



# The Comparative Research on Sex Education for Adolescents of China and the US

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Sex education refers to people's comprehension about sex, which involves not only sexual structure (anatomy, physiology, birth control, pregnancy, etc.), but also sexual relationships concerning human and moral problems. It includes at least sexual physiology, sexual psychology, sexual ethic, sexual law, etc., which aims to help people form the attitude and behavior that both society and morality can accept. So, it is a kind of long-term education for a person. For limited length, this paper only studies adolescents' (mainly students in primary and middle schools) sex education in China and the US (the United States). Due to the restriction of traditional thoughts, sex education on adolescents has been developing so slowly that it turns into the weak point of basic education and results in the growth of adolescents' sexual ignorance, sexual faults and sexual crimes. America is one of the earliest countries that launch sex education in the world and it has plenty of academic as well as practical experience we can study and learn from.

*Keywords:* China and the US (the United States), adolescents, sex education, comparison

## Research Background

Human society is constituted by male and female, so sex has great significance for human beings. However, for a relatively period, China has a deep misunderstanding of sex and sex education duo to the shackles of feudal ideology, which has resulted in shaping the psychology of sex obscenity and sex taboo. All sorts of social problems are resulted from the deficiency of sex education, such as adolescent sexual confusion, sexual ignorance, sexual errors, sex crime, teenage pregnancy, abortion, premarital sex and the spread of sexual diseases and AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). This phenomenon has a serious influence on physical and mental health of adolescents, family happiness, social stability as well as economic development.

More seriously, the deficiency of sex education also makes a number of young people commit crimes. According to the survey of a reformatory school in Xicheng District of Beijing, among 411 junior school students, there are 110 students who commit sexual crimes, accounting for 1/4 of the total percentage. And among the 110 juvenile delinquents, the proportion of girls is up to 90%. In addition, according to a juvenile justice survey in Beijing, among 1,200 juvenile delinquents, sex crimes actually accounted for 57%. From the above data, it can be seen that sex education has great significance for young people and cannot be neglected any more.

Through the research of American sex education for adolescents, it can be found that the idea of "sex

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freedom” and “sex liberation” which was very popular in America in the 1960s and 1970s has been abandoned now. Instead, they favor “sexual purity education”, abstinence and moral self-discipline. Nevertheless, the abandoned concept of “sex freedom” and “sex liberation” has been prevailing among young people in our country, which leads to great worry and anxiety.

Adolescence is a very critical period of a person. Sex education will greatly affect the physical and mental development as well as social adaptability of young people. So, we cannot evade the problems any longer and it is time to face them with courage and wisdom. It is fairly urgent to explore the pattern of Chinese sex education by learning both successful and unsuccessful lessons from US for the social stability and teenage health.

### **Definition: Sex and Sex Education**

Sex is a kind of system of whole existence. Human sexual instinct is restricted by social existence and human emotions. From this sense of understanding, sex and sexual behavior is a kind of special social behavior and mentality, so it is unthinkable, if there are no special preparation and learning. Therefore, sex education has become an indispensable part of socialization of human individuals.

From the point of educational objects, sex education aims to educating young adolescents. From the point of educational contents, sex education is not just physical health education and it also includes more aspects which have to involve the adaptation between social development and students’ reality. From the point of educational methods, sex education need to be carried out by families, schools and communities.

### **Research Significance, Purpose and Methods**

**Research significance.** It is known that sex education is a blind spot in China’s basic education. Many social problems are caused due to the lack of sex education, which has gradually aroused people’s attention. Since the reform and opening up, a group of educational theory and practice scholars have launched a series of researches and activities. Those researches have filled the gap both on theory and practice in this field in our country and laid the foundation for the further development. However, there are still some shortcomings, especially compared with American sex education.

America is one of the earliest countries in the world that start sex education, who has plenty of practical experience as well as some painful lessons. But, its current system of sex education is relatively complete and its theory and practice on sex education play a leading role in the world. Therefore, it has both theoretical and practical significance to study American sex education. Chinese scholars have done a lot on both theory and practice of sex education, which has greatly promoted the development of adolescents’ sex education in China. Nevertheless, there are few researches on sex education in Sino-American schools, especially sex education outside schools. Thus, the author thinks that it is fairly significant to study adolescents’ sex education in America and make a comparison with adolescents’ sex education in China.

