

The Politics of Sex

Lindsay Briggs

March 2, 2011

Lindsay Briggs, '02, is Associate Instructor, School of Health, Physical Education, & Recreation, and is Project Coordinator for the Center for Sexual Health Promotion, both at Indiana University-Bloomington

I know a lot about sex. At this point in time I might be the most knowledgeable person that you know, but I hope that in your life you have the opportunity to talk with many more sex researchers. In addition to my sex research, I do a lot of work in Africa and so it only makes sense that I specialize in sex behaviors in Africa. I am also heavily involved in public health and sex research domestically. Most of what I'm going to talk about tonight is on the domestic front since that is probably something that is more tangible for you. So that is where this talk is coming from.

In addition to being a Ph.D. student and Associate Instructor at Indiana University, I also serve as a board member for the Indiana Family Health Council. That non-profit organization handles all of the Title X funding for family planning clinics in the state. IU is one of the largest sex research centers in the country. I work at the Center for Sexual Health Promotion, but we also have the Kinsey Institute, which a lot of people have heard about, particularly as the pioneer and namesake Alfred Kinsey has become more popular with the release of the movie *Kinsey* several years ago. The Kinsey Institute is not specifically health focused; they do research around a lot of sexuality topics, but we at the Center work closely with them on a variety of our health related studies. I am specifically concerned with sex as it impacts sexual behavior and, most importantly, health.

Sex is the second most important thing you will ever learn in your entire life. Second only to reading because reading really is fundamental; if you can't read, you're in for a tough time in life. So besides reading, sex is the second-most important thing that you will ever learn. People always say to me, "Yeah right, sex education . . . we learn about it for what, two weeks in seventh grade and we don't really ever study it again?" And I say yes, and I think that's wrong. It's absolutely wrong. For the majority of people, I think sex is more important than much that they will ever learn. Yes, biology is important. Yes, algebra is important. And for some people it's really important because their whole job is centered on that. But 99% of people in the world, statistically, *will* have sex at some point in their lives. It has really big consequences: if you don't protect yourself you could become pregnant, catch a life-altering disease, or even die. You can create another human life if you don't know about sex or if you're not doing something correctly. In what other subject can you accidentally create another person without really trying?

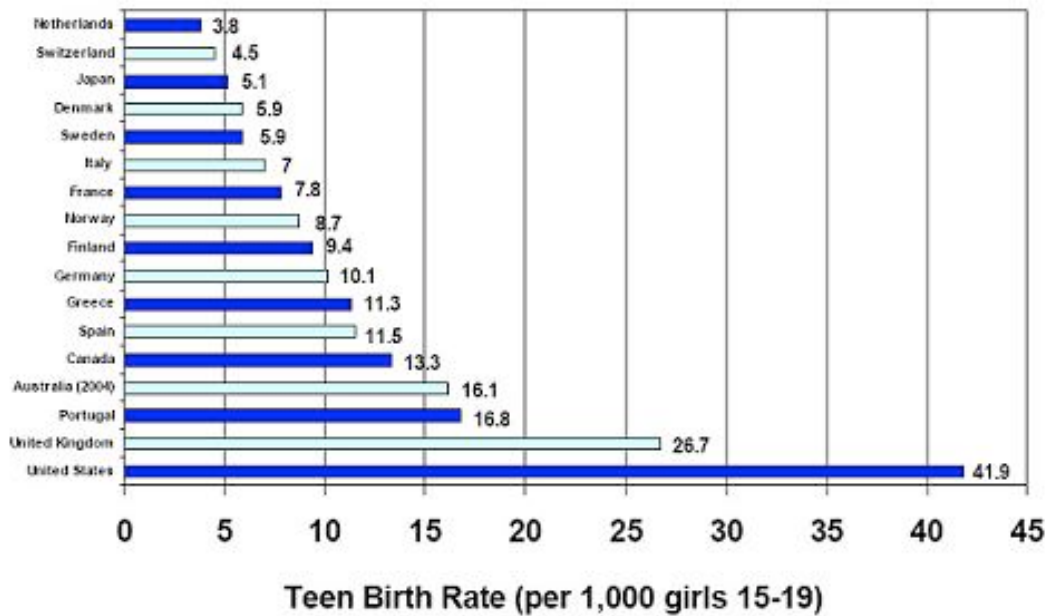
There are lots of other reasons why sex is important: pleasure, satisfaction, connection with a partner, and more. So all of these topics are really important and yet we say, “No, it’s the health teacher who talks about sex and shows some videos and then we’re done and we don’t have to worry about it ever again.” Again, I think that’s wrong.

