

Appendix H

Sex Education in Elementary Schools: Coed or Gender Segregated?

I am often asked if boys and girls should be separated for sex education, especially in the elementary grades. Pros and cons exist for either approach to sex education in the elementary grades.

Coed Instruction

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking about puberty and sex education with boys and girls together removes the stigma and mystery of the topic. • Boys and girls learn to communicate with each other about sensitive topics as they will need to if and when they develop intimate relationships in the future. • Boys and girls can learn from each other’s perspectives when they discuss topics together. • Students have an opportunity to develop empathy for the changes and challenges experienced by both sexes. • This approach ensures that the sex education provided to both sexes is the same. • In combined classes, boys and girls tend to behave in a more mature manner in order to impress each other. • Children who are transgender or questioning are not assigned to a group or class that doesn’t align with their internal sense of gender (gender identity) or external expression of gender (gender expression). • Keeping boys and girls together makes it easier and more efficient to schedule the instruction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When boys and girls are in the same class, they might ask fewer questions about sex-specific topics, such as menstruation and nocturnal emissions, unless a question box is used. • School staff will need to be prepared to respond to concerned parents or educators who don’t support teaching boys and girls together. • It is more challenging to differentiate instruction to meet the unique needs of both boys and girls in a coed class. • Some parents might express concern that coed instruction undermines their children’s “natural modesty.”

Gender-Segregated Instruction

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When boys and girls are in separate classes, they tend to ask more questions about sex-specific topics, such as menstruation and nocturnal emissions. • Some parents and educators are more supportive of teaching boys and girls separately. • Instruction may be differentiated more easily to meet the unique educational needs and learning styles of boys and girls in gender-segregated classes. • Parents who believe that coed instruction undermines children’s “natural modesty” might feel more comfortable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructing boys and girls separately can perpetuate the aura of stigma and add to the mystery of the topic. • Boys and girls miss the opportunity to practice communicating with each other about sensitive topics as they will need to if and when they develop intimate relationships in the future. • Boys and girls miss the opportunity to learn about topics from each other’s perspectives when they don’t discuss topics together. • Students are less likely to develop empathy for the changes and challenges experienced by the other sex. • This approach may result in genders receiving an unequal and gender-biased sex education. • In separated classes, boys and girls may behave in a less mature manner and act out in ways that can perpetuate stereotypical gender roles. • Some children may feel uncomfortable when assigned to a group or class that doesn’t align with their internal sense or external expression of gender (gender identity or gender expression). • Separating children by gender reinforces a binary notion of sex and gender. • Separating boys and girls makes it challenging to schedule the instruction and instructors.

Given the lack of research on this question, I can base my recommendation only on my experiences in teaching sex education to students across the grades, and the many discussions in which I've participated on this topic.

Below are some of my recommendations for ideal sex education for grades 4-6:

- Offer skills-based, research-based sex education in the same way, with the same content and strategies, to all students.
- Offer instruction taught by both male and female instructors who are qualified, prepared, and enthusiastic about teaching sex education. This is to model a stigma-free approach to talking about sensitive topics and to provide role models.
- Offer instruction to coed classes with all students together for the majority of the lessons.
- Offer one optional session with gender-segregated classes to allow students to discuss topics that are unique to their sex, such as menstruation and nocturnal emissions (optional).
- Use a question box to encourage students' higher order thinking. Answer all questions in a developmentally appropriate and professional manner.

Wendy L. Sellers, RN, MA, CPC
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Author's Note: Please note that the terms "sex" and "gender" have been used intentionally in this discussion. These terms are not synonymous, but for the purposes of this topic, I have attempted to maintain simplicity. To learn more about definitions of these and related terms, please read <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/sexuality-definitions.pdf>.