**Research purpose.** Through the way of generalizing and analyzing, this paper aims to have a good command of development of theory and practice on contemporary American teenage sex education. Besides, it makes comparisons with teenage sex education in our country. In this way, the deficiency of Chinese sex education can be covered.

By summarizing the experience and lessons of American teenage sex education, we will have a good understanding and reflection on the problems and situations Chinese sex education faced, which can provide some references and enlightenments for our country to improve adolescents’ sex education system.

It is very helpful to study the theory and practice of the American teenage sex education. Such study will

help us to enrich the theory of juvenile sex education and establish the adolescent education viewpoints with national character and sense of the times. Furthermore, this kind of concept will guide us to improve the practice of teenage sex education in our country.

**Research methods.** This paper adopts the usual methods used in comparative education, such as comparison method, factor analysis method, literature research method and historical method. Through literature study and historical method, we can get a preliminary understanding on the existing research results. At the same time, we will have a more thorough analysis by the way of comparison and factor analysis methods. Besides, definition, statistics and other research methods will be applied during the process of analysis, summary and induction.

## **The Development Process of Adolescents' Sex Education in China and the US**

### **The Development Process of Adolescents' Sex Education in China**

To the sex education in China's feudal society, the famous physician Professor Wu Jie-ping (1988, p. 35.) said:

There is no shortage of sex education in Chinese history, but that is a kind of feudal and harmful sex education, which makes constraints on people's desires by sex blockade and sexual repression. It has denied that the instinct of human beings has been modified in the process of in the social and cultural development in the history.

As for sex education, as a subject in modern field of education, its development process can be divided into the following three steps.

**The stage of "Enlightenment of Modern Sex Education" (early 20th century).** In the early 20th century, especially during the May Fourth period, domestic intellectuals called for "urgent plans for sex education and development". Very remarkably, it is the first time to have a trend of "sex education" in ideological and cultural history fields. At that time, intellectuals thought that sex education included sexual desires and sex instincts, the relationship between sexual desires and emotions. In addition, it also covered the hazards caused by excessive sexual desires and non-moral sex. The way of sex education is implemented through schools.

**The stage of the "Confinement Phase of Modern Sex Education" (the founding of new China in 1949 to the end of the "Cultural Revolution" in 1976).** At the beginning of the liberation, class struggle is still our primary task, and we are still actively preparing for the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea, so school education did not give enough emphasis on sex education. Owing to the interference of the "cultural revolution", "sex education" still did not have a breakthrough, which has become a blind spot in Chinese culture. For the sex education in this period, some scholars have proposed some suggestions. However, sex education for youngsters has been criticized and resisted by people. So such extreme conservative ideas of sex education have caused schools, families and society of this period lack of basic concept about sex education.

**The stage of "Rise and Development of Modern Education" (since 1977).** After the "cultural revolution", especially after the reform and opening up, China's sex education research and practice was gradually concerned and became flourished. In the end of 1979, the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health jointly issued "The Interim Provisions of health work in primary and secondary schools", proposing to strengthen adolescent health education. After the mid-1980s, sex education has begun to attract the attention of

the administrative departments of some cities. Besides, some organized and planned experiments on sex education have been gradually made. In 1988, China's sex education got a qualitative leap that the state education administrative departments began to attach importance to this field. The State Board of Education and the State Family Planning Commission jointly issued "A Notice for Adolescent Education in Secondary Schools". In 1991, the State Board of Education decided to carry out a comprehensive puberty education in junior high schools. So far, China's sex education has entered a new stage.

### **The Development Process of Adolescents' Sex Education in the US**

The US is one of the first countries that start sex education. Since 1892, Alan Watt published the first American sex works *The True Teachings*, American sex education has experienced a gradual expansion on both scope and content, especially in 20th century. The development process of US teenage sex education can be divided into the following three stages.