Sex needs to be talked about at every grade level throughout a person’s educational career. Of course it needs to be developmentally appropriate, before I get accused of being a sex-crazed maniac. You talk about your body parts and empower children with correct anatomical names, and with each developmental stage you gradually progress with sex education until they are equipped with the knowledge they need to make healthy decisions about their bodies. I think that if we have sex education across the life span, people will become much more comfortable talking about it, and people will stop thinking of it as such a taboo topic. I remember the first time I started talking with Professor Nagengast about my sex education job and my sex research interests. I thought he was going to faint dead on the floor. He said, “Please stop saying ‘sex’ and don’t say ‘penis’ or anything like that!” At school I hear people talk about their fields of study so casually. “How’s O-Chem?” “Man, that Spanish test was hard!” But for many people, my field of study cannot be discussed so casually, at least to outsiders. For my friends and me, talking about a penis is no different than talking about oxygen or long division. It really is. We take our work very seriously. We talk about our work in a very different way than a lot of outsiders would talk about our work, but we talk about our work the same way you would talk about yours. I wish you all could go out and talk openly about sex and it wouldn’t be a big issue. I think many of our health outcomes related to sexual activity would be a lot better.

Let’s look at teen pregnancy rates. This is not to stigmatize teen parents, but most people would agree that being a teen mom or a teen dad is not something that is desirable if it can be avoided, particularly in the US. In other countries it’s a little bit different, but we aren’t really supportive of teens who are going to be young adult parents. The following chart displays the rates of birth per 1,000 girls ages fifteen to nineteen.

If you look at the US, almost forty-two girls are giving birth. Comparatively, in the Netherlands, there are only 3.8 girls per 1,000. Many other countries fall far below our rate. Most of them are European and most European countries have comprehensive sexuality education and much more liberal views on sexuality. You see sex discussed in a much different way in these countries. Take the media for example. Here we really are very Puritanical and conservative about sex and obviously it’s not really serving us well. The big scam in sexuality education is, “If you talk about it they’re going to go out and do it.” Well that’s false and it’s been proven time and time again; other countries talk about sex a lot more than we do and they’re having far less teen pregnancy than we are. So, obviously there’s an issue there. Either they

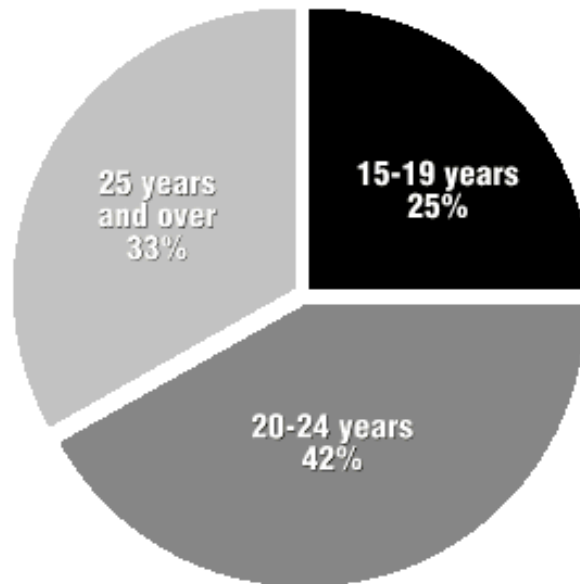
are having less sex in general, or they are more successful in getting people to make safer decisions when they do have sex.



* All birth rates are for 2006 unless otherwise noted.

Figure 1: Teen Birth Rate

Source: Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)



Source: Eng, TR, and Butler, WT, eds, *The Hidden Epidemic: Confronting Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1997.

