

Principles of sexual education



About principles

The longing to love and be loved is part of the very nature of man. A successful life, a successful marriage and family are among the preeminent desires of young men and women. But by the same token, a daily glimpse into various types of media gives an indication of how difficult this can be: the dealing with one's sexuality, one's physicality, with relational bonding and the fears related to bonding, all interwoven in the concurrent search for one's own identity. „Do we have the right understanding of love? Its meaning has often become sentimental and weak. (...) The modern age needs to see love as something much more spacious, more terrible, as something mightier“, said Romano Guardini.

We don't simply “fall” in love. We can also learn from the experiences of others. Amidst a sea of possibilities that exists for the development of one's understanding of reality, here is a compilation of expert considerations and suggestions.

They are geared toward all who are active in families, in educational formation (theoretical and practical), in schools and educational institutions. They are equally geared toward young people who are seeking reliable advice in their process of maturation.

Tulips are a meaningful symbol. In their beginning phase, tulip bulbs are tightly closed. But an unfolding is stirring within them. To intentionally break them open will not help them to bloom more quickly. Rather, they will come to bloom when their time is ripe. Allowing a tulip the proper time and conditions to ripen is rewarded by the beauty of the blooming flower.

1. Basics

Every human being pursues happiness. This is a basic need. In particular, a person's sexuality can be a source of great joy - but often enough also of great unhappiness. Hence, educating young people toward the development of a self-determined, mature and responsible handling of one's own and others' sexuality is absolutely necessary. For the large majority of young people, a stable relationship between a man and a woman and their children is essential to their idea of a happy life. They should be encouraged in this yearning, even if their present family situation is possibly different (a patchwork family, divorce situation, single parent etc.). They should be strengthened in their ability to find fulfilment as a man or a woman and to make their own decisions concerning their future.

It is important to take into consideration that human beings and their sexuality are tied into a particular order of existence. There are life principles and experiences that all humans have in common. These can be recognized and communicated reasonably. It is evident that they cannot be arbitrarily altered and are objective principles across cultures and belief systems.

Sexuality involves the whole person. It has physical, emotional, cognitive, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions. Sexual development is part of maturation in the identity of each individual and is essential for growth of competency in relationships. Different from that of animals, human sexuality can't be reduced to a series of physical drives and their satisfaction. As a vital force in the development of personality, it is simultaneously a gift and a challenge; a challenge insofar as the handling of sexuality and the consequences of sexual behaviour

include a call to responsibility. Persons express their whole self in sexuality. As nonverbal communication, it is also prone to disturbances and can be misunderstood. In order to contribute to a happy life, its principles need to be considered and sexuality needs to be learned as a language of love.

It is important as a first step to convey to children and youth a positive and holistic approach toward sexuality so that they can develop a natural attitude toward it without any fear. It should be understood as a basic life force that needs cultivating. Additionally, the dangers in the area of sexuality need to be explained to young people.

An essential task in young people's development is the integration of sexuality into their whole personality in the context of the pervading social and cultural environment. When this is successful, it serves as an important basis for respectful dealings with self and others. For this reason, children and youth need education and fostering that take their whole personal development into consideration. Reduction to a purely technical or biological sex education does not suffice.

Since sexual development needs (positive) formation, sex education is primarily the right and the duty of parents. The family is the most important learning-ground for a healthy sexual development. School has the task of supporting parents in their responsibility.

2. Goals of sexual education

A holistic sexual education pursues the following goals:

- » It accompanies young people during the challenging time of integrating their sexual development into a self-acceptance of their person as a whole.
- » It helps young people discover their own identity as a man or as a woman and helps them become conscious of their own dignity. This also means developing a positive attitude toward the other sex, getting to know and value its complimentary aspects.
- » It communicates knowledge about sexual development and the building of relationships, and in this way enables young people to make responsible decisions in the area of sexuality. This also helps prevent broken relationships and divorces.
- » It enables young people to communicate about sexuality, feelings and relationships and to develop the necessary, appropriate and respectful language needed.
- » It gives people a holistic approach to friendship, love and fertility and helps them understand the principles of love and sexuality (polarity of the sexes, unconditional love, a true and stable relationship as a shelter for mutual self-giving, desire for children).
- » It facilitates the development of a natural, positive and responsible attitude toward sexuality. This includes the ability not only to feel desire, but also the ability to sublimate desire in the exercising of self-control.
- » It helps prevent teen pregnancies and abortions and leads to the appreciation of each human being from conception until natural death.
- » It helps prevent sexually transmitted diseases.
- » It sensitizes young people to the existence of personal boundaries and the possible violation of those boundaries, thus working to counteract sexual violence and pornography.
- » It encourages exposure to various value systems at a time when young people in particular are being increasingly put under pressure in the areas of sexual orientation and behaviour. This also empowers them to be tolerant toward people who have a different sexual orientation.

By putting these goals into reality, sex education helps young people understand sexuality in its many aspects. This enables them to behave in ways that are beneficial for the person as a whole.

Such a holistic sex education is in the high interests of society. Besides positive benefits for the individual in his or her personal development, it fosters the formation of a generation that is capable of living responsibly in the larger context of generations preceding and following it. It also promotes general health-fostering behaviours and a family and child friendly society.

3. Quality standards of sex education

Educational Standards

- » Sex education should be appropriate for the young person's age, maturity and the personal stage of development. Hence, sex education should be geared to each young person's individual developmental and psychological stage. Perimeters of this stage should not be crossed.
- » Sex education takes children and youth seriously as unique personalities and gives them room to speak about their questions, fears and expectations. There needs to be room for emotions to be expressed, as well as space where values may actively be questioned and worked through.
- » Good sex education works in a holistic manner. Beyond the topics of the physical and psychological changes that occur, it also addresses the following themes: emotions, the role of the reasoning faculties, the meaning of decisions, the formation of friendships and the influence of the socio-cultural environment. Of key importance is the fostering of the ability to take responsibility for oneself and others.
- » Natural feelings of shame should be respected and considered during the choice of educational contents and materials. Sex education is not the place for the theme of sexual experimentation.
- » During puberty opportunities should be offered for strengthening girls and boys in their sexual identity and in their self-worth. In this context, when talking about subjects specific to girls or boys, it makes sense to initially meet and reflect in separate groups. On the basis of a greater understanding of one's own sex a new understanding of the other sex is made possible, which consequently helps mixed coeducational classes be even more constructive.
- » For subjects referring to one specific sex, boys should be, predominately, accompanied and taught by men and girls by women.
- » Young people need sufficient time and educational opportunities suited to their age and development to work through the many aspects of sexuality in order to form well-founded viewpoints.
- » The contents should be presented and worked through in an interactive manner. When young people develop their own viewpoints and their own well thought through decisions, these then have a strong influence on the individual's continuing development and personal growth.

Standards of training

- » Teachers of sexual education need an interdisciplinary training that imparts the contents of the biological, psychological, ethical, pedagogical-didactic and spiritual aspects.
- » The teacher training also contains biographical work about one's own sexual development. Sexual education teachers need to be mature personalities who can correctly assess the appropriate requisites of closeness and distance, and respect them, and who treat their students with respect and encourage them in finding their own opinions.

- » Mentoring, supervision and regular advanced training ensure the quality of the work.
- » Pedagogical concepts for sexual education must be developed in cooperation with both men and women and should be scientifically up-to-date. For this reason, research should be made in the fields of sexual development and pedagogy for sex education.
- » Pedagogical training and concepts for sexual education teachers should be regularly evaluated

4. Inhalte der Sexualpädagogik

Priorities of sex education include the strengthening of the individual's identity, the acquirement of competency in language and communication, objectivity, social and ethical standards, media, intercultural and inter-religious knowledge, as well as learning by means of relationships. In this context, sexuality is depicted positively as something that is fundamentally life serving and constructive: as an identity-giving foundation of the human person, as an expression of love and a sign of commitment, as a source of life and joy.