**The stage of abstinence education (from the founding of the US to the 1950s).** During this period, sex education mainly focuses on the problems of sexually transmitted diseases and illegitimate children, in other words, it aims to solve the problems caused by the confusion of sexual behavior. It has many characteristics. First, the theme of sex education is to against sex. Secondly, the purpose of education is not to encourage sexual behavior and sexual thoughts, but stress ethical sex education. Thirdly, the task of sex education is to persuade students to study hard and restrain the sexual desire. Finally, sex education is carried out mainly at home and communities, schools and churches play a weak role. Due to the research of sex is at the starting point, so people are lack of a scientific and proper understanding of sexual education. Thus, there are some limitations on the scopes, contents and objects of sex education, which results in a relatively low popularity rate of sex education.

**The stage without guidance (from 1960s to early 1980s).** During this period, the US teenage sex education has developed rapidly from a passive role to initiative. It has formed a relatively complete sex education system by the end of 1970s. It primarily shows in these aspects: They established implementation and research institutions for sex education, such as The USA Sex Knowledge and Sex Education Council, established in 1964 and the American Sex Educators and Counselors Association, established in 1969; They set up a teaching system for the cultivation of sex education; They systematically and scientifically compiled textbooks and reference books on sex education; and They formed a relatively complete way and method for sex education.

**The stage of pure sex education (since late 1980s).** "Pure sex education" emphasizes giving students correct knowledge on sex, aiming to make students keep physical and mental purity, as well as maintain social and moral order. Besides, it helps students know the value of pure sex lying on the free intercourse and advocate teenagers learn to respect each other sexually and learn to self-control and self-protect. The essence of this sex education is sexual morality, whose purpose is to teach people respect each other in sexual activities and use rational constraints instead of sex instinct. And both men and women need to keep chastity, and more for the chastity of the soul.

### **The Comparison of the Development Process of Adolescents' Sex Education in China and the US**

Throughout the development history of Sino-American sex education, it can be found that there are some similarities, connections and differences between them.

### **The Similarity**

At first, the development stage of adolescents' sex education between China and America is very similar. From the time division, the two countries' sex education can be divided into three stages, that is, sex education in the early 20th century, from 1960s to 1970s and late in 1980s. Apart from the two extremes of sex education in 1960s to 1970s, the contents and trends of the other two stages have much in common.

The early sex education in both China and the US is a little closed and conservative. During this period, sex is a taboo subject which is under the control of asceticism. So the purpose of sex education is not to encourage sexual activities and ideas. Under this circumstance, sex and morality are closely linked.

In early 20th century, sex education in junior middle schools in both America and China has developed rapidly. Moreover, the social background of the two countries is fairly similar. By the end of late 19th century and early 20th century, the scientific and technologic changes caused by western industrial revolution have greatly promoted the rapid development of economy, changed the living styles and liberated people's concepts including sex ideas.

Since the 1980s, sex education in China and the US has a considerable development, especially in China, who has gradually broke through the sexual taboo and come to the track of scientific education. Both of them have realized the importance of sex education. Though there are some differences between specific contents and implementation methods, they make an agreement in the core of sex education centered on morality.

Furthermore, there are some similarities in the development rules and trends of sex education in history. The sex education in China and the US experienced the periods of sexual taboo and sexual freedom. Since then, they paid more attention to cultivate noble sexual morality and set up correct sexual values. So, the two countries aim to develop good character in the future sex education.

Finally, there are also some similar points in contents and methods of sex education. From the point of a historical view, it can be found that the contents of sex education came from the original pure physiological knowledge, and gradually developed into a system including physiological, psychological and sexual ethics and other aspects of sex knowledge. The path of sex education is also from a single implementation by families to the present development of families, schools and society implemented cooperatively.

### **The Connections**

There is an interactive relationship between Sino-American sex educations. During the process of sex education development, the two countries have learned from and influenced each other. For example, at the beginning of the 20th century, the concept of sex education in America was introduced into China, which attracted the attention of Chinese intelligentsia. Since the 1980s, the US had realized the failure of previous sex education and noticed the value of traditional domestic ethics that play an important role in sex education. Besides, China's traditional culture has been concerned by the US. The "pure sex education" that was launched in 1990s is based on morality.

