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Youth. Sex. Relationships. Leading the National Conversation

Americans Speak Out II:

**National Survey Shows Strong Support for
Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) Education**

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Research Conducted by Barna Group



About Sex Education

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Executive Summary

Americans Speak Out II is a commissioned survey of adults from across the United States. The survey asked Americans what teens should learn in their sex education classes, and how tax dollars should be spent for this education.

The results confirmed previous findings which showed strong support for the themes essential to Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education. When it comes to sex education, most Americans agree that the goal should be optimal health for our youth. Americans said this about sex education:

- The primary emphasis should give practical skills for teens to wait for sex.
- Consensual sex, even with the use of contraception does not make teen sex acceptable.
- Teens should be encouraged to avoid sex, just as they are encouraged to avoid other risks, such as smoking and underage drinking.
- Teens should learn that the use of contraception does not make sex “safe.”
- Most Americans want at least half of sex ed. funds to go to Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education.

For too long, sex education classes have been co-opted by agendas that often compromise teen health. This must end. This new research voices a consistent concern for the health of America’s youth. Support for the SRA approach is evident in the survey results. And the support transcends racial or political party lines. When it comes to giving youth the tools to succeed, both now and in the future – Americans agree. Youth deserve the information and skills that best prepare them for a healthy adolescence, avoiding all sexual risks so that they are in the best place to build healthy families and communities in the future.

Background

Americans Speak Out II is a national survey of Americans that was conducted by Barna Group. The survey was commissioned by Ascend and the results are distributed by both Barna Group and Ascend. The survey was conducted from November 4 to November 16, 2016.

The Americans Speak Out II research builds upon earlier research findings gathered in the 2016 Americans Speak Out survey, and the 2012 Parents Speak Out research. This earlier research revealed that most parents, regardless of political party affiliation, gender, age, or race, agreed that Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education was the kind of sex education that they supported for their own children. But Ascend wanted to know more.

We wanted to know if Americans support the sex education approach that has dominated the federal funding landscape since 2010 – one that normalizes teen sex. We wanted to know if Americans thought that “consent” and “contraception” made teen sex “okay.” We also wanted to know if they were surprised by the fact that most teens are not having sex – and that the percentage of teens who have ever had sex has dramatically dropped over the past 25 years. Did knowing this information change their view on what should be taught in sex education classes across the nation?

And what about contraception? When teens are given information about contraception, how important is it that they know that even with its use, teens are still at significant risk for some potentially harmful and life-changing consequences?

The reality is that the cultural conversations about sex continue to change – and sex education topics often reflect those conversations. But at the end of the day, youth deserve a uniform message that reinforces the healthiest outcomes. Of course, optimal sexual health is only possible with sexual risk avoidance, consistent with the public health message communicated across nearly every risk behavior – that is, except for the risk behavior of teen sex.

The good news is that most Americans want youth to receive the clear risk avoidance message – and to receive the sexual risk avoidance message as the dominant emphasis for any sex education. This new information greatly informs sex education policy and implementation content strategies.

Key Findings

The key findings are described below:

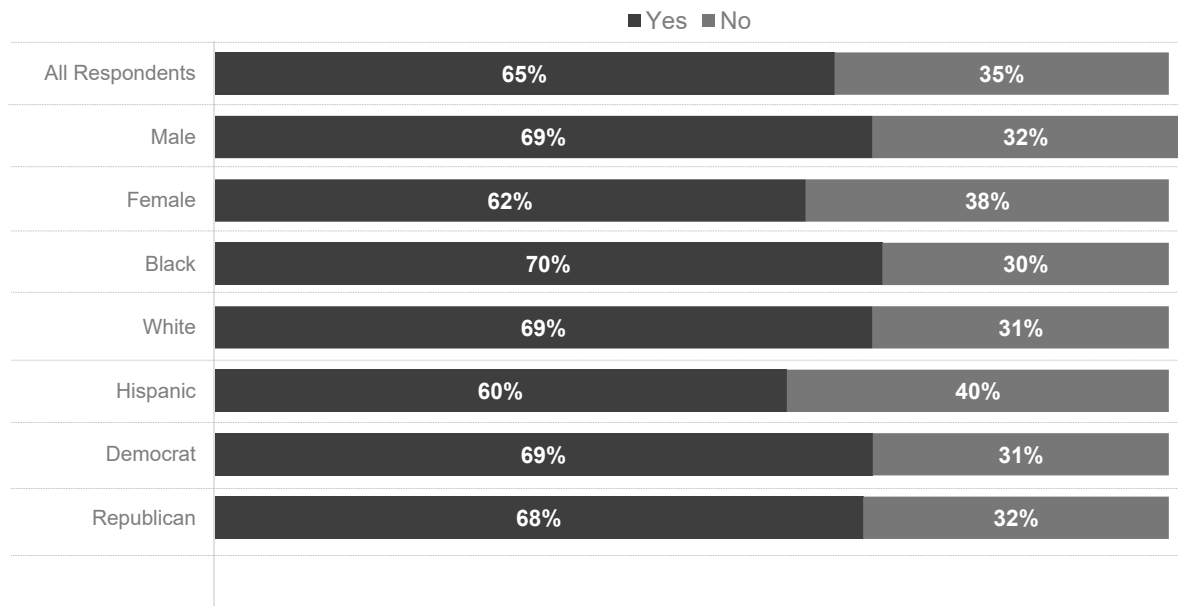
1. Most Americans are surprised that the majority of teens are not sexually active and that fewer are sexually active today compared with 20 years ago.

