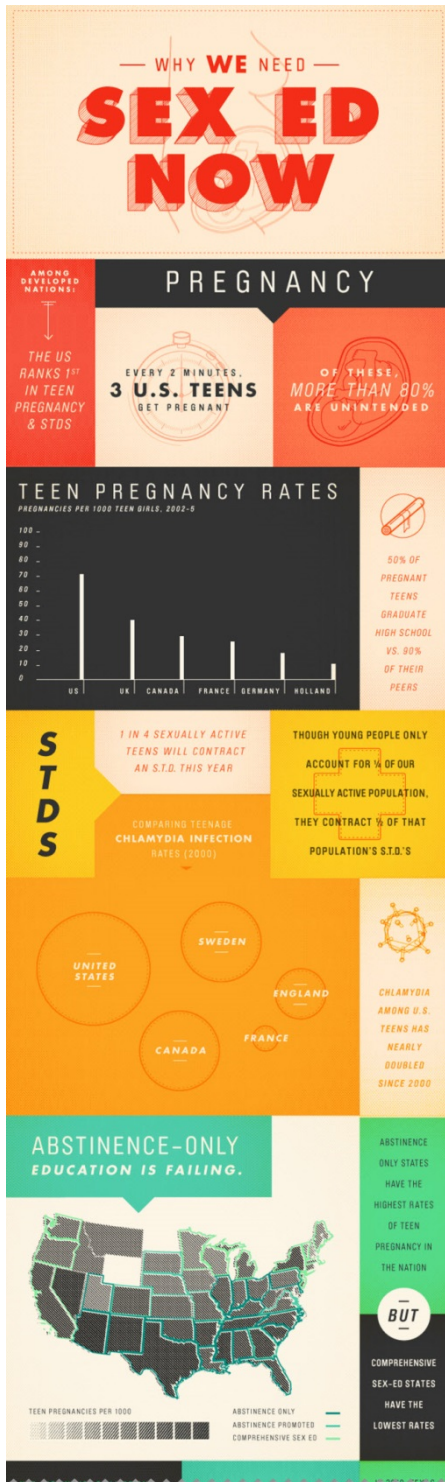
Gender inequality and rape culture are recurring themes in much of American culture. Both abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education approaches to sex education perpetuate these problems through intense gender stereotyping. The idea is that if girls and women are not “pure” or do not want to be, their bodies are not worth respecting, and so if a female happens to get raped or assaulted, she was “asking for it” (Friedman & Valenti, 2008). An example of this ideology is a law from Maryland that said after the

moment of penetration, “a woman could never be ‘re-flowered,’ [and] that gave rise to the principle that, if a woman consents prior to penetration and withdraws consent following penetration, there is no rape” (Friedman & Valenti, 2008, p. 300). That example completely fuels rape culture by being obsessed over sexual purity which then creates the gendered stereotypes of men having uncontrollable sex drives and women obligated to be “gatekeepers of chastity” (Schwarz, 2007, p. 138). Males are able to make negligent sexual decisions and females have to accept

the majority of the sexual and reproductive consequences, which in turn, denies females the opportunity to understand their sexual needs (Schwarz, 2007). What is daunting is how violence against women is so common that it has become a normal part of life in our society, because this violence is being carried out by “normal” people. Almost all of sexual violence is committed by someone close to the victim (Valenti, 2007). Sexual inequality through gendered stereotypes is rooted in the obsession of sexual purity. This thought creates the foundation of rape culture, which leads to a prevalence of sexual violence. Both abstinence-only education, in denying sexual activity, and comprehensive sex education, in reinforcing heterosexual norms, overlook teaching about sexual behaviors that reproduce sexual violence and about sexual behaviors where gender equality is central.

Because comprehensive sex education is newly funded and only recently recognized by the government, its curriculum has not been mandated everywhere and is not heavily regulated. Leaving the choice of how to teach their students up to individual schools districts creates a wide spectrum of comprehensive sex education instruction that is delivered unevenly

across the country. In many cases, abstinence-only practices replace comprehensive sex education approaches because of idiosyncratic variables such as teacher or schools preferences. An example of this is when the state of Mississippi finally implemented a policy requiring schools to teach sexual education in class but many teachers refused to discuss the subject with students (Hess, 2014). According to Hess, Mississippi school district teachers put on a purity exercise where they asked students to take a chocolate covered mint and pass it around the class to witness how dirty it became from the circulation. A Mississippi public worker and parent told the Los Angeles Times “They’re using the Peppermint Pattie to show that a girl is no longer clean or valuable after she’s had sex—that she’s been used...That shouldn’t be the lesson we send kids about sex” (Hess, 2014, p. 1). Even though comprehensive sex education is gradually becoming more funded and more mainstream, abstinence-only teaching lingers on, with the emphasis on “only.” This only emphasis sneaks into comprehensive sex education, which negates its purpose. Having more regulations on the curricula to ensure unbiased teaching will help lessen the gender



stereotypes of purity and virginity that can lead to rape culture. The pictured graphic “Why WE need Sex Ed Now” (Willis, 2014) demonstrates why comprehensive sex education is crucial for America.



## Conclusion

There is no way to avoid sexuality in our society because it is what keeps the human race going. There are two conflicting methodologies that the United States uses to educate youth about sexual activity. Due to the large gap between abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education approaches, it is no wonder that rape culture and gender inequality outcomes fall into this information breach. What comes out of abstinence-only education, on the surface, is one and a half billion dollars of tax payers' money over the course of thirty years that did not help American adolescents based on teen pregnancy and STDs rates still being the highest in the westernized world. Abstinence-only education indoctrinates through intimidation, fabrication, and manipulation using inaccurate medical and sexual information and it reproduces sexual stereotypes through encouraging sexual

purity. Comprehensive sex education offers medical accuracy and unbiased education for schools who do not take advantage of how unregulated this curriculum is nationwide. Unfortunately, comprehensive sex education often only teaches mainstream heteronormative sex education without exploring other areas of human sexuality. America can implement comprehensive sex education, but without regulation on the curriculum, it leaves the opportunity for schools to abuse the lenient guidelines on how comprehensive they allow it to be. Abolishing the approach that abstinence-only sex education presents, and adopting comprehensive sex education that is broader in content and includes discourse on female and male sexual pleasure beyond heteronormativity, would create a new, less gender divided view of human sexuality in America.

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