



Sex – sexuality education
Personal development for
the prevention of discrimination
and violence (SEXED)
**Talking about sex with children – without the
discomfort**
by

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This training unit has been developed in the trainer training course : « Sex and sexuality education - Personal development for the prevention of discrimination and violence » organised by the [Pestalozzi Programme](#) of the [Council of Europe](#) in cooperation with the Programme “[Building a Europe for and with children](#)”.

one in five
un sur cinq



Talking about sex with children – without the discomfort

Brief description

This training unit intends to help adults – teachers and parents – to respond to children’s questions about sex with ease. Once the ground rules are established to ensure a safe environment for all participants, a series of experiential activities will encourage small groups of participants to reflect and become aware of their position with regards to comfort and ease in such conversations. Participants will be invited to challenge their positions with respect to this topic and to develop ways of stretching themselves in this area to be able to refrain from avoidance or a dismissive style and deal with children’s questions in an informed, open and honest manner.

Expected outcomes

- ✓ Participants will become more aware of and sensitive to children’s curiosity about sex and sexuality.
- ✓ Participants will have an opportunity to address their feelings and attitudes about children making sexual enquiries in order to develop their ability and confidence in responding to children’s questions.
- ✓ Participants will explore the use of clear, respectful, age sensitive and culturally appropriate language for the child and the adult.
- ✓ Participants will be able to connect their beliefs and practices with the content suggested in the session.
- ✓ Participants develop a willingness to acknowledge other people’s feelings (A_DIV_3)
- ✓ Participants will be ready to examine their behaviour, language use and body language (A_SELF_1)
- ✓ Participants will develop their aptitude to elicit and respond to others’ beliefs, values, feelings and behaviours (S_DIV_3)
- ✓ Participants will develop their ability to use a variety of languages and registers to express oneself with nuance (S_SELF_2)

Activities

	Duration	Methods used
Activity 1: Introduction	30 minutes	Icebreaking pair work and plenary
Activity 2: What do the kids say?	30 minutes	Pair and group discussion
Activity 3: Map of styles	20 minutes	Presentation, question and answer session
Activity 4: Where are we now?	55 minutes	Opinion line, group discussion
Activity 5 Evaluation	20 minutes	

Background and context

The topic is a sensitive one for adults to address so the trainer has to be flexible to change the method as necessary especially if a feeling of safety in the group does not develop easily. The methods used are experiential: participants actively take part in activities in small groups so that the final result is engagement through conversations, sharing thoughts and feelings. This is intended to lead to self-awareness and the achievement of the intended expected outcomes.

The present training unit was piloted within a staff development course with a group of primary school teachers and the parents of their students aged 5 to 10 in Malta. The pair work exercise worked very well ie participants were able to speak to each other in a pair. This helped to pitch the conversation and the risk and safety level. The facilitator guided the participants with questions during this time. Issues about how to deal with abuse also came up in further discussion. Parents were at first reluctant to talk but with encouragement they participated. And there was conversation between parents and teachers about their different roles and responsibility in teaching, informing, supporting children in their curiosity about sexual issues.

Activity 1: Introduction

Duration: 30 min

Expected outcome

- ✓ Participants will get to know each other and tune in to the topic.
- ✓ An atmosphere of trust will be established.

Methods/ techniques used

- ✓ Icebreaking pair work and plenary discussion

Resources

- ✓ ...

Practical arrangements

- ✓ Comfortable room appropriate for pair work and plenary discussions

Procedure

Step 1 (10 min)

- ✓ Sit in a large circle and introduce yourself briefly (professional background and personal interest in sex/sexuality education).
- ✓ Ask participants to introduce themselves the same way.

Step 2 (5 min)

- ✓ Introduce the topic by saying something along these lines:
In dealing with children of primary school age [5 – 10] we are all aware that they are in families with parents or guardians, and at school with adults where conversations can lead to the children asking questions pertaining to sex, birth, sexual curiosity, etc. This is because children are in families and societal contexts where marriages, relationships, separations, unexpected pregnancies and births happen. Young children are bound to ask questions because they hear the adults' conversations and they discuss such issues among themselves. Adults often underestimate how much of the adult conversations and family events and happenings young children pick up even though adults think otherwise. Sometimes, the children will have queries and they ask the adult - parent or teacher - about what they understand or not about adult relationships and adult sex and sexuality. We must not underestimate children's exposure to a highly sexualized society through the media. Parents, guardians, adults and teachers often experience discomfort or embarrassment in answering these questions. The setting where children ask questions could be formal or informal such as during a lesson, at home, or during the break in the schoolyard, and so on. This training aims to address the discomfort adults often experience in such situations and to ensure that adults feel better equipped to answer children's questions when they arise.