About 60% of teens have not had sex, and that number has increased about 28% in the past 25 years. For the first time, the majority of teens from all ethnicities have not had sex. This is astounding data from the CDC- astounding because most messages teens hear only normalize (even expect) them to be sexually active. Survey respondents are surprised with this information too, probably because one rarely hears this positive news in the media. One must ask: "If sex education classes amplified and reinforced the sexual risk avoidance message and expectation - how many more teens would choose to wait for sex?" Of course, we don't know, but we can be fairly certain that more teens would avoid sex if more trusted and respected adults communicated the value of waiting, together with the practical skills to do so.

People are Surprised that Most Teens Are Not Sexually Active

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Recent research shows that the majority of teens are not sexually active, and that fewer are sexually active today compared with 20 years ago. Is that surprising to you?

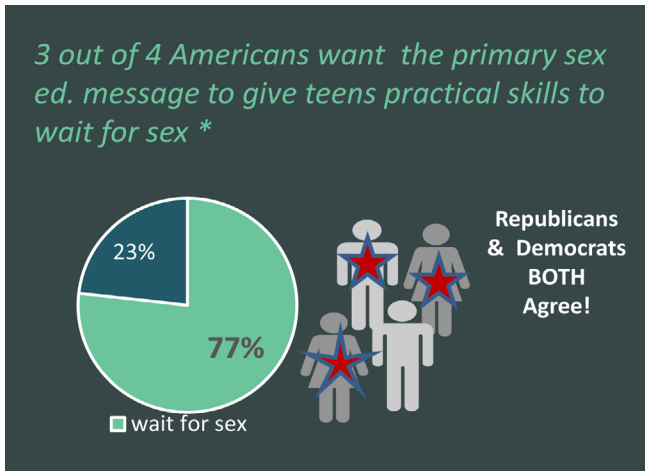


Note: Some categories show non-100% totals because of rounding

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2. The primary emphasis in sex education should be to give teens the practical skills to wait for sex.



Like every previous survey commissioned by Ascend, the Parents Speak Out II survey continues to show that most Americans want teens to be encouraged to wait for sex in a meaningful way. However, practical skill-building is essential to avoiding the risks of sex, and only SRA education meets this requirement. Before knowing how relevant the “wait for sex” message really is for teens, 71% of all Americans wanted the primary message teens receive to be one that uses practical skills to reinforce waiting for sex. But, after learning that most teens are not having sex, 77% supported this approach, a modest, but significant increase. The overwhelming support was similar, regardless of political party affiliation. 75% of Democrats and 78% of Republicans hold this view, demonstrating that among voters, there is a strong SRA support, regardless of party. This is a good sign for the future health of America’s youth – and should be instructive to political policy-makers at the national, state, and local levels.

