

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH: HELPING GIRLS LEAD HEALTHY LIVES



Girls Inc. is committed to advancing the rights and opportunities of girls and young women, with a particular focus on the needs of girls from low-income communities and girls who face multiple, intersectional challenges. Informed by the voices of girls themselves, we advocate to break through the barriers girls face and to reform systems that impede their success.

WHAT IS COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION?

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) helps teens make responsible decisions that impact their lifelong health. CSE programs use a holistic approach to provide young people with complete, accurate, and age-appropriate sexuality education that helps them make healthy decisions and reduces their risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy.¹

Comprehensive sexuality education includes medically accurate information on a broad set of topics related to sexuality, including: human development, healthy relationships, consent, decision making, abstinence, contraception, and disease prevention.² In contrast, abstinence-only or “sexual risk avoidance” programs are harmfully misleading and have not been proven effective at meeting the needs of young people.³



ACCESS TO REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE

Reproductive health care encompasses a broad range of health care services that affect the sexual health of women and girls. These services are especially critical because for many women (particularly low-income women), reproductive health care providers function as primary health care providers.

All people should have equal access to reproductive health, but this is not the case. Women of color, immigrant women, and LGBTQ+ people (especially those for whom these identities intersect) are disproportionately denied access to the reproductive health care that would give them the autonomy and options they need to lead healthy lives. For many women and girls, contraception and other forms of reproductive health care are out of reach because of their income level, where they live, or what their parents/caregivers think about them accessing these resources.⁴

WHY IT MATTERS

There is a pressing need for comprehensive sexuality education programs and for funding to support them. In the United States, the teen pregnancy rate in 2015 was 22 pregnancies per 1,000 teen girls (ages 15-19).⁵ Although teen pregnancy rates have declined considerably over the past few decades in the United States, the U.S. teen pregnancy rate is still highest as compared to other developed countries.⁶ There are also remarkable disparities in pregnancy rates between Latina, Black, and White girls. Latina and Black teen girls are about twice as likely as White teen girls to become pregnant.⁷

Giving girls control of their reproductive health allows them to have more control over their lives in general — including their health, education, careers, and overall economic security. Girls who do not have access to comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health care are more vulnerable to contracting sexually transmitted infections, having an unplanned pregnancy, and missing the signs of an unhealthy relationship.

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Girls who do become pregnant are too frequently met with barriers rather than resources and necessary supports. Despite protections against discrimination in education provided by the federal civil rights law Title IX, students often face discrimination, harassment, inflexible school policies, and other barriers, such as lack of childcare and transportation, that push them out of school. Sadly, as many as a third of young women who do not finish high school say becoming a parent played a major role in their decision to leave.⁸

Girls Inc. believes that all women and girls have the right to bodily integrity, sexual safety, sexual pleasure, comprehensive sexuality education, and access to affordable reproductive health care.

WHAT WE CAN DO

- Advocate for legislation that supports the health and well-being of young people by providing widespread access to non-shaming and inclusive comprehensive sexuality education and other resources youth need to make informed, responsible, and healthy decisions throughout their lives.
- Secure funding for programs that help educate youth about sexual health and healthy decision making, and end funding for programs that promote abstinence-only education, which has not been proven effective.
- Protect the use of Medicaid funding at organizations that provide life-saving healthcare to millions of women.
- Encourage young women to be informed, active participants in their health by seeking complete and accurate information about their health and reproductive rights.



END NOTES

1. Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. *Comprehensive Sexuality Education*. Retrieved from <http://siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&pageId=514>.
2. Ibid, see 1.
3. Santelli, J., Ott, M. A., Lyon, M., Rogers, J., Summers, D., & Schleifer, R. (2006). *Abstinence and Abstinence-Only Education: A Review of US Policies and Programs*. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 38(1), 72-81.
4. Planned Parenthood Action Fund. *Health Care Equity*. Retrieved from <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/health-care-equity>.
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *About Teen Pregnancy*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/teenpregnancy/about/index.htm>.
6. Sedgh, G., Finer, L. B., Bankole, A., Eilers, M. A., & Singh, S. (2015). *Adolescent Pregnancy, Birth, and Abortion Rates Across Countries: Levels and Recent Trends*. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 56(2), 223-230.
7. Ibid, see 5.
8. National Women's Law Center. (2017). *Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout for Girls Who Are Pregnant or Parenting*. Retrieved from <https://nwlw.org/resources/stopping-school-pushout-overview-and-key-findings/>.