### **The Differences**

Because of the different political system, cultural background, customs and habits, Sino-America have large differences in sex education. The major difference lies in the concept of sex education. Although the implementation of sex education in China is earlier than America, the developing speed is slower. It is shown that the differences between cultures mainly result in large differences on sex education. The US did not experience the feudal society, so it is not bounded by feudal ideology. At the beginning of the founding of the

US, Americans advocate freedom, democracy, equality, individualism and pragmatism, but oppose authority. They suppose that sex education can solve conflicts and social problems, so they strongly support sex education. However, China has experienced a long period of feudal society and traditional Confucian culture has taken root in people's hearts. Chinese traditional culture which is represented by Confucianism attached great importance to moral education. Due to the limitation of social and historical conditions, the emphasis on moral standard and goals went to an extreme.

### **The Comparison of China and the US Sex Education for Adolescents in School**

The school is the primary way for the implementation of adolescents' sex education. Due to different cultural traditions and concepts, Sino-American sex education in schools also reflects the different characteristics.

#### **The Standards of Sex Education in School**

Many Sino-American scholars have discussed the standards of sex education in schools. American scholars tend to assume that sex is innate, natural and spontaneous and menstruation, and sexual intercourse is the symbol of mature. Thus, they respect individual sex and indulge students' sex behaviors.

Chinese scholars argue that sex is social and it is formed by education in social environment. A person's sex proved to be mature only conforms to social norms and ethical standards. Therefore, Chinese people are used to putting adolescents' sex problems and their moral characters together.

But now, Sino-American scholars reach a consensus about sex education standards. They hold the view that sex is both biological and social, nature and nurture, and the mature of sex needs to consider biological and social factors comprehensively.

#### **The Goals of Sex Education in School**

According to the respective needs of China and the US, there are three fundamental purposes for sex education in schools. Firstly, it aims to promote the health development of students' physical and psychological mentality. Secondly, it aims to give a promotion of human benign evolution and progress. Thirdly, it aims to promote social stability, maintain national moral codes and keep social order.

#### **The Contents of Sex Education in School**

Both the contents of sex education in China and the US include physiological, psychological knowledge, sexual ethics (sexual values), the marriage, family life and other aspects. But there are big differences in specific contents and depth of the same knowledge.

The most basic contents of American sex education are to teach a large number of physiological knowledge. At present, China is focused more on mental health of adolescence, including adolescent emotion regulation, personality and interpersonal relationships. These aspects range from the fifth or sixth grades to high school. But, sexual intercourse and contraceptive knowledge is not taught, so the content is relatively simple.

The US ever emphasizes on the neutrality of sex education values, which caused teenage pregnancy and many other malignant social problems. China has always advocated a kind of value orientation of sexual morality, so sex education problems are much less than the US.

In aspects of marriage and family life education, the US generally has a high frequency of family disintegration, and thus, universal marriage and family life became an important part of sex education. In China,

the problems of divorce and single parents have increased in recent years, but marriage and family life play a small role in sex education in primary and secondary schools, which needs to be aroused people's attention.

### **The Teachers of Sex Education in School**

At present, China's colleges and universities do not set specialized departments or majors for sex study. In the face of the rapid rise of sex education, many schools make biology, gym, political teachers or the school doctors to teach students sex knowledge. Sex education involves human anatomy, physiology, psychology, ethics and sociology knowledge, so part-time teachers are not competent, because they lack of professional qualities. The US applies two ways to choose and train sex education teachers. First, they must have a healthy motivation and actively involve in this work. Second, they need to be qualified and establish a harmonious and honest relationship between teachers and students. In China, there are no such requirements and some universities only have a study group or optional course about sex education.

## **The Comparison of China and the US Sex Education for Adolescents Outside School**

### **The Comparison of Family Sex Education**

**The proportion of getting education from parents.** According to Durex's global sex survey report in 2000, American sex education mainly comes from families (accounting for 30), among them, the sex knowledge of 22% people is from their mothers and 8% people's are from their fathers. The proportion which China's primary and secondary school students get sex education from their parents is very low. Girls account for about 5% and boys for 1% -2%. Compared with China, American sex education for adolescents seems to be more open. The study showed that 38% of high school students in the US would like to discuss with their parents about sex, 65% of parents and children talk about sexual issues with natural feelings. Another study found that 94% of parents and children talked about the issues, and more than half of parents and children talked about puberty, sex and reproduction, AIDS and homosexuality. US sex education and research institutions survey also found that 59% of 10 to 12 year-old teenagers said that their parents talked with them about the nature of knowledge, 90% of households thought teenagers in high schools should have a sex education curriculum. While many Chinese parents and children are ashamed to talk about "sex" and they are afraid of "sex". Even though some parents talk with their children a few words about sex, it is always limited to the physiological health knowledge and contacts with the opposite sex problems. It seems that American parents have a better understanding of the importance of sex education than Chinese parents and they also want to provide young people with comprehensive knowledge.

