THE TENNESSEAN

'Waste of a valuable lesson': After overturning of Roe v. Wade, teens call for better sex ed



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How to access and properly use condoms and other contraceptives, preventing sexually transmitted diseases, how a person gets pregnant, consent.

These are all topics that even adults can find uncomfortable to talk about. But research shows discussing them through comprehensive sex education programs can often cut down on unintentional pregnancies and help people live healthier lives.

And in the wake of the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision overturning Roe v. Wade, as teenagers look toward their future, some believe learning about sex and reproductive health is more important now than ever.

Emma Rose Smith, a rising senior at Franklin High School, said she thinks teens need to learn about sex — and the possible consequences of having sex, like getting pregnant — because some teens are having sex or are in relationships.

An advocate for reproductive rights, Smith also thinks learning about the realities of sex could help people understand that abortion "isn't just a women's issue."

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Most Tennessee schools aren't required to teach sex education though, and when they do students are taught the best way to prevent pregnancy or STDs is to not have sex at all.

Paige Buckley, a rising senior at Brentwood High School, echoed her friend Smith.

"I think that some men just haven't been taught and also by separating women and men in sexual education classes, it kind of separates them completely and a man doesn't feel like if there's ever an issue, that he should help," Buckley said. "I definitely think that we should educate them and get them more involved. It's not just a female problem or responsibility."

State law requires sex education programs to "emphatically promote and encourage abstinence," including in counties where family life education programs are required due to high teen pregnancy rates.

This is how misinformation is able to spread, said Cindi Huss, the collaborating director for RISE: Healthy for Life, a community organization that leads sex education programs in East Tennessee.

Misinformation like a controversial comment made by Missouri lawmaker Rep. Todd Akin in 2012 where he said women involved in a "legitimate rape" can prevent themselves from getting pregnant.

"It is a societal responsibility to make sure that everybody has the information they need to make informed, responsible decisions about their life and their happiness," Huss added.

Teens call for more comprehensive sex education

And some Tennessee teens agree.

Alyson Nordstrom, a rising senior at Brentwood High School, said the only sex ed class she's had in school was as part of her physical education, or wellness, class in ninth grade.

"I remember how shameful they tried to make sex feel and it really wasn't geared toward the men, it was really geared toward the women and I just remember feeling very shameful about it," Nordstrom said.

Smith remembers seeing graphic images of STDs in her sex ed class, also as a ninth-grader.

"They literally showed like graphic images of gonorrhea, herpes and chlamydia, and every single STD and were like, 'the only way to not get any of those STDs, because you will get them, is abstinence,'" Smith said.

The focus on the negative consequences of having sex without including prevention strategies or what to do if someone does contract an infection or thinks they are pregnant is a "waste of a valuable lesson," Smith said. Especially for teens who might not have an adult to turn to or access to information outside of school.

Buckley agreed the curriculum was lacking.

"Not having abortion or [emergency contraceptives] in the curriculum, it kind of puts the blame of an unplanned pregnancy on women instead of having the man who helps the women get pregnant also take the blame," Buckley said. "It's really belittling, and it kind of makes us as women feel really alone and like every unplanned pregnancy is our fault. And we can't get out of."

And engaging, comprehensive sex education can make a difference, research shows.

Leading public health and medical professional organizations including the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists support comprehensive sex education programs that don't just focus on abstinence, the Guttmacher Institute, a reproductive health research and policy organization, said.

What Tennessee schools can teach about sex

Tennessee public schools aren't required to teach sex education, though high school students are required to take a wellness class to graduate that touches on topics like the reproductive system, contraception, healthy and unhealthy relationships, and the "potential outcomes of engaging in sexual behaviors" such as pregnancy and STDs.

State law does require schools to teach students about child sexual abuse and human trafficking, as well as how to prevent STDs including HIV/AIDS starting in elementary school.

Information about abortions, abortion referrals "and/or the encouragement of and/or advocacy for abortions" is prohibited in schools.

The state's health education standards require students to "identify the difference between abstinence and risk behaviors and why abstinence is the responsible and preferred choice for adolescence."

