

Putting sexuality education in context

All of us want young people to feel able to seek help and ask questions when they feel they need to.

Any parent or teacher of a primary school-aged child knows that young people this age have questions and curiosity – sometimes concerns – that relate to their bodies, babies, friends and other relationships.

If we set students' health and wellbeing at the top of the agenda, then the decision about whether and what to teach is straightforward.

Sexuality education responds to a developmental process relevant to every age and stage of life, with corresponding information and skills related to sexual development, bodies, reproduction, respectful relationships, and gender.



Sexuality education – the first lesson

Home is the first place for learning about trust and love, touch and affection, bodies, nudity, privacy, toileting ... Day-to-day life provides plenty of opportunities to learn information, values and attitudes from our family. Ideally, students learn that they are able to talk to their parents and carers and ask questions.

School life – the second lesson

Primary school brokers the child's experience of learning the rules for getting on in the rest of the world. A surprisingly large part of school interactions can relate to sexual territory. School camps, managing periods, love affairs, swear words, calling others 'sissies' and 'tomboys', peeking under toilet doors and bashfulness in the change rooms are all examples of school activities linked to sexuality. Students will often ask questions about their bodies, babies and conception; after all, their own bodies (and their peers' bodies) are changing while still at primary school.

Life on TV – the third lesson

For all of the excellent children's media and communications technology that are fun, entertaining and educational, students use a lot of other media that is difficult for adults to predict and control. Communication technologies make our lives easier in many ways but they have also changed how we make friends, how communication can occur between students and parents, and our access to information.

People most often express concern about young people's exposure to pornography, and sexualised images of children in advertising. What is harder to quantify is the effect of constant messages that creep up on us and influence our idea of what is normal and acceptable – programs about plastic surgery, popularity, celebrities, body image, paedophilia scares, and how to get a girlfriend or boyfriend.

In the absence of school-based sexuality education, these informal and often misleading lessons can continue without an opportunity to provide a balanced view within the context of age-appropriate learning and teaching.

The question we should ask is not, 'Should students learn about sexuality in their primary school years?' Rather, it is, 'How can schools best provide age-appropriate guidance and support?'

Child sexual development

Meet the child

When it comes to sexual development, children are not blank slates. Sexuality develops naturally in children (Richardson & Schuster, 2003). It is assembled over the years from different components which include the brain and body's own natural development, the way individual children perceive the world, as well as the lessons we teach them.

One of the most common concerns expressed by teachers is that they will either provide too much information too soon, or, too little too late. Children develop at different rates but there are general ages and stages that children go through. Bodies change and grow, feelings change, social interests and relationships change. Children have corresponding learning needs. Knowing what to expect can help to make decisions about appropriate learning objectives.

The types of information and skills children need are also influenced by the customs, beliefs and values of the time and place they live. Allowing for children's different stages, and for a range of family beliefs and values, are two good reasons why participatory learning strategies are so important in making the education fit the age and stage of the child.

The following tables outline important aspects of child sexual development from the age of five through to 14. They have been adapted with permission from the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (2008).

Twelve reasons why sexuality education is important in primary school

1 Many children want to know

Many younger children are curious about how babies grow and how they 'started'. Children should know before they start secondary school how a baby is conceived. While some children have no interest in the subject of sex, most have some and talk with their friends about sex and body functions. Sexuality education provides the opportunity to learn the anatomically correct vocabulary, which gives them a better chance to frame questions and express themselves.

