

# Sexuality and sexual health education in NSW government schools

Sexuality education, at age appropriate levels, is an important part of school education.

## Purpose of the document

This document includes information on:

- why we need sexuality and sexual health education in NSW schools
- policy and legislation relevant to sexuality and sexual health education in NSW government schools
- best practice principles for teaching and learning in sexuality and sexual health education
- references for teachers and principals.

Note: For the purpose of this paper the term “sexuality education” is inclusive of sexuality education in K-6 and sexual health education in Years 7-12 through the NSW Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) key learning area and Stage 6 Crossroads course.

## What is sexuality education in NSW government schools?

In NSW, we do not refer to this learning as ‘sex education’. This term can send incorrect messages about the focus of student learning.

Sexuality education content is not about sex nor is it just focused on aspects of child protection.

Student learning is focused on learning about the emotional, social and physical aspects of growing up, relationships, identity, reproduction, gender, human sexuality and sexual health.

A primary goal of sexuality education is to equip children and young people with the knowledge, skills and values to

have safe, fulfilling and enjoyable relationships and to make responsible and safe choices that promote and protect their own health, safety and wellbeing and that of others.

Being able to communicate, listen and negotiate with others and to make informed decisions are useful life-skills that can be applied to all relationships, including intimate relationships.

Other important skills include being able to recognise pressures from other people and to resist them, dealing with and challenging prejudice and being able to seek help from adults - including parents, carers and professionals - through the family, community and health and welfare services.

School education is about preparing young people for healthy, fulfilling adult lives. Providing comprehensive sexuality education ensures this.

Comprehensive sexuality education promotes postponement of first sex (with one sexual partner and safer sex considered as the next best alternative).

School programs that have been most effective in helping young people to abstain discuss both abstinence and contraception.





- increase the use of protection against unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) during sexual intercourse.

### What does the research tell us about children and young people?

The National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2014 found that students most commonly used the school sexual health program (43%) or an Internet website (44%) for information on sex and sexual health.

School programs have remained among the most trusted sources of information for young people across the past decade, whereas the Internet remains low on the list of trusted sources.

Family members have been consistently identified by young people as a significant source of information. However, students have reported low levels of confidence to discuss sexuality or sexual health related matters, such as contraception, with parents and carers.

The National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2014 found that the majority of students in Years 10, 11 and 12 have experienced some form of sexual activity.

Research reports two issues of concern:

- a low level of consistent condom use
- increased rates of unwanted sex, particularly in relation to pressure from partners and alcohol use.

This highlights the importance of education on communication skills, peer pressure, respectful relationships, consent and ethical behaviour in regards to sexual activity.

Communicating clearly to enhance positive feelings about sexual activity and feeling confident to negotiate sexual activity and contraception are key indicators of healthy relationships.

Despite ongoing concerns for the sexual wellbeing of young people, the vast majority of young people are confident in their decision-making around their sexual health. Those who are sexually active are, by and large, having sex that they enjoy and feel positive about.

The majority of those who are not having intercourse are feeling comfortable and confident that this is what they want. This is clearly a strength of young people and one which should be recognised in a strengths based approach to sexuality education.

### What do students learn about relationships, sexuality and sexual health in NSW government schools?

Sexuality and sexual health education is taught in NSW government schools in an age-appropriate way as part of the NSW Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards' Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) key learning area.

Teachers are guided by the age appropriate content within the syllabus to meet the learning and support needs of students in their class.

PDHPE is mandatory from Kindergarten to Year 10. In Years 11 and 12, students in government schools participate in Crossroads. Crossroads extends student learning from PDHPE in the junior years of schooling.

Students learn about many aspects of relationships, sexuality and sexual health.

This includes learning about body parts and puberty in primary school to rights and responsibilities in sexual relationships and planning and managing sexual health in high school.

Students learn about the qualities of caring and respectful relationships, recognising abuse and protective strategies.

Students also learn about appropriate sources of help and support, including parents, peers and sexual health services.

They are taught to be critical consumers and develop skills in seeking accurate and reliable sources of information, including information from the Internet and media sources.



# How does best practice sexuality education comply with and reflect NSW policy, legislation and frameworks in NSW government schools?

Staff employed by the NSW Department of Education are expected to plan for a safe environment for all student activities. The safety, welfare and wellbeing of children, young people or students are paramount.

Student's needs and welfare are the primary concern and the primary focus of professional practice. Professional knowledge and practice need to be examined in terms of their potential for furthering the best interests of children and young people.

