

The Importance of Sexual Health Education

Sexual health is a key component of our overall health and well-being. In principle all people living in Canada, including youth, have a right to information and the skills necessary to enhance sexual health. Enhancing our sexual health involves working towards a positive self-image and self-worth, integrating sexuality into mutually satisfying relationships, and preventing or treating sexual health outcomes such as sexually transmitted infections including HIV.⁶

Most people living in Canada become sexually active during their teenage years.⁷ Our youth have higher rates of STIs than the general population⁸ and specifically amongst Indigenous populations, colonialism has interrupted traditional sexual health practices which has result in higher rates of STI/HIV, unintended pregnancy and sexual assaults.

Traditionally in Indigenous cultures sexuality was seen as a gift and a source of great pleasure.⁹ Community adults openly taught children about their bodies, the moon time, and other sexual and reproductive passages. The Kokums (Grandmothers) were the keepers of the knowledge of herbal medicines for, among other things, birth control. This perspective was lost with the influence of the church and residential schools. The impact of the church-run schools, what the schools taught about sex, and the sexual abuse experienced there has made talking about sex for many Indigenous people taboo.¹⁰

Service providers such as teachers, health professionals, and front line workers are in a unique position to provide children, youth, and young adults with the knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes they will need to make and act upon decisions that promote sexual health throughout their

⁶Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN). (2010). *Sexual Health Education in Schools: Questions & Answers 3rd Edition*. Retrieved from www.sieccan.org/pdf/she_q&a_3rd.pdf.

⁷Maticka-Tyndale, E. (2008). Sexuality and sexual health of Canadian adolescents: Yesterday, today and tomorrow. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 17, 85-95.

⁸Public Health Agency of Canada. (2012). Report on Sexually Transmitted Infections in Canada. www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/sti-its-surv-epi/rep-rap-2012/sum-som-eng.php.

⁹Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada. (2002). *Finding Our Way: A Sexual and Reproductive Health Sourcebook for Aboriginal Communities*, Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada. Thomas, J., (2007). Leading an Extraordinary Life: Wise practices for and HIV prevention campaign with Two-Spirit men. 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

lives. Teen Talk has developed a comprehensive sexual health curriculum based on promising practices for sexual health. One notable document is the Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Information,¹¹ which provides a framework for implementing effective programming. The Guidelines embody an educational philosophy that is inclusive, respects diversity and reflects the fundamental basis of education in a democratic society.

Effective sexual health education programs recognize that responsible individuals may choose a variety of paths to achieve sexual health and supports informed decision making by individuals.¹² These programs provide individuals with the knowledge, personal insight, motivation and behavioural skills that are consistent with each individual's personal values and choices.¹³ Studies have consistently found that the majority of parents and youth want sex education to be taught in schools. Human sexuality, puberty, birth control and HIV/AIDS rank the highest as the most valuable topics of sexual health information.¹⁴ Youth also mentioned that they wanted to learn more about healthy relationships, HIV/AIDS, pleasure and communication skills.¹⁵ Research clearly demonstrates that providing youth with sexual health education does not lead to earlier or more frequent sexual activity.¹⁶

Effective programs have a positive impact on sexual health behaviors such as delay or decrease sexual behaviors and/or increase condom or contraceptive use. The research also shows that condom and safer sex distribution programs can increase their use among sexually active youth and does not result in earlier or more frequent sexual activity.¹⁷ In general, there is growing recognition that sexual health education can make a significant positive contribution to the health and well-being of the community.¹⁸

¹¹Public Health Agency of Canada. (2008). *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education*.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Frappier, J-Y Kaufman, M., Baltzer, F. et al. (2008) Sex and sexual health: A Survey of Canadian youth and mothers. *Pediatric and Child Health*, 13, 25-30.

¹⁵ Causarano, N., Pole, J.D., Flicker, S., & the Toronto Teen Survey Team (2010). Exposure to and desire for sexual health education among urban youth: Association with region and other factors. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 19 (4), 169-184.

¹⁶ Kirby, D., Laris, B. A., & Rolleri, L. (2007). Sex and HIV education programs: Their impact on sexual behaviors of young people throughout the world. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 40, 206-217.

¹⁷ Blake, S.M. Ledsky, R., Goodenow, C., et al. (2003) Condom availability programs in Massachusetts high schools: Relationships with condom use and sexual behavior. *American Journal of Public Health*, 93, 955-962. Retrieved from www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1447877/.

¹⁸ World Association for Sexual Health. (2008). *Sexual health for the millennium*.

www.worldsexology.org/millennium-declaration. Kirby, Laris and Rolleri, 2007.