

# Learning from Children: Implementing an Inclusive Sexuality Curriculum for the Early Years

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## Article abstract

There is a realistic reluctance among early childhood professionals about how to provide effective sexuality education. This article provides an overview of the Our Whole Lives curriculum cocreated by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ. It explores gender and sexual diversity while addressing stereotypes regarding children's development and interests and includes advice on how to encourage parental partnership. It is intended for professionals interested in exploring a curriculum and engaging in a pilot project. It could be used as a basis for examining this topic in college or university early childhood education programs. Suggestions for its effective use are based on the authors' knowledge about and practical experience in implementing the curriculum. Bennett has been a certified trainer of facilitators of all seven Our Whole Lives curricula for 25 years. Dickinson volunteered for several decades with children and families in the congregation where this curriculum was implemented.



## Learning from Children: Implementing an Inclusive Sexuality Curriculum for the Early Years

Pat Dickinson and Monica Bennett

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**Key words:** *sexuality education, gender, curriculum, parental involvement*

### Background

Sexuality includes many topics that are of interest to and create curiosity in young children, such as an understanding of the human body and reproduction, gender identity, sexual orientation, emotional attraction, and pleasure. It is important to help preschool children understand that the many discoveries they are learning about their bodies are a natural part of human development. This is especially important because sexuality is also the subject of much misunderstanding and of secretive and criminal behaviour. There is a growing understanding in Canada that adolescent suicide is often related to confusion around gender and sexuality (Kingsbury et al., 2022), as well as being a predictable outcome of sexual exploitation of young children in the US (Lopez-Castroman et al., 2013). There is also a sense that these threats can be significantly minimized when children are provided with information that helps them establish positive identities and boundaries (Nicholson & Steele, 2019). Further, sexuality education for children is considered a basic human right (Council of Europe, 2020). Awareness of the importance of providing sexuality education for

young children can create both urgency and anxiety among early childhood educators (ECEs). This apprehension is complicated by ECEs' understanding that children's sense of identity, including attitudes toward gender and sexuality, may be projected onto them even before they are born. As children spend more time in early childhood settings, it is critical that ECEs examine how sexuality education is and could be approached with children of this age.

There is evidence that ECEs are reluctant to engage in forms of sexuality education with young children that go beyond the “incidental” discussion of sexuality that often occurs during toileting, self-stimulation, and role-playing activities that occur naturally in early childhood settings (Balter et al., 2016; Davies et al., 2023; Prioletta et al., 2024). This reluctance has been shown in these studies to be based on three basic factors: (1) notions of childhood innocence, (2) the concept of developmentally appropriate practice that suggests children might not be ready for these conversations, and (3) the dominant gender binary that promotes heteronormative and cisnormative notions of acceptability. These factors have been influenced by religious, cultural, political, and moral values that can discourage natural conversations and discussions about children’s gender and sexuality (Bialystok & Wright, 2017; Rasmussen, 2010).

The reluctance among ECEs to address sexuality education is exacerbated by their awareness that sexuality is perceived to be a very controversial topic among parents of young children. Many parents are influenced by the same three basic factors noted above, which likely create confusion and a similar reluctance to initiate discussions on these topics with their own children. Complicating parents’ avoidance of dealing with their children’s developing sexuality is the viewpoint that children’s sexual education should be a parent’s, not an educator’s, responsibility. In one Australian study (Robinson et al., 2017), while the majority of parents felt that sexuality education should be a collaborative effort between the home and the school or childcare, nearly a third of parents felt it should be the responsibility of parents only. In Canada, the topic of sex education in public schools is often met with parental resistance, which has resulted in a fragmented mixture of sex education curricula that varies by province and school board across the country (Bialystok & Wright, 2017). Recent news that England may ban sexual education for children under the age of nine demonstrates the politicizing of this topic (Morton & Evans, 2024).

It is not surprising, then, that the subject of sexuality education is often fraught with controversy and some apprehension in early childhood education. This avoidance both perpetuates and is complicated by the reality that there are few models in practice that focus on this age group. This void adds to the problem because, without models from which to question and openly discuss deeply held beliefs and to consider possible alternatives, there is likely to be very little movement toward addressing this clear gap in providing for children’s healthy growth and development.

