



## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

# Let's talk about (queer) sex: The importance of LGBTQ-inclusive sex education in schools

**David Oliver** USA TODAY

Published 11:23 a.m. ET Aug. 5, 2021 | Updated 2:44 p.m. ET Aug. 5, 2021

What's a three-letter word that prompts parents to pontificate and teens to plug their ears when their parents bring it up?

You guessed it: S-e-x.

Just because teens can be hesitant to talk with their parents about sex isn't a reason to give up on the conversation. Not talking about it could be dangerous or even deadly, and markedly so for LGBTQ youth.

Just 8.2% of students said they received LGBTQ-inclusive sex education, according to LGBTQ education nonprofit GLSEN's National School Climate Survey in 2019. It's not shocking when you uncover it's only mandated in a minority of U.S. states.

Melanie Willingham-Jaggers, director of GLSEN, compares the fight for inclusive sexual education to that of critical race theory, noting people can favor long-held narratives over the truth.

"What we're having right now in our country is a debate around what responsibility we have to our children when it comes to educating them," Willingham-Jaggers says. "Queer, inclusive sex ed is not critical race theory. But what you see in both of these arguments is do we teach our children what is true in reality and history and nature? Or do we teach them what we want them to know?"

Sex education looks drastically different depending on where you live (though legislation is ongoing).

Thirty-nine states, plus Washington, D.C., require sex education and/or HIV education in schools, according to the Guttmacher Institute. But only 18 states mandate that sex and

HIV education be medically accurate.

As for LGBTQ inclusivity: 11 states (and D.C.) call for "inclusive content with regard to sexual orientation."

But on the other side of the coin, five states allow *negative* information on homosexuality and/or a *positive* push for heterosexuality. If you live in a state like Florida or South Carolina, for example, your children may be taught sexual education that discourages queer sex.

**Heads up:** 'Pray Away' details trauma of LGBTQ conversion therapy – and new leaders are still emerging

## What a lack of sex education means for LGBTQ youth

Dio Anthony, a 31-year-old writer in New York, remembers little about his high school sex education experience beyond a week-long course on sex.

"They weren't teaching you how to apply a condom like they show you in the movies," he says.

When he first slept with a man at 16, he had no idea what was going on. Future sexual encounters were not fun. He grew uncomfortable sharing details of his sexual escapades in his 20s even though his friends hooted and hollered about theirs.

"When we exclude LGBTQ+ young people from comprehensive education, we make them more isolated, behave in more risky ways and they are further pushed out and pushed into dangerous situations where negative outcomes are more likely," Willingham-Jaggers says.

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation found that LGBTQ youth, particularly Black and Latino LGBTQ youth, rarely receive sex education at school that is relevant to them.

This pattern reveals itself through statistics: Of the 36,801 people diagnosed with HIV in 2019 in the U.S., 25,842 were Black or Latino, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's over 70%.

"It isn't an accident that HIV is still so prevalent where it's prevalent," says Justin A. Sitron, associate dean of the College of Health and Human Services at Widener University. "It's because the public health system has not responded to both the access needs, and the cultural realities that men of color especially face." Widener University's Interdisciplinary

Sexuality Research Collaborative is behind the website [swagtoolkit.com](http://swagtoolkit.com), aimed at providing sex education to Black gay and bisexual men.

Such websites prove crucial, considering how often people pepper their search engines with questions – particularly about taboo topics, Sitron says.

"Without LGBTQ+ inclusive sex education, queer and trans youth are left in the dark when it comes to making informed decisions about their health, understanding their body, understanding how their body relates to other bodies out in the world," Willingham-Jaggers says. "When sex education labels some topics as controversial, it hurts all students by failing to provide a full and medically accurate understanding of sexual health."

LGBTQ young people get stuck at questions like, "'So I know I'm supposed to wear a condom when I have anal sex. But like, what is anal sex?'" Sitron says.

**In case you missed:** LGBTQ students need inclusive sex ed – but less than 10% in US are receiving it, report says

## **LGBTQ advocates change landscape of sex education**

Like bulls in china shops, LGBTQ advocates smash preconceived notions of sex education.

Scout Bratt, outreach and education director at Chicago Women's Health Center, directs a program of sexual health education for Chicago public schools and area universities; they work with fourth through 12th graders as well as college students. Yes, inclusivity begins as young as fourth grade: Instead of saying girls menstruate or boys produce sperm for example, you can say people who menstruate and people who produce sperm to incorporate trans and nonbinary people.

"We are trying to infuse queer inclusivity and gender expansiveness in the curriculum across all grade levels across all subjects," Bratt says.

Sexual health educator Shafia Zaloom consults around the country with schools about sexuality, and notes that curriculums vary among different types of schools – i.e., public schools don't have the same standards as independent schools.

After receiving feedback from LGBTQ youth, Zaloom worked to create a program that went in-depth on LGBTQ issues led by queer staff.

"When we provide kids with really inclusive, comprehensive sex education, they grow up to have more bodily autonomy, more healthy perspectives on their sexuality, they tend to delay and make more responsible decisions and be far more relational and communicative in their relationships," Zaloom says.

**Aww:** 'Sesame Street' to 'Ridley Jones': TV shows are teaching kids about LGBTQ issues, diversity

## Where to turn if your school isn't teaching LGBTQ-inclusive sex education

**Get involved in advocacy work.** "The states that have passed comprehensive LGBTQ inclusive sexual health education laws did not happen because one person raised their hand and said, 'We should have that.' It took time, it took advocacy, it took education," Vincent Pompei, director of the Human Rights Campaign's Youth Well-Being Program, says. "What we need to do is provide opportunities for communities and parents and educators to understand why it's essential."

**Turn to your local community.** Health educators, doctors and other sexual education resources and community centers abound. Talk to them, Sitron advises.

**Look online for resources – but verify them.** Planned Parenthood, Advocates for Youth and SIECUS are all solid resources, according to Sitron. Don't underestimate YouTube channels either. "When you live in a highly stigmatized area and you have no support, online might be the only community that you might be able to find," Carmen Mojica, reproductive justice movement leader, says. "And I don't think that there should be any shame in that." See also GLSEN and HRC.

**Adults, affirm your children.** Sitron recommends doing away with your helicopter parent mindset and becoming more of a partner to your child as they navigate their concerns.

**Children, talk to adults.** Spend some alone time with your doctor without your parents if you have any specific questions, Sitron says. Bratt adds that young people are leading this movement – so adults, make time to listen.

Above all, remember this: Sex should make you feel good – and feel good to talk about.

"It should be one of the things in our lives that makes us the most joyful," Sitron says. "And when queer people don't get to have that because their sex is problematized, we miss out on such an opportunity to be joyful and happy."

**Hear, hear:** We need to celebrate LGBTQ joy. Lives depend on it.