**The attitude of the parents on family sex education.** Generally, most Chinese parents fear to talk about sex. But in the American family, sex is a relaxed topic. Chinese family education is relatively closed. According to a survey, many parents never give sex education to their children. When the curious children ask them, the parents always change the topic and give a deceptive answer to children. As children ask their parents "Where did I come from?". Parents answered, "You are picked up from the outside"; or "You grew up to know". As the growth of age, the child starts to have the rudiments of sex consciousness and sexual interest. Parents are surprised or angry, or even think that children's personal character has a problem or becomes corrupted.

While American parents think that children should receive sex education in the family. When sexual issues rose by the children, they will answer all the questions, using the language that the children can understand, so that the children can understand the correct sexual knowledge and conception. American parents believe that if

children are given sex education before puberty, they would not be interested in the obscene things occasionally came across and they can resist temptations and choose the correct behavior.

**The content and methods.** American parents will talk about sexual physiology, sexual psychology, AIDS prevention knowledge, reproductive knowledge, contraceptive knowledge and even menopause to adolescents. Opportunity education is advocated in terms of methods. Although the sexual attitudes of Americans are more open, 35% of parents ask their children do not have sexual relations before marriage. Americans no longer believe that premarital pregnancy is morally defective, but it is best not to happen.

In China, even in families that have sex education, its contents, compared with the US, are much more limited and confined to physical aspects, especially girls get more information on menstruation and health knowledge than boys. Most parents have a negative attitude towards premarital sex and they regard it as a “sex mistake” relating to the personality and morality of a person. Similarly, pre-marital sex is not accepted by the majority of Chinese people.

### **The Comparison of Social Sex Education**

**The comparison of attitudes on adolescent sexuality.** Chinese concept of sex is very traditional and sex is a kind of taboo not just for young people, even adults would not talk about it openly. Thus, young people are constrained on sex. Even though American teenagers are living in a free and open society, they also have much confusion about the pressure of life and sex. The US adolescents generally have sexual distress, fearing to be laughed by their friends due to without sexual experiences. Moreover, they worry about getting pregnancy and contracting AIDS and other diseases after sexual behaviors, so a number of junior secondary school students have to bear the heavy responsibility of being parents, even they do not graduate.

Teenagers are specially privileged individuals of American society and they enjoy the highest degree of freedom and respect, but society only requires them to take slight responsibility. It is very vague to give what kind of respect and constraint on the behavior of young people.

The academic pressure of Chinese students is great and study is their main task. Love affairs are limited and disapproved by many teachers and parents. However, the US students have not been forbidden to fall in love no matter which grade they are in. On the contrary, they will be laughed, if there is no appointment. Love affairs among students are not the focus of school issue. Because the unmarried pregnancy has become a serious socio-economic and health problem in the US, American educators are mostly worried about that teenager does not know safe sex.

**The comparison of extramural education institution and school education.** The US has a strong tradition of community culture which attaches great importance to the role of the interaction of families, communities and schools for sex education. They prevent harmful off-campus behavior of young people by strengthening the management of community. So, community attaches particular importance to the change and role of families. Their main measures are to strengthen the construction of the community center, such as the parent schools and sex education advisory organizations. Some communities even train children to help parents solve educational behaviors and attitudes. In addition, schools often play a coordinating role in solving the problems of increasingly severe disintegration of families and single parent families by parents meetings.

Domestic scholars have pointed out that China’s sex education faces the problems of “constraints on family education, emptiness on community education and redundancy on school education”. Although this claim is a bit extreme, it does reflect some practical problems. The burden of educating teenagers mostly falls

onto the school, and families and communities cooperate less. This is true of sex education. While schools are busy to deal with senior high school entrance examination and college entrance examination, sex education for primary and middle school students did not attract too much attention.

