

- S1 00:10 From the beautiful campus of Texas A&M University, The Sydney and J.L. Huffines Institute for Sports Medicine and Human Performance in the Department of Health and Physiology brings you the sports medicine podcast. Our mission is to make sense of and connect the science, practice and application of the latest findings in sports medicine and human performance to the real world. Here's our host, the director of the Huffines Institute, Dr. Tim Lightfoot.
- S2 00:34 Hello, and welcome to the weekly edition of the Huffines Institute for Sports Medicine and Human Performance podcast. I'm your host, Tim Lightfoot and I want to thank you for joining us this week and taking the time to download us. Every week, we bring you interesting people in the world of human performance, exercise science, and many cases, general health, where it's special. It's pertinent to the things that we've been talking about. Today is no exception. We have Dr. Buzz Pruitt with us today. He's here from Texas A&M, a professor of health education, welcome to the podcast, Buzz.
- S3 01:03 Thank you very much.
- S2 01:04 Well, you're more than welcome. Let me tell the folks a little bit about you and then we'll get rocking and rolling. Dr. Pruitt has a doctoral degree in Health Education from the University of North Texas. He is a professor on Health Education division of the Department of Health and Kinesiology at Texas A&M University, and he conducts research that focuses on the history, principles and philosophy of health education, human sexuality and teen pregnancy prevention programs. You may be saying to yourself, I was tuned into a sports medicine program, now all of a sudden, we're talking about pregnancy prevention programs. Primarily, it's because last week you heard on the podcast Dr. Jim Pivarnik from Michigan State talked about exercise and pregnancy, and talked about especially a couple of well known cases of athletes who became pregnant during the season and the issues that those caused. And so, we wanted to talk to Dr. Pruitt, who is a well-known expert in this area about things to think about. And plus, sex ed seems to be a topic that people like to talk about, right? [chuckle]
- S3 02:01 Apparently so. Yes.
- S2 02:03 Let's just start off. Let's desensitize some of this. Sex ed seems to have such negative connotations, in the schools, in society. Why is that the case, and why shouldn't it be the case?
- S3 02:20 Well, I might take issue with that. I don't think it carries a lot of negative connotations for most people. The problem is, for a very small number of people, it's frightening. It's very negative, and they're outspoken about it. Most of the folks in the US, most of the parents - and when I say most, I mean better than 90% - would like to have sexuality education in the school curriculum, in the high school curriculum especially, and in the middle school curriculum. That's been the case for many years, so I wouldn't say there's a lot of negative connotation. There's certainly a lot of attention given to this subject. And people are excited to talk about it, afraid to talk about it, willing to ask questions. The interesting thing about sexuality education from my point of view having done it, I guess you do it. Having participated in sexuality education and conductive research on sexuality education and on evaluations on sexuality education programs, the interesting thing is we don't know what we're doing. [chuckles]
- S2 03:34 Really?
- S3 03:35 The more we study it, the more we find out that we don't know that much. And so, we wind up retreating back to the power of knowledge and the hazard of

ignorance. And that's the foundation of what we do in sex education.

