

LGBTIQ HUMAN RIGHTS • POLICY BRIEF

COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

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KEY POINTS

- Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is crucial for the full intellectual, emotional, and social development of children and young people.
- There is strong global evidence that comprehensive sexuality education leads to **positive outcomes**, including delayed sexual activity, reduced unintended pregnancies and STIs, improved decision-making, decreased bullying and violence in schools, protection against child sexual abuse, and stronger interpersonal and communication skills, while **abstinence-only approaches are shown to be ineffective or harmful**.
- To be effective for all students, CSE should include exposure to an understanding of diverse sex characteristics, gender identities, gender expressions, sexual orientations, and family structures, and should **affirm diverse identities and families**.
- Governments everywhere should **require, fund, implement, and sustain comprehensive sexuality education in schools**, and ensure it is age-appropriate and that it includes information about diverse identities and relationships.
- Governments should stop restricting education on gender and sexuality to provide all students with accurate and inclusive information, a key aspect of human rights protection and **achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**.

What is the purpose of this brief?

This brief aims to provide facts about comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and its immense significance for the safety and development of children, young people, and ultimately adults. The brief highlights CSE's particular value for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) people.

Research consistently demonstrates the benefits of comprehensive sexuality education, although the politics are deeply contested. Advocates of gender equality, human rights, and children's rights must be equipped with evidence-based arguments that will allow them to vigorously defend comprehensive sexuality education.

This brief is also for policymakers who are unsure of the value of comprehensive sexuality education and are seeking information to better understand how it contributes to a safer, more inclusive, and more rights-respecting world.

Finally, Outright seeks to ensure that policymakers and educators promote and defend sexuality education that is inclusive of topics related to **sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression,**

and sex characteristics. Sexuality education that assumes heterosexuality as the norm leaves lesbian, gay, and bisexual students vulnerable to bullying among peers and school staff. Sexuality education that recognizes a diverse range of gender identities helps students to understand and accept themselves and others, and facilitates safer environments free from peer-led gender-based violence. Sexuality education that recognizes the existence of intersex people is particularly crucial in debunking the myth that there are only two binary sexes and in preventing violence against persons with diverse sex characteristics—a particular challenge in single-sex schools, where intersex students may experience puberty that does not align with expectations for their assigned sex.

What is comprehensive sexuality education?

Comprehensive sexuality education is built around core principles, goals, and teaching methods that aim to deliver high-quality instruction to students on topics related to sexuality.¹ CSE is proven to

contribute to children's safety and well-being.² For LGBTIQ students in particular, it helps to prevent and reduce stigmatization, bullying, and violence.³

Comprehensive sexuality education is a curriculum-based, rights- and gender-focused approach to sexuality education that aims to equip children and young people with the **knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values** that will enable them to develop a **positive view** of their sexuality in the context of their emotional and social development, and **provide them with tools** to help prevent child sexual abuse, infections, and early pregnancy.

–UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education⁴

Sexuality education is comprehensive if it is built upon a scientifically accurate curriculum, human rights-based, involves incremental and age-appropriate learning, provides a range of sexual and reproductive health information, adopts an approach to developing critical thinking and life skills, values, and attitudes, and is contextually relevant.⁵

Unfortunately, comprehensive sexuality education is under threat. Some states, politicians, and organizations have gained prominence by seeking to restrict children's fundamental human rights and holistic development by denying them access to information and protections against abuse and discrimination. They fund and implement attacks on inclusive education rooted in inaccurate claims that they are protecting children.⁶ One vocal far-right organization in the U.S. has focused its energy on attacking the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which it describes as "promoting gender ideology" on the basis of brochures that affirm that same-sex attraction is not a pathology.⁷ These groups' advocacy has contributed to public outcry against CSE in countries like **South Africa** and **Ghana**.⁸

The World Health Organization points out that, especially with **younger learners**, "teaching about sexuality does not necessarily mean teaching about sex." Comprehensive sexuality education for younger learners involves teaching them about their bodies, about consent, and respecting their own and others' boundaries.

