



Guidance document for
school leaders on sexuality
and sexual health education



Acknowledgment and citation

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Principles of sexuality and sexual health education (SSHE)

- 1** Human rights
- 2** Accessible to all young people and inclusive of identities and experiences of all young people
- 3** Appropriate to the age and level of development of learners
- 4** Holistic and broadly-based in scope and depth
- 5** Scientifically accurate
- 6** Incorporates emerging issues related to sexual health and wellbeing
- 7** Supports development of health literacy
- 8** Uses a learner-centred approach
- 9** Emphasises a deep understanding of consent and respectful relationships
- 10** Promotes gender equality and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence
- 11** Culturally relevant
- 12** Nurtures positive values and attitudes towards sexuality and sexual health
- 13** Supported by a whole-of-school, or health-promoting school, approach
- 14** Provided by educators who have the knowledge, skills, confidence and commitment to deliver comprehensive sexuality and sexual health education
- 15** Uses engaging, evidence-based teaching methods
- 16** Trauma-informed



Guidance document for school leaders on sexuality and sexual health education

Purpose

This document has been developed to provide guidance for school leaders in the provision of sexuality and sexual health education (**SSHE**) within their school. Evidence-based sexuality and sexual health education is intrinsically linked with respectful relationships and consent education.

Research evidence (UNESCO, 2018) indicates that effective education in this field takes a broad comprehensive approach that goes beyond the teaching of reproduction, risk and disease. It includes teaching about body autonomy, values, rights and respect, communication, informed decision making, the influence of media and technology, healthy relationships, intimacy, gender and power imbalances and the understanding and negotiation of consent (Family Planning Australia, 2023a).

The audience for this document includes Principals, Deputies, Heads of PDHPE, Year Advisers, School Executive Boards and others who fulfil a leadership role within their school.

This document supports a whole-of-school approach, which recognises that **SSHE** messages are more effective when they are well-planned and consistent across schools and the community. A whole-of-school approach has been shown to promote communication and confidence, allowing staff to feel supported in their work with students and their communication with parents.

This document provides information and an evidence base to support communication with staff, parents and carers, and to frame school procedures and events.

Documents in this series:

- Sexuality and sexual health education best practice statement (Family Planning Australia, 2023)
- Guidance document for school leaders on sexuality and sexual health education (Family Planning Australia, 2023)
- Guidance document for school wellbeing staff on sexuality and sexual health education (Family Planning Australia, 2023)
- Guidance document for schools on working with parents, carers and families about sexuality and sexual health education (Family Planning Australia, 2023)

Introduction

Parents and carers are the first and most important teachers of their children in sexuality and sexual health education. Schools also have a vital role to play in supporting the sexual health education of young people.

Receiving effective **SSHE** is a human right (Centre for Reproductive Rights, 2008). **SSHE** programs support better health literacy outcomes across an individual's entire lifespan. These programs also enable young people to develop health literacy and skills to provide agency over their own bodies. Crucially, **SSHE** programs support health literacy and sexual consent across the lifespan of individuals.

Leaders set the tone and standard through which teachers view their place within existing school frameworks. Leaders create and foster environments of safe practice and learning that have capacity to evolve, adapt and support change when informed by the latest research evidence. Leaders ensure continuous review and modification of existing learning structures that encompass current societal expectations of student development in their sexuality and sexual health education.

Leaders are the changemakers across the SSHE landscape in NSW schools.

Comprehensive **SSHE** is the gold standard for students' development of autonomy and agency in their sexual and reproductive health (UNESCO, 2016). Taught appropriately, **SSHE** is a life skill that is part of each stage of education. Contrary to popular belief, comprehensive **SSHE** does not increase sexual behaviour amongst young people, nor cause them to engage in sexual behaviours earlier. However, when people do begin to engage in intimate or sexual behaviours, having received this education makes it more likely that it is safely and respectfully.

Of great importance in the effective delivery of **SSHE** is ensuring that it is meaningful to the learners, and reflects the lived experiences and needs of young people. This significance is a key feature of the **Quality teaching framework** (NSW Department of Education, 2008) by which all schools are guided on pedagogy. Significance refers to building the connections in learning between subjects, across content and reflecting real life. It also incorporates the inclusivity and cultural knowledge important to parents, carers and the community.

The role of leaders in the three key areas of compliance to syllabus outcomes, the development of strong community relationships and the meeting of student needs is nowhere more prominent than in ensuring the effectiveness of sexuality and sexual health education.

