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Sex Ed, The U.S, and Our Youth

Have you had the dreaded “sex talk” to your children yet, or are you waiting for the teachers at your local American public school to do it for you? If your teen happens to be going to a local public school in France, you would be able to rely on the education system to teach your children a proper and medically accurate sexual education curriculum. Michael Moore exposed France’s sexual education curriculum in his film *Where To Invade Next*. Instead of emphasizing the dangers of sex such as pregnancy, and STDs, France educates their students on both sides of sex, the danger but more importantly, the love. While using this approach in the sexual education programs in their school, they have successfully lowered their adolescent pregnancy rates to be one of the lowest in Europe. In a 2014 study, it was shown that compared to the highest adolescent pregnancy rate in Europe which is 35.5 live births per one thousand women, France is eight times as low a rate of 4.4 (“UK Has Highest Teenage Birth Rates in Western Europe”). This is a rate that the United States should stride towards. The United States junior high school sexual education curriculum should use France’s model of judgementfree, open sexual communication in schools, to reduce adolescent pregnancy rates.

The United States has an extremely high rate in teen pregnancy for a developed country, being almost 6 times higher than the rate in France in 2009 (“Adolescent Sexual Health in

Europe and the US”). In the book *European Approaches to Adolescent Sexual Behavior and Responsibility*, Berne and Huberman state that “Teen birth... rates in the United States are higher than in most other industrialized countries. For the last two decades, U.S. public health experts have worked to address these problems” (Berne, Huberman, 15). There is an astonishing 409,840 births among 15- to 19-year-old women in America each year (“Adolescent Sexual Health in Europe and the US”). One of the biggest reasons for these high statistic is the role that politicians play in sex education in public schools. After WWI, the United States decided to have medically accurate sex education that informed about STDs, unplanned pregnancy, and the emotions in sexual intercourse, in the junior high school curcium. However, the American sexual education curriculum changed in 1981, when Reagan passed the Adolescent Family Life Act which only funded programs with an “abstinence based” program (“History of Sex Ed”). Instead of viewing sex education as a public need, Regan based it on his conservative moral and political views, stating that sex was “public health enemy number one.” In 1987, Reagan was quoted stating “I think that that particular subject should be taught in connection with values, not simply taught as a physical, mechanical process” (“Boyd”)

To support sex education was too “liberal” for conservative political figures.

Zimmerman stated in his book *Too Hot to Handle - a Global History of Sex Education* “Yet even countries that officially embraced “liberal” sexual philosophies often struggled to provide much real sexual instruction in their schools” (Zimmerman, 4). It wasn’t until 2010 that funded abstinence only based programs started to dismantle (“A History of Federal Funding for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs”). The difference between France’s sexual education curriculum and the curriculum in United States junior highs, is that they don’t preach abstinence.

Moore actually goes inside of a french classroom as they're talking about sex education. As the teacher is speaking, she mentions sex as "making love" rather than just intercourse, as well as actually explains how emotions play into the act of love making. When Moore ask if they taught abstinence, the teacher laughed saying " That's not really a method of contraception, it's too risky" (Moore). With one of the lowest adolescent pregnancy rates, going from and a much lower rate of STDs than the United States they may have a point ("Adolescent Sexual Health in Europe and the US").

France's sexual education development normalizes sex and the body in public schools. Rather than blaming adolescents for the changes in their body and their sexual needs and desires, they encourage them and allow clarity that whatever they're feeling is normal. What do you feel is better for your child to learn, that the changes and developments in your body and hormones are normal and can be discussed in an open, judgefree environment, or that your body and changes are disgusting and should be hidden and repressed? By using the term "love making" rather than sexual intercourse, changes the tone of discussion. The term "intercourse" has many negative connotations attached to it through decades of being demonized, however the term "love making" is softer, and changes the tone from analytical and straight forward, to welcoming and more personal. A more comfortable and personal environment makes students feel more inclined to ask questions and be honest about sexual development, because they won't feel as though they will be judged or ridiculed.

There are so many excuses as to why teachers or politicians wouldn't want their adolescents to learn about sex at school. A familiar complaint is that by teaching sex education in junior high is that we're only making teens want sex more. With little to no real knowledge being

taught about sex education in American public schools, teens are having sex as young as 13 with no idea on how to protect themselves, prevent unwanted pregnancy, or what sex really is. For them, too much of their sex education comes from the mouths of misinformed peers and in the halls of their middle school and myths, rather than from informed teachers. Elizabeth Schroeder, EdD wrote about sexual development myths that are still believed and asked by students, one of which being “If a guy ejaculates, gets some semen on his hand, and an hour later touches his female partner’s vulva, can she get pregnant”? When we label sex as “bad” and try to push abstinence, it will only make teens more curious and less informed on how to achieve safe sex, then teens can’t be expected to know how to have safe, protected sex.

The United States is just recently starting to include contraceptives such as birth control and condoms in their sex education. “In 2015, a total of 229,715 babies were born to women aged 15–19 years, for a birth rate of 22.3 per 1,000 women in this age group. This is another record low for U.S. teens and a drop of 8% from 2014” (“STDs in Adolescents and Young Adults”). While this is progress, it’s nothing compared to the 4.4% of teen fertility rates in France in 2014 (“UK Has Highest Teenage Birth Rates in Western Europe.”). As a county, America should examine the differences in our education system, and want to improve. Call your teenager’s junior high and find out for yourself if your child is being given the sexual education they need. For the betterment of our adolescents, we need to stop shaming sexual development and intercourse and allow them to feel comfortable asking questions and talking honestly about sex. Our political and moral views should not matter as much as our youth.

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