

Engaging Parents and Caregivers Around Sex Education to Promote Youth Sexual Health

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Delivering quality, comprehensive sex education and fostering meaningful partnerships with parents and caregivers supports overall youth health, safety, and development.

Quality, [comprehensive sex education](#) provides youth with developmentally appropriate, evidence-based information that equips them with a critical set of skills and knowledge essential for developing a safe and positive view of sexuality, building healthy relationships, and making informed and thoughtful decisions about their sexuality and sexual health.ⁱ This may include information around:ⁱⁱ

- human development (e.g., anatomy, puberty)
- relationships (e.g., with their peers, families, and other trusted adults)
- personal skills (e.g., decision-making, communication)
- sexual behavior (e.g., abstinence, pleasure from sex)
- sexual health (e.g., contraception, pregnancy)
- society and culture (e.g., gender roles, diversity)

Beyond [reducing sexual risk behavior](#) (e.g., delayed initiation of sexual intercourse, fewer sex partners and experiences of unprotected sex), [comprehensive sex education has also been shown to positively impact](#) youth development of healthy relationships (e.g., improved knowledge about healthy relationships and dating skills, improved parent-adolescent relationships), communication skills (e.g., increased intention and self-efficacy in discussing relationships and/or sex with peers, parents and medical providers), and social-emotional learning (e.g., increased empathy, respect for others, and self-esteem).^{iii iv}

Engaging parents and caregivers in sex education amplifies these benefits and is essential to fostering a supportive environment where youth can thrive. As [influential sources](#) of youth sex education, partnering with schools can support parents and caregivers in discussing sexual health with their youth, and bridging the gap between school-based learning and home conversations.^v Further, such partnerships provide an opportunity for schools to build trust, dispel myths, and address any concerns that parents and caregivers may have around sex education. Encouraging open and positive communication between parents and caregivers and youth around sexual health has been linked to [delayed sexual initiation](#) and [higher rates of contraception and condom use](#).^{vi vii} With parents and caregivers as collaborative partners, schools can create a cohesive network of support that not



only enables youth to make informed decisions about their sexual health but also helps parents and caregivers feel confident in supporting their young person's development.

While a majority of parents and caregivers in the United States [support sex education in schools](#), some remain opposed, often due to concerns that largely stem from [societal, cultural, and/or personal beliefs and values](#) that influence their views around sexual health.^{viii ix} With most states currently having a [policy that requires sex and/or HIV education](#), it is essential to engage with these parents and caregivers to build mutual understanding around sex education.^x This ensures that parents and caregivers and schools are on the same page, ultimately supporting youth overall well-being and development.

To aid state leaders in supporting their local education agencies in engaging parents and caregivers around sex education, this information sheet describes barriers that may hinder engagement and shares strategies to help address them.

Barriers to Engaging Parents and Caregivers

In addition to societal, cultural, and/or personal beliefs and values that may influence parents' and caregivers' concerns with sex education, mistrust, misinformation, and stigma around sex education can also hinder effective engagement between schools and parents and caregivers.

Mistrust: A long-standing history of systemic racism and discrimination have created [racial and ethnic disparities](#) in access to sexual health care services and representation in sex education materials.^{xi} This history can lead to skepticism around sex education, particularly among parents and caregivers of marginalized communities who may already [mistrust medical systems](#).^{xii} For many parents and caregivers, this skepticism may be compounded by a mistrust in the intentions behind school-based sex education programs. Some parents and caregivers may worry that sex education may promote specific values or ideologies that conflict with their own and introduce views on sexuality and relationships without adequately respecting diverse family beliefs. These worries can be further heightened by the [inconsistencies in sex education policies](#) across the United States, where states take widely different approaches to providing sex and HIV education.^{xiii} These disparities can lead parents and caregivers to question whether sex education curricula might conflict with lessons taught at home, particularly if there is a lack of transparency or parent and caregiver engagement from districts in curriculum decisions.

Misinformation: In addition to stigma and mistrust, inconsistencies in sex education policies can breed [misinformation and myths](#) about sex education.^{xiv} This can include the curriculum covered and the timing of (i.e., the age of students) when that curriculum is delivered. Parents and caregivers who hear or see this misinformation may believe that sex education in schools may contradict or replace the values and lessons they impart at home. This perceived discrepancy may limit open dialogue between parents and caregivers and schools and [hinder the implementation](#) of comprehensive and widely accepted sex education programs.^{xv}

Stigma: [Stigma](#) related to sexual health can make parents and caregivers feel uncomfortable or conflicted about endorsing sex education, as [cultural and social norms](#) may label such education as inappropriate or unnecessary for children.^{xvi xvii} This can [create barriers to engaging parents and caregivers](#) who may recognize the educational value of sex education but feel constrained by social expectations or concerns about judgment within their communities.^{xviii}

Addressing these barriers requires a collaborative approach that prioritizes delivering accurate information and building respectful engagement. When intentionally informed about the sex education occurring in schools, parents and caregivers can feel confident that sex education complements, rather than conflicts with, the values they instill at home.

