

SIECCAN ISSUE BRIEF

SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION BOOKS IN SCHOOL AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES: ACCESS FOR YOUTH IS A HUMAN RIGHT

Released: June 29, 2023



ACCESSING SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION MATERIALS IN SCHOOLS AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Across Canada, schools and libraries are being called to review, censor, or remove books focused on sexuality, gender identity, and sexual orientation (Brown, 2023; Lederman, 2023; Logan, 2023). Often, calls to remove educational materials are framed within the context of parental rights or child protection (Benchetrit, 2023; Kemp, 2023) and claim resources focused on sexual health topics are “pornographic” (Logan, 2023).

Responses to these calls have highlighted the abilities of libraries and librarians to distinguish between educational and pornographic materials, choose credible books, defend freedom of expression and the right to read, and challenge efforts to stigmatize 2SLGBTQINA+ communities (Canadian School Libraries, 2023; New Brunswick Women’s Council, 2023; Unger, 2022).

In this SIECCAN Issue Brief, we add to this conversation by highlighting young people’s right to access educational resources that assist them in making autonomous decisions about their sexual health.

Access to information that can be used to make autonomous decisions is a human right.

All children and youth have a fundamental right to information that enables them to protect, promote, and enhance their bodily autonomy, sexual health, and well-being (SIECCAN, 2019; SIECCAN, 2023).

ACCESSIBILITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS ARE CORE PRINCIPLES OF COMPREHENSIVE SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION

Access to relevant sexual health information is a core principle of comprehensive sexual health education (SIECCAN, 2019). The *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education* (SIECCAN, 2019, p.23) state that:

All people should have access to age-appropriate sexual health information and resources beginning in childhood and continuing across the lifespan.

A large majority of youth (83%) and parents (73%) across Canada agree that access to age-appropriate sexual health education in schools is a basic right for all children and youth (Loveless et al., 2022; SIECCAN, 2023).

2SLGBTQINA+ youth have a right to access materials that reflect their lived experiences and sexual health needs (see SIECCAN, 2019; 2023). Educational resources that have inclusive language and represent a range of bodies and relationships are often missing in sexual health education (Epps et al., 2023; Planned Parenthood Toronto, 2016; Tordoff et al., 2020). Removing materials focused on gender and sexual diversity violates the rights of 2SLGBTQINA+ youth to access critical, relevant sexual health information.

BENEFITS OF COMPREHENSIVE SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION

There is strong evidence that comprehensive sexual health education can provide young people with the information, motivation, and skills to enhance their sexual health and reduce outcomes that negatively impact sexual health and well-being (see SIECCAN, 2019; 2020; 2023 to review the relevant research).

Comprehensive sexual health education is critical for the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV; SIECCAN, 2023). To ensure that young people develop the knowledge and skills to understand and prevent GBV, youth need access to evidence-based information on sexual health, bodies, gender norms, roles and stereotypes, consent, human rights, relationships, digital media literacy and technology, and sexual and gender diversity (see SIECCAN, 2023).

COMPREHENSIVE SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION CAN:

Improve interpersonal communication skills.	Improve safer sex strategies (e.g., condom use).
Increase understanding and awareness of sexual rights.	Improve contraceptive use.
Increase gender-equitable attitudes.	Build self-efficacy and communication skills to prevent sexually transmitted infections.
Expand understanding of gender and gender norms.	Reduce attitudes that contribute to GBV, including homophobia and sexism.
Improve social-emotional outcomes, such as increased empathy, respect for others, and self-esteem.	Improve critical GBV prevention knowledge and skills (e.g., increase bystander intervention skills, improve knowledge of sexual abuse, increase help-seeking behaviours).
Improve media literacy related to sexuality.	Decrease GBV (e.g., intimate partner violence, dating violence, bullying based on gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexual orientation).
Improve ability to access sexual and reproductive health services.	Impact sexual behaviour (e.g., delayed initiation of partnered sex, having fewer sex partners).