- S2 03:50 Let's unpack that a little bit. Doesn't that what you just said, your ammunition to these people who say sex education is better left at home with their parents?
- S3 03:58 Yes. I think it probably does. Wouldn't it be nice if we had a list of five things that you could do and that would produce the outcome that everyone wants for sex education?
- S2 04:10 Right.
- S3 04:11 There's some problems. What does everyone want as far as an outcome from sex education is concerned? Do they want what I think most of the professionals want, which is something that represents healthy sexuality? Or do they want total abstinence? Where there's a large body politic out there. And I mean truly, a body politic that believes strongly that's the outcome that is desired in sex ed. Do they want knowledgeable people who can avoid sexually transmitted diseases? Avoid pregnancy? The debate is what you want out of it.
- S2 04:52 Or just a reduction in teen pregnancy.
- S3 04:54 Or just a reduction in teen pregnancy, but we don't know how to reduce teen pregnancy even though we've reduced teen pregnancy. This is very complicated research because variables are so great. I've often been quoted on-- when I say sexuality education is not rocket science, it's far more complex than rocket science. It's not exercise physiology, it's far more complex than exercise physiology, because of the human element that's involved, because of the very motivations, interests. And then you throw in biological drives just to stir the mix. It's a very complex area, and there are wonderful people, passionate people, working all sides of the issue constantly and it filters into policy making at the government level. It filters into religious positions. It filters into changes in society such as what we've seen lately with the place of gay marriage. So, a very complicated issue.
- S2 06:00 So in general, and as you just said, sometimes this area may not predispose itself to generalities. But in general, we've heard a lot over the last 15 years or so about the abstinence-only types of programs and so forth. Have those been as good at - let's just take one metric, reducing teen pregnancy - as other more traditional sex ed programs?
- S3 06:24 I have seen no evidence that the abstinence-only programs can be tied to a reduction in teen pregnancy. Now, I've seen a lot of efforts to try to tie the abstinence-only programs to a delay in sexual debut. And that in itself probably does make a difference, but those data are questionable. The science behind abstinence-only is really kind of-- it's kind of mixed. The abstinence-only initiative-- I spent five years studying abstinence-only. It's a very elaborate effort to basically direct the kids not to have sex. The motive is not sex. The outcome that matters would be a delay in sexual initiation and starting to be sexually active. There are no data that support that acts, no credible data. There are data. That's part of the fun of this field is there are data that support this kind of thing but some of those data are made up or they're created out of very poor research designs. The credible research would suggest that most of what we're doing in the name of abstinence education has not only not worked, it might even create an ideation that would move the needle in the wrong direction.
- S2 07:51 Which means that would-- they'll make the problem even worse?
- S3 07:54 You're a statistician and you're looking for statistical significance. The changes that-- we've been able to see incredible data that result from abstinence-only initiatives have not fallen outside what we would call statistically significant. They also haven't fallen in the other direction. How I so-- so really what we're

saying is, abstinence-only is not doing anything.

S2 08:22

Yeah, because in most cases we're looking for something that makes a change 95 of 100 times, and that's kind of the general level of scientific proof across all branches of science, not just abstinence only science. And so, anything else is--  
[crosstalk]

S2 08:39

-- means it doesn't have an effect?

S3 08:40

It doesn't have an effect. We saw in our research, we found lots of hints that things - at the middle school especially - there might be a slight positive effect, at the high school, there might be a slight negative effect. We never found anything that we could really put on paper and say this was significant, this was really a big impact. Which means that telling kids not to have sex is probably not working very well. It's not doing a lot of harm, but who knows?

S2 09:15

I guess really, we should make, I think, clear and - I won't speak for you, I'll speak for myself - I think that our spirit in this conversation is not about whether premarital sex is wrong or right. We're just concerned about the health behaviors of these things. And we'll leave the moral judgments to the parents and so forth and so on.

S3 09:35

Speaking of health, there's every reason to support a delay in sexual activity from a public health perspective. Teenagers do tend to pick up sexually transmitted infections if they're sexually active, and they don't if they're not. They tend to have unwanted pregnancies if they're sexually active and they don't if they're not. So, there's a lot of reasons why the concept of abstinence has no real enemy. The problem is, it becomes unrealistic after a while. It's a very strong belief among policy makers who have a great deal of trouble voting against it. The federal government's been finding absent programs since 1996. We haven't seen a lot of results from that. Now, we've also seen during that period of time, however, a trending down of teenage pregnancy. You could jump to the conclusion that that's because we're telling kids not to have sex but we can't tie those two together. You could jump to the conclusion that that's a better informed teenager. You might have an easier time with that, but we still don't have the strong evidence that ties that together. That's why I open my comments with the fascinating thing about sex education is that after 40 years of studying it, I think I know less now than I know 40 years ago.

S2 10:56

The more we know, the less we understand?

S3 10:58

Maybe, so.

S2 10:59

To quote Don Henley in the Eagles. [laughter]

S2 11:02

Let me go to the only ups inside then. Some of the criticisms about sexual education programs in schools has been is that the fear is that it makes kids sexually active earlier. Is there any evidence that that's the case?