Step 3 (15 min)

- ✓ Ask participants to pair up with someone they feel comfortable working with and recall and share how and when they learned how babies were made.
- ✓ If anyone is happy to share their own experience in plenary, they are welcome to do so.

Tips for trainers

- ✓ Considering that there is sensitivity around this issue, ask participants to maintain confidentiality of content shared by anyone during the session.
- ✓ Remind participants of the fact that the group probably has diverse sexual experiences as adults and of the possibility that we might have had unwanted experiences in our sexual lives and some experiences that perhaps made us better persons but also gave us grief.
- ✓ Promise to be responsible for group safety and ask for the same from all participants.

Activity 2: What do kids say?

Duration: 30 min

Expected outcomes

- ✓ Participants will establish a starting point with respect to the topic and the group environment.
- ✓ Participants will feel comfortable in the group.
- ✓ Participants will become aware of the differences between children's and adults' verbal and non-verbal language use.
- ✓ Participants will learn about the unsaid thoughts that adults think when these topics are raised.

Methods/ techniques used

- ✓ Pair and group discussion

Resources

- ✓ Flip chart or white board
- ✓ Post-its or other sticky notes

Practical arrangements

- ✓ Participants will be seated in a circle.

Procedure

Step 1 (5 min)

- ✓ Invite participants to write on the sticky notes what children typically ask or how they comment about adults and other children regarding sexuality (see examples below). Ask participants to use the language that children use pertaining to conversations around sexual curiosity or knowledge.
- ✓ If they seem to be in need of help, you can give a few examples:
 - Why is your tummy big? Why are you fat?
 - Where does the baby come out?
 - Was I in your tummy?
 - How did I come out?
 - How do babies get in there?
 - Is sex a rude word?
 - Why do men and women have sex?
 - Can children have sex?
 - Mummy said babies come from hugs so if I hug my friend, we will have a baby?

Step 2 (10 min)

- ✓ Invite participants to move to the board and stick the notes there for all to approach and read.
- ✓ Ask participants to work with a partner and share the question/s they wrote, including some information about the context when possible.

Step 3 (15 min)

- ✓ Ask participants to sit down in a circle again.
- ✓ Read out the notes, engaging in a discussion about what contexts lead to such questions and conversations. Some of the questions you might want to ask:
 - How do comments or questions like these leave you?
 - What do you think of this comment/question?
 - What are or would be your reactions to these questions – verbal and non-verbal?
 - How could you address this issue with children?
 - Have you ever asked for advice from someone as to how to react to such questions/comments?

Tips for trainers

- ✓ When talking about this topic, it is always wise and even necessary for the trainer to be aware that some participants may have had unwanted sexual experiences that might create uncomfortable feelings and thoughts during training. The trainer needs to be sensitive to this 'invisible' reality of participants.
- ✓ Be prepared to allow non-participation and the style should always be open, inviting but not coercive. You also need to keep in mind whether the participants are in the training out their own free will or whether it is a compulsory training setting.

Activity 3: Map of styles

Duration: 20 min

Expected outcome

- ✓ Participants learn about the theoretical aspects of three different models of sex/sexuality education
- ✓ Participants will become aware of their way of handling questions
- ✓ Participants will be able to informed decision about their own approach to sex/sexuality education

Methods/ techniques used

- ✓ Presentation
- ✓ Question and answer session

Resources

- ✓ Power point presentation or prezi
- ✓ Laptop and projector
- ✓ A4 size sheets with the names of the different models to be posted on the walls

Procedure

Step 1 (10 min)

- ✓ Introduce the theoretical input as a model that is not absolute but rather a map: the three concepts of how sex/sexuality education can be/has been addressed by schools, society, media, families, church are the abstinence approach, the comprehensive approach and the holistic approach (see Appendix for further ideas).

Step 2 (10 min)

- ✓ Encourage active participation in the discussion so that participants are not only recipients of information as at a lecture but are making use of the 'map' being introduced. This kind of discussion will help participants to own or reject ideas, in other words to reflect.

- ✓ Questions that might make them respond:

- Which model is typical in your country/town/school?
- Which model is typically followed by most families where you live and work?

