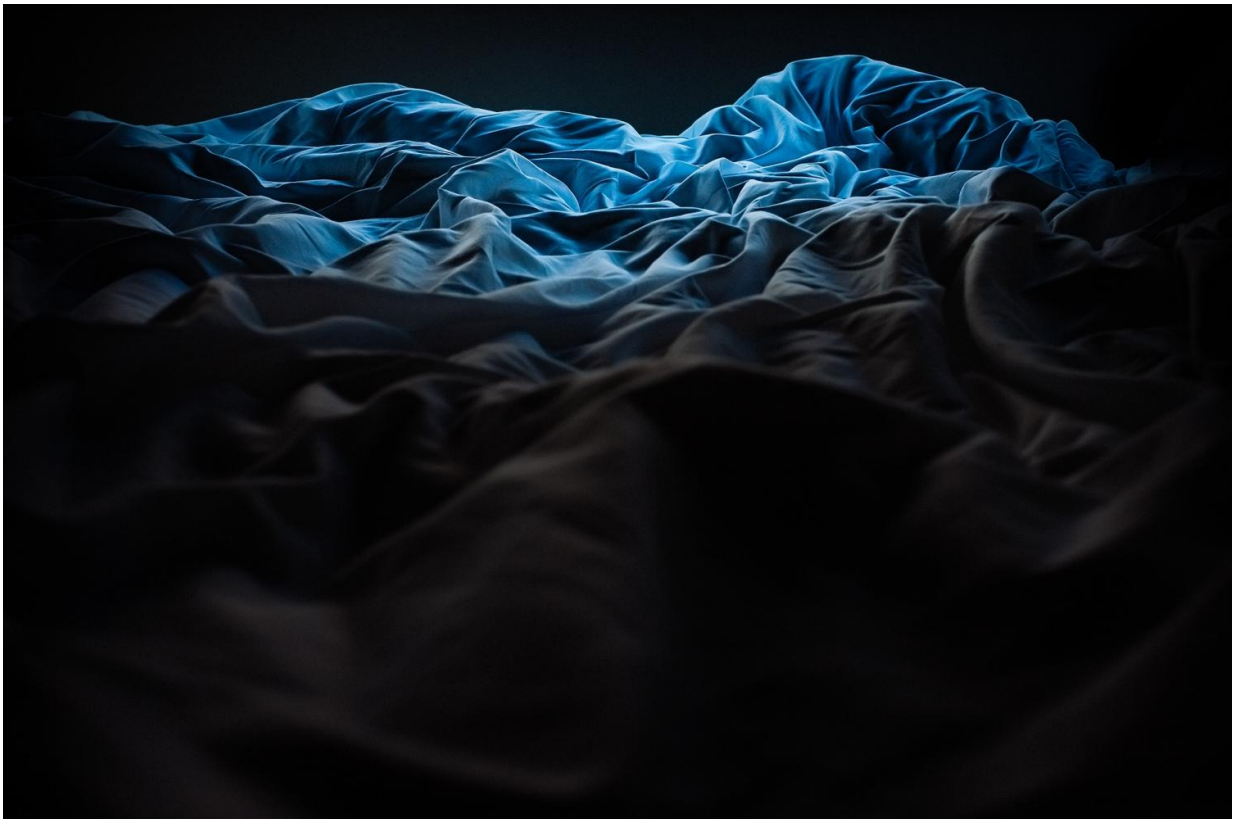


# Age, not abstinence, may be the bigger problem in sex education

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While abstaining from sex is the only foolproof way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, abstinence-only education programs often fail to prevent young people from engaging in sexual activity,

according to a report in the September issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

Part of the problem of sex education programs, however, may be a disconnect between what students are being taught and what they're really ready to learn, says Elizabeth Trejos-Castillo, the C.R. Hutcheson Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies in the Texas Tech University College of Human Sciences.

Too often, she says, sex education for 11- and 12-year-olds focuses on sex and contraceptives without explaining the biological changes they'll go through. This approach leaves many youths with the misconception that puberty means it's time to have sex.

After researching and reviewing existing curricula about puberty, Trejos-Castillo worked with students in the Lubbock-Cooper Independent School District for four years to develop the Normalizing Sexual Development curriculum, an abstinence-plus education program that includes two different levels, one for sixth-graders and one for [high school students](#). The older group learns about sex, abstinence, birth control, [sexually transmitted diseases](#) and what to consider before having sex. The sixth-grade curriculum presents [human development](#) as multi-faceted, teaching students about the cognitive, emotional and social changes they'll experience during puberty and how to cope with them.

- Increasingly often, adolescents are bombarded with highly sexualized messages by a wide array of media and social networks exposing them to mixed ideas about what sexual [development](#) is and presenting them with confusing and glamorized social expectations about sexuality.
- Abstinence-only programs do not provide adolescents with overall life skills to be able to understand their own [sexual development](#) and make informed critical decisions about

engaging in sexual activities that are not developmentally appropriate for them, and foresee the negative short- and long-term consequences of those actions.

- The importance of comprehensive sexual [education](#) is that it addresses the developmental needs (e.g., cognitive, emotional, physical, social, relational) of youth before, during and after puberty in a holistic way, providing them with long-lasting life skills to make healthy decisions.

**More information:** John S. Santelli et al. Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage: An Updated Review of U.S. Policies and Programs and Their Impact, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.05.031](#)

Provided by Texas Tech University

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