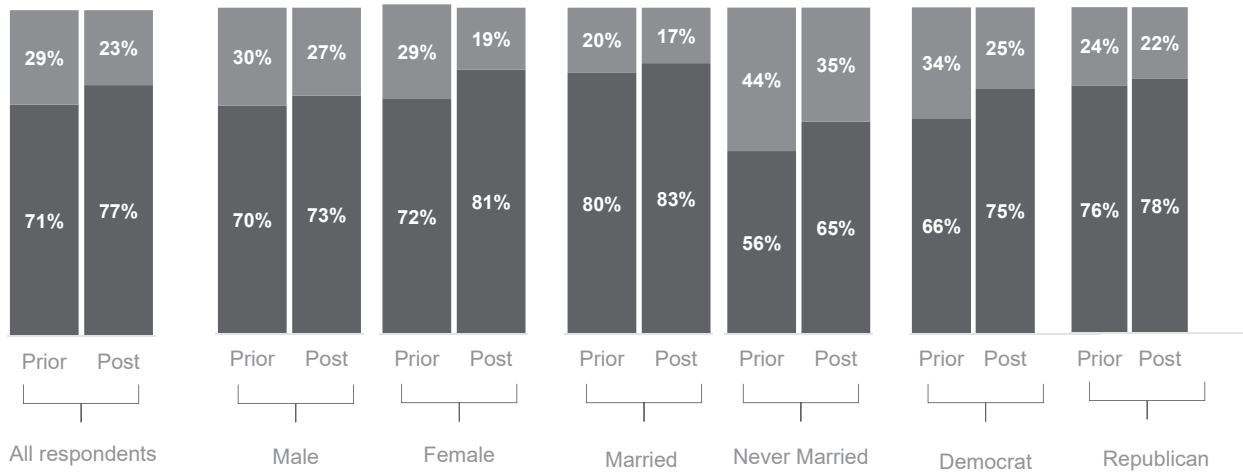
youth – and should be instructive to political

After Learning That Most Teens are Not Having Sex, Adults are More Convinced Sex Education Should Reinforce Waiting



Knowing this [that the majority of teens are not sexually active] what should the primary message teens receive in their sex education class?

- A message that uses practical skills to reinforce waiting for sex
- A message that says teen sex is okay, so long as they use contraception



Note: Some categories show non-100% totals because of rounding

Question: Knowing this, what should be the primary message teens receive in their sex education class?

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3. Teens should be encouraged to avoid sex, just as they are encouraged to avoid other risks, such as smoking and underage drinking.



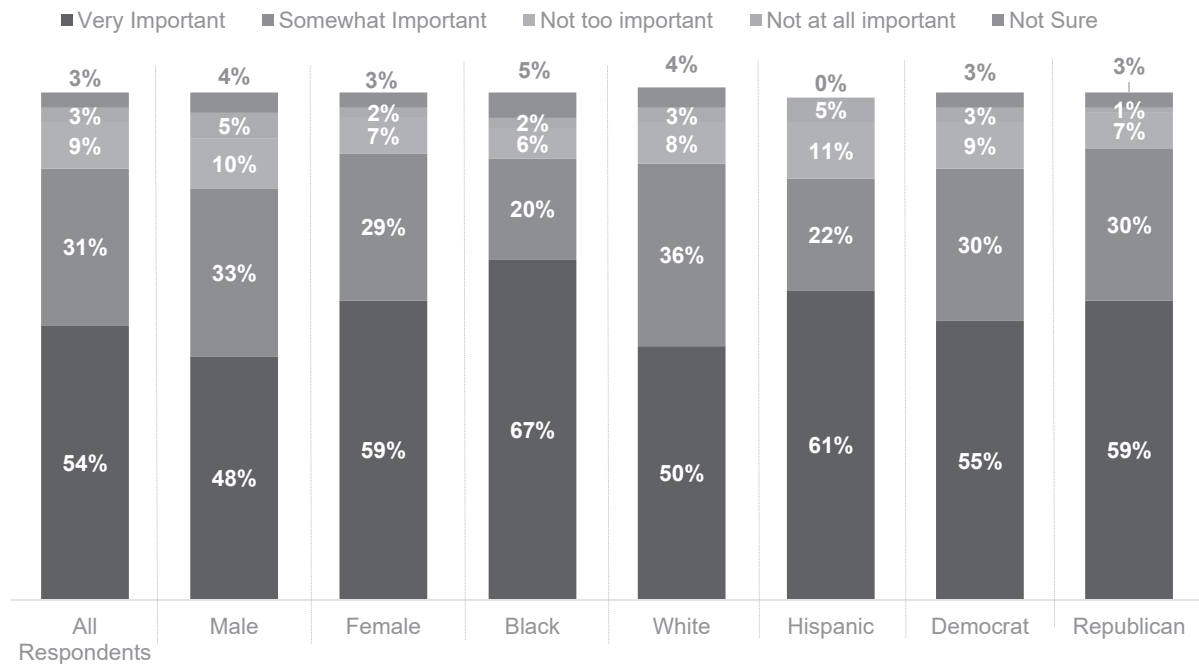
More than 80% think teens should be encouraged to avoid sex, just as they are encouraged to avoid other risks, such as smoking and underage drinking.

