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Research Paper

“Learning Nothing Would Have Been Better<sup>1</sup>”: Why Abstinence Only Sex Education is Harming  
Children in the United States

I remember my middle school sex education class vividly. My fifth grade class was thrust unwillingly into new information on sexually transmitted infections(STIs), menstrual cycles and where babies actually come from. We didn't realize how lucky we were to receive such comprehensive information. Not all sex education in the U.S. is created equal. There are only 13 states that require medically accurate information to be taught in sexual education classes.<sup>2</sup> This is baffling when 24 states and the district of Columbia require a form of sex education.<sup>3</sup> These spotty laws on sex education make it difficult to find out exactly what schools are teaching. However, it is not difficult to observe the consequences of an inadequate sex education. The United States has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates among industrialized nations. There are 750,000 teen pregnancies in the US each year, of those, 400,000 result in live births, and over 80% are reported as being unintended.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. falls behind in sexually transmitted infection(STI) rates as well. STI rates continue to rise in the United States. This rise disproportionately affects youth; 15 to 24 year olds represent only 1/4th of the sexually active population yet account for nearly half of all cases of STIs.<sup>5</sup> These horrifying statistics indicate that a serious change needs to be made to the current sex education system in the United States.

Researchers, comedians and writers have all cited abstinence only education as the root cause for the flaws in the United States sex education system. With so much federal money being spent on abstinence education and specifically abstinence only education, is it doing its job and helping teens to make healthy choices? Or is abstinence education harming United States middle

and high school students? What does sex education in America look like and how does it affect youth in their relationships, physical health and mental health?

In order to understand how the sex education system in America functions today, it is necessary to understand the history of how it began. Sex education in America is derived from religious education. Many private health services such as sex education started religiously, because many religious organizations had excellent public health services.<sup>6</sup> This began with the Puritans and their poor relief system in 1620. The church provided health services to poor families. This system spread, and in time, many different religious groups were offering health and social services. By the 1800's religious non-profit groups had been established to aid people in need of services. Even if these groups were not directly linked with a certain religious denomination, many were driven by religious ideals.<sup>7</sup> During this rise of religious nonprofits, charity organizations that advertised "scientific philanthropy" began to emerge in opposition. These organizations aimed to separate health and human services from religion and to achieve a more scientific, businesslike, and professional delivery of care. By not requiring religious conversion to receive care, the organizations moved toward a more regulated professional system. These charitable societies began to establish social work professional education programs so that their volunteers could be proficient in research, documentation and technical skills.<sup>8</sup> This movement towards the reform of health services took place during the progressive era (1900-1920). During this time an emphasis was placed on technical expertise, empirical information and rational planning. Because of this history, recently, with the application of faith based programs, the U.S. has taken a step backwards when attempting to address health and social services (including sex education). This is a regression to a time when immorality was thought to be the cause of poverty. When the Bush administration put an emphasis on abstinence

only programs rather than more fact based empirical programs, faith based programs took precedent.<sup>9</sup>

This recent precedent, in which faith based programs have emerged once again as the primary sex education provider of the United States, is largely due to Title V. Title V is a federal law signed by Bill Clinton which provides governmental funding to schools that wish to bring in outside sex education providers that promote abstinence. "According to a 2007 study from Mathematica Policy Research, the federal government allocates some \$50 million for abstinence-only education under Title V; states' grants match those funds at 75 percent, resulting in nearly \$100 million total in government money going to abstinence-only education each year."<sup>10</sup> This federal funding often goes directly to religiously based sex education, since many of the abstinence only programs are taught by evangelical Christians. One religious high school principal brought in Pam Stenzel, a well known abstinence only promoter and speaker, to discuss "God's plan for purity" with the students. When one student at the west Virginia school filed a complaint that bringing Stenzel in to teach that had violated religious liberties, the conservative principal threatened to call the college that she was hoping to attend and report her for "bad character."<sup>11</sup> This event is just one of many that demonstrate the lack of accountability that school's face when breaking the law.

