



# How Gay and Bisexual Men Compensate for the Lack of Meaningful Sex Education

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## Introduction

The information shared in schools on sex education in the USA is highly variable depending on the state and sometimes city in which a student lives. Sex education is mandated in 24 states and the District of Columbia (DC), and HIV education is mandated in 34 states and DC (Guttman Institute 2017). However, the information shared with students varies widely depending on the socio-political environment of the state. The result of this variability is that some students receive little to no pertinent information on sexual health and sexuality, especially on information pertaining to sexual minorities (Estes 2016). The lack of inclusive sex education that discusses all aspects including same-sex behaviors and relationships, can lead to a higher number of higher risk sexual behaviors (e.g. condomless sex) among gay, lesbian and bisexual (LGB) students (Blake et al. 2001). Yet in many socio-politically conservative states in the USA, like Oklahoma, instructors are prohibited from discussing same-sex sexual behavior except that it is 'considered responsible for contact with the AIDS virus' (Guttman Institute 2017).

The current study sought to assess the quality and type of sex education that was offered to gay and bisexual men who grew up and currently reside in Oklahoma, a socially conservative and rural state. Oklahoma has been identified as a state that does not provide basic equality to gay and bisexual men (Human Rights Campaign 2017). This environment presents a unique opportunity to assess how gay and bisexual men compensate for the lack of inclusive sex education and sexual health information in a socio-politically conservative environment.

## Methods

- An online survey of 112 gay and bisexual men who live in Oklahoma were prompted to provide a few statements about their experiences with formalized sex education. The majority of the participants (58, 51.8%) reported receiving no formalized sex education. While not specifically prompted, 42 of the 58 (72.4%) provided statements indicating how they compensated for this lack of formalized sex education.
- To assess how similar men compensated for the lack of effective formalized sex education, 20 gay and bisexual men currently residing in a socially and politically conservative state completed a semi-structured interview that explored their experiences with formalized sex education and alternate ways to compensate for lack of information provided.
- Participants were eligible to be interviewed if they were born male, were proficient in speaking English, were over the age of 18, and identified as a man who has sex with men.
- Interview data from this study were analyzed using a qualitative approach to inductively identify and interpret concepts and themes that emerged from the interview transcripts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

## Results

### Theme 1: Discussing Sex is Shameful and Stigmatizing (n = 18)

I think for me personally it was that my parents never talked to me about sex. Umm, just like never. There was just never anything to be talked about ... I think that that's where it's - for me-it's like it's always been this weird thing that's never been talked about. And so I'm like, 'How do I talk about it?'

"Brad", 22, White

We never once had a formal sex class at all. My family didn't talk about it, so we didn't do the whole sex talk ... I mean, it was really - you didn't talk about it, and if you did you got in trouble.

"Hugh", 34, White

I went to a private Christian school so it was just kind of one of those things, that it was just assumed that you weren't having sex.

"Luke", 25, Black

### Theme 2: Inadequate Sex Education When Provided (n = 11)

'It was more about personal hygiene than about sex.'

"Justin", 39, White

[The instructor said] 'If it's wet and not yours, don't touch it.' So that is what stuck in my mind. I don't think it was [for me], it was more related to safe sex for straight people. It didn't seem like it applied as much to me.

"Chris", 25, Native American

I feel like it was [about] hitting puberty and they [women] having their menstrual cycles. Oh by the way, condoms and stuff like that too.'

"Joe", 24, White

I feel like it was meant towards like teaching young men to be respectful to women and not, you, know, try to force them into situations that they aren't supposed to be into when you're fourteen years old. It was strictly heterosexual.

"Peter", 26, White

### Theme 3: Motivated to Seek Alternate Resources for Sex Education

Subthemes: From Peers (n = 12), Internet and Other Visual Media (n = 6)

Well, from the people who worked in the bars, because, like, the drag shows at the end would say, 'Safe sex is the only sex,' at the end of the drag show.

"Paul", 48, White

"Neil", 45, White

Well most of it would be, like, one of the websites that I had profiles on. They would have links that you could click on about safer sex practices and things like that

"Chad", 26, White

If it wasn't for the internet I would have never known anything. It was - oh my god, it would have been porn! Yeah. The internet and in porn.

"Hugh", 34, White

[Learned about sex] through friends. When I turned 15, I started going to the gay clubs, meeting people and making friends

"Gary", 34, White

There was an episode of South Park about AIDS, and it's South Park so they make a lot of jokes about it, but they mentioned a celebrity on there, Magic Johnson. And just out of curiosity because I'd never heard of him, looked him up and it just kind of snowballed from there.

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## Sociodemographics (N = 20)

- Race/Ethnicity:** White (16), Native American (2), Black/African American (1), Chose not to identify race (1)
- Education:** HS Graduate (3), Some College or Tech School (6), Undergraduate Degree (7), Graduate Degree (4)
- Relationship Status:** Single (13), In a Partnership (3), Married (3), Divorced (1)
- Sexual Orientation:** Gay (19), Bisexual (1)

## Discussion

- Gay and bisexual men seek out other forms of sexual health information to compensate for the heteronormative and AOUM sex education they received as students living in Oklahoma, a predominantly rural and socially conservative state. This includes peers, information available on the internet, television programs, and pornography.
- The hesitancy to discuss same-sex sexual behavior and sexual health topics within the home and classroom due to the cultural environment creates barriers which last into adulthood. This is only exacerbated by the lack of sexual health programming available in socially conservative and rural states of the USA.
- As gay and bisexual teenagers mature into adults, they are faced with navigating sexual experiences with less accurate information than their heterosexual peers, thus increasing the potential risk of HIV/ STI transmission.
- Sexual health information in the education system in these socially conservative, rural areas are often heavily influenced by religious and political leaders (Blinn-Pike 2008) and therefore make wholesale changes unlikely at this time. Providers can help make accurate information available by:
  1. Conducting trainings for providers and educators on the importance of comprehensive sex education
  2. Training peer educators to provide sexual health information gay bars and other venues
  3. Using push notification on geolocation dating applications and websites to help individuals find locations for free condoms, HIV/STI testing sites, and delivering online sexual health information

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