



The Relationship between School Sex Education on Post-Adolescent Romantic Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

- Studies have found an association between receipt of sex education and delayed first sexual experiences (Lindberg & Zimet, 2012).
- Two main types of sex education have been identified: abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education. Abstinence-based education promoted no sex to prevent unintended pregnancies and STIs and delay the onset of early sexual initiation, while comprehensive education includes biological aspects of sexual maturation, HIV and STI prevention, reproduction, and contraception (Weaver, Smith, & Kippax, 2005).
- Comprehensive sex education has strong evidence in support of delaying sexual initiation as well as increasing contraceptive use among young people (Kirby, 2008).
- Few Abstinence-only programs had significant positive effects on sexual behavior (i.e. safe sex practices via contraception) and most of these same programs failed to delay initiation of sex (Kirby, 2008).
- Early exposure to sexual activity positively correlates with sexual abuse as well as teen pregnancy (Logan, Halcombe, Ryan, Manlove, & Moore, 2007).
- Victims of sexual abuse are more likely to report unprotected intercourse, multiple sexual partners, and pregnancy involvement than their non-abused peers (Homma, Wang, Saewyc, & Kishor, 2012).
- No research has been conducted to examine the link between sex education and relationship abuse; however, evidence of the effects of poor sex education suggests a correlation.

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: Those who had abstinence-only sex education will report more relationship abuse as adults than those who had comprehensive sex education

Hypothesis 2: Those who did not have formal sex education will report more relationship abuse as adults

METHODS

Participants	139 young adults
Ages	18 to 27 (M=21, SD=9)
Gender	Male: 44 , Female: 84 , Non-binary: 1
Romantic History	Single: 51, Casually Dating or "Hooking up": 23, In a Serious Relationship: 52, Engaged/Cohabiting: 2

Measures:

Relationship Power: An 8-item report adapted from the Decision-Making Dominance Subscale of the Sexual Relationship Power Scale (Pulerwitz, Gortmaker, & Dejong, 2000) was used to measure the level of dominance in decision-making in post-adolescent romantic relationships. ($\alpha=.63$)

Procedure

Young adults ages 18 to 27 participated in the study. A Qualtrics survey was distributed for participants to fill out anonymously. The survey asked questions about participants' sex education prior to college and their experiences within romantic relationships. Students were given resources for relationship abuse and offered the chance to win a \$15 Visa gift card.

Measures con't:

Sex Education: The Fresno Student Sex Education Survey (ACLU Northern California, n.d.) was used to measure the frequency and quality of sex education for students.

Emotional Abuse: A 22-item report adapted from The Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory: Items Discriminating Battered Women From Women in Distressed Relationships (Tolman, 1995) was used to measure levels of emotional abuse in post-adolescent romantic relationships. ($\alpha=.95$)

Relationship Control: A 15-item report adapted from Relationship Control Subscale of the Sexual Relationship Power Scale (Pulerwitz, Gortmaker, & DeJong, 2000) was used to measure levels of relationship control in post-adolescent romantic relationships. ($\alpha=.92$)

