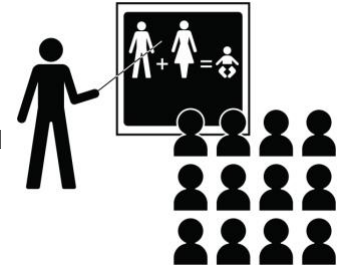


A 16-Year-Old Reflects on the Sex Ed Classes She Took at 6 and 13

By *Conor Friedersdorf, The Atlantic*

In response to my recent article on a sex education controversy, "[Should Public Schools Teach 13-Year-Olds About Grinding](#)," a 16-year-old girl offers her thoughts:



When I was six years old, my parents enrolled me in a two month sex-ed class at our Unitarian Universalist church. The class was fairly basic; on the first day, I recall sketching a crude outline of a man and a woman and then labeling their body parts. I felt vaguely subversive when I got to the male and female figures' respective groins (I have the nagging suspicion that my drawing did not include breasts, because at six, I had not yet even begun to consider that my chest could ever change shape). Our teacher sang a song about Josh and Jenny, fraternal twins with two eyes and ten toes each, and then—gasp!—mentioned Josh's two testes and Jenny's one vulva, presumably in an attempt to normalize dry, scientific discussion of the human body.

Some weeks later, the topic shifted to what makes a family, and we dull suburban children learned about the fictional Serena's rather unconventional family reunion ("This is Serena's gay cousin and his 20-year partner. They are standing next to Serena's divorced grandfather, who is talking to Serena's bisexual hermaphroditic polygamist aunt, who was born a man.") The class also supplied my first lesson in "no means no," a novel concept simply because, blessed with a loving family and a safe school and neighborhood, I had never before been exposed to the idea of sexual abuse.

Seven years later, about two weeks after my 13th birthday, I attended the first session of another UU sex-ed class, this one a year long. As eighth graders, we were deemed mature enough to handle the more emotional aspects of sex, and discussions ranged from basic reviews of anatomy, safe sex, and the various forms of sex to what we would do if we found out a partner had an STD, whether we would have sex before a relationship became serious, and whether the word "slut" was inherently offensive to women. We also spoke to a group of LGBTQ people about topics like coming out and experiencing often-pervasive homophobia and transphobia (among other attitudes), and we debated the importance or lack thereof of remaining a virgin.

You can imagine the awkward shuffling and bashful mumbles that ensue when a group of barely-acquainted 13-year-olds are introduced to such topics. We employed the ever-popular "anonymous questions box" that I assume is still omnipresent in sex-ed classrooms up and down the country, and the teachers always had a list of backup discussion questions to raise in case one went down poorly. My classmates and I could hardly bear to look at each other during the class each week.

But now, at 16, I consider those sex-ed classes incredibly valuable. I am aware that I still have a lifetime of learning ahead of me, but I am also aware that my knowledge of sex and sexuality far outstrips that of many of my peers. I feel confident in my ability to make responsible sexual decisions for myself, and I left the class with nuanced views on issues like gender equality and relationships (romantic and platonic alike). What many more-conservative parents need to consider is that the dissemination of information is not inherently dangerous. It is highly preferable, in fact, for children and teenagers to receive accurate, complete information from a reliable source than to spread the gossip and half-truths of their friends or the Internet.

I am aware, of course, that many parents do not believe their children are prepared for the more emotional, subjective parts of a class like the one I took, and that their children may truly not be ready. But it is crucial to protect the right of purely scientific knowledge to remain in the classroom, which must remain a bastion of learning what is true and not what is comfortable. With restrictions on the information considered acceptable for school, students leave the class with curious gaps in their knowledge: my school system, for instance, has established abstinence-only education until high school, with the result that a sex-ed teacher was once allowed to inform my class that condoms prevent the transmission of STIs but could not answer a question about whether they also prevent pregnancy.

I do not believe that the federal government is in any way within its rights to dictate a curriculum to a public or private school, and if states, localities, and school administrators choose to censor or neuter (literally) their sex-ed curricula, so be it. However, I think that making such a decision would be doing a monumental disservice to their students. Even if they feel uncomfortable facilitating frank, sometimes emotionally charged discussions on more subjective topics, schools should provide to their students as much objective information as possible.

Parents who disagree are free to opt their children out of the class or move them to a different school, but it is important never to lose sight of the purpose of schools: to educate children. Education and censorship should not and cannot coexist.