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; 2023; Cheedalla et al., 2020; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Mon Kyaw Soe et al., 2016; Lopez et al., 2016; Morales et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2018; 2021; Rothman et al., 2020; Scull et al., 2018; 2021; Schneider & Hirsch, 2020

COMPREHENSIVE SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION IS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

According to *The Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education* (SIECCAN, 2019, p. 17):

Providing access to comprehensive sexual health education for all people in Canada is a shared responsibility that requires the participation of families, communities, schools, and all levels of government.

Most parents/guardians and youth agree that sexual health education should be a shared responsibility between schools, teachers, parents/families, and others (e.g., community, health professionals; Byers et al., 2003; Gesner et al., in press; Weaver et al. 2002). In a national survey of parents/guardians in Canada, the majority of parents (85%) agreed that sexual health education should be taught in schools (Wood et al., 2021).

School libraries can provide a safe learning environment for youth; public libraries can provide a welcoming community space for youth to obtain learning materials that may not be available elsewhere or accessible to all youth (e.g., due to cost).

Not all youth have access to classroom comprehensive sexual health education that meets their learning needs. School and public libraries, therefore, play a critical role in providing young people with equitable access to sexual health information.

It is imperative that schools and libraries are supported in upholding youth's right to access important health information and ensure that sexual health education materials remain accessible.

KEY MESSAGE

Access to information that can be used to make autonomous decisions about health and well-being should be considered a basic human right of all people, including children and youth.

Access to information about sexual health can play an important role in contributing to the safety, health, and well-being of young people.

Policymakers should incorporate and prioritize consideration of the rights of young people to access information about sexual health in setting policy regarding sexual health education books in school and public libraries.

Suggested Citation:

SIECCAN. (2023). *Sexual Health Education Books in School and Public Libraries: Access for Youth is a Human Right. Issue Brief*. Toronto, ON: Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN).

REFERENCES

- Benchetrit. (2023). How the parental rights movement resurged in response to trans inclusivity in classrooms. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/parental-rights-movement-us-canada-1.6796070>
- Brown, S. (2023). N.B. sex education curriculum included in review of school gender identity policy. Global News. <https://globalnews.ca/news/9688287/n-b-sex-ed-curriculum-review-gender-identity-policy-713/>
- Byers, E. S., Sears, H. A., Voyer, S. D., Thurlow, J. L., Cohen, J. N., & Weaver, A. D. (2003). An adolescent perspective on sexual health education at school and at home: I. High school students. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 12(1).
- Canadian School Libraries. (2023). *CSL Statement: Book Challenges and Censorship in Canada's School Libraries*. https://www.canadianschoollibraries.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CSLstatement_BookChallenges_Censorship_May2023.pdf
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). *Compendium of evidence-based interventions and best practices for HIV prevention*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Centre for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB. <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/prevention/research/compendium/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). What works in schools: Sexual health education. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/whatworks/what-works-sexual-health-education.htm>
- Cheedalla, A., Moreau, C., & Burke, A. E. (2020). Sex education and contraceptive use of adolescent and young adult females in the United States: an analysis of the National Survey of Family Growth 2011–2017. *Contraception*: X, 2, 100048.
- Epps, B., Markowski, M., & Cleaver, K. (2023). A rapid review and narrative synthesis of the consequences of non-inclusive sex education in UK schools on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning young people. *The Journal of School Nursing*, 39(1), 87-97.
- Gesner, N., Fowler, S., McLaughlin, L, Bridges, S., Ryan, S., Noel, N., Debouver, P., Caron, E., & Thompson, S. (in press). Facilitating parent-child sexual health communication: Recommendations from the New Brunswick "Ask Me Anything" survey. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 32(3).
- Goldfarb, E S , & Lieberman, L D (2021) Three decades of research: The case for comprehensive sex education. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68(1), 13-27
- Kemp. (2023). Grandmother calls on Brandon School Division to remove LGBTQ and sexual education books. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/brandon-book-removal-lgbtq-1.6839336>
- Lederman, M. (2023). The battle over books: U.S-style book bans could happen in Canada too, if we're not careful. The Globe and Mail. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-us-style-book-bans-and-censorship-could-happen-in-canada-too-if-were/>
- Logan, N. (2023). Libraries are being accused of offering child porn: Librarians explain why that isn't true. The Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC). <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canada-libraries-book-challenges-1.6851688>
- Lopez, L. M., Tolley, E. E., Grimes, D. A., & Chen-Mok, M. (2009). Theory-based interventions for contraception. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, (1).
- Loveless, C , Vora, T , Quinn-Nilas, C , Knapman, S , Nause, J , Dyall, K , Wood, J , Byers, S , Mckay, A , & Wentland, J (2022) *An investigation into parental attitudes toward sexual health education guidelines in Canada: Results from a national study of parents*. Presented as a poster presentation at the 2022 Canadian Sex Research Forum annual meeting in Waterloo, Ontario.
- Mon Kyaw Soe, N., Bird, Y., Schwandt, M., & Moraros, J. (2018). STI health disparities: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the effectiveness of preventive interventions in educational settings. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15(12), 2819.
- Morales, A., Espada, J. P., Orgilés, M., Escribano, S., Johnson, B. T., & Lightfoot, M. (2018). Interventions to reduce risk for sexually transmitted infections in adolescents: A meta-analysis of trials, 2008-2016. *PloS one*, 13(6), e0199421.
- New Brunswick Women's Council. (2023). The rise in organized anti-2SLGBTQIA+ activities in New Brunswick. https://www.nbwomenscouncil.ca/content/dam/vnbw-vfnb/pdf/briefs_submissions/nbwc-rise-in-organized-anti2slgbtqia.pdf
- Planned Parenthood Toronto (2016) Trans and nonbinary youth inclusivity in sexual health: Guidelines for sexual health service providers and educators <https://ppt.on.ca/trans-and-nonbinary-youth-inclusivity-in-sexual-health-guidelines-for-educators-and-service-providers/>