S3 11:18

I've seen none. I've seen actually the opposite. I've seen credible data that would suggest that comprehensive sexuality education-- by comprehensive, we can get technical with the names of this but there is an abstinence-only version of sex education, there is a comprehensive form of sex education. The comprehensive includes messages, information about birth control - condoms, for example - as well as information about abstinence. The evidence suggests that the comprehensive approach is a little more effective in protecting kids - if that's the right term to use - in delaying sexual initiation. Again, not very compelling. There is just so much that goes into why a teenager have sex that can't be intervened by education. It's not as simple as many would lead you to believe. It's not as simple as saying don't have sex.

S2 12:26 Or just say no.

S3 12:26 Or just say no.

S2 12:29 I've had one proponent who said 'Well, just tell them that if they get excited, you have them put Lysol on their genitals.

S3 12:35 Great.

S2 12:36 And that's not the way to go either.

S3 12:39 Hardly. That's not humorous to a teenager. [chuckles] It's not really humorous to me either. There is an amazing-- in some of our research, we were trying to define the concept of abstinence. And we encountered one interview with one gentleman that said the definition of abstinence is never having a sexual thought until you're married. That's the kind of ludicrous idea that's out there. Well, human beings are not that way. They're not built that way.

S2 13:07 Especially going through puberty.

S3 13:09 Especially going through puberty. The feeling about abstinence is so strong, that it's become-- I've actually put together a word that represents it. Most of the time, we deal philosophically with issues. Philosophy comes from a Latin word that means love and wisdom, love of wisdom. The proponents of abstinence education approach the entire subject with a philodoxical approach.

S2 13:43 [chuckle]

S3 13:45 Doxi meaning belief, phila meaning love. They love the belief so strongly that they cannot face the results of science. So don't confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up, and that's the proponent of abstinence-only. So, all of the science that raises the question of why are we spending money this way, it doesn't matter because the mind is made up. We have to tell kids not to have sex.

S2 14:16 Now, you hear from some, I guess, corners of this discussion, that there's a problem with sex ed programs because the parents want to teach the children themselves. Is there data out there that suggest how many parents actually share the birds and the bees with their kids?

S3 14:33 There's actually studies going on continuously and it's hard to get a handle on. Parents have a concept that they are communicating about sex in a much higher rate than the kids will report. So, the kids will report that the parents are talking about it a moderate amount. The parents are saying I'm talking about it constantly. It's not as simple as that, I don't think. The overwhelming evidence is parents want sexuality education coming from all sides. They don't have a problem with schools doing it, they'll deal with it at home. They don't have a problem with churches dealing with it, which by the way, I think some of the more dangerous sex education is probably going on in churches and not in schools where you have people trained as educators and understand adolescent development and so on.

S3 15:25 Churches are conducting sex ed programs with volunteers. And their messages, quite often, are fairly abrupt, totally judgmental, and run the risk of producing more sexual dysfunction in later life than anything that would happen in the schools. So the general public probably says well, 'Leave it to the parents and if not the parents, the churches.' No, that's not the general public, they see through that. Now, there are people that say that, but parents want some help. The parents that don't want any help are also choosing to home-school their kids to buffer them from society. They're protecting them in many, many ways. That's their choice. But most parents, 90+% of parents in middle school and high school would like to see the subject dealt with, and they welcome the

opportunity at home. By the way, my freshmen will report to me that their parents are talking much more to them about sex than my freshmen 30 years ago would say.

S2 16:31 Wow. So that's increased?

S3 16:31 I think so.

S2 16:32 Do you think part of that is due to the fact that it's widely thought that media, especially, surrounding the kids nowadays, is more sexually-laden than it has been in the past?

S3 16:42 Absolutely.

S2 16:43 We're getting head shakes from the producers here which who are younger as well.

S3 16:47 And people that are in the media, that work in the media-- not only the media, but the internet. And I'll select it out. We're seeing - and I'm not doing this research - but there is research going on now that would suggest that the average 14, 15-year-old is learning about sex online in porn sites. Well, that can't be healthy, yet, they can get online and they can get to porn sites very quickly. Then they resolve what they see in the media as well in the general media - what's on TV, the language they use, the suggestiveness and the plain blatant sex sells idea with marketing. You can see why a young person today is being hit from all sides. Mom and dad want to be in that conversation, and they should be in that conversation.