Put the names of the three models on A4 size sheets and post them in three different corners of the room. After a few minutes of discussion, ask participants to position themselves near the model that they think they like best. Allow them to stand half way between models, too.

- Where do you want to place yourself? Why are you here?
- What are some ethical concerns?
- What other difficulties are there?
- How can we overcome the obstacles that you are describing in your settings to bridge the gap between your willing and the real status in your setting?

Tips for trainers

- ✓ Be aware that since three parameters are being introduced, in principle they may be correlated to the moral development of children. It may also be that even though school/teachers will incorporate sex/sexuality education, in the family it does not happen.
- ✓ During this time give more importance to the participants' questions as this is what they are thinking and the academic contribution is secondary to the participants' needs, thoughts and reflections.
- ✓ It may transpire that teachers and parents will ask and contribute comments about sex abuse, children's experimentation, sleeping arrangements, sleep over at friends' houses, safety of children, and possible sexual bullying.

Activity 4: Where are we now?

<p>Expected outcome</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Participants continue exploring their feelings of comfort and discomfort in conducting conversations with children as teachers or parents about sex and sexuality related topics ✓ Participants will develop skills to engage in such conversations with a comfort equivalent to talking about food. ✓ Participants will develop a group profile.
<p>Methods/ techniques used</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Opinion line
<p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ten A4 size sheets with numbers 1 to 10 written on them, one number on each. ✓ Post-its or sticky notes in different colors.
<p>Practical arrangements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Put the ten A4 sheets in a line on the floor from 1 to 10. ✓ Make sure there is enough room for participants to walk around.
<p>Procedure</p> <p>Step 1 (5 min)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ask participants to stand up. ✓ Explain that the numbers on the floor represent a continuum from a feeling of discomfort [one] to a feeling of comfort [ten]. Everyone is going to vote with their feet and will rate the intensity of their feelings. <p>Step 2 (10 min)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ask questions and ask participants to move along the line according to their answer to the question being asked. After each statement, you can “interview” a few participants to learn why they stand where they stand. ✓ The questions you might ask: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How comfortable are you talking about sex with your partner? • How comfortable are you talking about sex with a friend? • How comfortable are you talking about sex with your own parent(s)? • How comfortable are you talking about sex with your own children or children in your family? • How comfortable do you think that your parents were when you talked about sex with them? • How comfortable are you talking about sex with your colleagues? • How comfortable are you talking about sex with your students in class? • How comfortable are you talking about sex with your students one-to-one? • How comfortable are you taking about sex with the parents of the students you teach?

Step 3 (10 min)

- ✓ Explain that with the next statements 1 means disagreement and 10 means agreement with the statement:
 - Do teachers address SexEd with children in their classes?
 - Do parents address SexEd with their own children?
- ✓ With each question participants are to move along the numbers and rate their level of agreement.
- ✓ You can ask participants for a few comments again, e.g.:
 - What made you stop on number 5?
 - What were you thinking as you moved along?
 - Why did you hesitate?
 - Were you paying attention to see how the others move along back and forth?
- ✓ Issues that could come out are about responsibility i.e. whose responsibility is it to answer children's questions. Teachers worry that parents abdicate this responsibility. Parents often pass the buck to each other when their children ask. Teachers feel concerned that they do not know the children or their family context enough to feel confident to answer SexEd questions.

Step 4 (10 min)

- ✓ Depending on what topics emerged from the previous discussion, ask participants to form mixed groups of four (parents and teachers) and choose one or two of the issues to discuss (responsibility, privacy, interfering, appropriate age, etc.).
- ✓ Ask the groups to find 3 things they agree on and 3 where their opinions are somewhat different.
- ✓ Use reassuring language saying that this is not an easy topic but children are exposed to such a highly sexualized environment as are adults, and that they are starting to develop curiosity and language around sexuality at a very early age.
- ✓ You could make a process comment along the following example: It is important to realize from this exercise that though the questions that have been asked are simple, there are several layers of underlying thoughts for both the parents and the teachers.

Step 5 (5 min)

- ✓ Ask participants to come to a resolution and individually put a promise (to themselves) on a sticky note about what they will do (differently) about sex/sexuality education in the future.
- ✓ Put the sticky notes on the wall into a heart shape and take a picture of the heart. Participants can gather their resolutions at the end of the session.

