

## 13. Sexuality education and the prevention of sexual violence

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### **The need for sexuality education**

Far too few children and young people receive anything approaching adequate preparation for a safe and satisfying adult sexual life. Open discussion of sexual matters with trusted adults is usually absent at the very time when it is most needed. This, in turn, is compounded by the pervasive, confusing and conflicting (and predominantly negative) messages received by children about sexuality and gender. In turn, these may contribute to creating and sustaining vulnerability to coercion, abuse and exploitation. Effective sexuality education is therefore essential in order to redress this balance.

According to Unesco (2009), the primary goal of sexuality education is to equip children and young people with the knowledge, skills and values to make responsible choices about their sexual and social relationships in a world affected by HIV. In addition to learning about the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), children and young people also need to learn about the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse in order to recognise these when they occur, to protect themselves as far as possible and to identify and access available sources of support. Sensitising children, parents, teachers, police and local communities to the nature and extent of sexual violence, and giving permission to discuss it, are essential steps in tackling it. Sexuality education can provide an appropriate framework and context for educating students about sexual abuse.

For example, distinguishing between “good” and “bad” touch, learning how to express feelings, to resist pressure and to seek help are all key aspects of sexuality education that are also highly pertinent to sexual abuse.

### **School-based sexuality education**

Unesco (2009) argues that sexuality education has a number of mutually reinforcing objectives:

- increase knowledge and understanding (such as about sex and the law, the nature of sexual abuse and what to do about it);
- explore and clarify feelings, values and attitudes (developing self-esteem and feeling proud of one’s body);
- develop or reinforce skills (saying “no”, resisting pressure);
- promote and sustain risk-reducing behaviour (seeking help).

Potentially, schools provide a suitable, replicable and sustainable vehicle for the delivery of such education. Given their number and proximity to students, teachers can be best placed to deliver this education. Suitably trained and supervised peer educators can also provide useful support (Unesco, 2007), as can health and other professionals who come into professional contact with children. With increasing numbers of children attending primary school, it is sensible to introduce sexuality education at this level rather than waiting until secondary school, by which time many will have dropped out.

Successful introduction of school-based sexuality education requires commitment on the part of school authorities, for example to create room within an already crowded school curriculum, to ensure that suitable teachers are selected and supported to deliver sexuality education (with appropriate training and supervision) and that they are provided with suitable resources with which to do so.

Barriers to effective implementation of sexuality education include inadequate resources, lack of political commitment, community

opposition and reliance upon authoritarian and didactic approaches to teaching on the part of educators. It is also essential to acknowledge that in some places attending school may, in itself, constitute risk behaviour, particularly, but not only, for girls who may be especially vulnerable to harassment, exploitation and abuse (including by teachers) both on the way to and at school. Addressing this kind of vulnerability demands commitment and resources that go beyond the scope of what is usually possible within classroom-based sexuality education programmes. Nonetheless, interesting innovations have been undertaken and are described below.

As well as having to compete in an already full curriculum, sexuality education does not have the same status as other academic subjects, either for students or teachers. In part, this is because it is usually non-examinable. This lower status of sexuality education in schools is also a consequence of the potentially sensitive nature of its content (despite its importance to students' well-being). This is reflected in a lack of advanced training or associated career development for sexuality educators that may exist for teachers of other subjects. In the worst scenarios, teachers are simply expected to deliver sexuality education despite lack of training, experience or personal aptitude.

### **Goals and approaches to sexuality education**

In understanding the goals of sexuality education, it is useful to consider a continuum with the goals of risk elimination at one end and vulnerability reduction at the other. Risk reduction falls in the middle. “Abstinence only” demonstrates what is meant by risk elimination. These programmes seek to remove risk entirely by promoting sexual abstinence until marriage, often within an explicit framework of religious or ideological values and beliefs. Risk reduction focuses upon reducing specific risks, such as pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and can have demonstrable impact, while vulnerability reduction shifts the focus from the level of the individual to that of the group, community or institution (see

below). Both risk elimination and risk reduction draw heavily from psychological and social learning theories.

