



Ascend

Youth. Sex. Relationships. Leading the National Conversation

How to Bring Sexual Risk Avoidance Education to Your School



ParentsSchool**Toolkit**

INTRODUCTION

Across America, there is a battle underway to determine the kind of sex education our children should receive from local school districts. The vast majority of parents agree that schools should provide sex education for students. The question becomes: "What kind?" There are fundamentally two very different philosophies and approaches being proposed. The first is Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education, which provides the information and skills so youth can achieve optimal sexual health. SRA strongly promotes waiting until marriage as the healthiest choice—physically and emotionally—for youth. These programs often discuss contraception, but always within the context of teaching risk avoidance as the best and healthiest choice. The second is Sexual Risk Reduction (SRR) "comprehensive" sex education, which assumes that teens will have sex and so focuses on reducing the physical risks associated with sex. SRR "comprehensive" sex education advocates and demonstrates contraceptive use while only briefly discussing risk avoidance. This kind of sex education is based on the premise that premarital sex among youth is trouble free as long as contraception is used, an approach that essentially normalizes sex for teens.

According to a recent survey, entitled, Parents Speak Out, there is little sex education debate among parents across America. The findings are conclusive and demonstrate that the majority of American parents with children, aged 9-16, support SRA education, with Democrats and Republicans expressing similar support. Parents, regardless of party, gender, or race, expressed support for all the major themes presented in an SRA education class, offering a strong endorsement of Sexual Risk Avoidance education as the preferred choice for sex education.

The primary findings include the following:

- Most parents, but especially women and African Americans, support the dominant themes of SRA education. [Parents overall: 83%]
- Most parents believe that homosexual youth benefit from skills that help them choose to wait for sex. [85% agree]
- Parents strongly support their children knowing the limitations of condoms for preventing pregnancy and disease. [89%]

Yet despite overwhelming parental support for abstinence sex education, there is an organized effort under way in every state, led by groups such as Planned Parenthood, SIECUS, the ACLU, and NARAL Pro-Choice America, to prevent SRA education from being taught in schools. These groups and others are attempting to force schools to instead adopt SRR "comprehensive" sex education.

This toolkit will give you, the parent, the tools and insights you need to ensure that SRA sex education is an option in your child's school. The toolkit walks you through a seven step process that gives the greatest chance of success in ensuring the health and future of your child.

Can a parent really make a difference?

Yes! No one cares more about the sex education students receive - than their parents! You want to protect your children from information that could compromise their health. You want them to have the skills to thrive and to avoid all sexual risk. This toolkit will give you step-by-step strategies to influence the sex education in your community. YOU can make a difference!

Why call it SRA education?

Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) is a term that describes the education strategy within a public health definition. It moves past the often negative and inaccurate connotations attached to the simple term "abstinence education." This term helps concerned decision-makers understand the true intent and holistic nature of the approach. SRA is focused on optimal health outcomes. SRA empowers students to make sexual decisions that remove ALL risk, as opposed to only reducing the consequences of risky behavior.

Step One: Get Informed

Never underestimate yourself! One person can make a difference but your desire must be coupled with a plan and good information! First, do your homework:

- ▶ What is currently being taught? It is important that you know what is being taught so you can assure that the information is accurate, promotes optimal health, and is in line with your family values. But it also important to know because, as a parent, you want to be prepared to answer questions your child might have as a result of his or her sex education class. Find out more by contacting your school administrative office and asking to speak with the person responsible for sex education. Set up a time to review the curriculum that is being taught. Also ask to see handouts that are provided as a supplement to the text, as well as supplementary videos, posters and guest presentors. Is abstinence the central theme of the message? How much of the total curricula focuses on sexual risk avoidance vs. contraceptive information? Is there condom demonstration in the classroom? Are harmful and inappropriate sexual activities encouraged as alternatives to intercourse? What training has the sex educator received?
- ▶ What is the current policy concerning sex education for your school (school district)? Usually there is a written policy concerning the type of sex education which will be taught and the role parents have in the material selection process. School board policies are typically available in the superintendent's office.
- ▶ What state laws or policies exist concerning sex education? This is usually found through the appropriate state agency that administers policies for schools, such as the State Department of Education or the State Health Office. An online search should be sufficient to gain this information. Does your state require an emphasis on risk avoidance? If so, in what ways is your school emphasizing it?

What are the teen pregnancy/STD rates for 10-17 year olds in your county? This information is usually available through your state health agency. Are the rates going up or down? Is there a trend? Is there a sentiment in the community that sexual experimentation is an expected part of teens' middle or high school experience? Nuanced needs in your community should inform targeted messaging to reinforce healthy decision-making.

Step Two: Unite

If you determine that SRA abstinence is not being taught in your school and/or there is a need to change the policy and/or curricula to better emphasize abstinence, form a group of like-minded individuals in your community who share your commitment to abstinence education and are willing to join with you to present your case to the school.

- ▶ A group is always far more effective than a single parent trying to change or confront a school district. Initially, your group may be just an ad-hoc committee of interested parents, and community leaders.
- ▶ Name your group. It makes your efforts more official. It also adds strength to your efforts. Keep it simple, like "Parents United for Healthy Education."
- ▶ Consider including representatives from the medical, legal, and academic professions. Include youth and the faith-based community. A broad spectrum of expertise and concern further builds your strength and the case you present.