Opposition to rights-based sexuality education has driven the adoption, in an increasing number of countries, of antidemocratic laws that prohibit certain kinds of discussion and instruction regarding gender and sexuality. These include, among others, laws prohibiting "propaganda of non-traditional relationships" and gender diversity in **Hungary**, **Russia**, and **Kazakhstan**; the "don't say gay" laws in the U.S. state of **Florida**; and "anti-gender ideology" laws and policies in **Paraguay**.⁹ So-called gender ideology laws arise from the description of sexual and gender diversity as ideological rather than facts rooted in science and lived experience. Pushback against protecting the rights to education through CSE and for women's and LGBTIQ inclusion seeks to prevent access to sexual health information and services, among others.¹⁰

What does comprehensive sexuality education include?

Also referred to as "CSE," comprehensive sexuality education is centered around the provision of scientifically accurate and age-appropriate information on sexuality, gender, and sexual and reproductive health. The World Health Organization describes CSE as important for young people's health and well-being.¹¹ CSE is based on facts and evidence, dispelling myths and stereotypes.¹² It helps to curb conflicting or dangerous messaging from peers, social media, and the wider society.¹³

Age-appropriate CSE should begin at an early age and be sustained throughout childhood and adolescence.¹⁴ The WHO states that "sexuality education is a lifelong process, sometimes beginning earlier, at home, with trusted caregivers. Learning is incremental; what is taught at the earliest

ages is very different from what is taught during puberty and adolescence.”¹⁵ Evidence shows that “sexuality education is most effective when begun early and before sexual activity begins.”¹⁶ In addition, from an early age, too many learners experience gender-based violence, discrimination, bullying, and exclusion in schools and learning environments that could be mitigated through exposure to CSE.¹⁷

Comprehensive sexuality education covers various dimensions of human sexuality, including “the anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry of the sexual response system; identity, orientation, roles, and personality; and thoughts, feelings, and relationships.”¹⁸ The following topics should be included in CSE curricula:

- Puberty, menstruation, and sexual anatomy, including human diversity in relation to sex characteristics
- Human rights, bodily autonomy, consent, and approaches to prevent and respond to sexual violence
- Safer sex practices, including information on the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Contraception and pregnancy
- Emotional health and well-being, relational skills, relationships, and family life
- Gender
- Media literacy, debunking myths, stereotypes, and addressing stigma

What are the benefits of comprehensive sexuality education?

Research has shown the significance and effectiveness of comprehensive sexuality education. For example, Eva S. Goldfarb and Lisa D. Lieberman, public health and comprehensive sexuality education experts, published a report on three decades of research, assessing literature on CSE and evaluating CSE initiatives in the U.S and globally.¹⁹ The study critically assessed critical CSE goals and found that school-based initiatives have overall efficacy in reducing queerphobia and queerphobic bullying, increasing understanding of gender and

gender norms, helping to prevent child sexual abuse, supporting healthy relationships, and reducing dating and intimate partner violence.

Comprehensive sexuality education contains key elements that help safeguard the lives, health, well-being, and development of children and young people. It helps young people to make informed decisions about their health, rights, and bodies. CSE also provides scientifically accurate knowledge and facts about sexuality and life, dispels myths, expands empathy, and contributes to positive self-image, including body image.²⁰

Informed decision making. Many young people engage in **uninformed or higher-risk sexual behaviors** due to a lack of accurate information and support. Comprehensive sexuality education has been proven to equip young people with the knowledge, judgment, and confidence needed to make responsible decisions that protect their health and well-being, directly contributing to young people delaying sexual activity and increasing safe behavior.²¹

A global review found that in several contexts, CSE programs “significantly delayed the initiation of sex among one or more groups for at least 6 months,” while increasing safer sexual behavior.²² In the **U.S.**, a CSE program increased both abstinence and condom use, while in **Tanzania**, a CSE program “reduced the number of sexual partners among boys and increased condom use among both boys and girls.”²³ In **Sweden**, the effects of CSE reform examined over a “life-cycle” showed that “the reform led to a **significant reduction in sexual activity and unwanted pregnancies.**”²⁴ In **South Africa**, CSE school-based programs appeared to reduce unintended pregnancies and reported sexual behavior, as well as decreased sexual activity.²⁵ CSE initiatives also led to a decrease in sexual activity in **Senegal** and a decrease in unwanted pregnancy outcomes in **Kenya, Jamaica, Uganda, Malawi, and Mexico.**²⁶

In contrast, abstinence-only approaches to sex education are “ineffective in preventing early sexual activity and risk-taking behavior and are potentially harmful to young people’s sexual and reproductive health,” in part because they “exclude accurate information about contraception.”²⁷ A substantial

body of research, including multi-year U.S. studies, finds that abstinence-focused initiatives do not lower adolescent births, HIV, or other STIs but rather

