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# Sexuality Education

## A Value Sensitive Approach

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Sexuality education is a means of enabling people to make appropriate choices within the context of the sexual situations they encounter, with a knowledge of desired and undesired consequences. It is a way of empowering them with the skills with which to act on their choices within a moral framework of honesty, mutual respect, self-integrity and regard for our fellow human beings.

Studies have demonstrated that sexuality education does not make young people more sexually active, but encourages responsible decision making, including contraception usage and safer sex practices. It is a human right to be informed about sexuality and its implications for health and well-being before becoming sexually active.

There is broad agreement among AIDS educators that sexuality education is essential to a comprehensive campaign to limit the spread of HIV. This paper attempts to outline guidelines for a quality sexuality education programme, which would help people develop a sense of respect and comfort with their own bodies, as well enable them to make informed choices. It is hoped that these guidelines will provide a framework, while generating debate.

### **No Value Free Sexuality Education**

How sexuality education is defined, who teaches or facilitates the programme, sexuality education content and the methods used to convey that content are influenced by the moral or ethical base of the educator. Sexuality education is not neutral or 'value-free'.

Terms like 'democratic education', 'adult education', or 'participatory education' are also value loaded. Many 'AIDS activists' espouse these concepts. Yet there is a concrete and hidden agenda which seems to be saying: "We want you to change your sexual habits. You must not get AIDS! So use a condom when you have sex. Abstain, or stick to one partner if you can."

Are we, AIDS educators, apologists when we try to come across as value-free? We do not want to be seen as moralistic, like those who blame the current spread of HIV on 'moral decadence'. But it is important to remember that



**People should be enabled to determine their own values without succumbing to peer pressure. From NPPHCN/MRCs Roxy**

whatever we do or say has some or other moral base.

To be 'moral' refers to values or principles which guide us to aspire to what we believe is ethically correct. Morality is about what is considered good or bad in life. Sexuality educators need to endorse values and morals. We need to represent the highest aspirations of a potential democratic society. This implies speaking out against rape and exploitation and openly opposing racism and sexism. There is a vast difference between a 'moral' viewpoint and a 'moralistic' one, which encourages heterosexism. According to Kathleen Erwin, *International Journal of Health Services*, vol 23, 3 1993, the term

heterosexism "incorporates both the idea of dislike of homosexuality and gay people, and the societal and institutional-level discrimination against gays and lesbians". It is increasingly being used as an alternative to homophobia and other forms of discrimination.

Value-based sexuality education does not imply judgement of participants' behaviour in relation to the facilitator's values, but rather a framework from which the session is facilitated, enabling participants to face their own values without hiding behind culture, peer pressure, religion, law or nature. Instead of pretending as sexuality educators we are morally neutral, we need to be clear about our own morality. Educators do not want to be labelled as dogmatic, undemocratic, or manipulative. Yet some of the techniques used, foster dogmatic attitudes and manipulation under the guise of democracy and value-neutral education.

For sexuality educators to lobby effectively, we need to come together in support of comprehensive value-based sexuality education. We need to confront the confusion that exists among sexuality educators about values, ethics and cultural diversity.

## **Situating the Content**

Studies have documented the underlying socio-economic causes of increased HIV infection, as well as the implications of sexual violence and sexual discrimination which make certain people more vulnerable than others. Yet are we addressing these issues, or are we prescribing the condom band-aid rather than addressing risk practices such as sex for money or favours, child abuse and rape? Perhaps under the guise of being value-neutral we are saying "be dishonest if you choose, cheat on your girlfriend or boyfriend as long as you do it with a condom".

Sexuality education programmes should address these questions: what is sexuality, what is sexuality education, who should teach it, what should be included in the curriculum, what educational methods are appropriate for sexuality education?

## **What is Sexuality Education? Who should Teach it?**

Sexuality education is a part of comprehensive life skills training which prepares individuals for the emotional and physical changes they will be going through. Its starting point should be a clear understanding of what sexuality is. According to the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States,



***From Johannesburg City Health Department Community Service's Love and AIDS comic***

human sexuality is considered to be the totality of being a person, including all aspects of the human being relating to being a boy or girl, man or woman. It is subject to lifelong dynamic change.

Sexuality refers to the whole person including a persons thoughts, experiences, ideas, values, imaginings of a genital and general nature. Sexuality reflects our human character.

Sexuality education begins at birth, and continues as a lifelong process enabling us to adapt to the different sexual life stages that we encounter. This can commence with the physical exploration of the body, including the genital area. As vocabulary develops, questions are asked.

The purpose of sexuality education is to provide insight and eliminate fears in order to develop a rational basis for making decisions and examining our attitudes confidently. Through this education process we may gain insight into potential relationships and prevention of potential exploitation.

Initially the responsibility for sexuality education usually falls on the primary care giver, who has the task of answering questions and directing exploration as the need arises. Sexuality education also occurs through the



churches, schools and other societal institutions, sometimes directly, but most often through more subtle channels. There is a need for a multi-faceted approach to sexuality education, with the educators facilitating the learning and discovering process, rather than teaching from a perspective of the all knowing. Most people receive mythical sex education through their peers and the media. Adolescent peer educators are likely to be the most influential group of people in this regard.