2 Sexuality education provides preparation for puberty and beyond

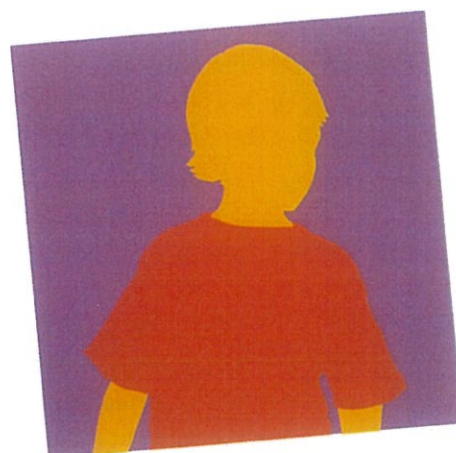
Good sexuality education plays an important part in helping children manage the physical and emotional changes that puberty brings. Children most frequently ask, 'Am I normal?' and, 'When will it happen?' A chance to hear what to expect and that physical changes and processes affect everyone can be self-affirming. Learning how to manage these changes is also part of helping children to become independent and confident.

3 Some children enter puberty earlier

The process of puberty can start as young as eight among some children. The different ages at which children start puberty can make it difficult for children as they observe themselves or their peers changing. All children need to know about puberty before it happens.

4 Sexuality education is an essential component of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS)

In Victoria, it is compulsory for government schools to provide sexuality education within the Health and Physical Education domain, including assessment and reporting against the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (DEECD 2009).



5 Parents want sexuality education in schools

Australian research since 1984 and recent international surveys challenge the convention that parents are reluctant to have sexual health issues taught in schools. Surveys in Canada, United Kingdom, United States, Russia and Greece all found that more than 85 per cent of parents either strongly agreed or agreed with the provision of sexuality education in schools (Langille, Langille, Beazley & Doncaster 1996; McKay 1996; McKay, Pietrusiak & Holowaty 1998; Weaver, Byers, Sears, Cohen & Randall 2002).

The apparent exposure of children to adult sexual themes through popular media has increased the concern expressed by families about the sexualisation of children. Providing sexuality education gives communities the opportunity to communicate their values in contrast to more commercially oriented messages.

6 Sexuality education helps young people make healthy choices

Children whose parents discuss values and attitudes towards sexuality and who receive good sexuality education at school are more likely to start sex later and less likely to have an unplanned pregnancy or a sexually transmissible infection. Reducing these negative outcomes is not the only purpose of sexuality education but it is an important one (Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada 2008).

7 Children are saturated with sexual messages

Almost daily we hear messages about bodies, privacy, birth, menstruation, sexual feelings, shame, being a boy or a girl and friendship, just to name a few. These messages influence our capacity to manage our health and relationships as we grow older. In the absence of formal sexuality education this process continues unguided and unsupported (Collyer, 1995).

8 Boys need sexuality education too

Boys can miss out on sexuality education within the family. Mothers tend to provide more discussion on this topic and may know less about boys' development. Boys are often left to learn about sex and sexuality on their own (Ray & Jolly 2002).

9 Gender stereotypes begin to affect children's choices and options

By the age of eight, children will display a sense of the rules about gender. For example, 'girls can't play soccer' or 'boys don't cry'. Sexuality education helps children to separate fact from fiction about being a boy and being a girl. A safe space and time to question strict gender rules can help broaden their options and make it easier for the children who don't fit the stereotypes.

10 Sexuality education can be protective against sexual abuse

Many important messages and skills that contribute to children's safety are part of a comprehensive sexuality program. They include:

- teaching children about the proper names of their body parts
- giving children permission to talk and ask questions about sexual body parts
- explaining the qualities of respectful relationships and appropriate sexual relationships
- identifying a support network of teachers and parents to whom they could turn
- understanding personal safety, that is, safety for our bodies and how to keep ourselves safe.

11 Sexuality education brings diverse families to the classroom

Sexuality education goes to the heart of what family means and provides a good framework for talking about the role of family and the networks we need to sustain ourselves. Children are increasingly in diverse family structures and are more aware of relationship break-ups between parents. Talking about families, babies, caring and ways of relating helps begin the process of teaching children about having and expecting positive, respectful relationships as they grow older.

12 Breaking the ice/Setting the stage

Talking about sexuality when children are young is a lot easier than when children become adolescents, when they are deep in the territory of whirling emotions, hormones and physical change. Giving children, educators and parents practice and comfort in talking about sexual matters lays the foundation for open discussions between young people and adults about this important aspect of ourselves.



