Health & Medicine

Let's Talk About Sex

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High-school students who are taught to communicate with their peers about sex are less likely to be sexually assaulted in college, a new study finds. Led by John Santelli, a professor of population and family health at the Mailman School of Public Health, the study is based on a confidential survey of 1,671 Columbia and Barnard students

and in-depth interviews with 150 more. It found that when high schoolers are taught how to decline unwanted sexual advances — a form of sex education known as refusal-skills training — they are half as likely to be assaulted in college compared to students whose sex education is limited to issues of birth control and STD prevention or those who receive no sex education at all.

Currently, just twenty-four states require sex-education programming of any kind. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has taken steps to roll back sex-education programs of the sort that the Columbia researchers found prevent sexual assaults, instructing public schools to prioritize abstinence-only education over programs that it says “normalize” teenage sex.

“Our research shows that we need to start sexuality education earlier,” says Santelli, whose study appears in the journal *PLOS One*. “We need a life-course approach to sexual-assault prevention, which means teaching young people about healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships before they get to college.”

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