**The comparison of the role of the mass media.** Both the mass media in China and the US have a positive, active and negative effect on the growth of young people. This negative effect is more obvious in the US where pornographic video flooded. In order to make money, businessmen not only run the yellow video rental shops, but also show movies with yellow lens. The yellow stuff is all-pervasive and their impact is very bad to the growth and development of young people.

The control of media is stricter in China. The law strictly prohibited the dissemination of pornography, violence and other things that are not conducive to the growth of young people in. China has not established film rating system, so it is easy to make the literary and artistic works which are not suitable for young people. If they enter into the horizons of young people, adverse impacts will be given. According to Freud's statement, the establishment of adolescents' sexual knowledge and sexual concept will influence them lifelong. Therefore, it is particularly vital to face the negative impact brought by mass media.

## **Reflections and Recommendations of the China's Sex Education for Adolescents**

### **Recommendations for Primary and Secondary School Sex Education**

#### **Getting rid of the old educational ideas and clearing the importance of sex education for adolescents.**

As Belinsky, Vissarion, and Grigoryevich (1843, p. 41) said, for young people, secretly obtained knowledge was more harmful than others, when nature itself began to wake the teenagers' interest in the issues, then the reasonable and scientific understanding of the secrets was the only way to save them from the harmful pornography.

People are the unity of the natural attributes and social attributes. From the emerging stage of sex need to the justifiable sex (marriage), there are 10 years that teenagers' sex need cannot be satisfied. This period is known as the "blank" or "starvation period". Sex is a human instinct, but human sociality put a lot of requirements on human instinct, asking people to self-control, which leads to contradictions. Hence, many issues of young people are happened. Therefore, sex education for adolescents is particularly important in their life and it is an important component of quality education.

**Making sex education outline, setting sex education curriculum and compiling textbooks on sex education.** The US promulgated "the National Education Outline" in the 1990s, whose contents are more detailed and comprehensive. In this regard, we can learn from them and combine with China's national conditions and culture. We need to make sex education outline of primary and secondary schools and provide specific implementation of the objectives and tasks. It is necessary to compile textbooks that are suitable for the developmental characteristics of students. Besides, it is obligatory to introduce physical, psychological and physical development, mental health knowledge and adolescent sexual development and heterosexual contacts, sexual physiology, sexual psychology, sexual ethics and moral education. In this way, we can put an end to the situation which is the lack of teaching materials, references and readings for teachers, parents and students.

**Setting the scientific content of sex education.** It is necessary to learn experiences of the US sex education to set the content. What is more, it could be in accordance with the actual conditions of our country. We should pay attention to the correct direction, adhere to the proper guidance, and it is also necessary to resist the stuff of western corruption, as well as backward sexual culture. And we need to stress on rigorous scientific

contents, especially the comprehensive and orderly contents.

### **Recommendations for Outside School Sex Education**

**Recommendations for family sex education.** Parents are children' first teachers and families are the basic place of sex education. As parents, first they must eliminate the misconceptions about sex education. The results of a study come from the World Health Organization shows that appropriate sex education does not lead young people to early sexual relations. On the contrary, it provides some basic beliefs for young people and promotes the understandings of adolescents' sexual development, human reproduction and healthy sex behaviors. Thus, it will help young people to adopt responsible sexual behavior.

**Recommendations for society sex education.** It is obvious that a good atmosphere in the whole society can help young people to establish a correct attitude towards sex. In Utah of the US, for religious reasons, the impact of adolescent sexual freedom is smaller, which still maintains a good atmosphere. Adult sexual dysfunction and psychological problems is less than other states. Apparently, a good social atmosphere can prevent young people from pre-marital sex.

**Recommendations for mass media.** It is necessary to establish a film rating system as soon as possible to improve the quality of media workers. The government should establish a classification system of film and television works as soon as possible to minimize the opportunities for young people's access to inappropriate contents. It is urgent to train media workers and help them have a positive sense of participation and audit films, televisions, newspaper and magazines strictly. In addition, we need to strictly regulate the local entertainment and cultural market, effectively making our efforts to create a good, healthy social atmosphere for the healthy growth of youngsters.

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