Figure 2: Distribution of New Cases of STDs by Age

Now let's look at STIs more deeply. STI stands for sexually transmitted infection. I know some people may be unfamiliar with this term, but it is basically the same thing as a STD, or sexually transmitted disease. It is actually more correct terminology to say STI because not everything is a disease. HIV is an infection, not a disease. Each year in the US about nineteen million people become infected with one or more STIs. A lot of it occurs in young people: almost two-thirds in those age fifteen to twenty-four years old. Having an STI can lead to a lot of different health conditions as well. An untreated STI can lead to infertility, cervical cancer, penile cancer, anal cancer, and much more. All of these things can be drastically increased by STIs. And if you have one STI you're much more likely to get another STI, particularly HIV. So having an STI is a really big deal.

I mentioned "comprehensive sexuality education," but let me start by saying that the alternative to comprehensive sexuality education is usually abstinence-only education or "abstinence until marriage" education. Abstinence-only education is exactly how it sounds. These programs only talk about abstinence and not about contraceptives or sexual activity other than to refrain from it. You abstain from sex until you get married and then once you get married you stay faithful to your partner. That's all you need to know about sex. If you just do that, you'll be fine. We've actually gotten more conservative as we've gone along. We've regressed rather than progressed in terms of sexuality education. When I was in elementary through high school most schools had pretty decent sexuality education. It was done on a district level and it was not a big deal nationally. It's only in the last decade or so that sex education in schools has become a really hot issue. Abstinence-only education has been proven time and time again to be ineffective. The only studies that say it is effective have been done by organizations that do abstinence-only education. They never want to discuss their results in depth because that would reveal their shoddy research, which wouldn't hold up to the rigorous tests of academic research. The information comes from SIECUS, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, one of the largest and most respected sexuality education organizations in the US. They did a comprehensive review of thirteen abstinence-only programs and consistently found that, at best, such programs will delay sexual activity by about eighteen months. Eighteen months is not that long when you think about a fourteen-year-old who went through an abstinence-only program. In eighteen months they will still only be fifteen or sixteen, far short of the marriage standard these programs set. On a side note, marriage being the end goal of when you can have sex often excludes a very big group of people, most notably gays and lesbians who are not allowed to get married in many parts of the country, as well as people who choose not to get married. So what does abstinence-only education mean to them? Does that mean they have to be celibate for the rest of their life unless they choose to enter a heterosexual marriage?

When teens do start to have sex after those eighteen months they typically don't use contraceptives, so they have increased STI rates and increased rates of unplanned pregnancy because they

are uninformed. They haven't been educated about contraceptives, don't know how to use them, and don't know where to obtain them. They are also scared of contraceptives. They've heard a lot of false information because many abstinence-only education programs spread a variety of myths. For example, condoms never work so don't bother using them. And so when these teens do go to have sex they think, "Why would I use condoms? I've heard that they don't work anyway." So, that's where the research stands when we talk about abstinence-only education versus comprehensive sexuality education.

I know Professor Nagengast told you I'm the most knowledgeable person you will ever hear from on this topic, but it's not just me who thinks comprehensive sexuality education is important. National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation (which does a lot of health research), and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government did a national telephone survey about this topic. Only seven percent of Americans said there should be no sex education in schools. That's a really small number. So ninety-three percent think we should be talking about sex in schools. And of those people who think we should be teaching about sex in schools, only fifteen percent supported abstinence-only programs. Therefore, the majority of those surveyed think that comprehensive sexuality education or abstinence-plus should be the standard. Abstinence-plus programs, by the way, focus on abstinence as being a very good, positive thing that teenagers particularly should be engaging in, but these programs also understand the realities of the situation and therefore teach about contraceptives and other important topics. Additionally, thirty-six percent said abstinence shouldn't even be the main focus of sex education. So as you can see, we have a lot of people who think comprehensive sexuality is really important and something we should push.

