You’ve reviewed the diagrams and models. You’ve memorized the definitions of ovaries, uterus and testicles. You understand how pregnancy happens. You’re familiar with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)—what burns and what itches—and you know that the most common symptom is no symptoms at all.

You’ve sat at your desk and watched that health teacher put a condom on a wooden penis model. You feel as if you understand the mechanics of sex—the physical aspect, that is. And you certainly understand that sex is as simple as inserting A into slot B. So what else could there possibly be to know?

Tons. That’s because there is so much more to sexuality than how your body works, pregnancy and STDs, which is what most of us learn in sex ed (if we’re lucky enough to get sex ed at all).

**THE CIRCLES OF SEXUALITY**

Denis Dailey, Ph.D., came up with a sexuality diagram called the circles of sexuality. Each area of sexuality has a circle:

- sexual health and reproduction,
- sexualization,
- sensuality,
- intimacy, and
- sexual identity.

What most of us learn in sex ed class—anatomy, how pregnancy happens and STDs—all falls into the sexual health and reproduction circle. And maybe you learned about date rape or sexual assault, which falls into the sexualization circle. But what about the other circles?

I’ve never had a teacher talk about sensuality, which has to do with pleasure. I wanted to learn about intimacy or feeling emotionally close to another person, but that is something that never got discussed in sex ed. And what about sexual identity or how you identify as male or female or who you’re attracted to? That was never mentioned.

Don’t get me wrong. It’s great that when we get sex ed, we learn about sexual health and reproduction and maybe a bit about the sexualization circle. But what about the other circles: sensuality, intimacy and sexual identity? Teens should learn about every aspect of sexuality.

**SENSUALITY**

Sensuality is about being aware of your body—how it feels, what feels good and what you think about your body. Sensuality—the pleasure of touching and being touched—is the reason most people choose to have sex and the reason why sex is such a big deal.

Can you imagine hearing your parents or a health teacher say the word “pleasure”? It’s embarrassing, awkward and private. Right? But in reality, pleasure is an extremely important aspect of sexuality. If there was no pleasure, then come on—how many people would actually be having sex? Exactly.

The fact that nobody talks about pleasure, or they tighten up and become embarrassed when it’s mentioned (admittedly, like I do) makes it seem like pleasure is a bad thing. However, it is 100-percent healthy to feel pleasure. Some adults are scared that if they’re straight with us and say, “yes, sex is pleasurable,” they are endorsing sex.

But if adults don’t acknowledge the truth of pleasure, some of us are likely to think that it is either something to hide and be ashamed of—like it’s some horrible and dirty act—or some of us rebel and rush into sex just to find out what the “big sex secret” is really all about.
classes, we are taught about diseases, like anorexia and bulimia, when discussing self-image, but never about how our feelings about our bodies and how they look can affect us sexually.

Feeling good about your body means you feel confident and can get into a relationship—whether it’s sexual or not—and be an equal partner in that relationship. When you feel good about yourself, you can ask for what you want and what you don’t want. If you are in a sexual relationship and don’t feel good about your body, can you have healthy and satisfying sexual experiences? I don’t think so.

**INTIMACY**

Intimacy is feeling emotionally close to another person and having those feelings returned. It may be just holding hands, snuggling on the couch, stroking someone’s hair or having that done to you. Not only is this experience of closeness physical, but it’s emotional, too. However you express these feelings of closeness, it’s important to have some sort of connection between you and your partner.

Intimacy in a relationship, whether sexual or not, refers to things like passion, honesty, trust, devotion, comfort and communication. We know that there is more to sex than just sexual behavior, but why don’t teachers talk about this openly with us? We want to know that a healthy relationship really isn’t all about whether or not to have sex. It’s also about having a connection with your partner. I know the topic of compatibility or mutual happiness in a relationship was never talked about in my sex ed class.

We need to be taught that intimacy is necessary to any healthy relationship, whether or not you and your partner are having sex. We need to feel safe and emotionally close to our partners, so we’re in a better position to ask for what we want and tell our partner what we don’t want. There should be mutual respect with intimacy, so we’re never in a situation where we’re doing something we don’t want to do—pressuring someone to do something they may not want to do or doing something just to please our partner.

**SEXUAL IDENTITY**

Sexual identity has to do with a person’s sense of maleness or femaleness (gender identity) and who a person is physically and emotionally attracted to (sexual orientation). But sexual identity is more than some simplistic definition. It’s really complex, and I feel like I lost out on learning about this in sex ed. No one ever talked to me about how normal it is to be a young woman and feel more masculine in some ways or more feminine in others.

While it’s important to learn about STDs, condoms and the morning-after pill, it’s just as important to learn about what it means if you like both males and females or get reassurance about coming out if you’re gay or lesbian. Some of us have totally checked out of sex ed because it only speaks to heterosexual couples, especially when all you’re learning about is how to prevent pregnancy. Teachers rarely address gay, lesbian or bisexual teens or teens who identify as transgender.

Sex ed teachers seem to assume that every girl is comfortable with being a traditionally feminine girl who can’t keep her hands off the lead-scoring quarterback. Wouldn’t it be great if that heterosexual guy who’s not super-macho could feel good about just being who he is? Yet we still aren’t being taught important information about gender roles, gender identity or sexual orientation. These all have an impact on us as sexual beings. We come in all varieties—heterosexual, gay, lesbian; masculine, feminine or something in between; male, female or intersex—and in relationships we can take on different gender roles.

**REAL INFORMATION ABOUT SEXUALITY**

Sexuality is a big, complex topic. Adults should trust us more with real information about it. We need this information, so we can make good decisions, be safe and communicate better with our partners. If we’re taught everything we need to know about sexuality, we, as teens, will value the complexity of sexuality—from how we communicate with partners to how we each choose to identify sexually. What is the harm in discussing these issues with us?

Sooner or later, we’re going to realize that being in a sexual relationship is so much more then inserting A into slot B. But how great would it be if we didn’t have to wait until later to figure this out?