

How Comprehensive Sexual Health Education Can Decrease Sexual Harassment

By: Ry Walker - Summer Policy Intern 2019

Survivors and advocates have worked to identify practices that have been proven to prevent gender based violence. One of the most effective tools in preventing sexual harassment is the use of **sexual health education**. The hypothesis contends that when students are made more vulnerable when they are not given the vocabulary to handle situations involving consent. If students are not taught that they must ask for consent before hugging a friend, and that they need consent every time, not just once, then they are at a disadvantage to both understand the consequences of their actions and advocate for themselves.

This brief outlines the research connecting sexual health education and prevention of sexual harassment, in both college and K-12 environments; in addition to the work of advocates on this issue. **Largely, the research concludes that pre-college instruction on consent does in fact decrease the likelihood that a student will be harassed and be the harasser.** Currently, less than 1 in 5 states mandates instruction on consent.¹ This means that “young people across the country are not being equipped with the language or necessary resources to negotiate sexual relationships.”²

Research on Higher Education

In 2016, the *Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation* at Columbia University surveyed the undergraduate population on the campus sex culture. One study utilized this data to determine whether students who received instruction on consent prior to college were at lower risk for sexual misconduct. In 2018, **the study concluded that “pre-college comprehensive sexuality education, including skills-based training in refusing unwanted sex, may be an effective strategy for preventing sexual assault in college.”**³

Research on K-12 Education

In one study, based on surveys of over 3,000 young adults and high school students nationwide in addition to formal interviews and informal conversations, a Harvard University research group, *The Making Caring Common Project*, investigated the attitudes of young people toward their sex education, both in schools and from their parents. Their research found that 65% of participants indicated that they wanted guidance on some emotional aspect of romantic relationships in a health or sex education class at school.⁴

In 2008, a quantitative study with 30 public middle schools in New York City, specifically 117 6th and 7th grade classes (over 2,500 students) that were chosen to randomly receive sexual health education interventions. After the “six-session curriculum that emphasized the consequences for perpetrators of Dating violence and sexual harassment state laws and penalties for DV/H, the construction of gender roles,

¹ Catherine Brown & Abby Quirk, “Momentum Is Building to Modernize Sex Education,” *Center for American Progress*, May 2019, available at: https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2019/05/23052627/Modernize-Sex-Education_brief11.pdf.

² Girls for Gender Equity, “This Moment, The Movement, Our Mission,” January 2019, page 18.

³ John S. Santelli et al., “Does sex education before college protect students from sexual assault in college?,” *Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health*, November 2018, page 2, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0205951>.

⁴ Richard Weissbourd et al., “The Talk: How Adults Can Promote Young People’s Healthy Relationships and Prevent Misogyny and Sexual Harassment,” *Making Caring Common Project*, May 2017, page 2, available at: <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/the-talk>.

and healthy relationships,” students were less likely to be the victim and perpetrator in peer sexual violence, to be the victim of sexual dating violence, and less likely to perpetrate sexual harassment.⁵

Model Policy: California Healthy Youth Act

Through the California Healthy Youth Act of 2015, California now aims to ensure that schools “provide pupils with the knowledge and skills necessary to have healthy, positive, and safe relationships and behaviors.”⁶ Through a separate statute, Education Code § 51225.36, schools that require health education to graduate must instruct on California’s affirmative consent standard.⁷ The standard reads as follows:

‘Affirmative consent’ means affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity. It is the responsibility of each person involved in the sexual activity to ensure that he or she has the affirmative consent of the other or others to engage in the sexual activity. Lack of protest or resistance does not mean consent, nor does silence mean consent. Affirmative consent must be ongoing throughout a sexual activity and can be revoked at any time. The existence of a dating relationship between the persons involved, or the fact of past sexual relations between them, should never by itself be assumed to be an indicator of consent.⁸

What Advocates Are Doing

Activists have long called for comprehensive sexual health education that discusses consent from early ages to decrease the prevalence of school-based sexual harassment. In November of 2017, MeToo movement founder, Tarana Burke, and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) launched #TeachThem, a national campaign “highlight[ing] the lack of education surrounding sexual assault, harassment, and consent in schools.”⁹ The campaign also provided “resources for individuals to advocate for better sexuality education policies in their communities.”¹⁰

In addition to national campaigns, non profit organizations, like Day One, engage in community- and school-based work to educate students about gender norms and consent. For example, a joint study done by Day One and Brown University which surveyed nearly 8,000 students found that most students would care if they observed girls at their school being verbally harassed but believed a minority of the student body overall would care about such an event. When dialogue was opened in a workshop setting, students were able to see their misperceptions and work toward reconstructing the social norms of their schools.¹¹

In conclusion, research shows that schools are doing a disservice to students by not teaching about consent in K-12 health education. New York should follow the lead of California and mandate that

⁵ Bruce Taylor et al., “Shifting Boundaries: Final Report on an Experimental Evaluation of a Youth Dating Violence Program in New York City Middle Schools,” *Police Executive Research Forum*, 2011, pages 8-12, available at: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/236175.pdf>.

⁶ 39 Cal. Educ. Code § 51930 (II, Div. 4, Part 28, 5)

⁷ California Senate Bill No. 695, available at: http://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB695

⁸ California Education Code § 67386, available at:

https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=67386.&lawCode=EDC.

⁹ Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, “#TeachThem Campaign Advocates for Sex Ed that Includes Consent, Violence Prevention Education,” November 2017, available at:

<https://siecus.org/teachthem-campaign-advocates-for-sex-ed-that-includes-consent-violence-prevention-education/>.

¹⁰ *ibid*.

¹¹ Anya Kamenetz, “How Schools Can Reduce Sexual Violence,” *National Public Radio*, November 2018, available at:

<https://www.npr.org/2018/11/13/660644128/how-schools-can-reduce-sexual-violence>.

affirmative consent be instructed from young ages, We must use the opportunity to educate and mitigate gender-based violence before it begins.

ABOUT GIRLS FOR GENDER EQUITY

Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) is a Brooklyn-based intergenerational advocacy organization, engaging cisgender and transgender girls of color and gender non-conforming youth of color. GGE centers Black girls in the movement to achieve gender and racial equity. Since 2001, GGE has committed to the optimal development of our communities through a combination of direct service, policy change, community organizing, and culture change work.

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