S2 17:41 Do they need to be in the conversation earlier now than they used to be?

S3 17:44 Absolutely.

S2 17:45 I mean, that kind of thinking my background was 11, 12, 13 when you got the talk. And now, it seems like it needs to be at what? Birth?

[laughter]

S3 17:56 I'm not kidding. At birth. The standard question is, when the sex education begin, and the answer is now birth. Education takes a lot of forms. It's not just telling kids what to do. It's not just having the talk. Even the messages from an affectionate couple to a baby are critical to sexual development. It starts at the beginning. And then when the child becomes verbal, it takes on words, and the words then are compared to the behaviors. Like I said, it's not rocket science. It's far more complex than rocket science. [chuckle]

S2 18:40 If we have folks that are listening, and maybe their kids have got sex ed at school, what are some hallmarks of good sex ed programs that have been shown to work? I understand the outcomes may be a little bit nebulous but let's use the big generic one and that's healthy sexual behavior with reduction of teen pregnancy.

S3 19:01 I think probably the comprehensive non-judgmental information, the power of knowledge versus the hazard of ignorance is really critical. I would look at the curriculum of my child's school, and I would say, 'Is this accurate? Is this medically accurate or just simply accurate?' If the information that was being told to my child was blatantly inaccurate, or carried a culturally hazardous message - for example, if they were taught boys will be boys - that's inappropriate. I would question that. Boys will be boys is a justification for rape. Yet, it has been a part of some curricula for some generations. Just because teenagers have hormones doesn't mean they have no control over their behavior. They can control their behavior. In fact, legally, they have to control their behavior. We should never have curricula that say teenagers are just--

S2 20:15 Hormone driven.

S3 20:17 -- hormone driven and they don't use their brain. No, that's not the message that should be coming out. So, accurate information. I'm biased in this case, but I think non-judgmental information as well. Non-judgmental presentations, presentations that affirm the dignity and worth of every person in the classroom. Which means, not presentations that select out the gay kid and say there's something wrong there, but presentations that recognize the diversity that is in a classroom and that diversity includes sexual orientation, even in high school - it begins to show to professionals even earlier than that - to not create education programs that select out certain students and devalue them simply because that's a judgment on the part of the teacher. I want a sex ed program that values abstinence and promotes it in rational ways - with good logic, not emotion. None of this pet-your-dog-not-your-date kind of message but--

[laughter]

S2 21:44 Haven't seen that, that's a bumper sticker?

S3 21:47 Yeah, but a program that empowers kids regarding the stage of life they're in. I also want a sexuality education program that recognizes the stage of life they're in. If you see an effort to do sex education for very young children, for example, that is all based on a metaphor. Holy mackerel, five-year-olds are not developmentally capable of processing a metaphor and yet you'll see curriculum that are designed metaphorically. It sounds good to the teacher and to the adult, but the kids are not ready for it. So I would say developmentally appropriate. I can go on on that one. [laughter]

S2 22:38 These are all great points to think about. I think that as we start to wrap up though, I think the question that I want to ask since you've worked in this area for so long is how do we get from where we're at to where we need to be with sex education? How long is it going to take before this is not such a hot button topic, especially in a school setting, as it has been in the past?

S3 23:06 I think there's some real encouragement and then there is some real concern. The real encouragement is in schools and in areas where there is active involvement on the part of parents, then the needle seems to be pushed a little bit in the positive direction. Parents that want sexuality education in their schools get involved. They are involved with volunteering in the classroom with the Parent-Teacher's Association. They visit the schools. They pay attention to what's going on. Not just the parents that don't want anything taught, the parents that do want things taught. Participation in the local school would be important. Unfortunately, a lot of what happens in sexuality education comes down from above, that is state policies and even federal policies. It's hard to be involved in the development of state policies or federal policies.

S2 24:04 Especially on the local level.

