

# YOUTH AND COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION



## HIGHLIGHTS

“Preparing children and young people for the transition to adulthood has always been one of humanity’s great challenges, with human sexuality and relationship at its core. Today, in a world with AIDS, how we meet this challenge is our most important opportunity in breaking the trajectory of the epidemic.”

*Michel Sidibé, Executive Director, UNAIDS*

## What is sexuality education?

Sexuality education provides young people with the knowledge, skills and efficacy to make informed decisions about their sexuality and lifestyle. Strong international commitments exist, mainly from human rights, health and youth empowerment perspectives, to promote comprehensive sexuality education. With IOM, UN Volunteers in Nepal are assisting a land reform process and building capacity of national and district-level government institutions to deliver psychosocial support and counselling to conflict affected victims.

Young people receive a range of conflicting and confusing messages about sexuality and gender on a daily basis. We believe that a thorough and high quality curriculum-based sexuality education programme can help all children and young people navigate these messages, and develop positive norms about themselves, about relationships and about their health as well as responsible citizenship. Although most governments have some type of sexuality education programmes in place, such programmes are often weak or unevenly implemented. Importantly, emerging research findings about effective approaches, along with the advent of new resources for implementing these approaches, make this a particularly opportune moment for advancing this basic human right.

## Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) emphasizes a holistic approach to human development and sexuality. UNESCO identifies the primary goal of sexuality education as that “children and young

people become equipped with the knowledge, skills and values to make responsible choices about their sexual and social relationships in a world affected by HIV.”<sup>[2]</sup> The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) defines a rights-based approach to CSE as “to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they need to determine and enjoy their sexuality – physically and emotionally, individually and in relationships.”<sup>[3]</sup> Both definitions view ‘sexuality’

<sup>[2]</sup> UNESCO. 2009. International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education

<sup>[3]</sup> IPPF. 2011. From Evidence to action: Advocating for comprehensive sexuality education pp3





within the context of emotional and social development, recognizing that the provision of information alone is not enough. Young people need to be given the opportunity to acquire essential life skills and develop positive attitudes and values. CSE is an approach that recognizes and promotes: human rights; knowledge, values and skills necessary for HIV prevention; and, gender equality.

Evidence has shown that comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) that is scientifically accurate, culturally and age-appropriate, gender-sensitive and life skills-based can provide young people with the knowledge, skills and efficacy to make informed decisions about their sexuality and lifestyle<sup>[4]</sup>. Research points to the fact that CSE can effectively delay sex among young people, even as it increases condom and overall contraceptive use among sexually active youth. Scholarly research during the last two decades has also shown that sexuality education does not increase rates of sexual activity among teenagers and does increase knowledge about sexual behaviour and its consequences<sup>[6]</sup>. It also reduces risk taking behaviours among those who are sexually active<sup>[7]</sup>. When young people are equipped with accurate and relevant information, when they have developed skills in decision-making, negotiation, communication and critical thinking, and have access to counselling and SRH/HIV services that are non-judgmental and affordable, they are better able to:

- Take advantage of educational and other opportunities that will impact their lifelong well-being;
- Avoid unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions;
- Improve their sexual and reproductive health and protect themselves against STIs including HIV;
- Understand and question social norms and practices concerning sexuality, gender and relationships and contribute positively to society; and
- Be better equipped to face other challenges in life, especially during the transition period from childhood to adulthood.

## Sexuality Education within legal and policy frameworks

While there are a range of views on what should be included in sexuality education, and what the term encompasses, there has been a strong international commitment to promoting the provision of CSE among young people. These include the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The international agreements over the past decades such as the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994, the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 and the World Summit on Children in 2002 have extended the scope of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), by affirming the right of all children and adolescents to receive sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information, education and services in accordance with their specific needs<sup>[8]</sup>. These policy commitments have also been highlighted in various regional and

<sup>[4]</sup> UNESCO. 2009. International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education.

