



MWIA TRAINING MODULE ON VIOLENCE

The Importance of Sex Education

Definition

Education serves as a powerful method to prevent and identify domestic violence, and it is logical and necessary to incorporate it into comprehensive sexual education. Every young person will eventually make important decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. However, the majority of adolescents lack the knowledge required to make such decisions responsibly, leaving them vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancy, coercion, unsatisfying relationships, and sexual and/or physical abuse. Indeed, a lack of sex education or abstinence-only programs are ineffective or lack evidence.^{1, 2} It is widely accepted that young people are interested in sexual education topics and seek information,³ however its highly personal nature adds to the complexity of obtaining accurate information from parents or adults,⁴ or lead to finding inaccurate and irrelevant resources making formalised sex education crucial.³

Sex education has traditionally focused on biological aspects such as contraception and sexually transmitted diseases, and human anatomy, development and childbirth. Ideally sex education can enable discussions about relationships, family planning, and gender roles; raise awareness of gender equality, reproductive rights, sexual abuse, and discrimination; and enable development of positive attitudes to sexuality.² Such a holistic approach is a crucial aspect of education that can empower all genders to make informed and responsible decisions about their sexual health.

Delivery

It is acknowledged that the delivery of sexual education is as important as accurate and relevant content. A safe learning environment can facilitate the participation and discussion vital for the development of sex education. It should be provided in a culturally sensitive manner and tailored to the audience. There are many advocates for sex education beginning early on from primary school, with age suitable material. Sex education needs to be ongoing, and delivered during critical points of social and personal development,⁵ where adolescent behaviours and attitudes are amenable to change. Trained facilitators provide the best outcomes, and these can include teachers, health professionals, and peers. Engaging the community and parents of the children are critical, as these are powerful sources of reinforcement of sexual education.⁴

Programs

Important resources include the “International technical guidance on sexuality education”, published by UNESCO in 2009, “It’s All One” which addresses other issues such as race and homophobia in this context, and “Stepping Stones” which has a strong focus on HIV prevention. What has been lacking in many sexual education programs internationally has been gender analysis and feminist understanding, with it being seen as controversial.⁵ The majority of programs in sexual education have been delivered in schools, and an important future direction is providing it in the community setting to ensure it reaches more marginalised populations.^{6, 7}

Outcomes

Overwhelmingly, the evidence supports that sexual education does not lead to earlier onset of sexual activity, but reduces risky behaviour and increases safer behaviours such as condom use, with positive outcomes such as reduced unplanned pregnancy rates and lower STIs.^{5, 8, 9}

Relationship with Domestic Violence

Sexual education is a primary prevention strategy in the multilevel approach to addressing domestic violence.⁵ It is particularly important as young women are common victims of, and young men perpetrators of domestic violence.^{5, 6} Teaching children, adolescents, parents, and communities to recognise domestic violence, unwanted sexual advances, and sexual abuse and allow an open discussion is crucial to tackle it effectively. This can range from distinguishing between a friendly and unfriendly touch, how to resist pressure and express feelings. In addition, it can be powerful in shaping responses to victimisation.⁵ Effective sexual education also empowers people on how to report domestic violence and avenues to seek help.⁵ Rigorous evaluation of the effect of education as prevention of domestic violence have been limited by short study periods and poor measurement,^{5, 7} but programs are promising in showing positive outcomes such as immediate changes in knowledge, attitudes, behaviours as well as lower rates of physical and sexual abuse at 4 years.⁶

Conclusions

Sexual education provides a valuable opportunity to improve the physical, mental, and social health of all genders. It can provide learning about reproductive health, facilitate satisfying and safe sexual relationships, and promote gender equality. It is being recognised internationally as an effective strategy prevent domestic violence, and presents an exciting opportunity for countries, communities and individuals to undertake.

Useful resources and websites

Comprehensive Sexuality Education, United Nations Population Fund. Available from: <https://www.unfpa.org/comprehensive-sexuality-education>

Guidelines & activities for a unified approach to sexuality, gender, HIV, and human rights education: http://www.popcouncil.org/publications/books/2010_ItsAllOne.asp

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