“displayed a perverse effect, increasing adolescent birthrates.”²⁸

Gender-transformative approaches to comprehensive sexuality education are particularly impactful. Gender-transformative approaches are efforts within and beyond curricula that address stereotypical and harmful gender norms, roles, relationships, and the redistribution of power, resources, and services to achieve gender equality.²⁹ They involve an inclusive understanding of gender, coupled with methods of eliminating inequality, harm, and power imbalances. A study of interventions in nine countries found that CSE curricula that address “gender and power in relationships were five times more likely to be effective in reducing STI and pregnancy rates than those that did not address these topics.”³⁰

Increased awareness of rights. Comprehensive sexuality education adopts a human rights-based approach, recognizing the rights of children, young people, and all persons to “health, education, information, equality and non-discrimination.”³¹ CSE provides learners with the tools to recognize discrimination and oppression, including against girls, women, and minority populations such as LGBTIQ people, while allowing a deeper appreciation of gender equality, sexual rights, and sexual and gender diversity.³² These help to prevent bullying and violence among young people, laying the foundation for building emotionally healthier and more empathetic populations.³³

Where CSE includes media literacy, students have “demonstrated increased media deconstruction skills,” useful for children’s and young people’s perceptions of themselves and the world around them.³⁴ Media literacy helps students and young people navigate social and all forms of media communication, identify biases, and use online spaces safely and effectively.

Protection against child sex abuse and sexual assault. Equipping children and young people with factually accurate information about their bodies and knowledge about their rights provides protection against child sex abuse. It facilitates a

stronger culture of reporting and holding accountable the perpetrators of sexual violence against children and young people.³⁵

While some opponents argue that CSE can “sexualize” or “groom” young people, the reality is that it provides them with age-appropriate knowledge and skills to help recognize abuse. Children who lack accurate information about their bodies and about abuse are more vulnerable. CSE protects young people by teaching them about abusive behavior, grooming, predation, informed consent, and how to seek help.

Increased interpersonal skills to facilitate relationship building. By addressing dating and relationships, sexism, power, gender dynamics, sexual violence, victim-blaming, and similar topics, comprehensive sexuality education equips students with the skills to recognize violence and coercion, increase self-advocacy, and ultimately prevent, address, and increase reporting of domestic and intimate partner violence, which can disproportionately impact girls and LGBTIQ youth.³⁶ CSE contributes to a culture of affirmative consent. It provides children and young people with the skills to build and recognize healthy relationships, develop interpersonal communication skills, foster self- and mutual respect, and increase socioemotional well-being.³⁷

Safer schools. A UNESCO study of 94 countries and territories revealed that LGBTIQ students consistently experience higher levels of violence than their non-LGBTIQ peers.³⁸ Globally, 45 percent of LGBTIQ youth report being bullied at school due to their gender identity or sexual orientation.³⁹ Studies show that CSE that is inclusive of topics related to sexual and gender diversity reduces incidences of peer-based bullying and improves mental health among LGBTIQ youth.⁴⁰ A study in the U.S. state of California found that “LGBTQ-supportive curricula were also related to students feeling safer at school and more aware of bullying at both the school and individual levels.”⁴¹

“Comprehensive sexuality education trains children and young people to think critically—in a world where misinformation, disinformation and myths about bodies and sexuality are rife. Being culturally and contextually relevant, CSE addresses issues within the cultural norms and structures the affected children and young people live in.”

–UNESCO⁴²

Does CSE sufficiently address sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics in practice?

Comprehensive sexuality education that includes teaching about sexual and gender diversity is rare. In addition, discourse on sexual and gender diversity in schools, from peers and even from educators, can be hostile or derogatory, undermining LGBTIQ learners’ dignity and rights.

Outright’s research finds that only 27 UN member states address sexual and gender diversity in their comprehensive sexuality education curricula, and only some of these countries mandate that students learn about diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.⁴³ Where inclusive CSE is not mandated, it can be easily skipped at the school or teacher’s discretion.

In Europe, mandatory sexuality education inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity is only present in 12 countries. Of these, only five—**France, Malta, Spain, Portugal, and Belgium**—provide education on the existence of intersex people and diverse sex characteristics in the curricula.⁴⁴ Teaching students about diverse sex characteristics and the existence of intersex people is crucial in curbing misinformation and stigma.

