

# GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FORUM

## COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

### **WHY CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS NEED TO LEARN ABOUT HEALTH, WELL-BEING, VALUES AND EQUITY**

As children move through childhood and then through adolescence, parents and other care givers teach them how to do everyday things e.g. how to cross the road safely, how to use a stove without burning themselves, or how to buy something from the local grocery store and come back home with the right change. They do this because these everyday things are important parts of their lives.

Sexuality and reproduction too are important parts of their lives. As children and adolescents grow and develop, they need sexuality education that matches their sex, gender, development and circumstances. They have a right to sexuality education because it positively impacts their lives by increasing agency and helping to challenge harmful gender norms that drive sexual and gender-based violence; child, early and forced marriage or unions; and female genital mutilation / cutting. Studies from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America, show that most children and adolescents are not getting the information and education they need [1, 2,3].

Many children and adolescents are poorly informed about the changes taking place in their bodies and minds at puberty, and are unprepared to deal with them. In many cases, girls learn about menstruation on the day their periods begin. Many are shocked and scared when they see their menstrual blood for the first time. And boys wake up confused and alarmed after their first nocturnal emission of semen. Many adolescents do not have the knowledge, so when sexual activity begins - generally during adolescence - they are unprepared to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies, assess risks and to make sure that sex is safe, pleasurable and consensual. They are also unprepared to refuse unwanted approaches from peers or from adults who use physical or emotional pressure to coerce them to have sex. They can also feel confused and excluded if diverse experiences, identities and practices are not talked about in sexuality education. And finally, they do not know where and how to seek help from a trusted adult and from health and social services when problems occur. These experiences can be aggravated within crisis settings.

What this adds up to is that children and adolescents in many places are facing health, psychological and social problems because we adults are shying away from sexuality education.

## WHAT IS COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION?

The UN\* International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (ITGSE) from 2018, defines CSE as: 'A curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality.'

It aims to equip young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes & values that will empower them to realize their health, wellbeing and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own wellbeing and that of others, and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.' [4]

The ITGSE describes CSE as having the following attributes – **“scientifically accurate, age and developmentally appropriate, curriculum based, comprehensive, based on a human rights approach, based on gender equality, culturally relevant and context appropriate, transformative, and able to develop life skills needed to support healthy choices.”** [4]

CSE teaches children and adolescents to treat each other with respect and dignity, learn to think about what is right and safe for them, adopt values of equality, love and kindness, and protects them from unsafe situations.

\*UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women and WHO

## WHAT IS THE AIM OF CSE?



Improve knowledge and understanding, and to correct misconceptions by providing age-appropriate, scientifically accurate, and culturally relevant information. Examples of questions that adolescents ask are: Why are my periods painful; and will I lose my manhood if I do not have sex now ?



Promote self-awareness and norms that are equitable and respectful of others, by providing opportunities to discuss and reflect on thoughts and feelings, attitudes and values. Examples of issues to stimulate such discussion and reflection are: How would you feel if someone teased you about your appearance or body odour; and is it true that only a boy can ask a girl to go out with him? Or can a girl ask a boy out?



Build social skills needed to make responsible choices and behave accordingly, by providing structured opportunities to practice those skills. Examples of issues to role play scenarios are: If someone looks at you or touches you in a way that you do not want, how would you tell them to stop; and how would you tell a friend that you do not want to join her for a party without breaking your friendship?



Promote safe and equitable learning environments, by explaining how gender norms create inequality, stigma and discrimination, and negatively affect health and well-being. Examples of helping learners develop critical thinking skills are: Think about how girls and boys are treated differently in society and how this affects them; what values should a happy and healthy family or school be based on?

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**To sum up, comprehensive sexuality education, in and out of school settings, is key to developing the skills, knowledge, autonomy, confidence and ability to make informed decisions about a person's sexual and reproductive life, so that they can enjoy fulfilling and healthy relationships and protect themselves, and their partners, against ill health, violence and unwanted pregnancy.**

## THE TRUTHS ABOUT CSE

Delivered in formal and/or non-formal settings

# 1

**In line with socio-cultural values:** CSE reinforces positive values such as respect, safety, responsibility and social cooperation, emphasising the importance of dignity, well-being and healthy relationships within families/households.

