What is more important in our lives than learning how to have mutual, caring romantic relationships? Certainly gratifying, mature sexual relationships also rank high. Yet, while schools and many other industries in this country devote tremendous attention and resources to preparing the young for work, they do remarkably little to prepare them for generous, self-respecting sex and love.

The cost of this neglect is profound. Beyond teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, various problems including substance abuse, depression, and many types of school troubles often have roots in sexual and romantic anxiety and failure. Rates of sexual harassment in middle school and high school are startlingly high. One national report indicates that nearly half of students in grades 7-12 reported experiencing sexual harassment in the previous year and 87% describe negative effects such as absenteeism and poor sleep, and misogyny is pervasive (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Words like “bitches” and “ho’s” are stunningly commonplace in many school hallways across the country, and terms that boys and young men use to describe sex these days — “I hit that,” “I nailed that,” “I crushed that” — are unnervingly impersonal and violent. Some girls also have picked up these phrases.

Failure to prepare young people for healthy love and sex can reverberate destructively throughout their lives. Divorce (which ends nearly half of all first marriages), constant marital conflict or quieter marital misery, and the inability to even form a relation-
ship all reflect this failure. Troubled relationships breed alcoholism, domestic abuse, and workaholism. The countless therapies, mediation, and legal settlements charged with managing relationship failures take a staggering financial toll. Conversely, supportive, stable romantic relationships are associated with higher wages, fewer health problems, and gratification in many domains of life.

A high school student told New York Times reporter Laurie Abraham, “As a society, we always tell kids, ‘Work hard, just focus on school, don’t think about girls or guys — you can worry about that stuff later, that stuff will work itself out,’ but the thing is, it doesn’t” (2011).

Many Americans argue, of course, that this preparation is not school’s responsibility. But then whose responsibility is it? The vast majority of American families simply can’t — or won’t — take on the task alone. Parents struggle with how to pass on wisdom about sexual and romantic relationships to their kids or don’t see this guidance as their role. Many teens, of course, resist talking to their parents about love — let alone sex — in a way that begins to do justice to the nuanced layers of these topics or provides any kind of map for the vexing, subtle work of developing mature romantic or sexual relationships.

The lack of modeling and conversation creates a perilous void. Young people often wind up learning about sex and love from their peers, the Internet, or the media. The harm is not simply daily exposure to misogynistic songs, pornography, and other debased images of sex — serious as that harm is. The media also spawns all kinds of misconceptions and reinforces deeply ingrained cultural myths about romantic love — for example, that love is an intoxication, an obsessive attraction, and that “real love” is clear and unmistakable and happens suddenly. For adults to hand over responsibility for educating young people about love and sex to popular culture is a dumbfounding, epic abdication of responsibility.

The reality is that schools could do much more to prepare students for both romantic love and sex. Some of these forms of guidance will certainly meet huge resistance in more socially conservative communities. But the real travesty is that political morality wars about sex have obscured the very hopeful fact that young people want and need many uncontroversial, vital forms of relationship and sex education. When it comes to relationship education, it is, in fact, possible to find a great deal of common ground across the usual political divides. But it will mean fundamentally rethinking sex education as well as seizing other opportunities in and around schools to guide young people. And it will mean finding ways to guide students on love and sex that are easy for schools to take on that are not another burden for stressed and overwhelmed schools and that often also support academic achievement.

What, then, are the current goals of sex ed? And what is the nature and quality of current sex ed programs? What kinds of sex education and romantic relationship education are, in contrast, likely to be most beneficial? How might we get from here to there?

The current state of sex education

While schools teach sex education in myriad ways — in part because of the absence of a national curriculum — courses in most states tend to be either “abstinence only until marriage” or “abstinence-plus” (abstinence “plus” information about contraceptives and safe sex). A smaller number of courses teach true comprehensive sex education. Sex education is thus almost always shrunk to what’s called “disaster prevention” — how to avert pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.

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Although the focus on abstinence and safety isn’t new, it is fired by the modern story we are commonly told about the habits of teens and young adults. This story goes like this: Most hormone-addled teens and young adults are ricocheting among sexual partners, “hooking up” (hooking up covers everything from intercourse to making out) often and casually, frequently in high-profile, semi-exhibitionistic ways. These young people are allegedly uninterested in real intimacy, and they seem to constantly confuse sex and intimacy. And so the logic goes that sex education curricula ought to help teens and young adults control their sexual impulses while underlining the value of intimacy.

Vast, vital issues are thus ignored. Rarely are issues of sexual reciprocity and pleasure or complex relationship issues addressed. The specific relationship challenges of LGBTQ students receive even less attention. Because of meager funding and because nearly half of all classes combine health education with physical education or some other topic, students may have only one course or just several sessions that deal with sex over their entire school career ( Campos, 2002).

Making matters worse, sex or health education is frequently taught by adults with little or no training or support. Sex education instructors are a varied
lot — physical education teachers, health educators, biology teachers, teachers who have been trained by outside organizations — with many different ideologies (Lamb, 2013). But there is a stunning gap between the preparation these instructors typically receive and their complex, hugely important, risk fraught task.