Some countries or school districts, including in Paraguay, **Hungary, Brazil**, and the **U.S.**, have prohibited the sharing of information on diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in schools, including by banning the teaching of books that

portray diverse people and families. This censorship paves the way for the introduction of school materials that lack scientific bases, contain religious biases, and reinforce harmful stereotypes on gender and sexuality.⁴⁵

The majority, or 166, UN member states do not mandate comprehensive sexuality education or include it in national curricula. In jurisdictions where CSE is not mandated, sexual and gender diversity is rarely included in the curriculum. When LGBTIQ people are mentioned, it is often in a negative or derogatory manner. Recent Outright research shows that CSE is prohibited by law in countries such as **Hungary** and the **U.S. states of Florida** and **Wyoming**, and countries such as **Iran** conventionally restrict these topics due to misinformation and queerphobia. In the Caribbean as well, recent learners and activists reported the complete erasure of LGBTIQ people from the curriculum.⁴⁶

In 2024, Outright issued a global survey of LGBTIQ people about the right to education, drawing 439 responses from 49 countries.

Of the participants who responded affirmatively when asked if they received any sex education in school, the majority said it was taught from a cisheteronormative lens. In addition:

- 57 percent of respondents reported that their teachers did not talk about or teach issues related to sexual orientation.
- 72 percent said teachers did not discuss gender identity and gender expression; and
- 73 percent said teachers did not discuss sex characteristics or the existence of intersex people in class.

Silencing discussions of sexuality and gender in schools contributes to hostility, invisibility, and fear for LGBTIQ students, who are left without legal protections, teacher support, or inclusive educational materials.

What are international human rights and inclusive development standards on comprehensive sexuality education?

Everyone has the right to education, including on CSE, in accordance with Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Articles 13 and 14 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.⁴⁷ The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) interprets these provisions through the “4-A” framework—availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability—in its General Comment No. 13.⁴⁸

Human rights mechanisms have interpreted these and other instruments as requiring states to provide comprehensive sexuality education. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has instructed states that “age-appropriate, comprehensive and inclusive sexual and reproductive health education, based on scientific evidence and human rights standards and developed with adolescents, should be part of the mandatory school curriculum.”⁴⁹ The UN Human Rights Council has stated that states have the duty of “developing and implementing educational programmes and teaching materials, including comprehensive sexuality education, based on full and accurate information, for all adolescents and youth, in a manner consistent with their evolving capacities...”⁵⁰ The Council points out that comprehensive sexuality education is a crucial tool in promoting human rights and eliminating violence against women and girls through engaging men and boys.

Beyond their human rights obligations under treaty law, all states have signed on to the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development Goal 4, “Quality Education,” sets a target that “all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development,” including through education on human rights and gender equality.⁵¹ Further, all states have committed to “ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education.” This encompasses comprehensive sexuality education initiatives at all levels.

What should states do?

- **Repeal laws and revoke policies that restrict age-appropriate content on gender and sexuality in schools.** Numerous national and local governments have passed laws or issued policies prohibiting information and content on concepts like gender, gender identity, so-called gender ideology, sexuality, sexual diversity, and sexual orientation. They should repeal these provisions to protect inclusive access to education for all students.
- **Mandate, fund, and implement comprehensive sexuality education initiatives that are LGBTIQ-inclusive.** States should mandate and fund the teaching of comprehensive sexuality education and ensure that it includes recognition and affirmation of diversity in sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics, as is age-appropriate, at all levels, to foster inclusive education.
- **Require training for school personnel.** States should provide holistic teacher training on LGBTIQ inclusion, addressing
- **Engage stakeholders and facilitate community support.** States should involve LGBTIQ human rights experts as stakeholders in the formulation, design, and implementation of education programs. In addition, states should ensure that community support for education and childhood development includes LGBTIQ families.

ENDNOTES

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ABOUT OUTRIGHT INTERNATIONAL

Outright International works together for better LGBTIQ lives. Outright is dedicated to working with partners around the globe to strengthen the capacity of the LGBTIQ human rights movement, document and amplify human rights violations against LGBTIQ people, and advocate for inclusion and equality.

Founded in 1990, with staff in over a dozen countries, Outright works with the United Nations, regional human rights monitoring bodies, governments, humanitarian and development institutions, and civil society partners. Outright holds consultative status at the United Nations, where it serves as the secretariat of the UN LGBTI Core Group.

**Together, for better LGBTIQ lives.
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