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# WHAT IS SEXUALITY EDUCATION?

*“You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”*

*John 8:32*



There is often confusion about what constitutes sexuality education. Some people object to sexuality education because they think it means teaching about the mechanics of sexual behaviors. The term “sexuality education” is used intentionally rather than “sex education” to emphasize that this type of education addresses not just anatomy and reproduction, but who we are as men and women.

Sexuality education is a lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs, and values about identity, relationships, and intimacy. It encompasses sexual development, reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, affection, intimacy, body image, and gender roles. Sexuality education addresses the biological, socio-cultural, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of sexuality from the cognitive domain (information); the affective domain (feelings, values, and attitudes); and the behavioral domain (communication, decision-making and other relevant personal skills).

Comprehensive sexuality education that is appropriate to students’ age development level and cultural background is an important part of the religious education program for people of all ages. A comprehensive sexuality education program respects that even in a religious community there is likely to be a diversity of values and beliefs about sexuality. Programs for young people must always complement and augment the sexuality education that children receive from their families.

The primary goal of sexuality education is the promotion of sexual health. The World Health Organization defines sexual health as:

“Sexual health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well being related to sexuality. It is not merely the absence of dysfunction, disease or infirmity. Sexual health is evidenced in the free and responsible expression of

sexuality that enhances life and personal relations. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, a socio-cultural milieu conducive to well being related to sexuality must be fostered and the sexual rights of all persons must be recognised and upheld.”<sup>47</sup>

Sexuality education seeks to assist people in developing a positive view of sexuality, provide them with information about taking care of their sexual health, and help them acquire skills to make sexual decisions now and in the future.

**Sexuality education for young people in a faith community has four primary goals:**

### *Information*

To provide accurate information about human sexuality, including growth and development, human reproduction, anatomy, physiology, masturbation, family life, pregnancy, childbirth, parenthood, sexual response, sexual orientation, contraception, abortion, sexual abuse, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases.

### *Attitudes, Values, and Insights*

To provide an opportunity for young people to articulate their sexual attitudes in order to understand their family’s and religion’s values, increase self-esteem, develop insights concerning relationships with family members of both genders, and understand their obligations and responsibilities to their families, religious community, and others.

### *Relationships and Interpersonal Skills*

To help young people develop interpersonal skills in the areas of communication, decision-making, assertiveness and peer refusal, and to learn to build satisfying relationships. Sexuality education

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programs can help young people develop the capacity for caring, supportive, noncoercive, and mutually pleasurable intimate and sexual relationships when they become adults.

### ***Responsibility***

To help young people exercise responsibility regarding sexual relationships by addressing abstinence, resisting pressure for sexual intercourse, and encouraging the use of contraception and other sexual health measures when they do become sexually involved. Sexuality education can be a central component of programs designed to reduce the number of sexually related medical problems, including teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV infection, and sexual abuse.

Sexuality education should be based on specific values about relationships and moral and ethical integrity. Because sexuality is such a deeply complex and personal subject, it is important that programs in both religious and secular settings clearly articulate the values that are the foundation for the program.

The following list of values is from the *Our Whole Lives* sexuality education program, developed jointly by the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association.<sup>48</sup> They were adapted from the National Guidelines Task Force list of values reflecting the beliefs of most communities in a pluralistic society. Of course, each faith community will need to review and modify these values in accordance with its own ethics, values, and religious teachings as well as community norms and diversity.

### **Values Inherent in Most Sexuality Education Programs**

#### ***Self-Worth***

- Every person is entitled to dignity and self-worth and to his or her own attitudes and beliefs about sexuality.

#### ***Sexual Health***

- Knowledge about human sexuality is helpful, not harmful. Every individual has the right to

accurate information about sexuality and to have her or his questions answered.

- Healthy sexual relationships are:
  - Consensual (both people consent);
  - Nonexploitative (equal in terms of power, neither person pressures or forces the other into activities/behaviors);
  - Mutually pleasurable (both receive pleasure);
  - Safe (no or low risk of unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and emotional pain);
  - Developmentally appropriate (appropriate to the age and maturity of persons involved);
  - Based on mutual expectations and caring; and
  - Respectful (including the values of honesty and keeping commitments made to others).
- Sexual intercourse is only one of the many valid ways of expressing sexual feelings with a partner. It is healthier for young adolescents to postpone sexual intercourse.

### ***Responsibility***

- We are called to enrich our lives by expressing sexuality in ways that enhance human wholeness and fulfillment and that express love, commitment, delight, and pleasure.
- All persons have the right and obligation to make responsible sexual choices.

### ***Justice and Inclusivity***

- We need to avoid double standards. People of all ages, people of different races, genders, backgrounds, income levels, physical and mental abilities, and sexual orientations must have equal values and rights.
- Sexual relationships should never be coercive or exploitative.
- Being romantically and sexually attracted to both genders (bisexual), the same gender (homosexual), or another gender (heterosexual) are all natural in the range of human sexual experience.<sup>49</sup>