S3 24:06 Yeah, but it can be done. There are activists around, and by activists, I mean you'd have to be an activist to attend state board of education meetings, to speak at state board of education meetings, to speak to the kinds of panels that influence laws and policies. It sounds far-reaching, but elected officials need to hear the message that sexuality education is an important concern for lawmakers, for policy makers, for leaders in our field. And the only way that happens is with participation.

S2 24:45 The dangers is if they only hear it from the minority, that's what we get.

S3 24:49 They are hearing it from the minority, and the danger is the majority is not speaking up as often. Now, there are some that are, and the good news is I think we do have more of a dialogue going on now about sexuality education. When I

got into this business 35, 40 years ago, the question was, do we or do we not have sex education? Now, the question is not do we or do we not. The question is, what kind do we have? The kind of sex education that shows positive results, healthy results, are the kind of sex education that is demeaning and flaunts the power of ignorance.

- S2 25:29 That's the type of sex education that doesn't work?
- S3 25:32 In my estimation, that's the kind that does not work.
- S2 25:34 Okay.
- S3 25:35 The value of ignorance versus the power of knowledge. That's what it's all about. We have plenty of evidence that empowering kids with knowledge is not a bad idea.
- S2 25:46 Yeah. They can be pretty bright.
- S3 25:49 They can be real bright. They can handle some of the mixed messages that they face. Don't have sex, but wear a condom if you do. That's not over the head of a teenager. They can handle that.
- S2 26:00 Yeah.
- S3 26:01 Despite what a lot of people would lead you to believe. They think that we've got to somehow purely represent our point of view. No, it's a real tough world out there, and teenagers can get accustomed to mixed messages, grey areas, difficult decisions. And when they get into that position, they need a loving parent and they need caring professionals to stand by them and get them through that time.
- S2 26:25 Well in one sense, what you just said really struck home and that was, it can be a tough world out there and if we want our kids to be the best they can be, we want to arm them with as much information as we can.
- S3 26:36 I think we do.
- S2 26:36 The tools.
- S3 26:38 We want to arm them with information. We also want to teach them how to find information, how to screen information, how to find the expertise that they need without going to porn sites, without going to their friends only for the kind of information they need to direct their path. And this can be done. There are professionals out there that do this and they do it very well. They face a continuous opposition from people that are just afraid to talk about sex in public or they are truly anti-sex. They believe that we should just be telling kids, No, don't do it. It's a very selfish message to say to someone, I told them not to have sex, because what you're saying is I did my part. I told them no, and I don't care about what they do. I just don't. No, we need to care about teenagers more than that. We need to quit treating them like they're problems to be solved and start treating them like they're resources to be developed; people to be loved.
- S2 27:42 You know what? We just got the sign that we are almost out of time, so that is a great way to wrap up here. We're going to wrap up by giving you an opportunity to give us your take-home message. And if that was your take-home message, we can just repeat it.
- S3 27:56 Well, I don't know if that was my take-home message. My take-home message really is, "As soon as we think we know what we're doing, we find out we don't." There's an awful lot going on in this field and we should be very, very skeptical about someone who says they know exactly what the answer is. Because, at least for the last four years, I haven't seen it.
- S2 28:20 Great job. Thank you for being with us.

S3 28:22 Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

S2 28:24 We had a great conversation. And I want to thank you all for joining with us today. Our regular listeners know that this is the time in the podcast when we bring in a producer and let them ask a podcast question of the week. And so here with the podcast question of the week, is Aland.

S4 28:41 According to Dr. Pruitt, when should sex education start?

S2 28:46 Good podcast question of the week. Be the first one to send us the correct answer via email at [Huffinespodcast@hlkn.tamu.edu](mailto:Huffinespodcast@hlkn.tamu.edu) and you'll win one of those nifty podcast T-shirts. So again, Buzz, thank you for being with us.

S3 29:04 Thank you very much. It's a pleasure.

S2 29:06 Glad to have you here. Thank you all for taking the time to tune in and listen. And we hope that you join us next week when we have another interesting individual from the world of sports medicine, human performance and health education with us. And until then, we hope that you stay active, stay healthy, and we'll leave it at that.

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