

Making the Case for Comprehensive Sex Education in the Child Welfare System

Your presenters today!



Karen Rayne, PhD, CSE
Director of Education,
UN|HUSHED



Andrea Requesnes, LCPAA
Vice President of Learning,
TACFS

Statistics about system involved youth and the lack of sex ed

49%

of 11-21-year olds **who experience the child welfare system** have recieved some type of sex education.



20%

received sex ed on contraceptives only.



19%

received abstinence-only sex ed.



10%

received sex ed on abstinence and contraceptives.

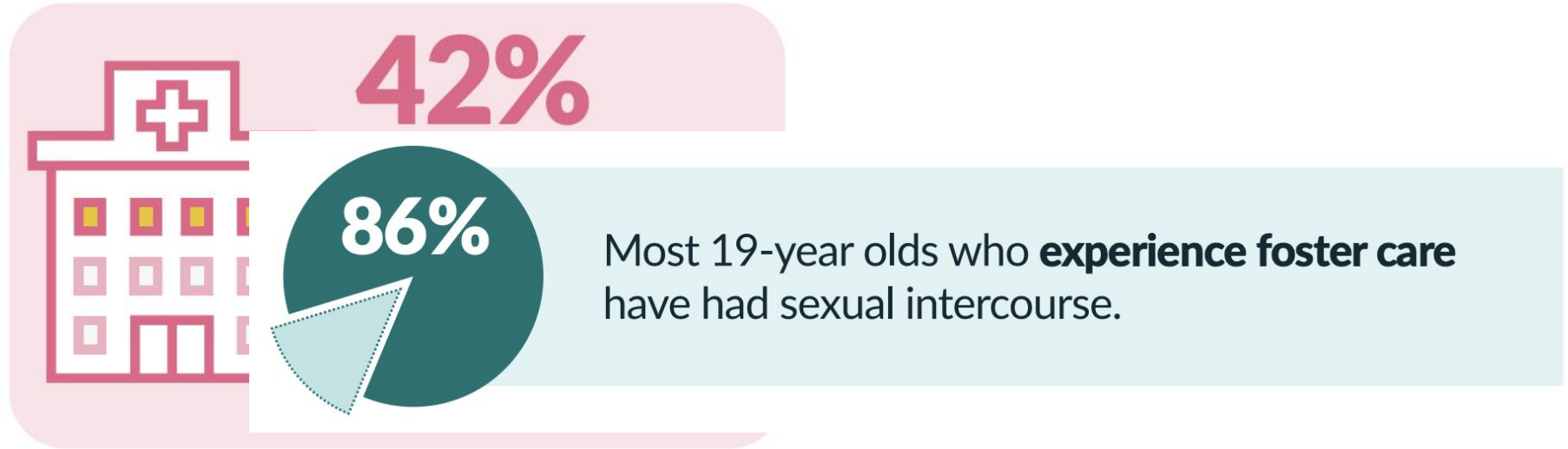
Statistics about system involved youth and the lack of sex ed



42%

of youth with an open child welfare case knew how to access birth control or family planning services.

Statistics about system involved youth and the lack of sex ed



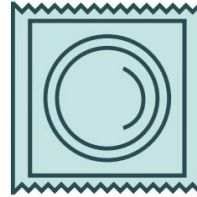
Statistics about system involved youth and the lack of sex ed



Among youth who experience the child welfare system:



On average, youth report having six sexual partners by 19.



43%

of 18-year-olds report inconsistent or no condom use.



14%

of sexually active 19-year-olds reported ever having an STI.



49%

of women reported ever being pregnant by age 19.

care

Statistics about system involved youth and the lack of sex ed

54%

of youth who experience foster care reported some physical or sexual abuse.

30%

of women ages 16-24 who experience foster care reported pressure from a partner to not use birth control and/or their partner sabotaging their contraceptives.