Step 6 (10 min) Debriefing

- ✓ Moderate a debriefing discussion based on the individual promises.
 - Can you elaborate on why you promised this to yourself?
 - What made you write this?
 - Why is it important to develop confidence and language skills to address children's curiosity?
 - ...

Tips for trainers

- ✓ This exercise is not about what the children say i.e. external to the participant but it is about eliciting personal feelings and thoughts.
- ✓ This is an exercise requiring trust and confidence so a safe atmosphere has to be established before implementing it. It is also fun, and inviting participants to speak from their 'position' is very effective.
- ✓ However, if the safety seems low or if participants do not feel very comfortable, you can invite them to move along the line according to the questions but not necessarily to comment.

Activity 5: Evaluation

Duration: 20 min

Expected outcome

- ✓ Participants will summarize what they have learned and will give feedback to the trainer.

Methods/ techniques used

- ✓ Discussion
- ✓ Written evaluation

Resources

- ✓ Project the feedback questions or distribute printed copies.

Practical arrangements

- ✓ A comfortable place to write and talk in pairs and small groups, possibly in plenary, too.

Procedure

Step 1 (10 min)

- ✓ Invite participants to write on a piece of paper what they will take away with them from this session from the
 - Intellectual aspect
 - Emotional aspect
 - Behavioral aspect
- ✓ Share in groups of two, then four or plenary if time and safety allow.

Step 2 (10 min)

- ✓ Invite participants to give feedback and jot down their thoughts to the questions below:

What has struck you most? _____

What has made you uncomfortable? _____

What would you add to this training session? _____

What would you leave out? _____

How will your behavior with children change regarding their curiosity about sexual issues?

Tips for trainers

Further reading:

Teaching Sexual Health Education

A Primer for New Teachers, A Refresher for Experienced Teachers

Prepared for www.sexualityandu.ca by Douglas S. McCall Executive Director

Canadian Association for School Health accessed March 2015

<http://www.sexualityandu.ca/teachers/teaching-sexual-health-education-manual>

This is a very good article as it gives teachers and facilitators a background to theory, it gives practical advice on what to do and how to do it.

<http://parents.teachingsexualhealth.ca/education/parents-role>

accessed March 2015

An excellent resource for all involved

Jennifer Schneider, Diana Tyson, Jackie O'Neill & Randy Auerbach: Sex Ed - Constructing a Comprehensive Model:

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/psychology/courses/3615/Projects/SexEd_Constructing_a_Comprehensive_Model.pdf

accessed December 2013 and March 2015

a very helpful power point presentation, materials and handouts form the course

Appendices

Appendix

Explanations of and approaches to sex and sexuality education

A short (power point) presentation can address the discomfort of adults – teachers and parents - regarding talking about sex with children. Go through some explanations of what sex and sexuality education is and the sense of responsibility it creates for both parents and teachers. The emphasis is a holistic one i.e. that sex education is not only biological information and learning about puberty but it also embraces the emotional and relational aspects of growing up, relating to the opposite sex, friendships, a sense of self-esteem and asking questions. Possible issues to present:

- Parents and teachers need to face their own attitudes about this topic
- The aims of SexED are also important
- Presenting the three approaches helps to generate discussion between facilitator and participants: Abstinence model - Comprehensive model - Holistic model
- Parents' roles and teachers' roles can be addressed
- Ethical issues: rights and concerns
- Problems and risks
- The cultural and socio-religious context of the country are very important to address as well

See sample presentation bellow

Let's talk about sex

Addressing the discomfort of
adults- teachers and parents -
regarding talking about sex with
children

Jenny Zammit

some explanations of Sex Education

- ⦿ Learning factual information on all aspects of sex - biological, moral, social...
- ⦿ Learning about the sexual self - behaviour, seduction...
- ⦿ Learning about the opposite sex - biology, psychology, stereotypes...

some explanations of Sex Education

- Learning about sexual behaviour
- Learning that sex is part of life
- Learning about your body and how babies are made
- And values, choices, self-respect, dignity...

names

- ◉ it is named Sex Education (SexEd) - EU - different models
- ◉ Sexuality Education (SEd) emphasises holistic approach - USA

aims of SexEd

- Four primary goals:
 - 1. to provide young people with accurate information about sexuality
- 2. to give them an opportunity to develop their values and increase self-esteem
- 3. to help them develop interpersonal skills and to help them exercise responsibility in their relationships
- 4. to promote future adult health

MODELS OF SexEd

- ◉ Abstinence model
- ◉ Comprehensive model
- ◉ Holistic model

ABSTINENCE MODEL

- **Abstinence-only education** focuses exclusively on postponing sex until marriage.
- STIs and HIV are mentioned as a result of sexual activity, but condoms and birth control are not mentioned at all.