Books for parents, students and teachers

The following books are available on the internet or through regular and specialist bookshops.

For parents and carers:

- Everything You Never Wanted Your Kids to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid They'd Ask):

The Secrets to Surviving Your Child's Sexual Development from Birth to the Teens (2004) by Richardson and Schuster. This is a guide to coping with a child's sexual maturation.

For students (F-2)

- It's Not the Stork: A Book about Girls, Boys, Babies, Bodies, Families and Friends (2006) by Robie H. Harris, Michael Emberley. This text is straightforward, informative and personable. Facts are presented in a step-bystep manner and with humour.
- Everyone's Got A Bottom – A Storybook For Children Aged 3-8 Years (2007) by Family Planning Queensland. This book is a useful tool for parents and carers to gently start a conversation with their children about self-protection.
- Where Did I Really Come From? (2008) by Narelle Wickham. About conception, adoption and surrogacy. Unlike other books of this genre, Where Did I Really Come From? embraces a wide range of conception stories, including donor insemination, IVF and surrogacy, and a wide range of family types.

For students (Years 3-6):

- Let's Talk about Where Babies Come From (2004) by Robie H. Harris. Includes topics such as How Babies Really Begin; Growing Up; What's Love?; Sperm and Egg Meet; Pregnancy, Birth and Adoption; and 'good' and 'bad' touches.
- Secret Boys' Business (2006) by Fay Angelo, Heather Pritchard and Rose Stewart, illustrated by Julie Davey. This is a book to help boys understand the changes they go through when reaching puberty. Secret Boys' Business has large clear text that is easy to understand and every page is full of amusing and colourful illustrations.
- Secret Girls' Business (2003) by Fay Angelo, Heather Pritchard and Rose Stewart, illustrated by Julie Davey. This attractive book about periods will particularly appeal to younger girls. Secret Girls' Business is fun and easy to understand with plenty of brightly coloured illustrations. Girls learn about changes that happen at puberty and are encouraged to make the transition with dignity and joy.
- Talking about sex with boys and girls (2000) by Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Brown. Are boys and girls different on the inside? How do you tell girls and boys apart? Do girls and boys have the same feelings? Is sex a dirty word? What does being pregnant mean? How do you get a belly button? This book explores these questions and more.
- Hair in Funny Places (2000) by Babette Cole. This is a picture storybook about puberty for middle to late primary school boys and girls. In this book, Mr and Mrs Hormone, two hairy monsters, mix potions that turn children into adults. We see some of the changes that result

from these potions. Hair in Funny Places can be a good conversation starter, easing the way for more detailed discussions about puberty.

- The Puberty Book: A guide for children and teenagers, fourth edition, (2007) by Wendy Darvill and Kelsey Powell. This new edition of The Puberty Book contains up-to-date information on all aspects of puberty and includes a new chapter on mental health which addresses issues that may concern young people as they are growing up.
- Puberty Boy (2006) by Geoff Price. This book provides a reassuring discussion of male adolescence including detailed drawings and diagrams of male and female anatomy. It addresses topics from sweat to semen, and body odour to body image. The book includes coverage of the emotional changes, independence, and the responsibilities that come with puberty.
- Puberty Girl (2005) by S. Movsession. This beautifully illustrated book covers information for girls 11-15 about all aspects of puberty, from body changes and menstruation through to hygiene, body image, personal safety and conflict resolution.
- Let's Talk About Sex: Growing Up, Changing Bodies, Sex and Sexual Health (2005) by Robie H. Harris. This book is informative, interesting and reassuring – with a generous dash of humour.
- Autism-Asperger's and Sexuality: Puberty and Beyond (2002) by Jerry and Mary Newport. This is a personal look at the sexual challenges of those diagnosed with autism or Asperger's syndrome.