There are two main weaknesses associated with these approaches. First, they tend to reflect an often unstated assumption that individuals are in control of their lives and behaviour. The reality of sexual abuse indicates how little control some children actually have over their bodies and lives. Second, they reflect the individualistic psychological orientation of western societies, underestimating the existence (in all societies) of multiple and of competing discourses and belief systems about sexuality and gender. Vulnerability reduction draws from theories of social action and explicitly seeks to address sexuality-related power differentials. However, these approaches are complex to implement and sustain, as well as being difficult to evaluate.

These different goals are associated, in turn, with two broad approaches to sexuality education which can be described respectively as “public health” and “rights-based”. The first is time-limited, focused and behaviourally oriented. There is a growing body of evidence (see all publications for Kirby in references below) that this approach, properly implemented, can have positive, measurable impact upon specific risk-related behaviours.

The focus of “rights-based” approaches to sexuality education is both broader and deeper. It includes explicit consideration within the curriculum of social and cultural dimensions of sexuality, such as gender, equity, power and discrimination. Measuring the impact of “rights-based” approaches is less well developed and more challenging. The goals of this approach are typically broader than the behavioural orientation of “public health” interventions. So, within a “rights-based” approach, increasing understanding of one’s body and entitlements to rights (including to give or withhold consent), improving self-esteem and acquisition of skills, are *all* perceived to be desirable outcomes in, and of, themselves, rather than as means to a narrow behavioural end.

## **Implementing sexuality education**

Experience from around the world demonstrates that it is possible to introduce sexuality education even in culturally conservative settings. For those wishing to do so a wealth of resource material already exists. This includes training materials for educators, curriculum development guides, curricula and resources materials.

The Unesco (2009) publication *International technical guidance on sexuality education* includes a comprehensive bibliography of existing, high quality sexuality education curricula, curriculum guides and teacher training manuals from around the world.<sup>27</sup> The publication is the result of an extensive process of research, review and consultation. The first volume considers the rationale for sexuality education and offers technical advice on the characteristics of effective programmes. The second volume, drawing from available evidence, practical experience and good educational practice, presents a “basic minimum package” of topics, concepts and learning objectives for a sexuality education programme intended for children and young people aged from 5 to 18 and over. The package is intended to be developmental, with each stage reinforcing and building upon previous learning.

Overarching topics, under which specific learning objectives are defined according to four age levels, are organised around the following key concepts:

- relationships;
- values, attitudes and skills;
- culture, society and human rights;
- human development;
- sexual behaviour;
- sexual and reproductive health.

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27. An updated version of this resource list is available online at the Unesco HIV and AIDS Education Clearinghouse website <<http://hivaidsclearinghouse.unesco.org>>.

Sexual abuse and violence are explicitly addressed in the curriculum, reflected in the following examples of learning objectives and associated key ideas to be explored in relation to “Gender-based violence, sexual abuse and harmful practices” (Unesco, 2009:86).

### **Gender-based violence, sexual abuse, and harmful practices**

#### *Learning Objectives for Level I (5-8 years)*

*Describe examples of positive and harmful practices*

*Define sexual abuse*

#### *Key Ideas:*

- There are positive and harmful practices that affect health and well-being in society
- Human rights protect all people against sexual abuse and gender-based violence
- Inappropriate touching, unwanted and forced sex (rape) are forms of sexual abuse
- Sexual abuse is always wrong

#### **Learning Objectives for Level II (9-12 years)**

*Explain how gender role stereotypes contribute to forced sexual activity and sexual abuse*

*Define and describe gender-based violence, including rape and its prevention*

*Demonstrate relevant communication skills (e.g. assertiveness, refusal) in resisting sexual abuse*

#### *Key Ideas:*

- Traditional beliefs and practices can be a source of positive learning
- Honour killings, bride killings and crimes of passion are examples of harmful practices and gender inequality that violate human rights
- There are ways to seek help in the case of sexual abuse and rape
- Assertiveness and refusal skills can help to resist sexual abuse and gender-based violence, including rape

### **Learning Objectives for Level III (12-15 years)**

*Identify specific strategies for reducing gender-based violence, including rape and sexual abuse*

*Key Ideas:*

- All forms of sexual abuse and gender-based violence by adults, young people and people in positions of authority are a violation of human rights
- Everyone has a responsibility to report sexual abuse and gender-based violence
- There are trusted adults who can refer you to services that support victims of sexual abuse and gender-based violence

