sexual abuse and abstinence from intercourse are taught by 41–47% of all sampled teachers. A very small proportion of teachers (1–9%) cover birth control methods, abortion and sexual orientation.

Timing of Sexuality Education

• Teachers’ recommendations. The majority (67–100%) of fifth- and sixth-grade sexuality education teachers believe that schools should cover a number of topics—puberty, how HIV is transmitted, STDs, sexual abuse, abstinence from intercourse, how to resist peer pressure to have sexual intercourse, implications of teenage parenthood, dating and nonsexual ways to show affection—in grade six or earlier (Table 1). The majority (54–97%) also say that by the end of grade five, schools should have taught about nonsexual ways to show affection, STDs, how HIV is transmitted, sexual abuse and puberty.

Sexuality education teachers are much less likely to think that topics such as birth control and abortion should be covered by grade five, but a larger proportion (19–31%) believe that these topics should be taught by grade six. Sexuality education teachers of grades five and six are more likely than teachers of grades 7–12 to say that each topic should be taught in grade five or earlier. For example, 97% of fifth- and sixth-grade sexuality education teachers believe that puberty should be taught by the end of grade five, compared with only 81% of teachers in grades 7–12 (data not shown). Fifty-six percent of fifth- and sixth-grade sexuality education teachers think STDs should be taught in grade five or earlier, compared with 29% of secondary school sexuality education teachers.

• Actual timing of sexuality education. The difference between the proportion of sexuality education teachers who think a topic should be taught in grade five and the proportion who say they teach that topic indicates the extent to which schools are not covering topics that teachers recommend be taught by certain grades. Similarly, the difference between the proportion who think topics should be taught before or during grade six and the proportion who say they teach those topics at grades six (Table 1) indicates the extent to which, by grade six, actual teaching falls short of teachers’ recommendations.

In all cases, sexuality education teachers are less likely to teach each topic than they are to say that each of the topics should be covered by the end of grades five and six (Table 1). The gap is relatively small for puberty; however, it is much larger for some other topics. For example, 88% of sexuality education teachers believe sexual abuse should be taught by the end of grade five, while in practice, 53% of sexuality education teachers address this topic in grade five. The gap also is large for dating (40% vs. 27%) and for nonsexual ways to show affection (54% vs. 26%).

The gap between recommendations of what should be taught by the end of grade six and the actual proportions of sexuality education teachers who say they cover certain topics, such as birth control methods, abortion and sexual orientation, in the sixth grade is very large. For example, while 19–31% of fifth- and sixth-grade sexuality education teachers think that birth control and abortion should be covered by the end of grade six, only 3–18% of sixth-grade sexuality education instructors actually teach these topics (Table 1). Similarly, while 31% of fifth- and sixth-grade sexuality education teachers believe that sexual orientation should be taught no later than grade six, only 14% do so in grade six.

Gaps are much larger when we compare our estimates for what all fifth- and sixth-grade public school teachers are presenting with sexuality education teachers’ opinions of when topics should be covered. With the exception of puberty, how HIV is transmitted and abstinence from intercourse, our estimates of the proportions of all fifth- and sixth-grade public school teachers who teach specific topics are less than half the proportions of sexuality education teachers who recommend the topics be taught by the end of sixth grade (data not shown). In the case of sexual orientation, birth control and abortion, the proportions of all surveyed teachers who teach these topics are less than one-third the proportions of sexuality education