

Changing Perceptions About Harm Can Temper Moral Outrage

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Comprehensive sex education works. Years of research show that it is [much more effective](#) than an abstinence-only approach at preventing teen pregnancy. In fact, abstinence-only programs may actually [increase unplanned pregnancies](#) and can contribute to harmful [shaming and sexist attitudes](#).

Yet abstinence, or “sexual risk avoidance,” programs persist in the U.S. Why? Ultimately many people believe that teenagers should not have sex. If adolescents just abstain, they reason, unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases will no longer be a problem. By contrast, comprehensive sex education operates under the premise that some young people do engage in sexual behavior, so it is worthwhile to help them understand how to avoid unwanted outcomes. For dedicated abstinence-only advocates, however, that approach is morally wrong.

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