

Beyond The Birds And The Bees: Surviving Sex Ed Today

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Sexual and reproductive educator Lena Solow teaches students in the Bronx during an after-school class.

Christopher Gregory for NPR

It's after hours at Rafael Hernandez, an elementary school in the Bronx, and room 421 is in an uproar.

It's what you would expect from a sixth-grade sex education class learning how to put a condom on.

Sex education. The very concept makes a lot of people cringe, conjuring images of teenage giggles and discomfort. It's also a subject a lot of teachers would rather avoid.

But Bronx-based teacher Lena Solow is more than happy to talk about the birds, the bees ... and beyond.

Solow has been teaching for 10 years. She covers the topics you'd expect: how to prevent STDs, pregnancy. But Solow talks about way more than going all the way. "One of my biggest goals as a sex educator is to be sex-positive," she explains, "to talk about pleasure and to talk about sex not just as something that just makes babies."



Solow demonstrates how to use a female condom.

Christopher Gregory for NPR

Dressed in a leather jacket with tousled hair, Solow looks a little like the Joan Jett of sex educators. She remembers her own elementary school education as less than stellar. "We had mostly the gym teachers teaching us sex-ed," she smiles. "I definitely had spelling tests as a big part of my sex-ed when I was in middle school: 'Spell gonorrhoea. Spell gonococcus. Now you pass or don't pass health.' Literally, that was what was prioritized."

Solow now works for [WHEDco](#), a Bronx-based community development organization that includes sex education in its programs for youth. Solow teaches along with peer educators — high schoolers who assist her teaching.

Peer educators are a key part of the equation, advocates say, especially with so many kids exposed to information about sex. Bianca Laureano is a co-founder of the [Women of Color Sexual Health Network](#). She says having instructors who share the students' backgrounds, "affirms young people's identities, and they can feel comfortable speaking with someone who not only mirrors their own cultural experiences, but also gives them the example of someone who has persevered. Resilience."



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There are no spelling tests in this class. But Solow does talk to kids about writing. Sexting, that is, and the legal ramifications of sending and receiving racy pictures of underage youths, even if they themselves are well underage. It can count as child pornography, she warns.

This is an example of how, while these students are really young, they already know — or think they know — a lot about sex. "My seventh graders, every single boy in that class has asked me a very explicit question about porn," she reflects. "Kids are getting information about sex and examples of what sex looks like in a lot of different ways already. It's actually not even about saying, 'Oh, we should be giving them information.' It's actually about saying, 'We need to be supplementing the information that they already have.' "



Solow talks to a student about an IUD.

Christopher Gregory for NPR

Beyond the basics, Solow is delving into topics that many teachers would skirt. Things like tolerance. Solow recently asked her students if they thought LGBT people would feel comfortable at the school. A lot of the kids say they didn't think so.

When I visit Solow's classroom at Rafael Hernandez Dual Language Magnet School, she's having the kids draw posters to make LGBT kids at the school feel welcome.

Things almost immediately start getting complicated. One boy, clearly uncomfortable, complains, "This is nasty."

"What's nasty about it?" Solow inquires.

"It's not natural," another one chimes in. "Our parents taught us not to become lesbians or gay ... we look up to them, and basically just listen to what they say."

Solow pushes back, gently.

"But can you think about how, just like you don't like it when people say things like that about you," she asks, "how somebody who was gay or lesbian would feel bad if they heard the things you were saying?"



"Kids are getting information about sex in a lot of different ways already," says Solow. "It's about supplementing the information that they already have."

Christopher Gregory for NPR

There's an uncomfortable silence. The student shifts nervously in his chair, and changes the subject.

I ask Solow how she walks the line between teaching about sex without contradicting what's taught at home.

"The conversation we want to have is not, 'I want to have a fight with you about your parents,' " she explains. "Listen. Everybody has different ideas about sex and sexuality. And we're in this classroom to make it a space where people can figure out for themselves what makes sense for them, and not judge the choices of others."

A group of boys in Solow's class are putting the finishing touches on their LGBT welcoming poster. They've written the word 'equality.'

They call Solow over, showing off their work.

"Tell me why you wrote equality there?" Solow asks them.

"Everybody is equal, so they don't have to judge each other," the boys respond. "They're still human. They deserve the same respect as everybody."

Outside, the grownups can keep fighting over these issues. But Solow says for a couple of hours in room 421, we can all agree to talk about sex respectfully.

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