

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
- Teaches that sexuality is a healthy, normal, and natural part of life and well-being in order to reduce stigma and other social barriers to healthcare and empowered decision-making
- Empowers youth to make informed, autonomous decisions while respecting the decisions of others
- Is not associated with an increased frequency of sexual behaviour or number of sexual partners

Related positive outcomes:

- Reduction in high-risk behaviours and reduced risk of HIV, STIs, and unintended pregnancy
- 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 evidence-based, relevant, functional, and practical knowledge on a broad range of topics related to sexual health and well-being, and discuss behaviours that lead to both positive (e.g., communication and consent) and negative (e.g., unprotected sex) sexual health outcomes
- ✓ Balance messaging about the positive aspects of sexual health with prevention messages related to sexual limit-setting and harm reduction (e.g., delaying first intercourse, choosing not to have intercourse, consistent condom use, regular STI testing, accessing sexual health services); consistently reinforce this messaging
- ✓ 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, ability, cultural background, and sexual orientation or gender identity whenever possible, and consult students to assess whether the information is meeting their needs

- ✓ Be accessible, both in terms of the availability of information and services and in terms of taking different needs into account
- ✓ 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 healthy sexual behaviours and social motivation (i.e., perceived social support for these behaviours); determines whether people will act on the knowledge they have

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

A critical examination of **environmental factors** that may impact an individual's ability to enhance and maintain their sexual health can help increase capacity to navigate potential barriers.

Other Factors for Success

- Teaching and learning materials should include a variety of formats (e.g., print, media, and technology-based alternatives; group work)
- Be inclusive and do not assume that students are heterosexual or identify with their gender at birth; understand that not all bodies fit the traditional biological definitions of male/female
- Inform students of their human rights; promote autonomous decision-making and respect for the rights of others
- Use a trauma-informed approach and promote gender equity and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence (e.g., discuss power dynamics, verbal/non-verbal consent)
- 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
- As an educator, take part in opportunities to increase knowledge and skills related to the delivery of sexual health education
- 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, diverse identities, 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 with the intent to improve subsequent programming and to establish program best practices.

Related Resources

SIECCAN (The Sex Information and Education Council of Canada) works to ensure that all Canadians have access to high-quality sexual health information. SIECCAN's *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education* outlines the core principles for effective comprehensive sexual health education in Canada, and strategies to support program development and evaluation to ensure success. The *Guidelines* are available at: <http://sieccan.org/sexual-health-education/>.

In addition to this document, 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://www.skprevention.ca/shop/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 <https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/effective-evidence-based-sexual-health-education-for-youth/>. The current summary was based on this literature review, as well as updated guidelines (e.g., SIECCAN's 2019 *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education*).

