

Guidance document for school wellbeing staff on sexuality and sexual health education

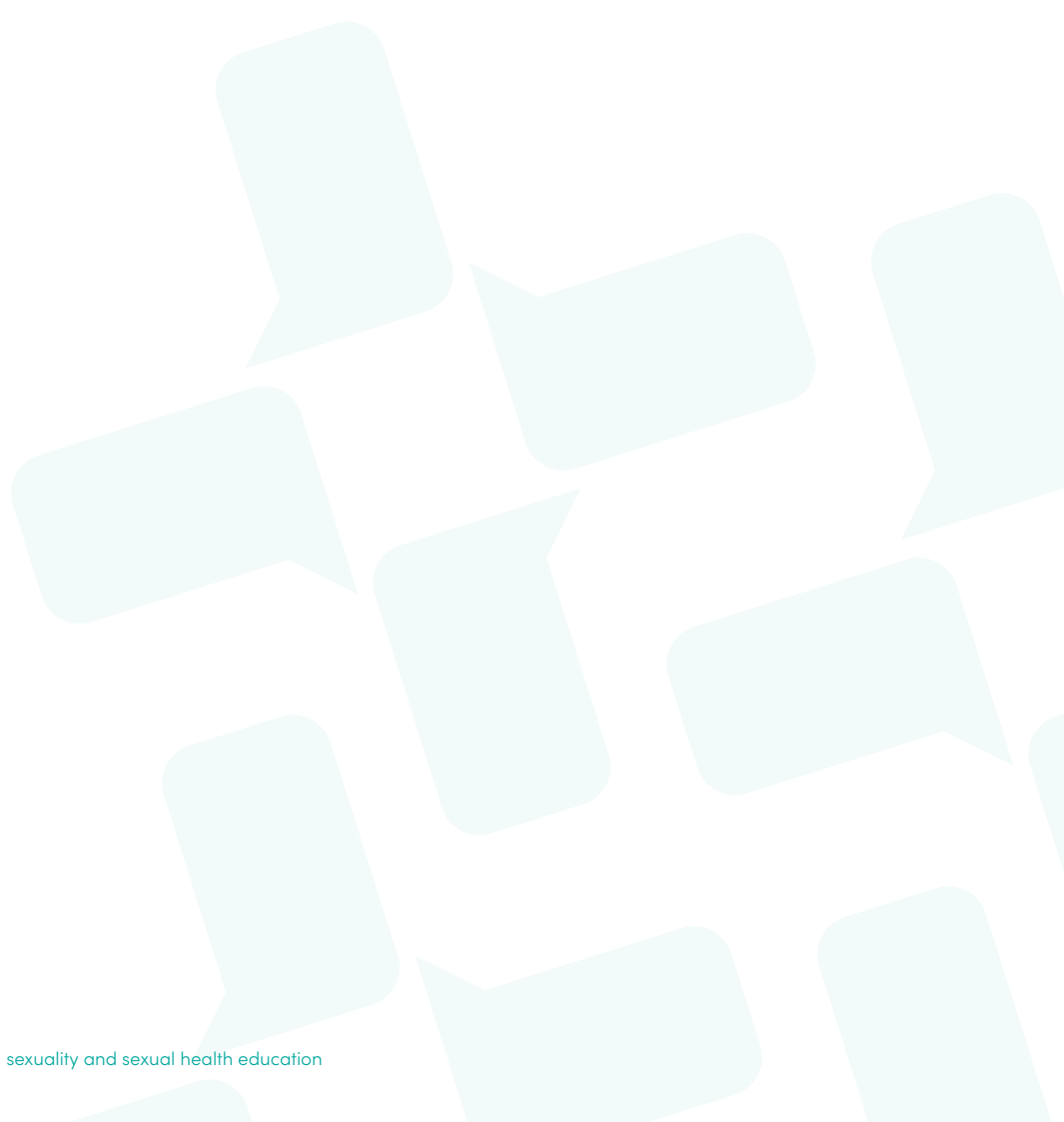


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Principles of sexuality and sexual health education (SSHE)

- 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



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Purpose

The aim of this document is to support school wellbeing staff in implementing sexuality and sexual health education (**SSHE**). Evidence based **SSHE** is intrinsically linked with respectful relationships and consent education.

Research evidence (UNESCO, 2016) 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 PA, 2023a).

The audience for this document includes year advisers, school counsellors, school social workers, school psychologists, school nurses as well as teachers, school leaders and others who support student and family wellbeing.

