

Adolescent Health: What Works in Schools

Evidence-Based Strategies for Your School



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) has established an evidence-based approach schools can implement to help prevent HIV, STDs, and unintended pregnancy among adolescents. It includes delivering **sexual health education**, increasing access to **sexual health services**, and promoting **safe and supportive environments**. This info brief provides an overview of this approach and information to help educators, staff, and administrators as they implement HIV, STD, and unintended pregnancy prevention efforts in their schools.

What Are the Risks? A Current Snapshot of Student Health

Data from CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey show that fewer high school students engage in health behaviors that put them at risk. But even though adolescents are making better decisions about their health, far too many are still at risk for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and unintended pregnancy.

46% of U.S. high school students did not use a condom the last time they had sex



More than **1 in 10** female students and **1 in 28** male students have been physically forced to have sex



19% of high school students have been bullied at school



Nearly **1 in 7** high school students misuse prescription opioids



More than **47%** of lesbian, gay, or bisexual students have considered suicide

Source: 2017 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey

- Some youth engage in multiple and serious risk behaviors like high-risk substance use* and sex without condoms, and go through harmful experiences such as being a victim of violence.
- Youth who engage in these behaviors or who have these harmful experiences are more at risk for a variety of negative health outcomes including HIV and STDs.
- These risks are more common among some youth—including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth, who are more likely to experience stigma, discrimination, family disapproval, social rejection, and violence. As a result, they are more likely to have poor health.

*High-risk substance use is any use by adolescents of substances with a high risk of adverse outcomes (i.e., injury, criminal justice involvement, school dropout, loss of life). This includes misuse of prescription drugs, use of illicit drugs (i.e., cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines, inhalants, hallucinogens, or ecstasy), and use of injection drugs (i.e., drugs that have a high risk of infection of blood-borne diseases such as HIV and hepatitis).



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What Works? CDC's Approach to School-Based HIV and STD Prevention

CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) has established an evidence-based approach to school-based HIV and STD prevention. It includes providing quality sexual health education, connecting students to sexual health services, and establishing safe and supportive school environments. These evidence-based strategies benefit all students. Further, activities related to health education and health services can be tailored to address health outcomes other than sexual behaviors, including high-risk substance use, violence victimization, and mental health. Promoting safe and supportive environments can address all of these health outcomes.

Sexual Health Education

Quality sexual health education (SHE) is a systematic approach to preparing students with the knowledge and skills needed to make informed health decisions to prevent HIV, STDs, and unintended pregnancy.

- Sexual health education includes planned, progressive learning objectives and outcomes across grade levels (K–12).
- Sexual health education addresses knowledge and skills students need before risk behaviors and health issues emerge.
- Effective SHE programs:
 - ✓ Are taught by qualified, trained teachers
 - ✓ Connect students to health services
 - ✓ Engage parents and community partners
 - ✓ Foster positive relationships between students and trusted adults.

Students who receive evidence-based SHE can reduce health risk behaviors and experiences and may improve their academic performance in school.



Why Are Schools Important for Promoting Student Health?

Schools offer valuable opportunities for improving adolescent health.

- ✓ They have direct contact with millions of students for at least six hours a day.
- ✓ Students generally attend school throughout much of their social, physical, and intellectual development.
- ✓ Many schools have staff with the knowledge to address critical health risk and protective behaviors.
- ✓ Many schools have the infrastructure to support a varied set of evidence-based approaches and interventions.



Benefits of Providing SHE to Students

- ↑ Knowledge to reduce sexual risk
- ↑ Condom negotiation skills
- ↑ Self-efficacy to delay sexual activity



Sexual Health Services

Sexual health services (SHS) give students access to preventive health care, such as STD testing, HIV testing, contraception, and condoms, and referrals to appropriate treatment, if needed.

- Through SHS, students can gain access to broad preventive health services, such as sexual risk assessments and counseling on healthy decision making and protective behaviors.
- Schools can connect students to SHS by providing the services on site or by referring students to youth-friendly health care providers in the community.

These services can provide students with information, education, support, referrals, and counseling for a broad range of health behaviors and experiences that can affect healthy development.



Benefits of Connecting Students to SHS

- ↑ Risk-reduction counseling
- ↑ HIV and STD testing
- ↑ Contraceptive use

Safe and Supportive School Environments

Creating safe and supportive environments (SSE) emphasizes aspects of school settings and family relationships that can protect adolescents and reduce their risk for HIV, STDs, and unintended pregnancy.

- These protective factors include school connectedness, parental monitoring, and parent-adolescent communication (both generally and specifically about sex).
- Safe and supportive environments connect adolescents to a network of caring peers and adults, including parents, other primary caregivers, and teachers.
- Improving environments can have a broad and lasting positive impact on health. It also establishes a context for sexual health education and sexual health services to be effective.



Benefits of Promoting SSE

- ↑ School connectedness
- ↑ Parental monitoring
- ↑ Parent-adolescent communication

Creating SSE involves schools, communities, families, and youth working together to protect students' health and improve academic performance.

For More Information

Schools provide students with the opportunity to learn the importance of behaviors and skills needed to engage in a healthy lifestyle now and into adulthood. Learn more about CDC's school-based approach to HIV and STD prevention at www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/programguidance.

Read additional info briefs in the *Adolescent Health: What Works in Schools* series at www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/whatworks.