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Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Early Childhood: Challenging Normative Assumptions and Exploring Pedagogical Possibilities

Editorial

Jessica Prioletta, Lindsay Herriot, and Adam Davies

Access to a comprehensive education around sexuality is a child's right (Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights, 2020). Yet, quality sexuality education in the early years remains limited, both in and out of formal education settings (Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2016; Balter et al., 2021; Davies, Balter, & van Rhijn, 2023; Prioletta et al., 2025; Robinson & Davies, 2017). The ongoing dominance of developmental logics on common understandings of children's "readiness" and the persisting image of the innocent child continue to legitimize the positioning of young children as "too young" to engage with sexuality-related matters (Robinson & Jones-Díaz, 2016), often leaving adults wondering how, if at all, sexuality education can be implemented with young learners.

In this special issue, scholars and practitioners from across Canada come together to challenge commonsense assumptions on sexuality education in early childhood and offer imaginative insights on implementing a quality program with young children.

Good-quality sexuality education should be comprehensive in scope. There are varying definitions of what constitutes a comprehensive education around sexuality, but they all rest on the core tenets that it must provide accurate information, facilitate the development of life skills, promote positive attitudes and values, be culturally relevant, and include diverse perspectives (Bialystok, 2019; Bonjour & van der Vlugt, 2018; Davies et al., 2026; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Lamb, 2013; Miedema et al., 2020). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2018), comprehensive sexuality education

> aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives. (p. 16)

In early childhood, a comprehensive education around sexuality must go beyond the common protectionary aims that limit sexuality education with young children to learning the names and functions of body parts in efforts to facilitate reporting abuse (Martin & Bobier, 2017). While knowing the names and functions of our body parts and knowing how and to whom to report abuse is of course important, quality sexuality education in the early years should be more than that.

For instance, according to the World Health Organization's (2010) European standards for sexuality education, eight sexuality themes are recommended to be addressed with children from 0 to 4 years old: the human body and human development; fertility and reproduction; sexuality; emotions; relationships and lifestyles; sexuality, health, and well-being; sexuality and rights; and social and cultural determinants of sexuality. Similarly, the UNESCO (2018) international guide outlines eight key concepts that should be addressed with children aged 5 to 8 years old: relationships; values, rights, culture, and sexuality; understanding gender; violence and staying safe; skills for health and well-being; the human body and development; sexuality and sexual behaviour; and sexual and reproductive health. In Canada, SIECCAN (2019) recommends that sexual health education for people of all ages reflect nine principles that include equality, inclusion, and human rights.

In this special issue, we bring attention to quality sexuality education in the context of early childhood specifically because young children are often ignored, misrepresented, and silenced when it comes to their sexuality education (Robinson, 2013). Many factors influence children's access to quality sexuality education. For instance, the ages-and-stages logic of traditional developmental psychology continues to heavily inform the positioning of children as distinct from adults and childhood as a distinct "phase" in human development. Critical scholars like Cannella (1997) have argued that developmental psychology can impede conceptualizations of children as knowledgeable agentic social actors. Developmentalism often operates to construct conceptualizations of children as incomplete and unable to understand themselves and their social worlds (see also Bhana, 2003; James et al., 1998; James & Prout, 1990; Mayall, 2002; Qvortrup et al., 1994).

Moreover, discourses of childhood innocence, heavily fuelled by traditional developmental logics, continue to characterize young children as pure, lacking knowledge, and vulnerable (Cannella, 1997; Robinson, 2013). While childhood innocence privileges white Eurocentric and cisheteronormative ideas of children and childhoods that consider only certain positions (e.g., white, cisgender, heterosexual, able) as deserving of protection (Nxumalo & ross, 2019; Rollo, 2018), access to comprehensive sexuality knowledge, information, and education is often viewed as inappropriate thanks to the dominant image of the innocent child (Davies, Balter, & van Rhijn, 2023). The developmental myth that sexuality emerges later in childhood (e.g., at puberty) also reinforces the common view that sexuality education is irrelevant, if not developmentally inappropriate, in early childhood (Osgood & Robinson, 2017; Taylor, 2010; Zaman & Anderson-Nathe, 2021). Consequently, children are often denied access to a comprehensive education around sexuality legitimized through the claim that it is in the best interest of the child (Steele & Nicholson, 2019).

The contributors to this special issue recognize that people are born *already immersed in sexuality*; sexuality does not suddenly emerge at puberty (Taylor, 2010). Moreover, we recognize that young children are always engaging with sexuality information through explicit and implicit messages in their families and communities, through information provided (or denied) in their formal education, and through their peers—as some examples—whether the information is accurate or not (Davies, 2021; Robinson, 2013). Not to mention that children are also constantly bombarded with media-based information on sexuality by media conglomerates, like Disney and major toy companies, whose marketing strategies function as sources of information around sexuality that play a deeply influential role in children's early sexuality education (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Azmi et al., 2021; Ragonese et al., 2017).

Through this special issue we hope to shift dominant narratives around sexuality education in early childhood. We reject commonsense beliefs that young children are too young for quality sexuality education, and we are cautious of approaches that centre adults' goals and perspectives. Instead, we argue that sexuality education is already happening in the early years, if not explicitly then implicitly, and offer innovative insights for how it can be approached in ways that meaningfully engage children with identity, social norms and roles, diversity, equality, and joy to support adults who are implementing or looking to implement sexuality education with children and families.

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