The CDC describes teen sex, smoking and drinking as youth risk behaviors. Programs for teens often encourage them to avoid the risks of smoking and underage drinking, but too-frequently, teen sex is normalized and tacitly described as a healthy part of adolescence. However, 85% of adults agree that it is important for teens to be encouraged to avoid sex because it is a risk behavior. Republicans and Democrats are in agreement (R:89% D:85%). Once again, Americans are siding with the healthiest messaging for youth.

Most Adults Agree Teens Should be Encouraged to Avoid Sex as a Risk Behavior

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How important is it that teens are encouraged to avoid sex, as a risk behavior?



Question: The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) describe teen sex, smoking, and drinking as youth risk behaviors. Programs for teens often encourage them to avoid the risks of smoking and underage drinking. How important is it that teens are encouraged to avoid teen sex?

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4. Consensual sex, even with the use of contraception does not make teen sex acceptable.

Most think “contraception” and “consent” don’t make sex okay for teens.

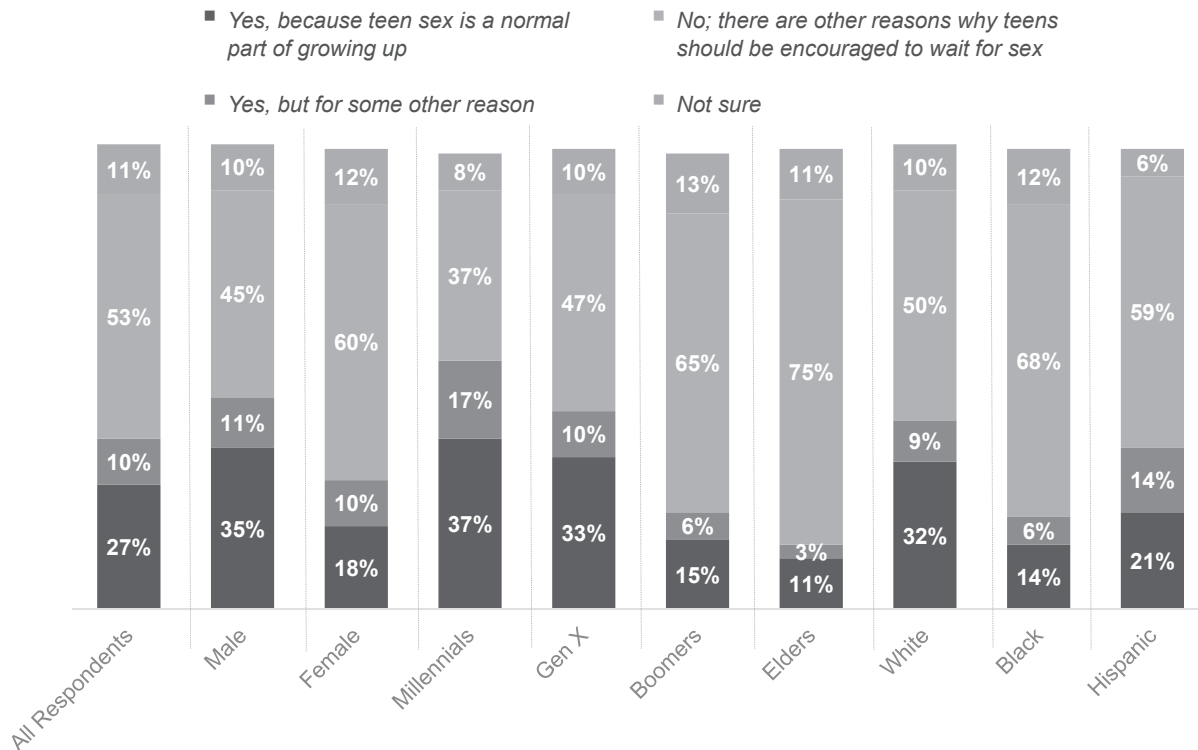


Increasingly, the message that teens are hearing equates consent and contraception with a green light to engage in sex. This simplistic equation can send a harmful message to vulnerable teens. Surveyed Americans agree that there should be more to the discussion and that teens should be encouraged to wait for sex. Their view sides with the abundant social science research that confirms a variety of possible negative consequences to teen sex that stretch far beyond the low bar of “consent” and “contraceptive usage.”