Statistics about system involved youth and the lack of sex ed

Of adolescent and young women (16-24 years old) who have lived in foster care:

- 62% experience intimate partner violence
- 30% experience experiencing reproductive coercion
- 30% experience unintended pregnancies

**These statistics are all
substantially higher than the
same statistics for the general
population.**

	General population of US youth	US youth who have experienced the child welfare system
% of teenagers who have recieved sex education	53.5% (in 1995, over 80% say they had recieved sex education)	49%
% of 19 year olds who have had sexual intercourse	62%	86%
Average # of sexual partners	4.3 - 6.3 (lifetime)	6 (by age 19)
% of women who have been pregnant by 19	0.05%	49%
% of women who experienced intimate partner violence	19%	62%
% of women who experienced reproductive coercion	12%	30%

Reasons that system involved youth fall through cracks when it comes to sex ed

- Movement between placements
- Region might not have good sex ed in the schools
- Hesitation, fear, and/or misunderstanding about whose job it is to provide sex education
- May have assumptions about their existing knowledge

Why *trauma informed* sex education is critical

- It's hard to learn when you're scared! *(This is just true.)*
- Sex negativity does not benefit young people. *(Young people often already know that sex has appeal, and ignoring their baseline knowledge doesn't give them space to introduce nuance.)*
- Transparency! *(When traumatized young people know what to expect they can be more open to new information within the known structure.)*
- Reinforcing bodily and medical autonomy. *(Because so many young people in care have had age appropriate autonomy removed from them, returning it to them whenever possible is critical.)*
- Professional self awareness. *(When professionals have examined their attitudes and values, they are able to know their triggers and to minimize their judgments.)*

**Adults are often
uninformed**

**Adults are often
uninformed
and opinionated**

"If I answer questions about masturbation, and my residential program says the young people can't masturbate, will I get in trouble?"

"Can I talk about the clitoris?"

"I don't know what information I'm missing about being LGBTQ+"

Adults are often uninformed and opinionated

"I thought IUDs were bad?"

"I just don't think it's okay for young people to have sex. Ever."

"Wait, what happens in the fallopian tube again?"

"How can I teach about abortion? I have strong opinions, but I don't think it's right to tell them to young people in care."

Knowing what you don't know is an essential part of teaching sex education.

Knowing what you don't know is an essential part of teaching sex education.

Great sex educators are committed to finding accurate answers

Resources

- *An Introduction to Sexuality Education: A Handbook for Child Welfare Providers*
(<https://www.unhushed.org/educators/store/handbook-child-welfare-providers>)
- Power Through Choices
(<https://www.healthyteennetwork.org/power-through-choices/>)
- Scarleteen (<https://www.scarleteen.com/>)
- Sex, Etc. (<https://sexetc.org/>)
- love is respect (<https://www.loveisrespect.org/>)

References

Regarding system involved youth:

- PettyJohn, M.D., Reid, T.A., Miller, E., Bogen, K.W. & McCauley, H. (2020). *Reproductive coercion, intimate partner violence, and pregnancy risk among adolescent women with a history of foster care involvement*. Children and Youth Services Review, 120.
- Rivas-Koehl, M., Naylor, K., Rivas-Koehl, D., Beckwith, S., DeCoursey, J., Griffin, A., Rust, K., & Scott, M. E. (2025). *Sexual and reproductive health among youth who experience the child welfare system*. Child Trends.

Regarding all youth:

- CDC. Key Statistics from the National Survey of Family Growth – N Listing. Retrieved 20 September 2026.
https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key_statistics/n-keystat.htm#numberlifetime
- Clayton HB, Kilmer G, DeGue S, et al. Dating Violence, Sexual Violence, and Bullying Victimization Among High School Students —Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2021. MMWR Suppl 2023;72(Suppl-1):66–74.
- Guttmacher. (2025). Fact Sheet: Pregnancy Trends in the United States.
<https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/pregnancy-trends-united-states>
- Hill AL, Jones KA, McCauley HL, Tancredi DJ, Silverman JG, Miller E. Reproductive Coercion and Relationship Abuse Among Adolescents and Young Women Seeking Care at School Health Centers. Obstet Gynecol. 2019 Aug;134(2):351-359.
- Lindberg L.D. and Firestein, L. (2021). Trends in U.S. adolescent sexual behavior and contraceptive use, 2006-2019. Contraception: X, 3.
- Lindberg L.D. & Kantor L.. (2022). Adolescents' receipt of sex education in a nationally representative sample, 2011–2019, Journal of Adolescent Health, 70(2):290–297.