According to one study of 169 teacher-education programs in the U.S., few programs require prospective teachers to take sex education and structured training opportunities are scarce (Rodriguez et al., 1995/1996). Another study indicates that 62% of sex education teachers aren’t professionally prepared, i.e., they don’t have a health education or public health degree (Rhodes et al., 2013). Lacking support and easy opportunities for training and often faced with teaching in what may be a political minefield, there’s little incentive for teachers to pursue outside sex education training.

Sexual education would be far more meaningful and productive if it focused on developing, maintaining, and ending romantic and sexual relationships with integrity and care.

Thin training and narrow, thin curricula mean that young people are vulnerable to all sorts of misconceptions about sex and love, and sex education programs themselves can compound these misconceptions. A 2004 federal report directed by Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) found that 80% of abstinence-only curricula contained “false, misleading, or distorted information about reproductive health.”

Unsurprising but equally troubling, most sex education courses simply have little or no effect on teens’ attitudes toward sex and love. A good deal of data — including our own — reveals that young people view peers, older siblings, and older peers as far more influential than sex education classes in shaping their views about both sex and love. Some teens and young adults we have spoken with simply view their sex education courses as ridiculous and stupefyingly distant from their daily hopes, questions, and fears.

A new approach to sex ed

Over the last few years, we’ve been surveying students, mostly aged 16-20, from a diverse range of high schools and colleges: four American high schools, one Canadian high school, and four American colleges. We’ve talked to dozens more high school, college, and graduate students from different parts of the country, as well as some of the adults who teach or advise them. We have asked these students mainly about their views on sex, love, and romantic relationships and about the key influences on these views. We’ve also asked them what topics they thought should be taken up in sex education.

Both our data and other relevant research suggest a fundamentally different approach to sex education. This data suggests that instead of focusing on self-control, sexual education would be far more meaningful and productive if it focused on developing, maintaining, and ending romantic and sexual relationships with integrity and care.

The focus on self-control in current sex education is built on an assumption that is simply wrong — that high percentages of young people are engaging in casual, often reckless sex and hookups while under-valuing intimacy. The reality is that large majorities of high school and college students from diverse demographic backgrounds and contexts are not having sexual encounters with multiple partners, and they’re actually quite interested in intimate relationships.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, only 24% of 18- to 19-year-olds nationally (in and out of school) had more than one sexual partner in the previous year, and only 5.5% had four or more partners (sex is defined as vaginal, anal, or oral sex). By senior year in college, only 20% of students have hooked up 10 or more times (that’s an average of only 2.5 hookups a year). (Armstrong, Hamilton, & England, 2010). Data from Child Trends indicates that among 18- to 25-year-olds, 8% were casually dating, 67% were dating exclusively, cohabiting, or married, and 25% were in no relationship (Scott et al., 2011).

What’s more, a fairly small percent of college students are looking for casual sex. There simply isn’t some widespread, burning desire to hook up that needs to be controlled. When we asked students in our sample about their ideal Saturday night, the majority of their responses had nothing to do with sex at all. Most commonly, students want in one way or another to “hang out with friends.” Further, when asked about their desired relationship status, across the sites, most students would prefer to be in exclusive, intimate relationships, and 10% don’t want a sexual or romantic relationship of any kind. Only 19% of high school students and 6% of college students wanted to be single and sexually active. While females were less likely than males to desire casual hookups or sex, a significant majority of males, too, are not interested in repeated, random hookups or sex. Research by Amy Schalet at the University of Massachusetts indicates that boys and young men are far more fearful about sex and far more interested in romance than is commonly believed (2012).

The students we surveyed did, on the other hand, indicate that they want more support both in formal sex education and from other sources on developing the knowledge and skills needed to have healthy
romantic relationships. Almost 70% wanted to talk more in sex ed about “how to develop a mature relationship,” and roughly 46% wanted to talk more about dealing with breakups. Forty-six percent of college students and 28% of high school students wanted more conversation about how to begin a relationship, and over one-third of students wanted to discuss “how to avoid getting hurt in relationships.” As one high school student put it, “I think lots of middle schoolers and high schoolers experience trauma at their first and failed attempts at sexual relationships, and this needs to be a focus. Making sure kids know that breakups are not the end of the world, and making sure they know the ins-and-outs of relationships in all their forms.” Many respondents said they wanted to learn how to do the “work” of relationships, and many young people are eager to talk about what love is and how you know when you’ve found it. As one Boston-area high school teacher observed, “my students can talk about love forever. They’re much more present, thoughtful, available to themselves when they talk about love. I always feel bad when we have to move on to another topic.”

To be sure, teaching self-restraint in sexual relationships is critical. In many high schools and colleges, a proportion of students — typically around 10% to 15% — are hooking up frequently, and these hookups, especially when they’re combined with alcohol, can certainly be damaging. But to focus sex education primarily or entirely on trying to get young people to restrain their impulses and to understand the value of intimacy is, for perhaps 85% to 90% of students, simply missing the point.