<sup>[6]</sup> UNESCO. 2009. International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education.





high-level documents, including the 2005 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (also known as the Maputo Protocol), and the 2008 Latin American Ministerial Declaration articulating a commitment by all countries in that region to provide sexuality education, including the Conference on Population and Development (CPD) 2012/1 Resolution on Adolescents and Youth in New York.

UNESCO has noted that sexuality education can be delivered through a range of programming modalities, including: family life education (FLE), population education, sex and relationships education, SRH education and life skills education, or through dedicated sexuality education programmes. Four overarching principles guide UNFPA's work on sexuality education: achieving social equity by paying special attention to vulnerable groups; protecting the rights of young people, particularly to health, education and civic participation; maintaining cultural sensitivity by advocating for sexuality and reproductive health in sensitive and engaging ways; and affirming a gender perspective that, while recognizing boys' needs, preserves spaces for girls, especially the poor and vulnerable. United Nations (UN) treaty monitoring bodies have recommended that SRH education should be a mandatory component of learning<sup>[9]</sup>. CEDAW calls on Member States to provide compulsory sexual education in a systematic manner throughout all educational institutions<sup>[10]</sup>. Similarly the Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that member states include sexual education in the official programmes of primary and secondary education<sup>[11]</sup>.

To achieve Universal Access for knowledge and to contribute to improve sexual and reproductive health (including HIV outcomes) for young people we need to:

- Place *gender and human rights* at the heart of sexuality education
- Achieve significantly *higher coverage*-reaching a critical mass of young people, and ensuring that we are reaching adolescents and youth both in and out of school settings
- Develop *comprehensive* school-based programmes from primary through secondary
- Address vulnerabilities and fight exclusion
- Promote local ownership and cultural relevance
- Take a positive life-cycle approach to sexuality

### Other key considerations when developing sexuality education:

- We need to reach young people before they become sexually active
- It is important to address young people's various identities including those young people living with HIV, young people who are also parents, young key populations etc.
- Teachers are key partners in successful sexuality education programmes
- Parents play a primary role in shaping social and sexual identities and need to support schools and teachers



## Tools for supporting sexuality education

### International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, 2009, UNESCO

The International Technical Guidance is a voluntary set of international standards that is based on the most current evidence on the impact of sexuality education programmes on sexual behaviour. It is a global template that can be adapted to national needs which takes a comprehensive approach to sexuality education – and includes attention to human rights issues and gender. The development of the Guidance was motivated by the urgent need to address the knowledge gap on HIV prevention amongst young people. The Guidance lays out clearly *what works in programming for HIV prevention or sexual health for young people and provides evidence to demonstrate that CSE does no harm* – critical in many advocacy efforts.

The Guidance also provides the ‘how’; recommending that sexuality education should start at age five, building on basic concepts in a building block approach, and continue through childhood and adolescence. The Guidance gives a clear framework for the kind of *learning objectives* that are needed and the key concepts that should be covered in any set of curricula, for specific tranches of age.

UNESCO and UNFPA have also developed a range of other tools to support the development, scale-up or review of sexuality education programmes;

#### Levers of Success: Case studies of sexuality education programmes

**Cost & Cost-Effectiveness Study (UNESCO):** *ground-breaking multi-country study showing that sexuality education can be highly cost-efficient, when coupled with youth friendly services*

**Scaling-Up Sexuality Education (UNESCO)** *analysis of effective approaches to scaling-up sexuality education including five case studies of country experiences in scaling-up.*

**Sexuality Education Review and Assessment Tool (SERAT)** *an interactive, participatory tool to review existing curricula at different age-grades against core criteria laid out in the International Technical Guidance and other key resources.*

**“It’s all One curriculum”** *Guidelines and activities for a unified approach to sexuality, gender, HIV and human rights education (Population Council 2009)*

**Global Guidance Briefs** *HIV Interventions for Young people in the Education Sector, IATT/YP, 2008*

**Peer Education Toolkit** UNFPA

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All tools are available at:

[www.unesco.org/aids](http://www.unesco.org/aids)

<http://www.unfpa.org/public/global/pid/1258>.