And by law, parents and guardians are allowed to opt their students out of sex education classes.

In recent years, a movement for more parent rights led mostly by conservatives has also led to laws that allow parents to opt their children out of LGBTQ-related lessons in schools and challenge teaching materials that feature topics related to sex, gender identity, sexual orientation and even race.

What robust, effective sex education can look like

But many reproductive rights advocates and even health care providers believe schools are the best place to ensure all students receive good, factual information.

Though parents should be responsible for teaching their children about sexual health, Nordstrom says, if parents aren't doing it then, she believes the responsibility falls on public schools.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists says "studies have demonstrated that comprehensive sexuality education programs reduce the rates of sexual activity, sexual risk behaviors (such as number of partners and unprotected intercourse), STIs, and adolescent pregnancy."

A 2011 study analyzed state laws and found that states that where “abstinence is emphasized in state laws and policies” had higher average teenage pregnancy and birth rates than states that covered abstinence along with contraception and condom use.

And researchers have found no evidence that providing young people with sexual and reproductive health information and education results in increased sexual risk-taking, according to a 2015 United Nations Population Fund study on "sexuality education."

Some schools do offer more comprehensive sex education programs.

Templeton Academy, a private school in Nashville, serves about 120 students in grades 6-12. Last school year, the school hired a sex therapist who was trained to teach sex education, said Tee Wilson, director of admissions for the school.

"We give our students the opportunity to ask real questions," Wilson said. "It's getting harder for public school teachers to have autonomy in their own classrooms, and it's doing students a disservice.... They were able to confide things in her that they hadn't been able to do with other adults."

Students lead many of the conversations at Templeton, Wilson said, whether about social justice concerns they see playing out in society or the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision to overturn the constitutional protection of abortion rights.

Lilah Williams, a Templeton student who uses they/she pronouns, said them and their classmates were able to ask real questions about sex, even about things like pornography or how to access birth control, during her sex ed seminar at the school.

"She talks about more realistic stuff instead of just abstinence, like porn versus reality, what to do if you get pregnant and stuff that's actually useful," they said.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that sex ed includes accurate and age-appropriate information about the benefits of delaying sexual intercourse, normal reproductive development and contraception. It should also teach "about forms of sexual expression, healthy sexual and nonsexual relationships, gender identity and sexual orientation and questioning, communication, sexual violence, consent and decision making."

Advocates for Youth, a national organization that focuses on a variety of issues, argues that the characteristics of effective sex education include safe environments for participants, are developed by the community, are implemented by trained educators and respect community values while responding to community needs.

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Huss and her colleague Jessie Birkeland at RISE agree.

Making sex ed as inclusive as possible, including tackling racism in reproductive care and the challenges for transgender, non-binary and LGBTQ+ individuals, should be a priority, they argue.

"There are a lot of parents who won't teach their kids things that are necessary for them to learn. So schools should teach that," Lily Swain, a rising senior at Franklin High said. "Schools should teach that gay people exist. You're going to come across gay people in the world. Schools should teach about sex and the challenges we are going to come across."

Teens rally for reproductive rights, better education

In May, Williams, a rising junior at Templeton Academy, joined one of Nashville's first protests following the leaked draft of the Supreme Court decision on abortion.

"I've always been very politically active, and I care a lot about bodily autonomy," Williams said. "It's also scary that this could lead to further rights be taken away."

And the Williamson County teens like Smith, Nordstrom, Buckley and Swain are taking it upon themselves to help educate their peers and others about their reproductive rights and options — and how, in their view, they are under attack.

The four young women have formed Teens 4 Reproductive Rights and are planning a rally later this month in partnership with organizations like Planned Parenthood of Tennessee and North Mississippi, and Healthy and Free Tennessee.

The rally, they hope, will be more like an educational community event and less like a protest.

Buckley said she doesn't necessarily trust that "older generations" are going to "take the initiative to teach [teens] about safe sex, abortions, LGBTQ+ relations" — so the teens are taking it upon themselves.

"I think that as our younger generation we need to educate each other and come together more than ever," she said.

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