The real crisis is not young people hooking up recklessly: It’s our miserable failure as adults to provide young people with even rudimentary forms of meaningful guidance on how to develop gratifying, mature, respectful sexual and love relationships.

A fundamentally different, more effective approach to sex education would not only engage young people in thinking about how and when to exercise self-control, it would attend to a very different set of questions and concerns about sexual and especially romantic relationships. It would spark serious reflection about how to develop caring, mutual sexual relationships, develop students’ understanding of their own sexuality and respect for the range of sexualities, and guide young people in learning about their partner’s sexuality. It would help students learn how to assess others as possible romantic partners, and develop in students the knowledge and sensitivities needed to build a healthy relationship. One way to develop these capacities is to provide students with various examples of caring, vibrant romantic relationships, showing how thoughtful, self-aware adults deal with common stresses and challenges.

(One can imagine students watching and discussing, for instance, the compelling, mature marriage of the main couple on the TV show “Friday Night Lights.”)

It would encourage students to reflect on the many forms of love — “There are as many loves as there are hearts,” Tolstoy says — and develop their thinking about how to distinguish immature from mature love and how to parse the myriad forms of attraction, infatuation, and love.

Done well, these conversations can respond to students’ underlying anxieties, help them avoid badly wounding and even scarring each other, and improve their abilities to develop and maintain a wide range of close relationships. Further, reflecting on romantic and sexual relationships can help students develop important academic skills and may be the most powerful way to teach young people ethics — far more effective than the typical forms of character education in high school and college — because ethical issues in romantic relationships meet teens exactly where they are emotionally.

We have found that high school and college students enthusiastically plunge into these kinds of ethical questions: What do I do if I know my friend is cheating on his girlfriend who is also my friend? Is infidelity justified under any circumstances? Is it exploitation when a senior hooks up with a freshman? Reflecting on these questions can develop complex thinking and problem-solving skills, enable students to consider multiple perspectives and sort out their ethical obligations to others, learn how to ethically reason when dealing with conflicting loyalties, and take up questions about human rights and dignity.

Getting from here to there will certainly not be simple. But we might begin by drawing on the experience of several other countries where romantic relationship education in schools is the norm. In Norway, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, for example, some form of relationship education is compulsory for students beginning in primary school, and romantic relationships are taken up in middle and/or high school. Scattered efforts in the U.S. may also prove instructive. Prompted in part by the Bush Administration’s concern about high numbers of unwed mothers in low-income communities, various community settings and schools around the country have taken up romantic relationship education. Recent research suggests promising outcomes for several of these programs. Only a few programs have been tested in relatively small quasi-experimental studies, including Love U2: Increasing Your Relationship Smarts and The Art of Loving Well. At the very least, we could pilot and evaluate diverse approaches in a far wider array of contexts.

We could also provide a much better range of online resources for sex educators and parents that in-
crease their confidence, comfort, and skill in guiding children in developing mature relationships and in dealing with specific issues like breakups and cheating. Parents who have failed in romantic relationships, if they are thoughtful about these failures, can certainly be effective mentors as well.

Adults have failed to provide young people with meaningful guidance on how to develop gratifying, mature, respectful sexual and love relationships.

Perhaps most important, educators and community leaders of many kinds can move toward making teaching romantic and sexual relationship education what it should be — a high-status, prized, vibrant activity — while providing more meaningful training and support to relationship and sex educators. Uphill as it may be, it’s vital for education schools, superintendents, school boards, and foundations to take on larger roles. High-profile, university-sponsored sex and romantic relationship education institutes and certification for sex educators, for example, can elevate the status and legitimize the teaching of sex education. Foundations can support innovative programs and online resources and help create greater public interest in relationship education.

Finally, it’s important to seize opportunities outside of sex or health education courses. History, literature, and social studies courses, as some other countries recognize, are among subjects ripe with opportunities to talk about love. After-school programs offer numerous opportunities to spark these conversations. Sports coaches especially need guidance on talking about romance and sex, given how commonly they’re viewed as mentors by the more than 40 million children who play organized sports and given how frequently they hear low-minded talk among boys about girls and expressions of homophobia on buses and in locker rooms.

True, some school boards, superintendents, and principals will be loath to take up any issues involving sex and romance, and talking about mutuality and pleasure in sexual relationships will be incendiary in some communities. It will also be hard for many schools now consumed by high-stakes testing to implement high-quality romantic relationship education.

But there are many good reasons to keep fighting for including talk about pleasure and reciprocity as part of sex education. Perhaps most important, ignoring this topic results so often in pervasive misconceptions about sex and in males’ misunderstanding or disregarding female pleasure. And it’s hard to muster a convincing argument — from any ideological perspective — for failing to better guide young people in developing respectful and mature romantic relationships.

Given the terrible downsides of neglect and the large health, educational, and ethical benefits of thoughtful romantic relationship education — and given that we could achieve these benefits relatively inexpensively — how can we possibly not keep pushing down this path? We can continue to righteously wring our hands about sex-crazed teenagers. Or we can take real steps toward helping young people develop the skills and wisdom they need to love well at many stages of their lives — and perhaps gain far greater maturity ourselves.

References