It is illegal for public schools in America to use any government funds towards religious speech or teachings. While some schools blatantly break this law, others simply skirt it by presenting programs that have religious undertones without an explicitly religious message. Regardless of the illegality, abstinence only education has become a massive industry due to the amount of government and private money that it has accumulated. And yet, abstinence only education does not seem to be doing its job. "In comprehensive studies of CDC data and on the

effects of sexual health education in different communities, comprehensive sex ed. delayed sexual activity by an average of 18 months, while abstinence-only education had little to no effect on the beginning point of sexual activity.”<sup>12</sup>

Abstinence only education does not only fail to stop teens from engaging in sexual activity, it is detrimental to their relationships, physical health and mental health. A comprehensive quote from *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, demonstrates some of the consequences of an inadequate sex education.

Think about caring for the 13-year-old with chlamydia, the 16-year-old with a second pregnancy, the 17-year-old with pelvic inflammatory disease, the 18-year-old with an ectopic pregnancy, the 16-year-old who presents after experiencing date rape, the 18-year-old being tormented for her sexual orientation, and the 15-year-old who was unable to negotiate using a condom with her boyfriend and did not know about emergency contraception. There are consequences associated with not educating our youth about sexual health issues, including sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancy, and sexual violence.<sup>13</sup>

This vivid description of the consequences that many young women and girls face because of inadequate sexual education is appalling. The rates of pregnancy, STIs, and sexual violence among teenagers are so high that the situations described here are becoming common. The United States continues to have one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy among developed countries and contraceptive use is consistently lower in the United States when compared with other countries.<sup>14</sup> The CDC reported that 66% of United States high school students have had sex.<sup>15</sup> Yet, these students are not receiving comprehensive sexual education.

In 2002, only 62% of teenage girls received instruction on contraceptive use before their first sexual experience.<sup>16</sup> Instead, girls are being taught that if they have sex they will be ruined. In certain sex education programs taught in the United States, girls who have had sex are compared to chewed up pieces of gum, tape that has lost its sticking power, or dirty sneakers.<sup>17</sup>

This is not teaching. This is a tactic to shame girls into staying chaste. While boys are taught that puberty signals hormonal changes and a sudden intense urge for sex that must be addressed, girls are taught about periods, and the dangers of pregnancy.<sup>18</sup> Girls are taught to say no, but boys are not being taught to stop. Recently, a national dialogue on sexual violence has been started across the United States. Sexual violence has become an epidemic on college campuses. One of the causes for this epidemic is the lack of sex education. "Powerlessness about sex and young age at first intercourse predispose adolescent women to non-voluntary sexual experiences."<sup>19</sup> This powerlessness is instilled in girls early on by their teachers, counselors and principals. One survivor of sexual assault at a young age who had been taught that girls who have had sex are equivalent to a chewed up piece of gum said "No one should ever say that, that's horrible... But for me, I thought, I am that chewed up piece of gum."<sup>20</sup> It's heartbreaking that while boys are taught that sex drive is natural and that they have needs that must be met, girls are taught to deny any sex drive. It is their own fault if they are assaulted, because they didn't say no the right way. Comprehensive sex education could stop this victim shaming, and shaming of sexually active women in general by teaching young women that it is their own choice what to do with their bodies.

The way to offer that choice is to present youth with all of the options, instead of presenting abstinence as the only choice that is acceptable. While abstinence is a necessary and important aspect of sex education, it should be presented as one of many options and not the sole option. When abstinence education is presented as the only venue available to teens curious about sexual activity, it becomes scientifically and ethically problematic.<sup>21</sup> In bioethical terms, abstinence-only education does not meet the standards of the principle of autonomy. Autonomy is defined as the ability to make the best choice for yourself. When abstinence only education

misrepresents or does not present all of the other options, it is taking away the student's right to choose for themselves. Teens themselves reported in a study that "having more information from parents, school, and health arenas can prevent pregnancy."<sup>22</sup> If more information and medically accurate information is presented, then teenagers have the tools to make healthy and protected choices. As John Oliver said on his TV show, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, "Why are you trying to yell the horniness out of teenagers?" Teenagers are going to be curious and engage in sexual activity, especially when we live in a culture filled with hyper sexualized media images that we see everyday.