ABSTINENCE MODEL PLUS

- ◉ **Abstinence-plus or abstinence-based sexual education** teaches that students should wait until marriage to have sex
- ◉ refers to methods of protection from STIs and HIV.
- ◉ This type of education advocates abstinence but also focuses on contraceptive options and gives information regarding pregnancy, STIs and HIV, and prevention.

CRITICISM ABSTINENCE MODEL

- Critics suggest that abstinence-only programs are fear based and use false information about the effectiveness of contraception and the ways you can acquire STIs and HIV.
- Reject provision of information about steps young people can take to protect themselves against disease and unintended pregnancy because they argue that to do so sends a mixed message.

COMPREHENSIVE MODEL

- **Comprehensive sexual education** explains the consequences of sexual decision making, includes information on types of sexually transmitted diseases and how to prevent pregnancy.
- Some programs combine an abstinence message with comprehensive information, but all cover the consequences of sexual activity and discuss the best protection methods.

CRITICISM COMPREHENSIVE MODEL

- ◉ Some critics suggest that giving information about sex will encourage teenagers to become sexually active
- ◉ Knowledge is power and students who have information are best able to make choices to protect themselves.
- ◉ Most research suggests that comprehensive education is the most effective for adolescents

HOLISTIC MODEL

- **Holistic sex education** focuses on a broader view of youth development
- Teens are guided through subjects such as self esteem, employment, mental and physical health, and family life ie the focus is not solely on sexual activity
- Included in a holistic program is a comprehensive unit on sexual decision making.

HOLISTIC MODEL

- ◉ Includes the emotional, social, intellectual and ethical aspects, in addition to the physical aspect of sexuality.
- ◉ The child is always the focus of SexEd, anchored on the values of love, respect and responsibility.

PARENTS' ROLE

- Research shows that the most effective sex education comes from parents discussing sex openly and honestly with their children.
- Parents should not depend solely on the school system to discuss sex with their teenager or young person.

PARENTS' ROLE

- With a high rate of teen promiscuity there is a growing number of teens infected with a sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy,
- It is clear that more information on good sexual decision making is needed.

ETHICAL CONTEXT

- ◉ The three models are not applied in a vacuum - there is the curriculum framework advocated by the educational system
- ◉ There are beliefs, values and subscription to faiths that influence decisions and lifestyles which adults embrace and which influence the style of bringing up children
- ◉ Beliefs and adherence to a faith can determine adults' ideas and values - parents and teachers
- ◉ Thus teaching SexEd is not purely pedagogical but value laden.

ETHICAL CONTEXT... RIGHTS

- ◉ To have the highest attainable standard of sexual health
- ◉ To seek, receive, and impart information related to sexuality and education
- ◉ To decide to be sexually active or not
- ◉ Respect for bodily integrity
- ◉ Choose their partner

ETHICAL CONTEXT... RIGHTS

- ◉ Consensual sexual relationships
- ◉ Consensual marriage
- ◉ Decide whether or not to have children and when
- ◉ Pursue a satisfying safe and pleasurable sexual life.

ETHICAL CONTEXT... CONCERNS

- ◉ SexEd can lead to early sex
- ◉ SexEd can deprive children of their 'innocence'
- ◉ SexEd could be against the child's culture or religion
- ◉ Parents could object to SexEd
- ◉ Conflict between education and societal, familial or personal values of the educators concerned
- ◉ Multifaith communities
- ◉ Multiculturalism

ETHICAL CONTEXT... CONCERNS

- ◉ SexEd is ok for young people but not ok for young children
- ◉ Teachers willing to teach SexEd but could need training
- ◉ SexEd is covered in other subjects

CHALLENGES

- ◉ Establishing a relationship with children as parents and with students as teachers so that conversations with sexual content can happen easily and comfortably
- ◉ Adults (teachers and parents) need to reflect and evaluate their personal position towards SexEd in order to converse with children
- ◉ Believing that children are exposed to a highly sexualised world

WHAT CAN WE DO?

- What can we do better?
- As a school
- As a team

- Personal level
- As a parent/in the family
- As a teacher