So why don't we have more messages that are positive as they relate to sex education? If you bring up the topic of sex education it often gets very political, very quickly. It gets difficult to talk about and it's usually phrased negatively; the trend is to start talking about all the bad things that can happen and people love to use negative images to scare people. So why is that? For one, sex is confusing for most Americans. Sex is not so confusing if you know about it, but since we are afraid to become educated we're really confused. Yet at the same time we're absolutely fascinated and obsessed by sex. But we're also terrified and embarrassed about it, so we just can't bring ourselves to talk about it. Americans spend thirteen billion dollars annually on pornography. Of course this alone doesn't represent how fascinated we are with sex, but thirteen billion dollars is a lot of money for people who are uncomfortable talking about sex and don't want sex to be discussed in schools. We don't want to talk about sex, but we will view it a lot.

In another recent survey, looking at parent and child communication around sexuality issues, seventy percent of boys said they had not discussed with their parents how to use contraception before they engaged in sexual intercourse. When parents were surveyed, on the other hand, fifty percent admitted that they had not talked about the issue with their son. But wait, didn't seventy percent of the boys say,

“Nobody’s talking to me?” So we have twenty percent of the parents who say that they are discussing contraception, or think they are, but their sons are saying, “No, they’re not.” It is interesting to wonder what is going on there. Maybe the parents said something like, “Yeah, use condoms,” then “Who’s hungry?” and then *whoosh*, everyone went out to dinner. And then the kids are like, “Wait wha . . . ? Did you just say something to me about sex?” They are left pretty confused but the parents think, “Yup, check that off the list. Talked about condoms.” But are they making it an intentional conversation? Are they talking about it enough to make the message sink in? Teenagers, particularly young boys ages eleven to fourteen, may not have the best attention spans or enough maturity to let it sink it the first time. Parents need to talk about sexuality-related topics more than once and more than in a thirty-second fly-by conversation. This is how we can reduce that communication gap.

Ideally everyone’s parents would be engaged and would talk about these topics, but unfortunately we know that we do not live in an ideal world. This is where the “personal responsibility crowd” just doesn’t get it. That is why school-based sexual education is really important. Children spend more time at school than almost anywhere else and so school can play a vital part in their sexual education when parents are not able or willing to do that. Year after year, sexuality be addressed in school at age-appropriate levels. At eleven years old not everybody needs to hear about condoms. At age twelve you might start introducing the topic of sex. At age thirteen you could start talking about contraceptives. At age fourteen, depending on where you are and other factors, you might talk about how to use contraceptives. The same discussions should be happening in the home but unfortunately not all kids have involved, engaged parents who want to talk about these topics.

Ok, I’m going to get more political now. I try as much as possible to present this as unbiased, but inevitably my bias will show and many of you will be upset. There’s nothing I can do about it except stop talking, but that’s not why I was invited here. Unfortunately, the nature of my work is political. Not because I want it to be, but because many conservative politicians stick their noses in my work and muck it all up. Blame them.

Politicians on both sides love to use sex as a political tool. Unfortunately it tends to be used by Republicans more than Democrats for what, I think, happen to be not good things. If it weren’t so tragic, it would be really funny. Take a look at this nifty little image I found.



Christine O'Donnell Campaign Button, 2010

Source: http://www.zazzle.com/instead_of_voting_for_christine_odonnell_button-145165235282347372

People are so clever. And by “people” I do not mean Christine O’Donnell. I think she is the biggest buffoon ever. But I’ll give credit where it is due; she did retract her lame masturbation comments. She said something along the lines of, “Yes, when I talked about my anti-masturbation stance I was twenty. When you are twenty, you are much more naïve and likely to say things off the cuff. I don’t feel that way anymore. I’ve come to my senses.” But this was a big thing during the political campaign. Democrats used it to their full advantage: “Don’t vote for this lady because she thinks she has the right to tell you what to do in the privacy of your home.” Although she was retracting her statement everywhere, the damage had already been done. That’s politics for you. You make one silly statement and it stays with you forever.

