

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Teaching Children about Sexuality \*

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Sexuality includes more than sexual activity. It includes interpersonal relationships, affection, intimacy, body image, gender roles and other factors. We all go through a lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs and values about sexuality.

Currently, parents are – and ought to be – the primary sexuality educators of their children. Recent research indicates that most children look to their parents as the most important source of information on sexuality. Peers rank next, followed by school courses and then television. About 70% of youngsters have talked to their parents about sexuality.

Adults were polled about their sexuality education. In contrast to youngsters, they were not likely to learn about sexuality from their parents. Only 5% learned from their fathers, and 20% learned from their mothers. Peers – with their inadequate knowledge – were the major source of information. Even though few adults learned from their parents, about two-thirds of them have talked with their own children about sexual issues. However, many studies indicate that these parents are *uncomfortable* discussing sexuality with their children. They welcome assistance from more formal programs.

School-based programs for sexuality education typically have four main goals –

1. to provide accurate information about human sexuality,
2. to help our youth develop and understand their own values, attitudes and beliefs about sexuality,
3. to help young people develop relationships and interpersonal skills,
4. to help youngsters exercise responsibility in sexual relationships. (This includes abstinence, resisting sexual pressures, contraceptive use and maintaining sexual health.)

There are no federal laws requiring sexuality education or controlling its content. However, there are laws at the state level. Arizona is one of 22 states that require schools to provide both sexuality and STD/HIV education. California is one of 14 additional states that only require STD/HIV education. Twenty-six states require instruction on abstinence. Of these, 14 states – including Arizona and California – also require information on contraception, pregnancy and disease prevention. Both Arizona and California also require education concerning child development, dating, family responsibilities and interpersonal relationships. Of course, the information given is *appropriate to the age level* of the students. In order, the most commonly and thoroughly discussed topics are –

- body image,
- reproductive anatomy,
- puberty,
- decision-making skills,
- families,

- abstinence,
- STDs/HIV/AIDS,
- sexual abuse,
- gender roles.

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**To help our children to become responsible citizens,  
they need accurate information and effective decision-making skills.  
The same is true in relation to sexuality.**

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Arizona and California are among 31 states that require or recommend instruction in decision-making skills. These skills include resisting peer pressures, setting limits while dating, training that unwanted sexual advances are wrong, and encouraging personal responsibility and respect for others. However, Arizona is among 8 states that require or recommend that homosexuality be covered as an unacceptable or illegal lifestyle.

An international study on sexuality education found that the best results occur when sexuality education is given *before* the onset of sexual activities. It is more successful, when information about contraception and STD prevention are added to abstinence training.

Contrary to the belief of some, sexuality education does *not* lead to increased sexual activity. On the other hand, neither abstinence-only training nor comprehensive sexuality programs significantly reduce sexual activity. However, the comprehensive programs do help some students *postpone* sexual intercourse. When intercourse does occur, the comprehensive programs lead to much greater use of contraception and STD prevention than abstinence-only training or no training.

The vast majority of Americans support sexuality education. In repeated polls, over 80% of parents want sexuality education in the high schools. Even more (95%) want education to prevent HIV/AIDS. Even so, in almost all situations, there are options that allow parents to remove their children from such instruction. However, less than 3% of parents have chosen to do so.

As parents or potential parents, you can get more information about sexuality by taking a **Human Sexuality** course at your local college or university. Taking this course will not only educate you, but it will allow you to become a more positive force in educating your own children.

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\* Adapted from Daniel Daley's "Fact Sheet on Sexuality Education," *SIECUS Report*, August/September, 1996, pages 22-24.