In a report on promising curriculum-based approaches toward sexuality education (Virginia Healthy Sexuality Workgroup, 2010), only two models were cited that addressed this age group, and only one of these models is currently being implemented, the Our Whole Lives (OWL) K–1 curriculum cocreated by the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) and the United Church of Christ (UCC).<sup>1</sup> This reality provided the motivation for the authors of this article to share their knowledge about and experience working with this model. We are particularly encouraged to do so because the model confronts factors such as childhood innocence and the dominant gender binary that historically have been seen as deterrents by many ECEs. Additionally, the model incorporates parental involvement as an essential component.

Both authors have volunteered for decades in the Children and Youth Religious Exploration program in a Unitarian Universalist congregation that regularly implements the OWL program. One of the authors (Bennett) has been a certified trainer for all seven OWL curricula for 25 years and has implemented the OWL curriculum with K–1 children, including the parental component of the program with the various age groups for which the program is intended. She shares her experiences below in the hopes that this case study could be used to stimulate discussion among ECEs about the opportunities and challenges of implementing a sexuality curriculum with young children. It could also be used by professors in college and university early childhood education programs as a discussion topic to explore the possibilities of providing healthy sexuality education for young children.

## Case study

### *Description of curriculum*

The entire OWL sexuality education program is jointly published by the UUA and the UCC. Sexuality education is not traditionally thought of as a component of religious education. However, the notion that religion and sexuality education are necessarily framed in conflict has been challenged by academics (Rasmussen, 2010; Young et al., 2015) who suggest that this oversimplifies a more complex relationship between various ideologies and secularism in general. Bialystok and Wright (2015) argue that, in the Ontario context, opposition to sexuality education on religious grounds obscures more fundamental issues such as xenophobia, particularly against Muslims, and recommend that intersectional social justice efforts become part of a movement toward comprehensive sexual education. The OWL program seems well positioned in such a movement since Unitarian Universalists are “diverse in faith, ethnicity, history and spirituality, but aligned in our desire to make a difference for the good” (UUA, 2026).

The following description is taken from the planning guide for the OWL curricula facilitator trainings (UUA & UCC, 2024):

*Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education ...* curricula are refreshing, bold antidotes to a culture that is conflicted about sexuality and, therefore, saturated with mixed messages and misinformation. The curricula provide an opportunity to step back, reflect, and evaluate these messages, so that participants and their families can more effectively act on and communicate their sexual values. *Our Whole Lives ...* creates a partnership between the family and [the] community [in which it is being taught. It helps] parents fulfill their role as their children’s primary educators. The curricula support and nurture four sexuality values: Self Worth, Sexual Health, Responsibility, and Justice and Inclusivity. Participants learn how to embody these values in their own decision making and relationships and how to support others’ efforts to do so. (p. 3)

There are seven *Our Whole Lives* curricula, each reflecting the realities of age groups across the human lifespan. The “curriculum for Grades K–1 helps 5–7-year-old children begin the lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes about identity and relationships, safety, and health” (Solot & Miller, 2023, p. 1). It recognizes variability among children, and facilitators are expected to plan the workshops and adjust the schedules and activities accordingly. Teaching methods include games, toys, stories, visual aids, movement breaks, songs, activities, crafts, discussions, and direct teaching. Questions are expected and encouraged. The program runs for eight weeks at one hour each and covers the following topics:

1. Our Wonderful Bodies
2. Bodies and Gender
3. Body Boundaries
4. Families
5. How Babies Begin
6. Pregnancy and Birth
7. Babies
8. Celebration

Parents/caregivers are considered the primary sexuality educators of their children and are integral to the program. The parent/caregiver orientation is conducted well before the first session, and attendance is mandatory. In it, adults meet separately from the children to become familiar with the curriculum, to reflect on the values they want to impart to their children, and to develop a sense of partnership with the facilitators. During the simultaneous children's orientation, games that build trust and support are played along with songs and games that build awareness of similarities and differences among participants. The entire group reassembles to close out the session.

Importantly, parents/caregivers are provided with a "HomeLinks" resource each week. It includes a synopsis of the day's session, suggestions for reinforcing the lesson at home, how to follow up in the years ahead, and book and media recommendations. Parents/caregivers are also encouraged to attend the final session, entitled "Celebration."

### *Training for facilitators*

Facilitators are screened by their home congregations for their suitability to the work. This screening can include the submission of a resume/CV, an interview conducted by a congregational program oversight body, reference checks, and a police records check. Once selected, facilitators attend an authorized three-day, 20-hour training. Adult experiential learning principles are integrated into the training using interactive participatory methods. Direct teaching is also used. During the training, facilitators become familiar with the curriculum and learn how to articulate the importance of comprehensive sexuality education, to work with both children and parents/caregivers, and to practice facilitation skills.