Rothman, E F , Daley, N , & Alder, J (2020) A pornography literacy program for adolescents *American Journal of Public Health, 110*(2), 154–156 <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305468>

Schneider, M , & Hirsch, J S (2020) Comprehensive sexuality education as a primary prevention strategy for sexual violence perpetration *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 21*(3), 439-455

Scull, T M , Kupersmidt, J B , Malik, C V , & Morgan-Lopez, A (2018) Using media literacy education for adolescent sexual health promotion in middle school: Randomized control trial of Media Aware *Journal of Health Communication, 23*(12), 1051-1063

Scull, T , Malik, C , Morrison, A , & Keefe, E (2021) Promoting sexual health in high school: A feasibility study of a web- based media literacy education program *Journal of health communication, 26*(3), 147-160

SIECCAN (2019) *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education*. Toronto, ON: Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN). https://www.sieccan.org/_files/ugd/1332d5_e3ee36e39d944009956af5b86f0a5ed6.pdf

SIECCAN (2020) *Questions & Answers: Sexual health education in schools and other settings*. Toronto, ON: Sex Information & Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN). https://www.sieccan.org/_files/ugd/1332d5_6506a2c46aba4bb2927143fda80caade.pdf

SIECCAN (2023). *Guidelines for integrating gender-based violence prevention within school-based comprehensive sexual health education*. Toronto, ON: Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN). https://www.sieccan.org/_files/ugd/919ea6_f4ce370c572d4d48963ea56f0b804c08.pdf

Tordoff, D. M., Haley, S. G., Shook, A., Kantor, A., Crouch, J. M., & Ahrens, K. (2021). "Talk about bodies": Recommendations for using transgender-inclusive language in sex education curricula. *Sex Roles, 84*, 152-165.

UNESCO (2018) International technical guidance on sexuality education: An informed approach <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>

UNESCO (2021) The journey towards comprehensive sexual health education: Global status report <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379607>

Unger. (2023). Southern Manitoba parents call for 'sexually explicit' children's books to be removed from libraries. <https://winnipeg.ctvnews.ca/southern-manitoba-parents-call-for-sexually-explicit-children-s-books-to-be-removed-from-libraries-1.6195340>

Weaver, A. D., Byers, E. S., Sears, H. A., Cohen, J. N., & Randall, H. E. (2001). Sexual health education at school and at home: Attitudes and experiences of New Brunswick parents. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality, 11*(1), 19-32.