RESULTS

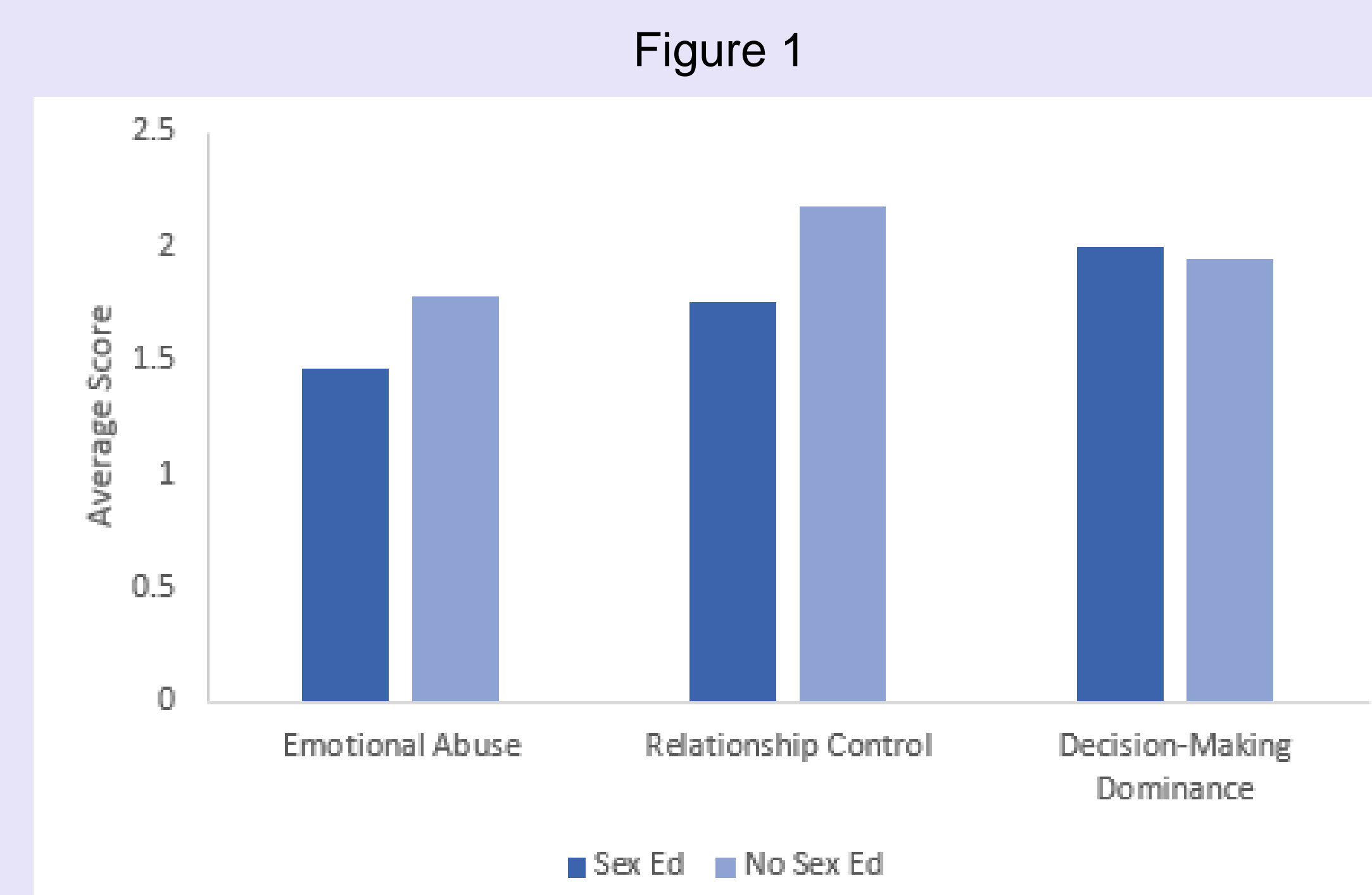


Fig 1: Sex Education and Abusive Romantic Relationships

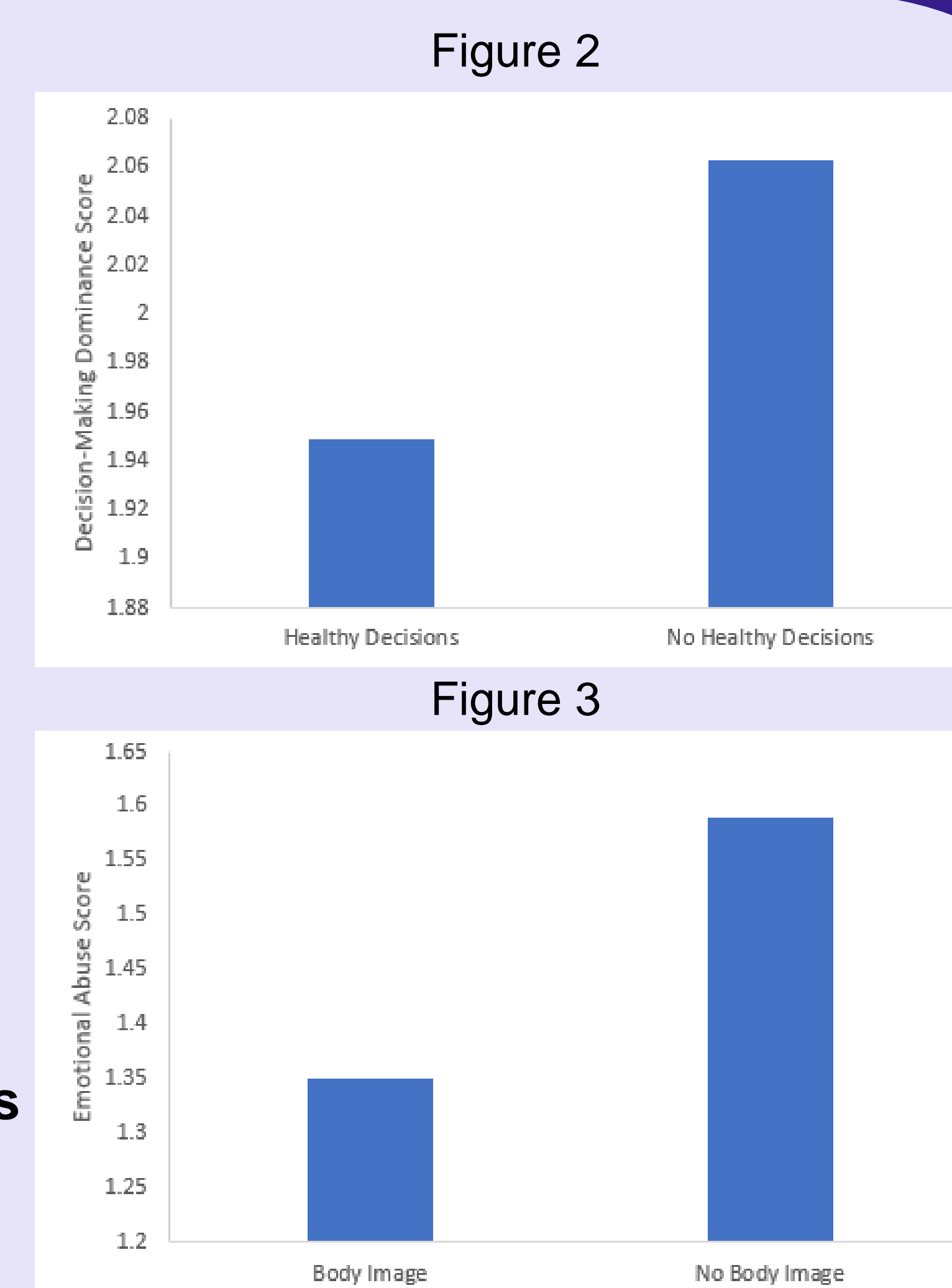
- Emotional Abuse: ($t = -1.771, p = .079$)
- Relationship Control: ($t = -1.58, p = .134$)
- Decision-Making Dominance: ($t = .677, p = .500$)

Fig 2: Healthy Decisions and Decision-Making Dominance Subscale

- Participants who did not learn about healthy decisions reported a higher mean score for Decision-Making Dominance than those who did ($t = 1.954, p = .05$)
- Higher scores indicate participant had more dominance, and lower scores indicate partner had more dominance

Fig 3: Body Image and Emotional Abuse

- Participants who did not learn about body image reported a higher mean score for emotional abuse than those who did learn about body image ($t = 2.148, p < .05$)



DISCUSSION

Hypothesis 1: Not Supported – There was no difference in relationship abuse between those who had abstinence-only vs. comprehensive sex education.

Hypothesis 2: Not Supported – There was no difference in relationship abuse between those who had sex education and those who did not.

Follow-up Analyses: Those who did not discuss Body Image in sex education classes had a higher mean score for Emotional Abuse Total than those who did discuss Body Image. Furthermore, those who did not discuss Healthy Decisions in sex education classes had higher mean score for Decision-Making dominance than those who did discuss it. However, those who discussed Healthy Decisions had a mean score indicating more evenly weighted decision-making between both partners.

Conclusion While sex education and romantic relationship abuse are not directly related, certain subjects taught within sex education appear to be associated with decreased levels of relationship control and emotional abuse.

Limitations We had a relatively small sample size, especially in those who did not experience any form of sex education (N=14). We likely did not have the power to detect an effect if one was present. This study was also retrospective when asking about sex education experience, so it is possible participants did not have accuracy when thinking back as far as 5th grade. Finally, in this study we only identified whether students had learned about a topic, not the quality or effectiveness of this delivery.

Future directions Future studies should examine how ethnicity and socioeconomic status play a role in access to sex education. Because differences in relationship quality were present based on the subjects learned, future studies could also investigate other sources of information where people learn about sex education such as the home. Due to the retrospective design, future researchers could follow a sample of adolescents from the time they are enrolled in a sex education course through young adulthood to see associations with future relationships in a prospective study. Finally, future studies could examine the quality of the experience of sex education, not just whether they were taught it.

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