### *Implementation history*

Bennett has conducted facilitator training weekends for this curriculum four times over twenty years and has delivered the curriculum to this specific age group approximately four times over ten years.

### *Note on pronouns*

In the following observations, gender-neutral pronouns are used except where gender is relevant to the person or the story. This practice is in keeping with the curriculum's goal of teaching inclusive, affirming ways. Our hope is that the reader will appreciate that identifying gender is not always necessary.

## **Observation #1**

In one of the lessons, children are invited to create a drawing of their family. In this lesson, different family configurations are described and depicted. Facilitators know about and include depictions of the families from which the participants originate and with whom they are living at the time. Every child defines their family as they understand it. Families with two houses, two sets of parents, parents of the same and/or different genders, grandparents as parents, no parents, as well as foster families, extended families, pets, etc. are all represented and understood by the child. Recognizing the importance of each child's familial context is fundamental to the program because, regardless of the constellation of a child's family, those parents/caregivers are the child's primary sexuality educators.

This exercise allowed one child to celebrate their separated family in its current form for the first time (mom, brother, and cat in one home and dad, brother, stepmother, stepsister, and two dogs in another). The child captioned the picture "we ARe A fAmily" and proudly brought their picture home to their single mother, who was concerned about how her children were settling into their new reality. Years later, that picture still has pride of place on the fridge door.

This anecdote exemplifies how all family configurations are welcomed and valued in the classroom. And, while it is not explicitly about gender and sexual diversity, activities like this present an opportunity for including families of diverse gender and sexual identities.

Later in the program, when children were asked to identify an adult—besides their parents—to whom they would disclose a boundary violation, that same child identified their stepmother. The mother was relieved to get confirmation that her child felt safe within their blended family. Identifying adult helpers is an important part of the lesson entitled Body Boundaries, and it is only one way that preventing child sexual abuse is woven into the curriculum.

Instead of only attempting to teach children to say no to abuse and to report it, a trauma-informed, research-based approach is used that helps lay the groundwork for future learning about consent in healthy relationships. As identified in the curriculum (p. 2), this includes, but is not limited to:

- Teaching the correct names for body parts
- Discussing the difference between public and private
- Practicing hearing and respecting “no” from others
- Teaching that touching should never be kept secret
- Emphasizing the right to say no and to define their own boundaries around being touched.

## Observation #2

As part of the curriculum, hand-sized toys or games are distributed to participants to keep their hands and/or bodies busy while they pay attention to something else. One toy is play dough. In one class, one of the children quickly rolled black play dough back and forth into a snake-like shape. They then held it up and proudly proclaimed “I made a penis!” The use of the word penis reinforced using the correct biological name, and a nonanxious presence was modelled by simply saying, “Yes, that is the shape of a penis. Thank you for showing us.” I, Monica, also wanted to affirm diversity, so challenged them all to create a vulva. A relatively complex structure, I assumed it would take a bit of time—time I needed to cover the material in that session. It was not to be. Another child took the red play dough they had already rolled into a snake-like form, instantly curved it into the shape of a heart and beamed, declaring, “I made a vulva!” I smiled broadly and replied, “Yes. You. Did.”

The children learned that their genitals are not shameful; indeed, they are something to be proud of. They learned about the general structure of penises and vulvas. And they also saw respectful conversations about human bodies modelled. None of the children giggled, blushed, looked away, or questioned the interactions. They accepted the fact that human body parts are just one of many things they are learning about. While in this case the opportunity was missed, it could be a good place to also discuss intersex.

In this short interaction, we all saw how there need not be any embarrassment related to the human body. Indeed, there is pride and joy to be found when we respect the body and celebrate the individual who resides within it. Human genitals are normal and easy to talk about if we do not shroud them in a cloud of shame and guilt. Many adults inadvertently express that shame and guilt when they use euphemisms to refer to genitalia, and those negative associations are passed on to their children when they do so. Adults may also choose to ignore or gloss over references to sexuality, hoping that it will help children retain their “purity.” However, there is no innocence to be lost. Juxtaposing innocence and sexuality assumes that sexuality is inherently morally wrong. However,

human sexuality is, among other things, just a set of facts. Complexities are then layered on to basic information. Providing affirming and accurate information to young children balances puritanical views, normalizes this part of the human experience, and fosters future openness to learning about sexuality.