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.

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

SSHE is a key aspect of overall health and wellbeing. In partnership with parents and carers, schools play a crucial role in equipping students with the age-appropriate knowledge, motivation, and skills needed to have respectful and healthy relationships and to support and enhance their sexual and reproductive health as they mature.

SSHE in schools is an essential component of health education and supports the rights of children and young people to education and information about sexuality and sexual health.

Schools' broad contact with nearly all young people ideally positions them to deliver consistent, timely and evidence-based **SSHE** and support (Montgomery & Knerr, 2018; Power et al., 2022). Surveys of Australian school students also indicate that school-based sexuality and sexual health education programs are amongst Australian students' most utilised and trusted sources of sexual and reproductive health information (Power et al., 2022; Roth et al., 2021).

The principles in practice for school wellbeing staff

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 wellbeing staff 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 wellbeing staff can facilitate and support **SSHE** programs within their schools.

1. Promote human rights

- Share with your school community that receiving effective sexuality and sexual health education is a human right (Centre for Reproductive Rights, 2008).
- Know and be able to communicate relevant national laws and policies about human rights, including the rights of vulnerable groups such as girls and women and people identifying as LGBTQ. Ask students how we can protect the rights of these groups if we see discrimination occur. Ask if students know which organisations support these groups.
- Support the rights of children and young people to access healthcare and support services and to seek out information about **SSHE**. Refer them to useful sites such as healthdirect, NSW Health's Sexual Health Infolink or Family Planning Australia's Talkline. Consider displaying posters and resources that alert young people to health and community services that are relevant to them.

2. Accessible to all young people and inclusive of identities and experiences of all young people

- Always assume that there are LGBTQ students in a school who do not feel comfortable to self-identify and provide information to include them. Hold students accountable for homophobic/transphobic language and behaviour when you see and hear it.
- Include scenarios, examples and discussion that show a variety of people and relationships, including same sex and rainbow families and a wide range of cultural identities.
- Some cultures may believe that some aspects of sexuality are wrong (e.g. homosexuality) or may encourage children to follow cultural practices that are illegal (e.g. child marriage, female genital mutilation). Remain objective and present the facts as they are e.g. what the scientific evidence states and how Australian law addresses these issues.

3. Appropriate to the age and level of development of learners

- Talk about **SSHE** with students the same way you would any other topic. Use language and concepts that are developmentally appropriate from early primary through to secondary school years and build on concepts over time as students mature.
- Consent can be taught to young children through talking about personal space, respect, safe and unsafe touch, assertiveness and refusal skills. For older children, this may be about the characteristics of respectful relationships, using scenarios that include negotiating consent and actions that they can take to protect their own and others' safety.

4. Holistic and broadly-based in scope and depth

- **SSHE** covers not just physical health but covers the social, emotional and cultural aspects of sexuality. This includes the positive aspects of sexuality such as intimacy, pleasure and sensuality.
- Learning about contraception and STIs is important. However, learning that sex should feel good, there are variations in sexual expression and there are many ways people can experience pleasure is also important.

5. Scientifically accurate

- Before using or recommending new age-appropriate resources, check that the most current version will be used and that it is linked to reliable and current research evidence.

6. Incorporates emerging issues related to sexual health and wellbeing

- Keep up to date on information about health conditions that are new or increasing, social issues impacting on sexual health and newly available preventative health strategies.
- It is important to talk about these issues before students leave school and more fully explore their sexuality and independence as young adults. Examples of important issues may include awareness of protection against HIV, including pre- and post-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP and PEP), how to access testing and treatment for STIs and harm reduction strategies around body modification and tattooing to decrease the risk of acquiring blood-borne viruses.
- Be open to conversations that are relevant to them, such as sex at music festivals and online porn. How can we negotiate better and safer sex and look after each other at music festivals? How is porn similar and different to real life? How might porn and media affect our relationship expectations, behaviours, boundary setting and treatment of others?

7. Supports development of health literacy

- Encourage help-seeking skills and how to access health services when needed. Talk about what to expect during a health appointment and ways to communicate with health workers, such as preparing a list of questions beforehand.
- Discuss young people's rights, such as their right to confidentiality and privacy, their right to receive information in a format they can understand and their right to a second opinion. Identify where they can go if they want to make a complaint about a service provider.
- Empower students to make informed decisions about their sexual health, as well their understanding of the law about sharing intimate images, consent and pornography.