Gay marriage is a huge topic, particularly now, and those on the Right love to use it as a political tool. Politicians use sex as a political tool because it gets people excited and gets them to support their party. Instead of focusing on important issues like taxes, the budget, and jobs, they will just say something like, “Oh! We need to talk about this sex issue!” And then everyone gets excited and whipped into this political fervor and it distracts from the country’s real problems. Just this week Obama said that the federal government was going to stop defending the Defense of Marriage Act, which prohibits gay marriage. Republicans then actually said, “We know that we have all of these really important issues like the budget and jobs, but we just cannot focus on those right now; we really need to worry about this now because that is just going to break us.” Really? We have people who have no jobs. We have to keep passing emergency budget measures. And right now you can’t even focus on those things because you’re so whipped up into a panic about gay marriage? Really? But that’s what these Republicans do because they can get those very vocal minorities get really excited about such issues. Those individuals think, “Oh no! I’m really scared about this and so I’ll go help them and fund their political campaigns because I know they care passionately about defending gay marriage.” But all it does is continue that bad cycle of

politics. So these Republicans use it as a tool to get people excited about something and distracted from noticing things that they aren't doing.

Planned Parenthood is another big news item right now. Conservatives love to talk about Planned Parenthood and abortion. It is a number one fundraising issue for big campaigns and they love to beat up Planned Parenthood because it makes them look real tough on "bad people." So let's talk about how family planning and sexuality education overlap and work together. The Republicans love to claim that they are the party of family values. It's largely Republicans who support abstinence-only education. So, they don't want you to know about sex and they don't want you to know how to protect yourself if you decide to have sex. They just want you to wait until you're married, go live behind your white picket fence, have your babies, and everything's fine. The Republicans are also largely against health care reform. Why is that relevant? Universal healthcare would provide access to information and options for young women, older women, all people who are of reproductive age. People without employer-provided health care could then go to their doctors and talk about family planning and other sexual health issues. But if you can't get to the doctor the chances of being educated about family planning are slim, particularly given the Republican stance on sexual education while at school. Republicans also keep attacking Medicaid. This program provides funding for people who are low income, and many of the people it covers are children. So, if women don't have insurance, just how are they supposed to go and make healthy reproductive choices? They can't be educated at school, they can't access contraceptives or get pre-natal care because of lack of insurance, and then when they turn up at the hospital and give birth, Republicans think those newborn babies shouldn't get health care either. Okay, so I'm still looking for the family values. I don't see any valuation of life or families in that string of scenarios.

Let's take it a step further. I mentioned earlier that I sit on the board of the Family Health Council in Indiana. We are a major recipient of Title X funding. Title X funding was created by President Reagan, shocking at this point in time, to fill a gap of care where sometimes Medicare, insurance, or other public support systems didn't reach. Title X funding is specifically for reproductive health. It helps women who want to get on contraceptives but can't afford them. It also provides pre-natal care for women who are pregnant. Right now Title X is under vicious attack by Republicans. They want to cut it entirely. Rep. Mike Pence, Republican from Indiana, is specifically attacking Title X and wants to defund Planned Parenthood because they "fund abortions." Of course, federal money doesn't fund abortions because of the Hyde Amendment; it only supports for all of the other "silly" reproductive health measures like HIV testing, pre-natal care, and Pap smears. But since three percent of Planned Parenthood's private money goes to fund abortions, he wants to cut out all of the federal money that doesn't fund abortions. Pence just attached it to the emergency budget bill that was passed yesterday. It still has to go to the Senate and thankfully it is very unlikely that the Senate would approve it. As a side note, every time people attack

Planned Parenthood, the organization rakes in more money because they are one of the most aggressive fundraising organizations in the country. The federal money they stand to lose spurs a fundraising effort that leads to donations from private individuals and from big corporations that are pro-choice. In the end Planned Parenthood actually makes a lot of money from all of this, because if the cuts are going to be defeated this year, they will still get their federal funding as well as all of the donations. So indirectly, Mike Pence is really their biggest fundraiser!

Let's go back to our thought experiment. The conservatives don't want to tell you how to avoid getting pregnant in school. They don't tell you how to take care of yourself by going to the doctor. If you become pregnant they don't want to pay for that pregnancy or for the baby after she or he is born, but they also didn't want you to abort that baby. So no matter what, you end up with a slew of bad options and poor outcomes. Where are those family values? What family are you valuing? They only value the families that are wealthy and are lucky enough to pay for private health insurance. For everybody else the message is pretty much, "Sorry, but screw your family." Therefore, you can see where politics has really impacted family planning and women's healthcare in general.