Student focused practice includes:

- respect
- age/ developmentally appropriate responses
- realistic expectations
- empathy
- focusing on the student's needs
- ensuring the student is able to participate in decision making about his or her future
- maintaining appropriate boundaries
- promoting positive experiences and outcomes.

Source: NSW Department of Education, Child Protection Awareness Training – Section 3 Professional Practice – e-Learning reading, updated 2015.

When planning programs, teachers should review the content of sensitive or controversial material to ensure it is appropriate to the development, experiences and cultural values of their students.

It is recommended that sensitive subjects be planned for later in the school year, when respect and trust has been developed between students and with the teacher.

## Controversial Issues in Schools Policy

Some members of the community can consider aspects of PDHPE, such as sexuality, education, drug education and child protection education sensitive or controversial.

The Department's **Controversial Issues in School Policy** and **Implementation Procedures** provide direction for the management of controversial issues in schools.

The school has a responsibility to inform parents, prior to the occasion, of the specific details of the program, so that parents have time to exercise their rights of withdrawing their child from a particular session on certain controversial issues. In this regard, a parent's wish must be respected. Source: Controversial Issues in Schools Policy Implementation Procedures.

This statement should be applied to the introduction of external speakers on controversial issues and the study of controversial material to supplement curriculum programs. Evaluation of school programs indicates that, where parents and carers have an understanding of the program, students' learning is improved.

Where parents and carers indicate they wish to withdraw their child from a program it is useful to negotiate which parts of the program they are concerned about. Schools should implement a consultative process to ensure parents and carers have opportunity to participate in discussions on both curriculum content and teaching and learning materials where appropriate to ascertain whether parts of the program need to be modified.

There are many misconceptions about what students learn about and how students learn in sexuality education. Communication with parents and carers assists the community to better understand the content and aims of the programs.

Establishing how parents will be informed about programs and involved in consultation is a school-based decision.

Where appropriate, schools can support parents and carers by providing them with current information about a wide range of sexuality and sexual health issues.

Schools working in partnerships with parents and carers can also dispel some of the anxiety parents may experience from an expectation that sexuality education is their sole responsibility.

## Child protection and wellbeing

The legislation passed in 2009 for the Keep Them Safe: A shared approach to child wellbeing stipulates that all NSW agencies which provide services to children, young people and their families, or whose staff come into contact with

children and young people in the course of their work, are considered to have a particular role in protecting children and young people from harm.

Employees of the NSW Department of Education have responsibilities under the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 relating to the reporting of concerns about suspected risk of significant harm and risk of harm to children and young people to their principal or workplace manager.

The **Mandatory Reporter Guide (MRG)** can assist in making an informed decision regarding child protection concerns. If concerns about the safety, welfare or wellbeing of children or young people constitute risk of significant harm, principals must report these to the Child Protection Helpline on 133627.

The Child Wellbeing Unit can be contacted on 9269 9400 when staff are unclear about how to use the MRG, wish to get advice on the MRG or the MRG indicates to contact the Child Wellbeing Unit.

Education has an important role to support children and young people and to identify where problems arise that may put their safety, welfare or wellbeing at risk. All staff must convey risk of harm concerns to the principal.

The **Protecting and Supporting Children and Young People Policy** sets out the responsibilities of NSW Department of Education employees under the legislation. All staff have a duty to recognise safety, welfare or wellbeing concerns for children and young people that arise from or during the course of their work.

**Protecting and Supporting Children and Young People: Revised procedures** (updated 14/3/2014) require that all staff in schools are aware of the indicators of child abuse and neglect of children and young people, their obligations to report suspected risk of harm and the procedure for doing so.

If staff have reasonable grounds to suspect risk of significant harm to a child or young person, they are required to tell their principal or workplace manager.

## Disclosures

Students should be made aware at the beginning of educational programs that disclosures that indicate they may be at risk of harm will be reported to the school principal in all instances. This includes personal disclosures related to instances of abuse, sexual activity under the legal age of consent or drug use.

Sexuality education can be a sensitive issue for some children and young people. Teachers need to create a supportive learning environment so students feel safe to learn and ask questions. There are number of steps teachers can take to ensure their classroom environment is a safe place for all students when talking about relationships, sexuality and sexual health.

It is important to enable students to withdraw if they find issues personally confronting and to protect them from making harmful disclosures. Equally, it is important that teachers are prepared for issues that arise as a result of a student making a disclosure.