8. Uses a learner-centred approach

- Effective delivery of **SSHE** provides opportunities for students to input into the content and considers learner preferences for delivery styles. Schools provide adjustments to ensure programs are relevant to the context of the learners. For wellbeing staff, this may include adjustments like those below.
- Provide students with frequent opportunities to get up and move around – allow space for movement. Consider noise, distractions and preferred seating.
- Allow students to take breaks or leave the environment if needed. Provide a 'chill out' space if needed.

9. Emphasises a deep understanding of consent and respectful relationships

- A person's sense of self-confidence underpins their ability to assert personal boundaries. While a student may have an intellectual understanding of consent and respect, wellbeing staff should be mindful that some students live in unsafe circumstances in which survival and conformity is prioritised over asserting oneself.
- Develop concepts of safety, bodily autonomy and consent in everyday situations such as family relationships and friendships. Learning then builds up to sexual consent, sexual relationships and positive communication and behaviours in relationships.
- Model consent and respect in daily life. Respect students' personal choice to engage or disengage from discussions and activities.

10. Promotes gender equality and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence

- Narrow gender stereotypes create outdated beliefs of how males and females should look and behave and can contribute to family and domestic violence.
- Where do our assumptions about gender come from? What are ways to challenge and re-define stereotypical descriptions such as 'man up' or 'throws like a girl'?
- How do gender norms impact how we navigate relationships and shared decisions? How can we ensure that individual rights are equal regardless of someone's gender?

11. Culturally relevant

- Emphasise strengths and values held by families and cultural groups in the school community to support positive identity.
- Explore, examine and challenge ways in which cultural norms can affect people's choices and relationships.
- Select resources to reflect culturally diverse communities and languages.
- Share links with students and families to translated or accessible resources on relevant health topics such as from Family Planning Australia, Health Translations, International Student Health Hub, Multicultural Health Communication Services and NSW Refugee Health Service.

12. Nurtures positive values and attitudes towards sexuality and sexual health

- Be aware of your own cultural biases and remain non-judgemental in your communication with students.
- Don't focus on a student's bad decisions. An alternative is to ask the student what happened and why, debrief and talk about what could happen differently in the future.
- Help students identify healthy coping strategies when they are feeling stressed, angry or emotional. This does not replace staff responsibilities when students are experiencing bullying, abuse or discrimination.
- Model the behaviour you want to see.

13. Supported by a whole-of-school, or health-promoting school, approach

- Discuss **SSHE** with parents/carers during student planning meetings and include it as a discussion point during individual student planning (FPA, 2023b).
- Provide opportunities for parents and carers to see what their children learn in **SSHE** and why it is included. Hold an information session for parents and carers about sharing key messages at home.
- Link in with health and community expertise and support students to visit services and professionals or access their resources. Purchase youth-specific **SSHE** resources from external organisations to share with students.

14. Provided by educators who have the knowledge, skills, confidence and commitment to deliver comprehensive sexuality and sexual health education

- Ensure staff have up-to-date knowledge about the content and provide them with further training opportunities.
- Establish a safe learning environment. Use trauma-informed practice (see Principle 16).
- Be approachable, invite and answer questions, including those that are challenging. Facilitate engaging and participatory learning.
- Identify current, reliable and evidence-based sources of information.