Now a side note on why I don't apologize for being biased about politics. I am always sensitive to political attacks on people. Being at Indiana University and associated with the Kinsey institute, every single year we're challenged by the many conservatives in Indiana. Every year the budget of Indiana University as a whole is held up because of the Kinsey Institute. Conservatives say, "We shouldn't fund Indiana University, which is a state institution, because they support work at the Kinsey institute and sex research is not worthwhile and we should not be spending our public money on this." So every single year the entire budget of this giant university is held up because of one small unit that does research, and most of the money that comes in to the Kinsey Institute is private money. So it's similar to how Pence wants to defund Planned Parenthood even though the federal money it receives doesn't go to the thing he opposes. So it's very personal to me when politicians use topics that they don't like as a reason to say, "Let's not fund them at all." The politicians with no direct ties to the issue use their personal biases to impact people who have tremendous ties to the issue. None of the wealthy and insured politicians in Congress, and most often they are men, are ever going to face a situation where they are a poor woman who is trying to make reproductive health choices with little or no resources. It's frustrating and annoying. And it really gets me fired up.

Finally, let's move to a lighter topic and talk about sex scandals. This is my chance to point out the hypocrisy of our politicians and get revenge for them being so annoying about family planning. Let's talk about my current favorite, Rep. Chris Lee. How awesome is he, all studly and posing?



Representative Christopher Lee, R-NY, and the photo he submitted on Craigslist
Source: CNN Online, via Gawker.com

More often than not, it seems to be Republican Representatives and Senators who find themselves in very embarrassing sexual situations. That's not to say that Democrats don't, for there have definitely been a fair share of them, but it seems the most embarrassing and ridiculous ones tend to be Republicans. Chris Lee actually took the smart path; as soon as the news broke, he immediately resigned instead of pretending it wasn't him or letting things drag on. This strategy worked out well. It was a topic for a week—he was “the Craigslist Congressman”—and then he went away. Others, like Newt Gingrich, will say condescending things about people and then months or years later we find out that they are doing all of the things about which they criticized others. Every time they talk about sexual immorality you can't help but think, “Yeah, but you're the one who has cheated on every wife you've had.” Or, “You're the one who engaged in gay sex and drugs with others.” Ted Haggard is a good example; although he is not a politician, he played a big part in the whole sexual morals debate. These people have the big mouths and tell you what to do, but in their private lives they do what they say no one else should be doing. It's ridiculous and hypocritical.

So what are the solutions? First and foremost, educate yourself about sexuality. I opened this talk by saying that sex is second-most important thing you will ever learn, and so everybody should personally become educated about it. If you didn't get the education in school, find out how to get it now. Then talk about sex in your home. Talk about it with your family. Talk about it with friends. Educate others. Break down those taboos and make sex something that's not such a scary subject. The more secretive and hidden it is, the less likely we will be to do something that's positive for people. Become an advocate for comprehensive sexuality education. Support organizations like SIECUS or Planned Parenthood, or whoever aligns with your own values and is doing the things you think are great. Support them in whatever way you can: volunteering, money of course, and other ways. Then interact with politicians and let them know where you stand. One of the biggest things we battle is a sense of apathy among young

people who think, “What can I do?” and “That person doesn’t connect to me in any way, so why bother?” Tell your representatives how you feel. You can send them a form letter or e-mail message about sexuality education. If you sign up for newsletters from Planned Parenthood or other groups I guarantee you’ll get lots of those emails. It’s easy and takes little time and effort. For those of you who are more passionate and have more energy, meet with your federal representatives! People overestimate the amount of time that it takes to contact them or somebody in their office. Go talk to them and say, “Look, this is how I feel about that issue.” This is important because often the most vocal people are those who have the more fringe or negative images of sexuality. As I said previously, only seven percent of people don’t think we should talk about sexuality education in schools. Unfortunately that seven percent minority is a really loud and vocal group and they aren’t afraid to meet with their political leaders. Interact with your leaders and balance the discussion. Let them know that you support the issue and that this is something that is really important. Don’t let them use these things as a political tool if you don’t believe in that. Thank you.