

Comprehensive relationships and sexual health education in Australia

Our Position

- Australia has a national school curriculum that supports the nation-wide implementation of comprehensive relationships and sexual health education (hereafter called CSE). However, our approach has been somewhat piecemeal and lagging behind other countries.
- While we have been making attempts at responding to violence against women with some targeted piloting of additional respectful relationships or consent education, this is only a fraction of what the evidence tells us would be a best practice ..
- All students from Foundation to Year 12 should have access to age, developmentally and culturally appropriate CSE that empowers them with knowledge and skills to make healthy and safe choices concerning their relationships, sexual health and well-being, both in real life and online. ^{1,2,3,4}
- CSE should be accessible to all young people irrespective of their age, ability, socio-cultural context and/or engagement with mainstream schooling; including young people with disability, and those disengaged from mainstream schooling.
- Educators play a vital role in delivering CSE. This should be clearly articulated by all Australian educational authorities, who should provide relevant support and professional development to teachers, including evidence-based training and teaching resources to enable them to confidently and competently deliver CSE.
- CSE should be acknowledged as an integrated educational and health promotion initiative that directly contributes to lifelong sexual and reproductive health and well-being.
- Schools should offer a positive, respectful, and inclusive view of relationships and sexuality that reinforces the value of diversity, including diversity of culture, ability, sexuality and gender.

What is CSE?

Globally there are slightly differing terms used to refer to CSE. In Australia our most common terms are 'comprehensive relationships and sexual health education' or 'comprehensive relationships and sexuality education'. For the ease of reading, this document uses the term 'comprehensive sexuality education' abbreviated to CSE, which is the term used in the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education: An evidence-informed approach (2018).⁵

Internationally some terms also include: prevention education, relationships and sexuality education, family-life education, HIV education, life-skills education, healthy lifestyles and basic life safety. Australian researchers sometimes use the term RSE.

Regardless of the local term used, the word 'comprehensive' refers to the development of learners' knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward positive sexuality and good sexual and reproductive health. Core elements of programmes share certain similarities such as a firm grounding in human rights and a recognition of the broad concept of sexuality as a natural part of human development.²

CSE provides a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and relationships, recognising the possibility of pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, based on a foundation of mutual consent, free of coercion and violence.

The eight key concepts the UNESCO guidance recommends should be covered in CSE include:

1. Relationships
2. Values, Rights, Culture and Sexuality
3. Understanding Gender
4. Violence and Staying Safe
5. Skills for Health and Well-being
6. The Human Body and Development
7. Sexuality and Sexual Behaviour
8. Sexual and Reproductive Health.

In Australia, we also have a plethora of programs and providers operating in a way that are not comprehensive but aim to deliver specific topics or sub-elements of CSE such as lessons in consent education, protective behaviours education and respectful relationships education (RRE). Delivered in isolation of all the other concepts, and/or outside a programmatic approach across the year levels, this topic-specific work has limited impact.

The evidence

An international systematic review carried out in 2021⁶ and spanning 30 years found evidence for the effectiveness of CSE in delivering a range of outcomes for young people including:

- unintended pregnancy prevention
- STIs prevention
- dating and intimate partner violence prevention
- development of healthy relationships
- prevention of child sex abuse
- an appreciation of sexual diversity
- improved social/emotional learning
- increased media literacy.

Substantial evidence supports beginning in primary school, in a way that is scaffolded, of longer duration, LGBTQ-inclusive, and takes a social justice approach. It should address a broad definition of sexual health and take positive, affirming, inclusive approaches to human sexuality.

By the age of 14, 7% of boys and 6% of girls in Australia have had sexual intercourse for the first time,⁷ By the age of 16-17 years, approximately two-thirds of young people have had a romantic relationship and one-third have had sexual intercourse.⁸ Sex-positive teaching about sexuality and relationships, both prior to, and throughout adolescence, equips young people with a positive understanding and attitudes about safe, pleasurable and respectful sex and relationships. Young people want to learn about these topics, to feel positive about themselves, their sexuality and their bodies.^{30,8,9,}

We also know from other research that CSE programs are a trusted information source for young people with two Australian studies that found between 43-77% of young people cited school programs as a trusted source of information on relationships and sexuality.^{10,11}

In 2023 research by Curtin University¹² analysing an online survey of 2,427 parents found 89.9% of parents were supportive, with only modest differences being associated with particular demographic variables.

Why is CSE important?

CSE is important as it:

- (1) Influences behaviours that lead to decreases in unplanned pregnancy, abortion and sexually transmissible infections including HIV.^{13,14,15}
- (2) Influences behaviours that lead to a decrease in intimate partner violence, victimisation and sexual abuse.^{16,17}
- (3) Lays the foundations for healthy, positive attitudes about sex and relationships.
- (4) Facilitates critical thinking about social constructions of gender and fosters gender equality and assists in the development of skills and attitudes to support confident, respectful and considered approaches to young people's sexuality, interactions and relationships online and in real life.^{18,19,20}
- (5) Contributes to the prevention of child sexual abuse as it teaches concepts to assist children accurately recognise and report abuse, as well as carry out other protective behaviours.
- (6) Influences behaviours that lead to decreases in homophobia and transphobia.^{24,21,22}
- (7) Facilitates safer navigation of online socialising, sexuality and access to sexual content.^{23,24,11}
- (8) Encourages critical analysis of popular media, pornography, social networking and other online environments.^{25,26}

How should it be delivered?

The Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education (AC:HPE) currently includes components of CSE,²⁷ which have been strengthened concerning concepts of consent in the last revision however these guidelines remain notably ambiguous and open to interpretation, and omit some key CSE topics.²⁸

Australian research shows that young people perceive school-based CSE as valuable however the inclusion, quality and relevance of CSE teaching is inconsistent.^{28,29,23} This may be attributed in part to lack of specific CSE guidelines within the AC:HPE.^{28,29} Other contributing factors include teacher skills and confidence to teach CSE, absence of school policies and a non-supportive school culture.^{29,30,31}

FPAA advocate for government to allocate the resources to:

- (1) Develop a shared national framework for Australia that includes the creation of the following foundational resources:
 - a) National Standard for CSE Educator Competencies

- b) National Standard for CSE Delivery Models
 - c) National List of Recommended Resources
 - d) National List of Recommended Providers.
- (2) Scale up education activities across Australia by leveraging from existing state-funded programs so state education systems meet the UNESCO technical guidance.
- (3) Ensure high quality, clinically accurate, professional development programs for school leaders, teachers, health and welfare professionals as they are critical, to ensure they are equipped with the knowledge, skills and confidence to provide CSE in accurate, responsive and supportive ways both in and out of the classroom.
- (4) CSE training should also be provided to all pre-service teachers at the tertiary level across Australia.
- (5) Parallel community based CSE programs are vital, to ensure young people outside of mainstream schooling are afforded the same opportunities for learning and support.

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⁴ WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA. (2010). Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe. Cologne, BZgA.

⁵ International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence-informed approach, Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>.

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