**Age- and developmentally-responsive:** CSE content is adapted to the age and developmental stage of the learner. Learners in lower grades are introduced to simple concepts such as family, respect and kindness. While older learners get to tackle more complex concepts such as gender-based violence, sexual consent, HIV testing, and pregnancy.

# 2

# 3

**Evidence that it is effective:** CSE is five times more likely to be successful in preventing unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections when it pays explicit attention to the topics of gender and power [5]. Research has shown that abstinence-only programmes are ineffective. To achieve positive change and reduce early or unintended pregnancies, education about sexuality, reproductive health and contraception has to be wide-ranging. CSE is about educating learners on all the possible options and choices, including abstinence, delaying sexual activity, condoms and other contraception. The evidence shows that CSE is effective when it provides holistic information and skills to act.

**National contexts determine content:** Technical guidance on CSE notes young people should have access to full information about comprehensive SRH services. For example, in countries where abortion is legal this should include information on abortion, while in countries where abortion is restricted, information on post-abortion care should be included.

# 4

## THE TRUTHS ABOUT CSE

Delivered in formal and/or non-formal settings

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**CSE is for everyone and everywhere:** CSE is about quality education, health, and well-being for all and promotes values of inclusion and dignity for all. CSE is in line with agreements signed by UN Member States which reiterate that all people, regardless of age, sexual orientation, or gender identity, should have equal access to the highest attainable standard of health, including education, health services, and accurate sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information – without discrimination. CSE can be delivered in-school or in out-of-school settings such as the youth center, community, refugee camp, youth-friendly clinic etc.

**Young people gain life skills and take better decisions:** Research from all around the world has shown that CSE leads to learners delaying the age of sexual initiation, increasing the use of condoms and other contraceptives when they are sexually active, increasing their knowledge about their bodies and relationships, decreasing their risk-taking, and decreasing the frequency of unprotected sex. Thus, overall, CSE leads to healthier, happier and more fulfilled young people who have the information, attitudes and skills to make better life choices for themselves.

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**7 Young people learn to manage risk:** CSE helps young people to understand and manage their risk in relation to sexual activity. Good quality CSE ensures that, over the years, learners receive information that builds on previous knowledge about their bodies and how to take care of them to remain happy, healthy, and to lower risk.

**CSE protects children and young people from abuse:** SRHR cover the rights to health, education, to be protected from violence and abuse, to access information, to bodily integrity, and the need for consent. CSE provides children and young people with the knowledge and skills to challenge toxic and harmful gender norms. It enables them to prevent engaging in non-consensual sexual activity, to recognise violence or abuse, and how to ask for help.

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# THIS IS A CALL TO ACTION >

## WHAT IS NEEDED?



The CSE Partnership Forum calls on policy makers and funders to act on the following recommendations from the 2021 UN report, *'The journey towards comprehensive sexuality education: A global status report'* [6]:



i) Commit to strong political leadership and clearly mandate CSE in policy and legal frameworks



ii) Assign a budget dedicated to CSE programmes in national / sub-national budgets, and for co-financing by donors, in both in and out-of-school settings



iii) Increase coverage of gender-responsive CSE for *all* children, adolescents and young people, both in and out of school and in times of crisis, as well as increase the comprehensiveness of the curricula itself



iv) Invest in teacher training and support, including the development and dissemination of teaching materials and job-aids to provide CSE that is non-discriminatory, inclusive and accessible, non-judgmental, scientifically accurate, rights-based, gender-transformative and effective

v) Support governments, parents and other stakeholders to better understand the long-term benefits of CSE, and to involve other sectors, especially youth-led organizations, in providing CSE

vi) Monitor progress and demonstrate how to overcome challenges, in line with national, regional and international commitments

vii) Fully involve young people in discussions about curricula content, delivery channels (i.e. classroom, youth club, online, media), and how to meet their needs. Listen actively and seek out the perspectives of young people

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