Student experience

- Over 95% of young people reported that they believe relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is an important part of the school curriculum, and 93% reported receiving RSE at school, most commonly in Years 8 and 9. However, less than 25% reported that their most recent RSE class was very or extremely relevant to them. LGBTQ young people are even less likely than heterosexual young people to report that their RSE was relevant to them.
- Most commonly, young people reported that their RSE classes included discussion of puberty (71%), correct names for sexual body parts (68%), female reproduction (64%) and respectful relationships (61%).
- Young people who felt positive about sexuality are more likely to consider the quality of their relationships with their partner; particularly their communication, and their partner's comfort and safety.
- GPs are a trusted source of sexual health information for most young people (78%); however many young people do not know how to talk with their GP about sexual health issues.
- Young people described the best teachers for RSE as approachable and respectful (92%), knowledgeable (90%), having a sense of humour (86%), calm and unflappable (83%), willing to ask students what they want to learn (81%), and relating well to students (81%).

Young people commented that they would like their school education to include topics about gender and sexual diversity, masturbation, pleasure, how to talk to sexual partners, consent, and where to seek help about sexual health.

From the 7th *National survey of Australian secondary students and sexual health 2021* (Power et al, 2022).

* This information is taken from the 7th *National survey of Australian secondary students and sexual health 2021* (Power et al., 2022).

The principles in practice for school leaders

To read the full version of the Principles of **SSHE** refer to the *Sexuality and sexual health education best practice statement* (Family Planning Australia, 2023a).

In order to foster an effective whole-of-school approach, school leaders have an essential role in promoting **SSHE** in their interactions with parents and carers, students, school staff and the wider community. Here are some tips on how school leaders can lead and support **SSHE** programs within their schools.

- Ensure **SSHE** best practice is embedded in school procedures and environments.
- Share and discuss the *Best practice statement*, the other *Guidance documents* and other relevant documents with staff and across your school community. Ensure **SSHE** is regularly discussed in staff meetings (Family Planning Australia, 2023a).
- Ensure that teachers are supported to address **SSHE**. For example, ensure ongoing professional development in this area. Ensure that delivery is planned cohesively across year levels and ask teachers what would be helpful to them in delivery of **SSHE** lessons.
- Ensure any external educators brought in to complement existing programs are evidence-based, accurate and align with effective practice principles (Family Planning Australia, 2023a).
- Provide opportunities for young people to have a say in **SSHE** programs and relevant school procedures. They strongly benefit from being empowered with the information to manage their own sexual health.
- Work with wellbeing staff to address young people's concerns in a variety of ways (Family Planning Australia, 2023b).
- Engage with families to provide information and resources about the importance of **SSHE** and the approach taken by your school. This enhances parent/carer confidence and improves outcomes for students (Family Planning Australia, 2023c).
- Link with local health and community services to provide resources and referrals.
- Work in partnership with communities with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to foster culturally safe sexual health education.

Addressing challenges

Teachers consistently report that having enough time to prepare and deliver effective **SSHE** lessons is their main barrier to implementation of **SSHE** across all stages and years (Lewis, 2015; Roth et al, 2021). To address this, teachers require ongoing support for **SSHE** to be planned and taught in a consistent and meaningful way.

Additionally, teachers and other school staff benefit from their school leaders setting the tone for a proactive and positive engagement with parents, carers and the community.

Leaders have always had a unique role to play ensuring consistent key messaging, community engagement and teacher development in support of **SSHE**.

Schools can empower parents and carers by providing information on the outcomes for students, which include **a reduction in sexual assault and gendered violence** (UNESCO, 2018) as well as **reduced rates of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmissible infections** (Montgomery & Knerr, 2018).

Alignment

This resource aligns with:

- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2022) [Health and physical education: Support resource – focus areas](#)
- Department of Education (2022) [Australian student wellbeing framework](#)
- The Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation. (2021). [National principles of health education](#)
- NSW Department of Education. (2018). [Life ready years 11 and/or 12](#)
- NSW Department of Education. (2008). [Quality teaching framework](#)
- NSW Department of Education. (2023). [Sexuality and sexual health education](#)
- NSW Department of Education. (2021). [Statement of intent: Our shared commitment](#)
- NSW Department of Education. (2020). [Trauma-informed practice in schools: An explainer](#)
- NSW Education Standards Authority. (2018). [Personal development, health and physical education \(PDHPE\) K-10 syllabus](#)
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2018). [International technical guidance on sexuality education](#)

**Availability of these resources may depend on access provided by each organisation and may change without notice*

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