Sex education focuses on the following points:

- » It helps developing children and youth understand what's happening in their bodies. This pertains not only to the development of the sexual organs and the change of hormonal balances, but also the structure and alteration of the brain and the changing perceptions of one's environment. Additional personality training can strengthen youth against insecurity and fears and help them discover sexuality as a resource for their evolving development.
- » Information is given about the natural course of the female cycle. Girls learn to value their femininity and fertility. The themes of love and reproduction are worked through in their natural and cultural context, stressing the responsibility of man and woman for beginning and developing a new family. Boys also learn to value their awakening fertility and their masculinity. The different ways that each sex may react sexually are conveyed. Girls and boys consider ways of dealing with these reactions responsibly.
- » Consciousness of one's own fertility has a key function: through knowledge of the ability to become a mother or father one day, the scope and import of the consequences of sexual activity are recognized and considered in a responsible way.
- » Perception of one's own feelings, their expression and a respectful handling of them are practised. This pertains to all feelings, but particularly to the sexual ones that come to light during youth.
- » Working through visions of life and discussing them contributes to purposeful behaviour. The meaning of love and the gift of self are worked through fundamentally.
- » Sexuality always concerns the relationship to self and others. Hence, an essential part of good sex education is the cultivation of competency in communication and competency in relationships. To begin with, the subject of the building of friendships is addressed in an appropriate manner. In order to prevent wounding from broken relationships, the value of reliable, faithful and loving relationships is worked through. Marriage between man and woman is mentioned as the best and most protected place to live out sexuality, and for the raising of children.
- » The young person comes to understand that sexuality underlies particular psychological motivations, depending on the specific phase in life, and that these motivations change in the course of life.
- » Sex education discusses the biological and cultural relationship between man and woman and imparts an encouraging image of each sex. Fatherhood and motherhood are introduced as equally meaningful and responsible tasks. The core family (father, mother, child/ren) is seen as the general rule, since this generally corresponds to the young people's background and also to their aspirations and desires.
- » In a manner appropriate to their age, sex education introduces various sexual orientations in the context of their real distribution in the population. Minorities are neither discriminated nor idealized; majorities are neither ignored nor depreciated. Respect for the individual person is communicated.

- » Great care is taken for children and youth who suffer emotional pain due to broken family relationships. These are addressed in an appropriate way and not trivialized.
- » Information is given on subjects such as teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, without making them a main emphasis.
- » Sex education addresses the physical and psychological risks of early sexual activity and promiscuous behaviour and the importance of waiting or abstaining (sublimation of the drive).
- » The development of the unborn child beginning at conception is demonstrated verbally and with illustrations. The physical and psychological consequences of an abortion are also shown in an age-appropriate manner.
- » An objective presentation of all family planning methods and their effects on women and men individually, and on their relationship, is given, again in a manner appropriate to age and developmental stage. Effects and side effects of contraceptives are described in an age-appropriate manner.
- » Legal and personal boundaries are discussed so as to give orientation and to prevent sexual violence. The young people learn to name their personal boundaries and practise saying no (self-assertion training).
- » Sex education addresses hygiene of body and soul, e.g. the avoidance of pornography, telephone sex, sex as a commodity, etc.
- » Sex education strengthens media competence. Reality and fiction are set against one another. Youth receive help in taking a critical look at their behaviour toward media in the context of their own personal development and life goals, especially considering the backdrop of the harmful effects pornography consumption has on relationships. The topic of addiction prevention is also addressed.

5. General conditions

Sex education is the primary right of parents or guardians. Consequently, parents and guardians are always to be informed and included when sex education is offered in educational institutions.

Some parents are overwhelmed when it comes to teaching their children in this area, either due to time commitments, content, or possibly due to their own biography. They often need support and training themselves. At the same time we should also consider that youth go through natural and developmentally necessary detachments from their parents. For this reason educational opportunities outside the family are an important support for the parental task of educating their children. In this respect, sex education in and outside schools has a supportive and supplementary function. At the same time, rights must be ensured, either the right to voluntarily take part in sex education classes, or, respectively, for parents to opt their children out from classes, and for teens, the right to choose to participate in sex education or to opt out.