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A Brief Exploration of Sexual Education

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As it so happens, none of you would be reading this story if it weren’t for sex. You know, your parents “did it,” and—long story short—a single sperm penetrated an egg and a baby was born. Now, we know how sex works. We know how relationships work (kind of), and many college students know what sexually transmitted infections are and where to get birth control, etc. But not everyone does.
Unfortunately, the United States doesn't have a united stance on sex education, and what students learn from state to state varies based on laws that dictate what's taught in classrooms. Iowa is one of the leading states in sex ed and enforces comprehensive sex ed programs. Some states allow parents to have their children opt out of these programs, while other states leave all decisions to the school districts. The good news is that sex ed has come a long way from where it once started.

It used to be about chastity belts and the Comstock laws, which were enacted in 1873 and made it illegal to send any "naughty" materials such as contraceptives and information through the postal service. "The history of communication around sexuality has always been interesting because it's been taboo to talk about sexuality in general," says Amy Popillion, senior lecturer in human development and family studies. "Early on, a lot of the talk centered around ways to control desires to do things like masturbate."

When World War I rolled around in 1914, STIs, then still referred to as sexually transmitted diseases, became a hot topic of conversation. In 1918, Congress passed the Chamberlain-Kahn Act, which provided money to educate soldiers on the risks of STIs. At that time, people started to see sex ed as a public health issue. "It turned into a scare tactic type of thing," says Popillion. "The schools started to integrate [sex ed] more, but it still focused on a lot of the scare tactics, you know, 'don't over-masturbate' and all of those things."

"It wasn't until [Alfred] Kinsey that we started to see sex ed appearing on college campuses," Popillion adds. Kinsey was an American biologist who founded the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction in 1947 and produced the ever-popular "Kinsey Reports," which focused on human sexual behavior.

Shortly after Kinsey made his mark in the sex ed world, Mary Calderone acted as president and co-founder of the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States, or SIECUS, and the medical director for Planned Parenthood. Her most notable contribution was standing firm on the idea that children should learn basic facts about sexuality at a young age and that birth control and medical information should be available to everyone.

There are two major forms of sexual education taught in the United States today: comprehensive and abstinence-only. Comprehensive sex ed covers everything from anatomy to contraceptives, reproduction, birth, STIs, sexual orientation, values, dating, communication, sexual pleasures, intimacy, expressions of sexuality and body image. Abstinence-only, however, simply tells students that they should wait until marriage to engage in sexual activity. A 2004 poll conducted by NPR, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government found:

- Sixty-nine percent of the general public said it was very important to have sex ed as part of the school curriculum, as opposed to seven percent who said it shouldn't be taught at all.
- Forty-four percent of people said sex ed was somewhat effective in helping teens avoid getting HIV/AIDS and other STIs, forty-seven percent said it was somewhat effective in helping teens avoid pregnancy, thirty-five percent said it was somewhat effective in helping teens postpone having sexual intercourse and forty-four percent said it was somewhat effective in helping teens make responsible decisions about sex.
- Thirty percent said the government should only fund sex ed programs that promote abstinence-only, whereas sixty-seven percent said the government should fund comprehensive sex ed programs.

Sixty-six percent of people said sex ed should be required for students, and thirty-two percent said it should be optional.

When asked if giving teens information about contraceptives would encourage them to have sexual intercourse earlier, thirty-nine percent said yes while fifty-five percent said no.

Iowa is one of twenty-two states that mandates sex ed in the public school system. This doesn’t mean, however, that every student is being fed the same information. "The tricky part is what the law says versus what happens, and it goes back to who your teacher is," Popillion says. "Different teachers are going to carry it out in their own individual ways. They might be required by law to teach comprehensive sex ed, but they, of course, can throw in their own biases."

On Iowa State’s campus, HD FS 276: Human Sexuality (one class that’s always, always full), offers comprehensive sex ed. "When people say sex ed, I think people's minds go right away to the sex aspect, like 'Oh no, we're talking about contraception and abortion!' and all of those things that are very sex-oriented, whereas when we say comprehensive, we mean relationships and intimacy and taking care of your body," Popillion explains. "That's what comprehensive truly means."

Popillion argues we should take a more normative approach, because sexuality is so much a part of who we are. "We have so many taboos and repressed things, and we're so willing to provide education around other things, but it's interesting to me that people don't provide information about your whole entire life." Popillion says. "It's not just about sex, it's about relationships and communication, and it impacts you in almost every single thing you do in some aspect throughout your day."