Sex Education in the 201st Century

Controversies about the proper content of school-based sex education continue, but in some fundamental sense they have been matched by—perhaps even overtaken by—other pressing realities. For example, there are increasing demands that school resources be dedicated to teaching the basics of reading, writing, and math and to upgrading the attention given to science education. Many communities find that meeting these legitimate demands places substantial pressure on school hours and budgets, often at the expense of such areas as art and physical education as well as health education, which often includes sex education. Moreover, limited budgets can also decrease the amount of training made available to sex education teachers.

This situation is particularly distressing because during the last decade, increasing numbers of programs have become available that can help teens delay having sex, increase their use of contraception when they do have sex, and potentially help reduce the incidence of teen pregnancy. Some of these programs are based in schools, some are in community settings, and some span both.

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Numerous schools and communities welcome these evidence-based programs, and funding through the Office of Adolescent Health and the Family and Youth Services Bureau has supported many such programs nationwide and also has increased the amount of attention given to using and replicating effective programs. Even so, many sexually experienced teens (46% of males and 33% of females) report that they had not received any instruction about contraception before they began having sex, and states like Oklahoma and Alabama—with 2 of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the country—do not require any sex education in school at all.

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sess possible benefit. For example, 4 issues might be addressed. First, can online sex education systems help young people learn some of the key skills increasingly seen as central to risk reduction, such as negotiating skills and a strong sense of agency and self-efficacy? Or is the main value of these online sites more likely to be in the somewhat less difficult task of providing information? The research base here is weak at best, although one study of sexual health promotion on Facebook has demonstrated that young people will at least access this information. In addition, methods of assessing the effect of online interventions on behavior are currently an emerging topic in research design.

Second, is there a way for online sex education to be presented in the voice and tone of teens to reflect their concerns yet also provide accurate and credible information? Adults and professionals could lead the way, but a site that feels like it is the product of a lecturing, authoritarian, adult group may well be unpopular. Involvement of teens in the development of sites will likely be needed for success, and teen-appropriate humor and perspective could be especially attractive. One site currently has been developed and is administered solely by teens; its motto is “by teens, for teens.”

Third, might there be a way for professional groups like the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the National PTA to create a standardized but fully teen-centric core set of materials, lessons, and interactive components that could then be “localized” by community groups? Detailed information on adolescent-centered services and where to go for what types of help, including information on confidentiality, cost issues, and privacy, would be particularly useful for teens. Fourth, how can online systems support and amplify evidence-based programs already in use? Are there some instances in which the online platform is preferable?

Given the controversies about sex education that have limited the full use of well-designed, evidence-based programs, the acceptance and use of online sex education and support remain to be determined. However, because the Internet is essentially unregulated, there is no need to secure anyone’s particular approval for any site or its content, improving access of teens to sex information without school board approval. In addition, although not all teens are in school, odds are that they are online. The Internet is already a major source of sex information, some of it inaccurate, so why not encourage development of responsible, relevant sex information that would appeal to teens and be easy to use? It may be an idea for which the time has come.

ARTICLE INFORMATION
Published Online: June 12, 2014. doi:10.1001/jama.2014.4789.
Conflict of Interest Disclosures: The authors have completed and submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest and none were reported.

REFERENCES