### **Learning Objectives for Level IV (15-18 years)**

*Demonstrate ability to argue for the elimination of gender role stereotypes and inequality, harmful practices and gender-based violence*

*Key Idea:*

- Everyone has a responsibility to advocate for gender equality and speak out against human rights violations such as sexual abuse, harmful practices and gender-based violence

*It's all one* (Haberland and Rogow, 2010) also provides structured guidance and activities for addressing the issue of sexual coercion within the context of sexuality education. For example, in the section entitled “The matter of consent” students explore the concept of sexual consent through case studies, short skits and discussion with the goals of helping them to understand and appreciate the importance of consent in sexual situations and to strengthen their abstract thinking skills (see below).

### **Addressing vulnerability to sexual abuse and violence through sexuality education**

In recent years, efforts have been made, within sexuality education, to acknowledge and address vulnerability to sexual abuse and vio-

lence. This demands consideration of the sexual and social realities that exist beyond the classroom. It means, for example, giving consideration to contextual issues, such as the school institution itself and the power relations that exist within it, both among pupils, and between teachers and pupils, which constitutes a serious obstacle in some settings. Sexual vulnerability is also linked to other forms of risk and vulnerability, such as racism and homophobia, drug and alcohol use and to gender inequality and violence in the household.

*It's all one* is a resource for the development of a comprehensive curriculum on sexuality, gender, HIV and human rights. The resource is designed specifically to enable educators and policymakers (in all regions of the world) to address both individual and social determinants of sexual and reproductive health. The resource promotes the development of critical thinking skills and learning, and reflection about the ways in which gender, rights and other social factors, such as race, ethnicity and class, can affect sexual experience. In so doing, this approach seeks to promote active, informed participation in civil society by children and young people.

Other approaches to addressing vulnerability in school settings include the “Stepping stones” programme for HIV prevention that seeks to improve sexual health through the development of stronger, more gender-equitable relationships, achieved in part through improved communication between partners (Stepping stones, no date). The “Stepping stones” programme uses participatory learning approaches to increase knowledge of sexual health, awareness of risks and the consequences of risk taking. The approach focuses on communication skills, and provides facilitated opportunities for individual, small group and community self-reflection. “Stepping Stones” was first developed in Uganda and has since been used in more than 40 countries and translated into several languages. Key features of the approach are its focus on community action, intensive nature (13 three-hour sessions), use of highly participatory learning approaches (critical reflection, role play and drama) and facilitation by skilled leaders. “Stepping stones” explicitly considers the power-



based nature of sexual relationships and is thus relevant to creating social norms that recognise and promote the rights of children and the unacceptability of sexual coercion and abuse.

In Zambia, the Ministry of Education, International HIV/AIDS Alliance and the Planned Parenthood Association of Zambia (PPAZ) collaborated with teachers and students (grades 4-9) to explore why some schools were high-risk locations for HIV transmission and unintended pregnancy, and to identify what could be done to address this. Teachers were engaged in a participatory process designed to explore their own experiences and concerns about HIV, reproduction, gender, sexuality, pleasure and harm. They considered their personal role in creating sexual risk, together with possibilities for prevention within the school setting. Teachers received training to help them explore their own attitudes and values before going on to develop relevant learning skills and materials. Teachers acknowledged the problem of sexual abuse and made plans to address it through a facilitated participatory assessment with students. This generated a wealth of material that revealed high levels of sexual activity and sexual abuse and led, in turn, to the development of a set of lessons designed to promote a safe environment for learning about sexuality and relationships. Further materials were developed and included a curriculum, manuals for teacher training and books for students.<sup>28</sup>

The successful development of these kinds of approaches to tackling vulnerability requires long-term planning and the development of suitable evaluation methodologies, together with considerable investment in human resources and materials.

## **Conclusion**

Parents, schools and communities need to understand why sexuality education matters. Properly designed and implemented, sexuality education can provide children and young people with the under-

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28. Materials available online at <<http://www.aidsalliance.org/Publicationsdetails.aspx?Id=293>>.

standing, awareness and skills they will need to navigate adult sexual life. Programmes should include sexual abuse and violence, explaining what these are and what to do about them, including how to access support.

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