Beliefs about Acceptability of Teen Sex

Assuming sex is consensual and contraceptive is used, is it OK for teens to have sex?



5. Teens should learn that the use of contraception does not make sex “safe.”



95% of Americans think it's important that teens know condoms offer only limited protection and other contraception offers no protection against STDs.

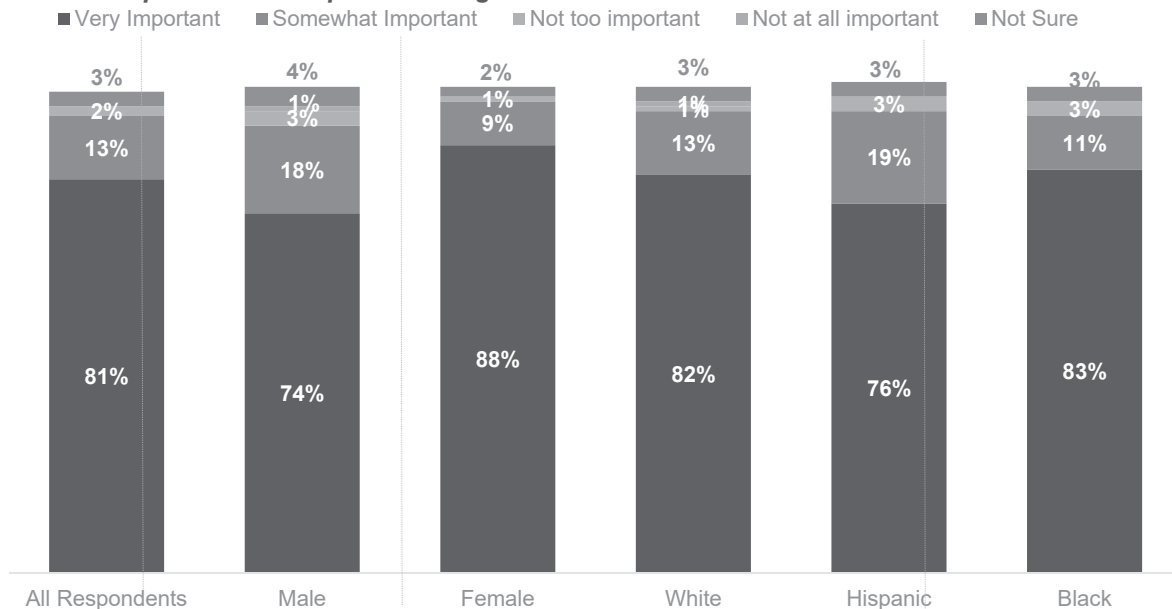
Condoms offer only limited protection in preventing pregnancy and STDs – and they offer no protection against the many nonphysical consequences that can accompany teen sex. Other contraceptives offer no protection against STDs and no protection for the nonphysical effects. Teens regularly say that they thought they would be “safe” to engage in sex, if they used some form of contraception. Many sex education programs normalize teen sex and censor the accurate information about the risks that still remain, even with the use of contraception. These sex educators say they are concerned

that teens won't use contraception if they are informed that risks still remain. The reality is that when teens are given the false impression that sex-with-contraception is as protective as not-having-sex, they are exposed to significantly more risk. Most Americans disagree with this approach by sex-normalization advocates. Americans want teens to know that contraception does not make sex “safe.” The results are consistent among all survey cohorts.

Teaching about Limitations of Contraception is Important

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How important is it that teens know that condoms offer limited protection and other contraceptives offer no protection against STDs?

