Abstinence was the message most frequently identified as most important in 1999 (by 41% of teachers), while responsibility was the highest-priority message in 1988 (cited by 38%). STDs (including HIV and AIDS), reproductive facts and self-esteem were more likely to be cited as one of teachers’ three most important messages in 1999 than they were in 1988. In contrast, the emphasis placed on contraception decreased: Teachers were less likely to cite the topic in 1999 than in 1988, either as their most important message (2% vs. 5%) or as one of their three most important messages (15% vs. 22%).

Seven teachers in 10 said that students who receive sexuality education that stresses abstinence are less likely to have sexual intercourse than students who do not, while 86% said that students who are taught to use contraceptives if they are sexually active are more likely to use them if they have sexual intercourse than are students who are not taught about contraceptives; 6% said that neither type of instruction is effective. One in five teachers (19%) thought students taught to be sexually abstinent, but to use contraceptives if they do have sex, are more likely to become sexually active than those taught only about abstinence (not shown).

Almost all sexuality education teachers in public secondary schools said that students should be taught about sexual development, sexual behavior and its possible negative outcomes (Table 2). Thus, 98% or more believed that by the end of grade 12, courses should have covered puberty, how HIV is transmitted, STDs, how to resist peer pressure to have sexual intercourse, implications of teenage parenthood, abstinence from intercourse, dating, sexual abuse and nonsexual ways to show affection.

Secondary school sexuality education teachers were about as likely in 1999 as in 1988 to think that courses should include information on the implications of teenage parenthood, STDs and how HIV is transmitted; they were slightly more likely to think they should cover abstinence from intercourse by the end of grade 12. However, 1999 survey respondents were much more likely to think that all of these topics should be covered in grade seven or earlier. The proportion who believed that implications of teenage parenthood should be taught by the end of grade seven increased by 16 percentage points between the two surveys. There were smaller increases in the proportion who cited that timing for instruction on STDs other than HIV (11 percentage points), abstinence from intercourse (11 percentage points) and how HIV is transmitted (five percentage points).

Although a majority of the teachers (78–93%) believed sexuality education courses should cover birth control methods, factual information and ethical issues about abortion, where to go for birth control, the correct way to use a condom, and sexual orientation, the proportions favoring coverage of these subjects were lower than they were for the other topics.