

Effective Sexual Health Education for Youth



Why is sexual health education important for Saskatchewan youth?

Saskatchewan youth have high rates of STIs, unplanned pregnancies, and HIV infections. These rates indicate that youth are participating in unsafe sexual behaviours. Effective sexual health education is an important tool to address potential gaps in knowledge and to help ensure that Saskatchewan youth are making informed decisions about their sexual health.

Sexual health education is recognized as a right for all people, such that all people should be provided with the information, motivation, and behavioural skills needed to enhance their sexual health and avoid negative sexual health outcomes.

Defining sexual health: Sexual health is more than the absence of disease and dysfunction. It is a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality. Common indicators used to assess the sexual health of Canadian youth include:

- age at first intercourse
- sexual activity participation rates
- number of sexual partners
- condom use
- STI rates and adolescent pregnancy rates
- sexual violence*



What works for sexual health education?

Research indicates that comprehensive approaches to sexual health education are much more effective than abstinence-only approaches.

Comprehensive approaches to sexual health education have been shown to reduce the risk of HIV, STIs, and unintended pregnancies through a decrease in high risk behaviours.

* Although sexual violence is not regularly included as a sexual health indicator, it is important to consider as it can have significant consequences for sexual health.

Comprehensive Sexual Health Education

- Explains the benefits of delaying sex until youth are emotionally and physically ready, while also ensuring they are taught how to protect themselves when they do decide to have sex
- Has been shown to reduce participation in high risk behaviours and a reduction in the risk of HIV, STIs, and unintended pregnancies
- Is not associated with an increased frequency of sexual behaviour or number of sexual partners

Related positive outcomes:

- Delay of first intercourse
- Increased condom and overall contraceptive use
- Increased knowledge about sexual behaviour and its consequences

Importance of Sexual Health Education in Schools

Schools are the only formal education institution to have meaningful (and mandatory) contact with nearly every young person. It is for this reason that schools are in a unique position to provide children, adolescents, and young adults with the knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes required for them to make and act upon decisions that promote sexual health throughout their lives. Teachers are well-positioned to provide sexual health education because they are seen as trusted sources of information and often serve as role models, advocates, and mentors.

Importantly, research has shown that well-planned and implemented sexual health education in schools works.



Characteristics of Effective Sexual Health Education

- ✓ Be comprehensive by incorporating the necessary information, motivation, and skills to effectively carry out and maintain behaviours that promote sexual health (*see sidebar on next page*)
- ✓ Provide functional and practical knowledge by specifically targeting behaviours that lead to negative sexual health outcomes (e.g., unprotected sex)
- ✓ Deliver and consistently reinforce prevention messages related to sexual limit-setting (e.g., delaying first intercourse, choosing not to have intercourse, consistent condom use)
- ✓ Provide clear examples and opportunities to practice sexual limit-setting, condom use negotiation, and other communication skills so that students are active participants
- ✓ Tailor information to meet students' needs, developmental stage, cultural background, and sexual orientation whenever possible
- ✓ Be accessible, both in terms of the availability of information and services and in terms of taking different needs into account (include information about diversity and sexual orientation)
- ✓ Provide educators with effective pre-service and in-service education, high-quality teaching materials, administrative support, and sufficient time to achieve learning objectives with students

Information, Motivation, Behavioural (IMB) Skills Model

The IMB model suggests that sexual health education must equip people with the **information, motivation, and behavioural skills** needed to enhance sexual health and avoid negative sexual health outcomes.

1st prerequisite: information that is directly relevant to sexual health and the prevention of negative sexual health outcomes, and is easy to apply in an individual's own life

2nd prerequisite: both personal motivation toward health sexual behaviours and social motivation (i.e., perceived social support for these behaviours); determines whether people will act on the knowledge they have about sexual health

3rd prerequisite: having the behavioural skills necessary for actually doing the healthy behaviours; practice and role play are necessary

Other Factors for Success

- Teaching and learning materials should include a variety of formats (e.g., print, media, and technology-based alternatives; group work)
- Include activities that address social pressures influencing youth sexual behaviour, including peer and partner pressures
- Increase awareness of and access to preventive health services and information (e.g., include activities where youth visit health clinics, pharmacies, and other places that offer sexual health services)
- Increase parental involvement through good communications with the home and through take-home learning activities
- Obtain input from youth with respect to their needs and wants for sexual health education
 - According to research studies, youth want education on a variety of topics, including: STIs, dealing with peer pressure, sexual decision-making and communication, healthy relationships, sexual coercion and sexual assault, adolescent pregnancy and parenting, sexual behaviour, sexual orientation, and abstinence

Important Considerations

- Findings regarding the efficacy of peer-to-peer sexual health education interventions are mixed. While there are reported benefits for the peer educators (e.g., gaining valuable job experience, a sense of community, personal growth, and counselling skills), the impact that peer-led education has on improving sexual outcomes among youth has proven unconvincing.
- Evaluation of sexual health education programs is important in order to assess program strengths and weaknesses in order to improve subsequent programming and to establish program best practices.

There are numerous resources and guidelines available to help sexual health educators increase their knowledge and ability to teach youth about factors related to their sexual health. A list of these resources is available from the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute website at: <http://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/online-resources-for-sexual-health-educators/>

For more information about effective sexual health education, please see the complete literature review titled "Effective Evidence-Based Sexual Health Education for Youth", available at <http://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/effective-sexual-health-education-for-youth/>.