Step Three: Know the Facts in the Sex-Ed Debate

Never underestimate yourself! One person can make a difference but your desire must be coupled with a plan and good information! First, do your homework:

- ▶ SRA education opponents will typically describe SRA using the term: “SRA-only” or “SRA- only-until marriage.” The purpose is to mislead the public by falsely implying that SRA programs cannot contain any information about contraception and to make SRA education sound narrow and unrealistic in today’s world.

- ▶ Additionally, because of the well-documented, broad support for SRA among parents, SRR “comprehensive” sex education advocates may attempt to intentionally mislead the public into thinking that their programs DO promote SRA in a meaningful way. They may refer to “comprehensive” programs as “SRA based” or “SRA-plus”—even though risk avoidance is discussed in a very minimal way.

- ▶ **A key point:** Describe abstinence education as sexual risk avoidance education – because that is exactly what it is! It provides teens the information skills they need to avoid (or reclaim) a sexually risk-free lifestyle.

SRA Vs. “Comprehensive” Sex Education Comparison A Look at Typical Programs

	SRA Abstinence	SRR “Comprehensive”
Emphasis on Risk Avoidance	Devote more than 50% of page content to promoting risk avoidance. ¹	Devote less than 5% of their page content to SRA. Allocate six times more content to the goal of promoting contraception than to the goal of promoting SRA. ²
Focus	Risk elimination (SRA)	Risk reduction (contraceptive use, especially condoms)
Message	Focused. (Waiting until marriage is clearly the BEST choice.)	Mixed. (EITHER SRA OR having sex with a condom are equally good choices; or, SRA is marginally better than having sex with contraception.)
Philosophy	a) Teen sex and/or casual sex is problematic, even if contraception is used, based on risk of STDs, pregnancy, and negative emotional consequences. b) Armed with full information about the risks of teen sex and the benefits of abstinence, teens CAN and DO choose to refrain from having sex. (The majority of teens today—53%—have not had sex. ³)	a) As long as contraception is used, teen sex and/or casual sex is unproblematic. There are no potential negative emotional consequences. b) Teen sex is expected, inevitable, and a natural part of healthy sexual development .
Behavioral Goal	Delayed sexual initiation, preferably until marriage, or “renewed abstinence” for the student already sexually experienced.	Increased contraceptive use, especially the condom.

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Step Four: Present Your Concerns to the School

Preparation. As you prepare to meet with various school officials, remember that your tone is as important as what you say. Therefore - Remember ABC:

- ▶ Ask questions to gain more understanding.
 - ▶ Be respectful.
 - ▶ Communicate your concern for the health and future of your children. Emphasize that this is a very important issue for your group and other parents in the school district.
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- ▶ Begin by meeting with the school sex education teacher. Perhaps s/he would be happy to implement an SRA program, but lacks the skills or resources to do so. You can help by presenting the research supporting the SRA approach. Give him/her a summary of research-based SRA curricula that would fit your community. Be prepared to answer questions.
 - ▶ Meet with the school principal, if you do not receive satisfactory results from your meeting with the school sex education teacher. Present your concerns in writing. Request a response – in writing.
 - ▶ If necessary, make an appointment with the School Superintendent and present your concerns in writing. Ask him/her to respond to your concerns—also in writing.
 - ▶ If policy must be amended or if school personnel are unresponsive, contact each of the school board members individually. Express your concerns.
 - ▶ Request an opportunity to present your concerns and recommendations at a school board meeting.
 - ▶ Practice until perfect. Prepare for each meeting. Write out your short speech before the school board meeting. Do not “ab lib” your comments. Because time to present is usually limited, assign individually important points for several articulate members of your group to make at the meeting. Create a tapestry in the various speeches that weave together the important points you would like to communicate.
 - ▶ Be on the same page. Create talking points that all members of your group use. Avoid hostility in your remarks. Be science-based and factual. Avoid religion arguments for your position. Never overstate the facts. The evidence in support of SRA education is strong. Use it with confidence!
 - ▶ Contact Ascend with specific questions about education, but first refer to the information available to you on the Ascend website under the “Resources” link. [www.thenaea.org/resources]

Step Five: Get Your Message Out: How to Work the Press

The media is a powerful agent in shaping the public perception on any issue. That is why it is important to be very reasonable and compelling in expressing key points and representing the message of SRA education. Keep in mind that when communicating risk avoidance to the media, it is critical to avoid a purely defensive or accusatory tone. The following tips will help you understand the process of getting positive press for your efforts.

Generating Positive Press

What is newsworthy? Depending on whether you live in a large city or a small town, the dynamic of your news cycle will be very different. Your story will always be competing with the other news of the day, so it must be relevant and appealing. Before presenting a story to a local paper or television station, make certain the story involves one of the following key elements:

- ▶ Local Impact
- ▶ Important Event
- ▶ Community Controversy
- ▶ Human Interest Story (How this affects my child)

If you want your story covered, it would benefit you to develop media contacts. This is as easy as calling your newspaper or local television station and introducing yourself to the education and health reporters. Creating clear media messages is essential in shaping positive opinions for your issue.