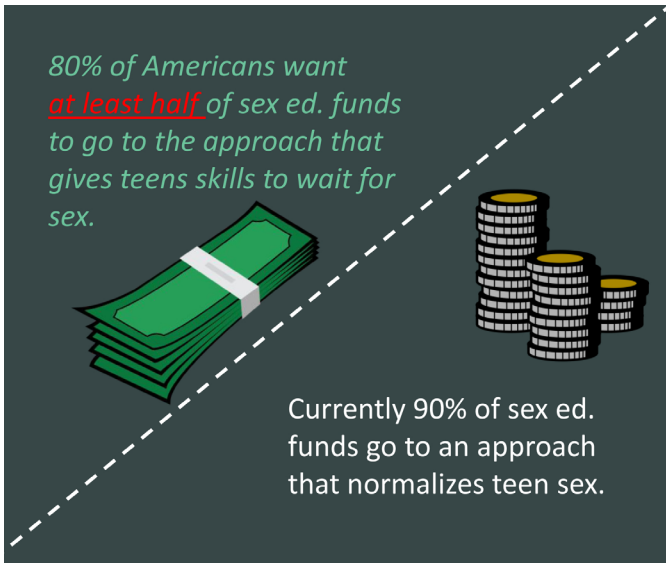


Question: The CDC reports that condoms offer limited protection against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and other contraceptives offer no protection against STDs. How important is it that teens know that condoms offer limited protection and other contraceptives offer no protection against STDs?

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6. Most Americans want at least half of sex ed. funds to go to Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education.



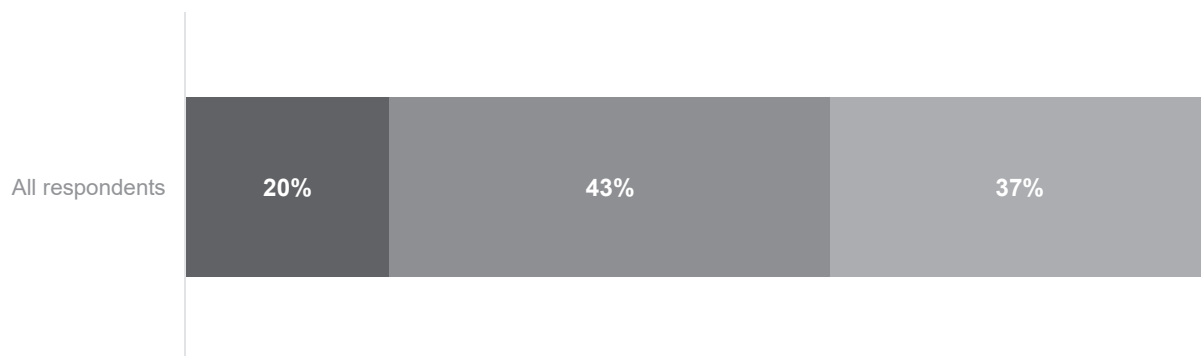
Increasingly, the message teens are hearing equates consent and contraception with a green light to engage in sex. This simplistic equation can send a harmful message to vulnerable teens. Surveyed Americans agree that there should be more to the discussion and that teens should be encouraged to wait for sex. Their view sides with the abundant social science research that confirms a variety of possible negative consequences to teen sex that stretch far beyond the low bar of “consent” and “contraceptive usage.”

80% want at least half of sex ed. funds to go to the approach that gives teens skills to wait for sex.

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Currently, the majority of federal sex education funding goes toward an approach that tells teens it is ok to be sexually active, as long as contraception is used. Other approaches emphasize giving teens skills to wait for sex. **How do you believe tax revenue should be allocated for sex education?**

- Most federal funding should focus on an approach that tells teens its ok to be sexually active, as long as contraception is used
- Federal funding should be allocated equally for both approaches
- Most federal funding should focus on an approach that gives teens skills to wait for sex



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Observations and Recommendations

About 100 sex education bills are introduced in state legislatures each session and school board meetings are often the venue for heated sex education debates.

The views of most Americans, though, seem to be marked more by unanimity than divisiveness. The Americans Speak Out II survey presents a clear picture of what most Americans want for sex education in America – and in their own local schools. The survey results provide a strong endorsement of SRA education as a preferred choice for sex education. And support is strong among both men and women, among both political parties, and among all ethnicities. Optimal sexual health should provide the foundation for America's sex education classrooms. There's not much debate according to most Americans. Sex education needs to be about health and helping youth avoid risky behaviors that can derail their future prospects. And we happen to agree.

Americans want youth to be healthy. They want youth to emerge from adolescence as thriving, healthy adults who escape the myriad of pitfalls that often surface when teen sex is added to middle and high school life. They want them to escape poverty and build healthy relationships so they can form healthy families and marriages in the future.