Strategies to Engage Parents and Caregivers

When engaging parents and caregivers around sexual health education, it's important to remember that family attitudes and perceptions around sex are closely linked to cultural, societal, and family values. Sexual health topics can be [sensitive or even taboo](#) for some parents and caregivers, which may cause them to be cautious about school-based sex education.^{xix} While this information sheet provides a list of strategies to engage parents and caregivers around sex education, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Ultimately, each school community will need to determine the strategies that seem most aligned with the assets and needs of the parents and caregivers they work with. State education agency (SEA) leaders can provide these suggestions to their local education agencies (LEAs) and help them think through which strategies make the most sense for their communities.

1. Get to Know the Parents and Caregivers in Your Community

Fostering trust, collaboration, and building partnerships with parents and caregivers around sex education begins by getting to know the parents and caregivers you work with, understanding their fears and values, and what they want and do not want from school-based sex education. SEA leaders can support these efforts by guiding LEAs on how to strategically use needs assessments that are often required for various funding streams as opportunities to understand the needs and assets of a broad spectrum of parents and caregivers. Such guidance can come in the form of formal documents or professional development offered to LEAs. In addition to suggestions about fostering general participation in needs assessments, SEAs may provide LEAs with demographic and other data to help elevate groups that LEAs may wish to prioritize in assessing. By hearing from a diverse set of parents and caregivers and using data to understand their perspectives more deeply, LEAs can ensure that program development reflects and is tailored to the community's unique needs and values; in hopes of beginning to foster a foundation of trust that invites parents and caregivers into collaborative discussions about sex education.

2. Involve Parents and Caregivers in Decision-Making

Involving parents and caregivers in [decision-making around sex education](#), from planning through implementation, is essential for building a supportive, effective learning environment that reflects the community's diverse values and needs.^{xx} By inviting parents and caregivers to participate before concrete plans are established or as they are amended, schools can demonstrate that parents' and caregivers' input and perspectives are valued. This proactive approach not only helps mitigate potential controversy but also builds broader community support for implementing sex education programs. At the state-level, SEA leaders can work with LEAs to gather feedback when conducting state reviews of health education standards, reviewing health curriculum options, or planning the implementation of any passed legislation that affects sex education within the state. SEA leaders can also encourage LEAs to leverage natural periods of planning, such as the transition to a new school year. SEA leaders can also support networks of communication across locally-oriented groups such as Parent Teacher Associations, School Health Advisory Councils, and school action teams, which offer platforms for parents and caregivers to [actively participate in decisions](#) around school health efforts.^{xxi} These groups should

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prioritize transparent communication, ensuring parents and caregivers are informed about each step in the decision-making process, including how decisions are made, how they will be monitored, and who to contact for further questions.

By fostering this collaborative environment, schools can create a foundation of trust, understanding, and shared responsibility that benefits youth and their parents and caregivers.

3. Promote Co-learning

Research shows that a significant majority of [parents and caregivers support comprehensive, medically accurate sex education](#) and look to schools to complement their home discussions on sexual health.^{xxii} However, many parents and caregivers may feel unprepared to engage in these conversations, and schools may not be aware of the conversations that are (or are not) happening at home. Promoting co-learning around sex education can be essential for fostering healthy conversations between parents, caregivers, and schools and providing students with a well-rounded, supportive foundation in sexual health education. To do this, SEA leaders may consider working with LEAs to identify community organizations that can offer parent and caregiver education classes or workshops (e.g., [Familias Unidas](#), [Linking Families and Teens](#), [STRIVE](#)) that can equip them with the knowledge, confidence, and skills necessary to discuss sexual health topics with their young person.^{xxiii xxiv xxv} Ideally, these could run parallel to youth sex education classes to [encourage intergenerational dialogue](#).^{xxvi} If parallel classes are not possible, SEA leaders could help LEAs with developing or identifying supportive materials (e.g., [GCAPP's Parent Toolkit](#)), such as assignments or question-and-answer guides, that can further enhance parents' and caregivers' ability to learn and deliver accurate information around sexual health.^{xxvii}

By actively fostering a co-learning approach and building parent and caregiver capacity, schools can create partnerships that not only enhance youth understanding of sexual health, but also strengthen parents' and caregivers' ability to navigate these conversations effectively. Ultimately, equipping parents and caregivers with the right tools to foster a healthier, more open dialogue about sexual health that can benefit both youth and parents/caregivers alike.

Conclusion

Involving parents and caregivers in school-based sex education is essential for fostering a supportive, comprehensive, and effective approach to youth sexual health. Through collaboration, transparency, and targeted outreach, schools can address barriers like stigma, mistrust, and misinformation that often hinder parent and caregiver engagement. By intentionally engaging parents and caregivers, soliciting feedback, and creating spaces for meaningful dialogue, schools can demonstrate respect for family values and promote open communication that reinforces educational efforts at home. Ultimately, fostering these partnerships helps youth make informed decisions about their sexual health, supporting their development in a way that aligns with family values while ensuring they have access to the essential knowledge and skills needed to navigate relationships and health decisions now and in the future.

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