SEXUALITY EDUCATION: WHAT IS ITS IMPACT?

This policy brief provides an overview of the impact of good quality sexuality education on the health and well-being of children and young people. The examples in this brief are taken from Europe and Central Asia but they are also relevant to countries outside of these regions.

Sexuality education is teaching about the cognitive, emotional, social, interactive and physical aspects of sexuality. Sexuality education does not encourage children and young people to have sex. In the Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe, experts agreed that: “Sexuality education starts early in childhood and progresses through adolescence and adulthood. For children and young people, it aims at supporting and protecting sexual development. It gradually equips and empowers children and young people with information, skills and positive values to understand and enjoy their sexuality, have safe and fulfilling relationships and take responsibility for their own and other people’s sexual health and well-being.”

Sexuality education lays the foundation for a safe and fulfilling passage to adulthood, e.g. by encouraging understanding of emotions and feelings, teaching the principles of human reproduction, exploring family and interpersonal relationships, learning about safety, and developing confidence and communication skills. These can then be built upon gradually, in line with the age and stage of development of the child.

This policy brief presents the available evidence describing the “hard” and “soft” aspects of sexuality education. At the same time, the authors recognize that the impact of “soft” aspects of sexuality education have not been sufficiently studied to date.

IMPACT OF GOOD QUALITY SEXUALITY EDUCATION ON THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Sexuality education delivered within a safe and enabling learning environment and alongside access to health services has a positive and life-long effect on the health and well-being of young people.

Studies in several European countries have shown that the introduction of long-term national sexuality education programmes has led to “hard outcomes”, as shown in Table 1:

- Reduction in teenage pregnancies and abortions
- Decrease in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among young people aged 15–24 years
- Decrease in HIV infections among young people aged 15–24 years
- Decrease in sexual abuse
- Decrease in homophobia

Table 1: “Hard” outcomes of good quality sexuality education
RISE IN AGE AT FIRST INTERCOURSE

From 2005 to 2010 the percentage of sexually experienced 15-year-olds has remained stable in Western European countries and increased in Eastern European countries. However, at least four countries (Finland, Germany, Kazakhstan and the Netherlands) observed a decrease in the percentage of sexually experienced 15-year-olds.

INCREASED CONTRACEPTIVE USE AT FIRST INTERCOURSE

Over the last three decades, Germany saw a significant increase in contraceptive use at first intercourse. In 2010, 92% of young people used some form of contraception at first intercourse, compared with only 80% of girls and 71% of boys in 1980 (Figure 1). Similarly, in the Netherlands, nine out of ten adolescents used contraceptives at first intercourse. This is not only due to sexuality education, but also to national safer-sex campaigns, good access to reliable, affordable and acceptable contraception, youth-friendly services and supportive environments. Increased condom use is particularly important as it also protects from HIV, other STIs and human papillomavirus (HPV). Figure 2 shows contraceptive use broken down by contraceptive method.

The experience of some countries provides direct evidence for the positive behavioural changes that have occurred in parallel with the introduction of sexuality education.

### Table 2: “Soft” outcomes of good quality sexuality education

- Awareness of human rights
- Respect, acceptance, tolerance and empathy for others
- Gender equality
- Confidence and self-esteem
- Skills in contraceptive use
- Empowerment and solidarity
- Critical thinking
- Skills in negotiation, decision-making and assertiveness
- Parent-child communication
- Sexual pleasure and mutually respectful relationships

Social norms and gender inequality influence the expression of sexuality and sexual behaviour. Many young women have low levels of power or control in their sexual relationships. Young men, on the other hand, may feel pressure from their peers to fulfil male sexual stereotypes and engage in controlling or harmful behaviours. Good quality sexuality education has a positive impact on attitudes and values and can even out the power dynamics in intimate relationships, thus contributing to the prevention of abuse and fostering mutually respectful and consensual partnerships.

Beyond that, by increasing confidence and strengthening skills to deal with different challenges, sexuality education can empower young people to develop stronger and more meaningful relationships (Table 2).

### Figure 1: Contraceptive use at first intercourse in Germany

### Figure 2: Contraceptive method at first intercourse in the Netherlands in 1995 and 2011

Young people using no contraceptive have been excluded from this table.
DECLINE IN SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTION RATES

In Estonia, increased knowledge about contraception including condoms, positive attitudes and intention to use contraception, self-efficacy in using contraception, negotiation skills when a partner refuses to use a condom, ability to seek contraceptive services and counselling, and more.

In Finland, school-based sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services for young people were introduced in 1990, leading to an immediate decrease in teenage pregnancy rates. However, owing to budget constraints, both programmes were drastically reduced in the period 1998–2006. This had an immediate impact on abortion and birth rates among 15–19 year old girls. The rates decreased again after the reintroduction of sexuality education and youth-specific health services in 2006 (Figure 3).3

DECLINE IN TEENAGE PREGNANCY RATES

Sexuality education is thought to decrease teenage pregnancy rates because of the specific knowledge it imparts about contraception including condoms, positive attitudes and intention to use contraception, self-efficacy in using contraception, negotiation skills when a partner refuses to use a condom, ability to seek contraceptive services and counselling, and more.

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Figure 3: Abortions and deliveries in 15–19-year-old girls (per 1000), Finland, 1975–2010

Figure 4: Decline in registered cases of three STIs (Chlamydia, gonorrhoea and syphilis), Estonia, 2001–2009

REFERENCES

1. WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA. 2010. Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe: A framework for policy makers, education and health authorities and specialists. Cologne, BZgA.