The survey results paint a picture that mirrors the goals and realities of so many SRA programs across the nation. The SRA approach to sex education casts a vision for youth to define and pursue their future goals; to help them gain the understanding that healthy habits begin early, and that avoiding all the risks associated with teen sex is an important way to clear the path for a bright future. And that sexually active teens can make healthier, sexually-risk-free decisions in the future. SRA programs focus on habits that make the Success Sequence a reality in the lives of students: graduate, get a job and wait until married to become a parent. The reality is that when youth are encouraged to take ownership for their present decisions and future opportunities, positive results often follow.

- Policymakers, whether seated around a school board, or in the halls of Congress, would do well to listen to what most Americans want in sex education policies:
- The primary emphasis in sex education should be to give teens the practical skills to wait for sex.
- Teens should be encouraged to avoid sex, just as they are encouraged to avoid other risks, such as smoking and underage drinking.
- Consensual sex, even with the use of contraception does not make teen sex okay.
- Teens need to learn that the use of contraception does not make sex "safe."
- Most Americans want at least half of sex ed. funds to go to Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education.

In the Americans Speak Out II survey, most were surprised to learn that the majority of teens are not sexually active and that fewer are sexually active today compared to 20 years ago. We suspect most policymakers are equally unaware of this extraordinary and positive data. They need to know that SRA is resonating with teens. That it is relevant today – even more than a generation ago. Policymakers deserve to know that often, the decisions to engage in teen sex – or to delay sex – are not decisions made in isolation. They have an impact that extends far beyond the risks of pregnancy or infection.

Frankly, those who claim that teen sexual activity is healthy – so long as each partner consents and no pregnancy ensues – are on the wrong side of science and are promoting a strategy that could compromise the future health and success of youth. Normalizing teen sex, so long as the teen uses contraception is simplistic, naive, and uninformed at best, but harmful at its root.

Teen sex is risky behavior. The CDC considers it so and for good reason. Social science research confirms the broad advantages that can be experienced by teens who choose to avoid sexual risk. And waiting for sex, preferably until marriage, improves the prospect for positive future outcomes. Sexual risk avoidance education gives research and theory the legs of practicality. Therefore, sex education policy should focus on sexual delay, hopefully until marriage. Why? Because the health of youth translates into the health of adults – and families – and our nation. Policy must place optimal health as the desired outcome, with the understanding that every incremental step toward that goal is success.

About the Survey

The Americans Speak Out II report contains the findings from questions commissioned by Ascend in a nationwide study of 1,281 adults ages 18 and older. The study, known publicly as OmniPoll, is a shared-cost research study conducted by Barna Group. Organizations commission questions in OmniPoll on a pay per-item-basis, while Barna Group includes a variety of demographic and other profiling variables for cross-tabulation purposes. The November OmniPoll was conducted via online survey from November 4 to November 16, 2016. The sample error for this research study is +/- 2.6 percent points at the 95% confidence level.

Due to the personal and sensitive nature of these topics, the confidential form of an online survey, versus phone survey, produces more reliable results. Analyses show that respondents to phone surveys exhibit “interviewer bias,” in which a proportion try to give socially acceptable answers to the phone interviewer.

Headquartered in Ventura, California, Barna Group has conducted hundreds of studies and over a million interviews over the course of its 30-year history, earning it an esteemed place of regard concerning social and cultural issues. It is a respected source for understanding how Americans view and interpret culture and cultural issues that impact everyday life.

The Questions

The following questions were asked in the Americans Speak Out II survey:

- What do you believe should be the primary message teens receive in their sex education classes?
- Assuming sex is consensual and contraceptive is used, is it OK for teens to have sex?
- Recent research shows that the majority of teens are not sexually active, and that fewer are sexually active today compared with 20 years ago. Is this surprising to you?
- Knowing this, what should be the primary message teens receive in their sex education classes?
- Currently, the majority of federal sex education funding goes toward an approach that tells teens it is ok to be sexually active, as long as contraception is used. Other approaches emphasize giving teens skills to wait for sex. How do you believe tax revenue should be allocated for sex education?
- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) describe teen sex, smoking, and drinking as youth risk behaviors. Programs for teens often encourage them to avoid the risks of smoking and underage drinking. How important is it that teens are encouraged to avoid teen sex?
- The CDC reports that condoms offer limited protection against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and other contraceptives offer no protection against STDs. How important is it that teens know that condoms offer limited protection and other contraceptives offer no protection against STDs?