If teenagers do not receive the information about sex from their schools, they will turn to other sources. In an article which recently appeared in the New York Times, *When Did Porn Become Sex Ed*, Peggy Orenstein interviews high school students, many of whom describe that they learned about sex by watching pornography. While the students admit that depictions of sex in pornography are fake, they still look to it for instruction. In a study conducted on college students, "60 percent consult pornography, at least in part, as though it were an instruction manual, even as nearly three-quarters say that they know it is as realistic as pro wrestling."<sup>23</sup> Without a comprehensive sex education, students turn to images presented in pornography, many of which are violent, demeaning, and set impossible standards. This creates an unnecessary unhealthy culture that promotes sexual violence. Comprehensive sex education would help to eradicate that culture. A quote published in the Journal *Obstetrics & Gynecology* illustrates this theory, "Providing accurate, honest, balanced information about these issues will help adolescents understand and achieve a healthy sexual and reproductive life."<sup>24</sup> Recently, president Obama has introduced a bill which would remove all funding for abstinence only education and

put in its place a more comprehensive program.<sup>25</sup> While this may seem like a rational answer to the widespread inadequacy of the sex education system, this bill has met substantial opposition.

Two researchers from from the DeVos center for religion and civil society published an article on the heritage foundation (a conservative think tank based in Washington DC) website that was encouraging Congress not to sign president Obama's bill into law. Their main argument in the article was that the comprehensive "Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program" that Obama proposed should be resisted by Congress. Instead of creating "yet another comprehensive sex education program", Congress should instead maintain abstinence education.<sup>26</sup> They cite a few studies that highlight "decreased sexual activity" in teenagers who were offered abstinence only sex education programs compared to teenagers who were offered no sex education programs (although they downplay this comparison and focus on the decreased sexual activity). They state that abstinence education works to stop teens from having sex, and in their conclusion section entitled "It Just Plain Works" they reiterate that abstinence education "equips today's youth with the knowledge and positive benefits of delaying sexual activity".<sup>27</sup> Throughout their article, phrases are used such as "out of wed-lock", and "virginity pledges" are highlighted as effective tools. While religion is never explicitly mentioned as reasoning in the article, there are undertones that it is the main drive behind the push for abstinence only education.

Abstinence only education has such a low success rate of delaying the sexual activity of teenagers, that a question has been proposed about the real motives of speakers who promote these programs. In a *Rolling Stone* article about the state of sex education in the United States, it is suggested that the real motives of the conservative speakers who promote abstinence only education is not to delay their sexual activity, but rather to promote an evangelical Christian viewpoint. The article describes how these speakers skirt the law and promote religion after their

speech: “Then the speakers often will ask students to visit them at a church, perhaps that very night, to hear a second talk – one containing an altar call to come to Jesus. These church talks often are advertised alongside public school appearances.”<sup>28</sup> They do not care as much that the students receive the information necessary for them to make healthy choices, they only care that the students adhere to their religious guidelines. It is no longer an issue of misinformation, but it becomes an issue of religious liberty.

Abstinence only education has become a loophole in the education system through which religion has seeped into the public school curriculum. It is no longer an issue of what will prevent teenagers from making unhealthy choices, instead it is a command for them to follow a set of strict rules set forth by Christianity. While some might argue that religious values help children to make the right choices, countless scientific studies beg to differ. The statistics show that over half of the high school students in America have already had their first sexual experience. Denying that young people are interested in sex is not a strategy that has been working. Pregnancy, STI, and sexual violence statistics are alarmingly high. Instead of ignoring and shaming the young people who choose to engage in sexual activity, we should be helping them. Sex education and talking about sex has become taboo in the United States, which is ironic when children are presented with thousands of hyper sexualized images everyday. Helping children and teens to understand the sexualized world that they live in by starting an honest and open conversation is the infinitely more beneficial than pretending that it doesn't exist. If parents and schools worked together to talk about sex in a more open way, children could enter their first sexual experience feeling confident and safe, rather than judged and scared. Or, they could have the tools to decide that they want to wait. I was lucky enough to attend a school that offered a comprehensive sex education program, without which I would not have made the safe decisions I



did. Other students living in the U.S. might not have that same opportunity. Receiving an inadequate sex education can negatively affect the rest of your life, and everyone should have the opportunity to make healthy decisions about their own bodies.

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