### 1) Create a class agreement and expectations

It is important to set consistent classroom rules as well as reinforce positive behaviours.

Establishing and maintaining guidelines and boundaries for students will encourage mutual respect and allow for positive relationships to develop in the classroom.

A useful strategy is to engage students in the development of these ground rules. Below are some examples of rules you could use for discussion:

- listen to different ideas without 'put downs'
- no interruptions while someone is talking
- stick to the point
- everyone has the right to speak
- each person is responsible for his or her own behaviour
- what other people say in class is confidential
- never refer to someone by name when giving an example
- always support each other
- respect other's cultural traditions, beliefs, values and languages
- everyone has the right not to offer an opinion.

## 2) Discourage public disclosures

Teachers can actively discourage disclosures of personal or sensitive information. Keep discussions global rather than personal, as this will enable all students to discuss issues more freely. Encourage students to talk in third person, for example, "If a person... what if someone..."

## 3) One step removed

One step removed is a strategy that allows students to explore a range of sensitive issues without confrontation or personal threat. One step removed suggests teachers use fictitious case studies, moral dilemmas or any techniques that dissuade students from talking in the first person in class discussions.

Instead of the direct "what would you do if...?" approach, teachers substitute:

- "suppose this happened to someone...what advice would you give them?...what could they do?"
- "imagine someone was feeling...what advice would you give to help them in their situation?"

When exploring possible outcomes of case studies or moral dilemmas, it is important to use conditional language: such as "...this might happen" or "...this could happen", never use "this will happen".

## 4) Protective interrupting

Protective interrupting involves teachers interrupting students who begin to disclose private information, e.g. "It sounds as though you want to talk about this. Why don't we talk about it after class?"

After protective interrupting, guide the discussion back to one step removed.

If staff have reasonable grounds to suspect risk of significant harm to a child or young person, they are required to tell their principal or workplace manager.

If a student discloses information it is important:

- to tell the child or young person you believe him or her
- to be aware of your own emotions in relation to what the child or young person is telling you, and keep those emotions under control
- to be prepared to listen and support a child or young person when he or she tells you about an event or behaviours that indicate risk of harm

- to use a calm reassuring tone and talk at the child or young person's level
- to listen to the child or young person and acknowledge that it may be difficult to talk about what is happening to him or her
- not to make promises you cannot keep - especially that you won't tell anyone
- to offer support to the child or young person
- to avoid expressing doubt, judgment or shock
- to be aware of the child or young person's cultural and linguistic background and how this might impact on disclosure.

Following up suspicion or belief that harm or risk to a child or young person has occurred can be the first important step in stopping the harm and preventing further harm from occurring.

More information on how to create a supportive classroom environment can be found on the **Teaching Sexual Health website**.

## Code of conduct

Teachers continually use their professional judgement to decide on the best strategies, resources and teaching and learning methods for any given situation.

In making these judgements, teachers must take into account the age, maturity, health and other characteristics of children and young people. They must also be aware that their own conduct at all times, must be keeping with that specified in the **Department's Code of Conduct** and of their role and responsibilities pursuant to it.

Resilience research confirms that the presence of a caring adult in aspects of their lives is important in assisting students to overcome adversity and achieve at school.

Effective teaching in PDHPE relies on positive relationships that are developed in a professional manner. The teacher is, by the nature of their role, in a position of trust, authority and influence.



They can have a significant impact upon students' educational progress, social and emotional wellbeing and behaviour and have the responsibility and authority to manage interactions and situations. Relationships need to be carefully managed for the safety of all involved.

Effective teaching and learning is supported by establishing a trusting relationship between student and teacher that:

- focuses on the needs of the student
- models and fosters caring and supportive relationships to increase
  - self confidence, awareness and management of behaviour
  - positive attitudes towards assisting others.

Clear guidelines are provided to ensure appropriate relationships with clear expectations of the student and teacher.

Further advice about professional practice in the teaching of PDHPE can be found in:

- **Advice about maintaining professional relationships with secondary students - Student: Friend or Foe?** Curriculum Support Directorate, PDHPE, Vol 3, No. 4, 1998
- **Advice about the use of touch in PDHPE or Sport - A Touchy Subject**, Curriculum Support Directorate, PDHPE, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1998.
- **Legal Issues Bulletin 55 (Dec 2014) Transgender students in schools – legal rights and responsibilities** (Intranet only)

#### **For more information, contact**

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#### **Teaching Sexual Health website**

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