Upon reflection, I found incredible joy in the moments of children's creativity and awareness. I like to think that that moment affected each child as they grew. I like to think that it meant that they weren't embarrassed at experiencing a period, a nocturnal emission, or an orgasm, and that the pride and joy felt for their body means that they don't accept unwanted sexual attention. Obviously, an eight-week course cannot do all that, but it does provide a foundation upon which that aspiration can become a reality.

### Observation #3

The workshop on how babies begin “teaches that an egg, a sperm, a uterus, and loving caregivers are part of each child's story” (Solot & Miller, 2023, Workshop 5, p. 1). During this lesson, we started by presenting the vagina/egg/penis/sperm version of the story. Everyone listened attentively, and then one child directly and calmly stated, “My parents never did that. I was adopted.” The child recognized that the version of the story presented was different for their parents; their two loving female parents did not have penis/vagina intercourse.

Again, in that moment, I found joy in this child's honesty. What mattered most was the small world of their loving family. They understood the details of human reproduction and did not see the emotional or cultural meaning adults assign to it. For them, it was more important to understand the facts about how they fit into their world. Here, the program and the facilitators provided a safe and inclusive place where diverse notions of gender, sexual orientation, and family structures were affirmed and celebrated.

The curriculum promotes the notion “that gender identity and anatomy do not always align as society might expect and expands critical thinking about gender roles and assumptions, guides facilitators in how to make the program accessible to all children, and honors body diversity” (Solot & Miller, 2023, p. 2).

### Observation #4

The facilitators heard a side conversation between two children during a lesson. A white child was heard saying to a Black child, “How come your skin is the colour of poo?” As facilitators, we assumed that the question came from an innocuous place of curiosity. At the same time, we knew the question was full of meaning even before we saw the hurt on the other child's face. They said that “poo isn't a nice word for my skin” and the other child apologized. We affirmed the Black child's feelings and we thanked the white child for recognizing those feelings and apologizing. We then pointed out that all of us are different in one way or another (eye colour, number of siblings, etc.) and that skin colour is one of the ways we may be different. We reinforced that we have to respect other people no matter how they may be different from or the same as us.

Though not directly linked to gender and sexuality, this anecdote is a reminder that one's identity is not a single entity. One's race and/or skin colour—and all the history they represent—are inextricably entwined with all the other parts of one's identity. They cannot be separated and are as valued as any and all parts of one's identity.

It was a short interaction, but it was used as a teachable moment that reinforced the value identified in the curriculum as “justice and inclusivity.” Within the curriculum, skin colour is “intentionally brought into the conversation about bodies and ... representation of children and families of color are included in stories and recommended resources” (Solot & Miller, 2023, p. 2). Children are better equipped to think and act justly when they observe interactions

like the one described above that models justice and inclusivity. These values are integrated throughout the lessons.

## Conclusion

Sexuality education is a lifelong process that begins informally at birth, and parents/caregivers are the primary sexuality educators of their children whether or not they ever utter a word about it. They model the expression of feelings and emotions and how to be in relationship with people of the same and other genders. The words they use and don't use, and what they do and don't say, speak volumes about what is important and teach children how we are to interact with one another.

The observations in this case study demonstrate that when we listen carefully to children's conversations, interacting honestly with their uncomplicated understandings about their own bodies and relationships, we can learn from them how to best respond in ways that will establish a healthy attitude toward human sexuality and, hopefully, enrich their lives.

The OWL curriculum, "for the majority of participants [in the program], will be their first experience with formal ... sexuality education" (Solot & Miler, 2023, p. 1). The curriculum recognizes the primary role of the parent/caregiver while also acknowledging that both parents and early childhood educators can benefit from working in partnership with trained sexuality education facilitators.

The curriculum model used in this case study was collaboratively written, produced, and implemented by two religious denominations whose faith and beliefs are exemplified in their open, positive, justice-seeking approach to sexuality and diversity. In contrast, other faith communities—especially high-demand religions—are well known for their anti-sex and misogynist/homophobic/transphobic attitudes and activities. The authors offer Our Whole Lives as a model to support further investigation into the critically important topic of early childhood sexuality education.

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1 Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religious movement characterized by a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Unitarian Universalists assert no creed but instead are unified by their shared search for spiritual growth. For more information go to <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe>

The United Church of Christ is an inclusive and diverse community of Christians connected by faith that calls us to build a just world for all. For more information go to <https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/>

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