15. Uses engaging, evidence-based teaching methods

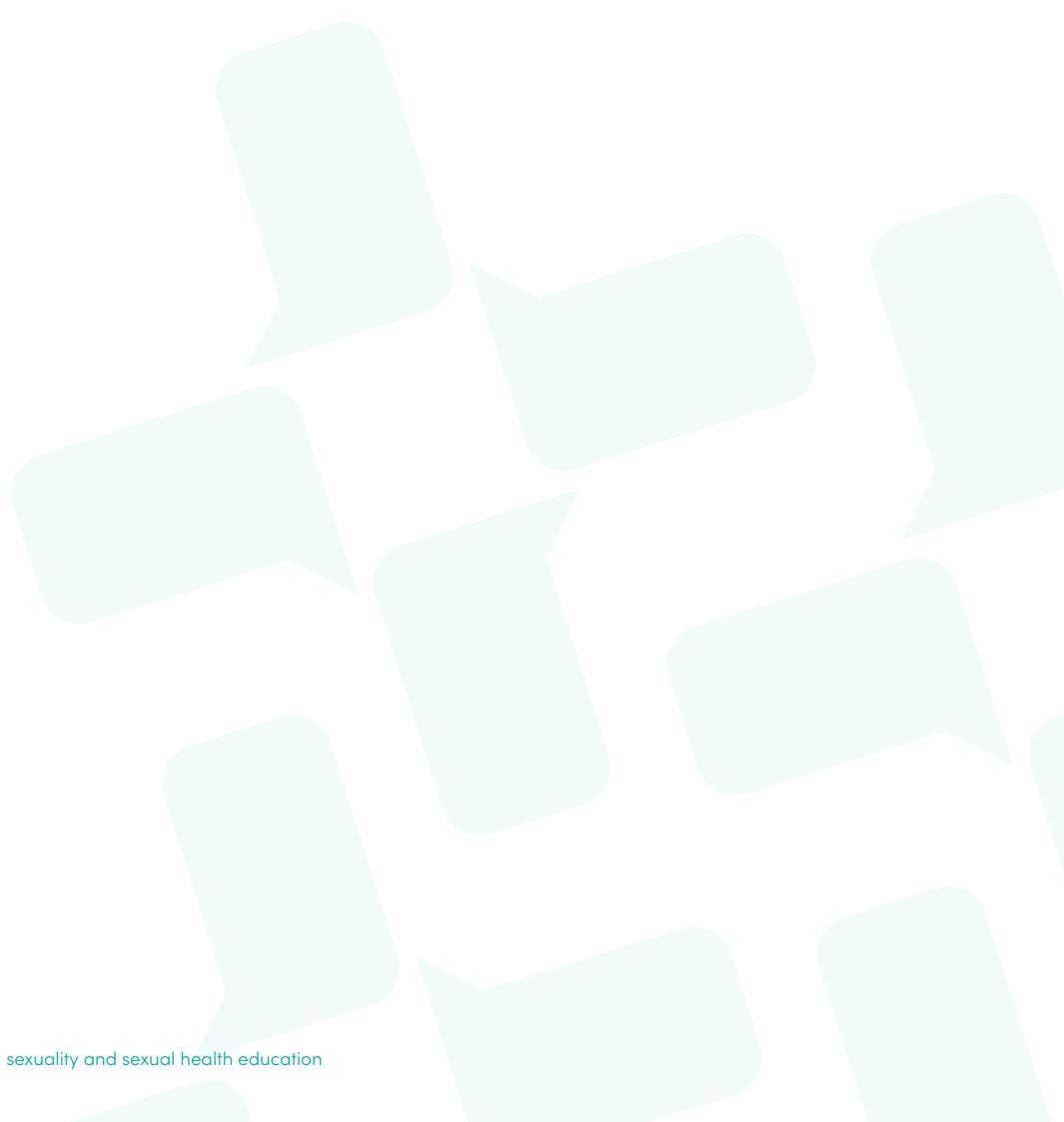
- Avoid the use of fear and shock tactics, as these methods are less effective and may result in students becoming triggered or disengaged.
- Consider the many different perspectives, values and attitudes held by students, families and the community.
- Create an environment that is inclusive and values-fair and where potentially controversial issues are respectfully discussed. Use positive role modelling such as how you treat those around you.
- Ensure school staff's own personal views do not impact on factual information that is provided to the student.

16. Trauma-informed*

- Provide physical and emotional safety for students. Use strategies such as an agreement at the start of each session to agree on ways of communicating (e.g. respecting confidentiality), use protective interrupting if needed, avoid graphic images or stories which may be triggering and maintain a calm environment.
- Respect diversity: use language, stories and resources which are culturally safe and inclusive of diverse cultures, genders and relationships.
- Develop positive relationships focused on trust and consistency. Inform students about routines and topics coming up, use open communication and model mutual respect.
- Empower students. Take a strengths-based approach, provide opportunities for students to make their own decisions and support students to pursue their learning goals.

- Develop plans to deal with disclosures. Support students who may be triggered and identify alternative safe spaces and external sources of support if needed.
- Consider the needs of all students, particularly those who may be marginalised; including LGBTQ, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse, when planning sessions.
- Refer young people to appropriate support services if required. Examples are headspace, BeyondBlue, Transcultural Mental Health Line and Kids Helpline.

* This information is taken from the Integrated trauma-informed care framework: My story, my health, my future. Prevention and Response to Violence Abuse and Neglect (NSW Health, 2023).



Alignment

This resource aligns with:

- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). (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 (ACPHER). (2021). National principles of health education
- NSW Department of Education. (2018). Life ready years 11 and/or 12
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- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (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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