Sex ed programs at school are 'cringey,' 'moralistic,' study finds

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 (Hongqi Zhang / Getty)

[**Heidi Stevens**](http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/stevens/chinews-heidi-stevens-20130507-staff.html#nt=byline)[**Contact Reporter**](mailto:hstevens@chicagotribune.com?subject=Regarding:%20%22Sex%20ed%20programs%20at%20school%20are%20%27cringey,%27%20%27moralistic,%27%20study%20finds%22)Balancing Act

What's worse than hearing your gym teacher fumble through a lecture about contraceptives and sexual anatomy?

*Not* hearing your gym teacher fumble through a lecture about contraceptives and sexual anatomy, obviously. Comprehensive [sex ed is linked to](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/component/content/article/450-effective-sex-education) fewer teen pregnancies, lower rates of sexually transmitted infections and delayed initiation of sexual activity.

But what if there were a third option?

[A new study](http://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/6/9/e011329.full.pdf+html) on students' attitudes about sex ed finds teens would prefer to receive their information from a trained sexual health professional — preferably one they don't have to see in the hallways later.

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"Some students described their embarrassment at discussing sexual and personal matters with teachers they knew and found it awkward seeing teachers around school afterward," the study states. "For some, the fact of a subject teacher speaking about sex or relationships was regarded as 'highly embarrassing' or 'cringey.'"

Published in the United Kingdom's [BMJ Open](http://bmjopen.bmj.com/) medical journal, the study analyzed 55 qualitative reports talking to 12- to 18-year-old students about their sex-and-relationship education in 10 countries, including the United States, the U.K. and Canada, from 1990 to 2015.

On the whole, students found their sex ed classes to be important but out of touch, overly clinical and exceedingly awkward.

"Teachers were not always trusted to maintain confidentiality, and some doubted their impartiality," the authors write. "Teachers were also perceived to be moralistic, to judge students according to different values and to have difficulty accepting that students were sexually active."

In their defense, [one-third of teachers](http://www.futureofsexed.org/teacherstandards.html) responsible for leading sex ed courses in the United States receive no training on the topic, according to the Future of Sex Education Project, a partnership of youth advocates and educators that pushes for comprehensive sex ed in public schools. Just 61 percent of American colleges and universities require sexuality education courses for health education certification, the group says.

Not a great setup.

Back to the study: When researchers asked students how they'd feel about learning from a sexual health professional, students said such an instructor would likely be less judgmental, more informed and better at delivering material about sex and sexuality.

Grown-ups don't shoulder all the blame for sex ed being "cringey," though.

The study found that many young men admit to being disruptive in class, often explaining their behavior is meant to mask their anxiety.

"Men are expected to be sexually knowledgeable and competent," the study states. "Young men were reluctant to risk revealing themselves as sexually inexperienced by asking a question; they were keen to assert that they already know everything, but some wanted teachers to understand their inability to admit to any ignorance about sex."

(Keen to assert! I love that wording.)

Young women, on the other hand, reported being harassed and having their reputations attacked by young men for speaking up in class.

All hope is not lost though. Teachers who spelled out specific rules, maintained control in the classroom and protected students from ridicule were able to engage students in safe, informative discussions about sex and relationships, the study found.

"Ground rules for discussion, behavior and confidentiality were felt to reduce discomfort," the authors write, "as were humor and fun."

Other findings:

•Young people disengage from sources of information that don't match their own experiences.

•Sex ed classes tend to focus narrowly on heterosexual intercourse, failing to acknowledge the full range of sexual activities students engage in and want to discuss.

•If teens receive the message that sex is wrong, they are likely to also believe that preparing for sex is wrong and will fail to use contraception.

The study is food for thought for educators and health providers, certainly. It's also a good road map for parents who, ideally, are engaging kids in conversations about healthy sex and relationships at home.

Remember: Humor and fun — good. Cringey and judgmental — bad.

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