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Sex education for children is taken to be a controversial topic. On the one hand, opponents argue that teaching about sex and sexuality should be left to parents because schools are not good at handling such subjects. On the other hand, there is a demand for sex education as opponents argue that it can lower high school dropout rates and teen pregnancies. This debate has created a religious divide with Catholics preferring abstinence-only approaches while liberals want comprehensive education that emphasizes condom use. Proponents of sex education also say that teaching children about sex can help protect them from child sexual abuse. Recently, a link has been made between sexual abuse and suicide. This connection is based on peer sexual pressure, poor self-esteem, and excessive media glorification of sexual activity. In a survey done by the University of New Hampshire in 2010, students were asked if they wanted to be an involved parent rather than be involved in their child's sex education. The results showed that 60% of those who had children said that they would want to be involved as parents rather than as teachers. In the United States, sex education varies from state to state and has been around for centuries. In the U.S., only twelve states require all schools to teach sex education, however other states have laws mandating specific types of sex education. In most states, students are required to take a class, or a specific program called "comprehensive sex education" is required by law. In many states the law describes the types of material that must be taught in sex education class and sometimes even mandates which form it is taught in. In Delaware, Maine, and Wisconsin, for example, a variety of lessons must be taught which include anatomy and evolution. These programs also teach how to protect oneself from date rape as well as how birth control works. Some states have more specific definitions for what constitutes sex education. In Alabama, sex education means an educational, factual course in human sexuality which includes, but is not limited to the following topics: sexual abstinence as the expected standard for all school age children; sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS when it is relevant to the topic; contraception; pregnancy; prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy; preparation for parenting; sexual orientation of students. Sex education programs vary in effectiveness depending on what techniques are used. However it is known that comprehensive sex education programs increase knowledge and decrease risky behaviors later on. These programs teach students about both abstinence and safe sex. This combination approach has proven to be most effective. One of the most controversial parts of teaching sex ed in schools is teaching about birth control methods. Some believe that birth control will encourage promiscuity, but studies show that it actually decreases the risk of teen pregnancy. Some states are also passing laws requiring schools to teach abstinence, although most research has shown that abstinence only-proponents are less likely to use contraception during sex. To make sure students are getting the most out of this instruction, some state sex education programs provide "safe sex peer-to-peer" programs. Participants share experiences about sexual topics with their peers and adults. Some critics feel sex education is unnecessary because teens can just use their parents as an unbiased source for information without the need for formal education on the matter.

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