Through insight into one's own ethics, the educator can become conscious about conveying ethical principals without being moralistic and judgemental.

In sexuality education sessions participants become aware of their own sexual orientation and values. This can give rise to guilt, anger and feelings of exploitation. It is important for the sexuality educator to have experience in counselling and know when to refer a participant to another source for help or follow up.

## **A Sexuality Education Curriculum**

For people to have real choice they need access to accurate factual information, but as we examine human behaviour we see that it is influenced more by values and feelings than by factual information, and therefore our curriculum should reflect this influence. For people to act in their best interests they need skills. These include: assertiveness, decision making, negotiating, general communication skills and the ability to use safer sex practices.

Sexuality education needs to confront ways of enabling people to determine their own values without just succumbing to peer pressure.

Building relationships and developing communication skills are essential to sexuality education. Healthy, rewarding and joyful relationships include: mutual caring, being able to communicate with each other, sharing a sense of humour, playfulness, caring about groups and causes outside of the immediate relationship, individual and mutual friendships, tolerance, breaking away from gender stereotypes, sharing responsibilities, including necessary chores and sexual fulfillment.

Sexual activity includes all actions that give rise to sexual thoughts or feelings. People should be able to explore the potential for pleasurable touches besides zoning in on sexual penetration, both anal and vaginal. There are a variety of low-risk sexual activities which people can try when developing their relationships. Sexual relationships may begin with warm feelings on sight, friendly smiles, talking, holding hands, hugging, kissing, touching,

looking and exploring each other's bodies and eventually touching the genitalia in a variety of different ways depending on the couples desires and interests.

Everyone should be aware of the consequences of coitus. We are all part of humanity and what we do sexually impacts on others. The potential consequences of coitus are desirable and undesirable ones, including pleasure and closeness, or pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Sexuality education should impart knowledge of how to attain desired consequences and prevent undesired ones, including information about contraception, its usage and where to obtain it. Prevention of STDs and where to go for treatment.

Love and commitment are not essential for coitus. Although some sexuality educators may find it essential to stress that love and commitment are preferable, the fact is that they do not always accompany the act of coitus. It is through the mistaken coupling of love and sex that people resort to dishonesty and manipulation, both towards themselves and their partners. It should be made clear that people can love without coitus and you can have coitus without love. In other words feelings of sexual desire should not to be mistaken for feelings of love.

Regardless of gender all human beings experience a multitude of sexual attitudes, feelings and capabilities. Society and culture often determine what is gender appropriate behaviour, which can open people to unnecessary guilt or manipulation. All people are created equal and must have full rights to the



**Tradition being invoked to justify forced sex must be challenged in sex education. *From NPPHCN & MRCs Roxy***

pursuit of a fulfilled life of their choice. Sexuality education programmes need to examine gender relations and how manipulation of one gender by another has led to pain, disease and poverty. These consequences are similar to those of exploitation on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, gender and physical disability.

Sex education should start with where participants are at. We need to consider not only the socio-economic and political environment but also the attitudes, beliefs, values and cultural trends. This requires research into the specific situation and needs of participants. Research and education are inextricably linked, and sexuality education needs to be placed within the reality of the participants' environment. Research will reveal the extent of the cycle of sexual violence, breakdown in relationships and gender conflict, enabling the sexuality education content to include these aspects.

We need to consider factors in peoples environment that would enable them to carry out what they have learnt. For example, before teaching about condoms, one should ensure that they are available, affordable, acceptable and accessible.

## **A Safe Learning Environment**

The learning situation needs to provide a safe environment for participants to examine and reassess values which may have been inherited through many generations. This includes assurance of confidentiality within the group, and the right of individual participants to withhold secrets. Personal attacks should not be allowed. The facilitator must ensure that members describe their own personal feelings rather than generalise their feelings to the group.

Although participants learn more from peers than official sexuality educators the educator can facilitate learning by setting the learning climate. This involves techniques such as circular seating arrangements, appropriate trust building ice-breakers and energizers and the use of buzz groups and small groups.

Education which deals with attitudes and feelings, requires an experiential approach, through dynamic small groups which allow for exploration and examination of individual ethical dilemmas. Techniques such as introspection through music therapy, art therapy or role play allow for self-examination of values whereas lectures lend themselves to preaching.

Sexuality educators should avoid hiding behind biological facts, and teaching in a didactic manner behind a mask concealing real feelings. Teaching facts is defended as being 'value-neutral sexuality education'. Sexuality

educators need to be able to use language frankly and openly when facilitating a sexuality education session. The facilitator must be sensitive to words which would be considered offensive to the participants and to adapt language usage accordingly. Participants must be made aware of how the sexual language they use may insult or undermine others.

A sexuality education programme needs to demonstrate precisely those qualities we hope will motivate participants in their future relationships. Qualities such as honesty, mutual respect, tolerance, commitment to our word and equality are essential. The educator needs to deal frankly and honestly with all issues that arise. It is through this approach that participants are presented with a model they can choose to adopt. Attitudes are primarily learnt by example.

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