
The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education: Improving our Understanding of Gender and Gender Norms

School-based sex education plays a vital role in the sexual health and wellbeing of young people. The results of [Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education](#) found that sex education has the potential to impact so much in addition to pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention.

Research suggests that narrow views of gender and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in young children can lead to gender-based harassment. Focused efforts to increase acceptance of transgender and gender-nonconforming people can be effective.

Expanded Understanding of Gender and Gender Norms

- Making children's literature that challenges gender stereotypes available and accessible to students may not be enough. Using that **literature to engage students in discussions, relating gender-based bullying and harassment to harassment and oppression of other marginalized populations, and using a critical literacy approach** helped young children to expand their views of gender, gender expression, and gender norms.
- "Children need safe spaces in which to experience, play with, and begin to challenge the naturalized assumptions about gender."
- Young children (as young as pre-school) are quite **capable of understanding and discussing issues related to gender diversity, including gender expectations, gender nonconformity, and gender-based oppression.**
- The development of such understanding requires **instructional scaffolding** over a period, and not just one session.

Recognition of Gender Equity, Rights, and Social Justice

- The **use of social justice and rights-based frameworks** in designing and teaching topics related to sexuality and sexual health is related to **increased knowledge, awareness and appreciation of gender equity and sexual rights, and awareness of discrimination and oppression based on gender and sexual orientation from preschool through high school.**
- One study found that a rights-based approach to sexuality education among predominantly Hispanic and African-American HS populations in Los Angeles led to **more positive attitudes about sexual relationship rights.**
- The research offers evidence to support programs that **make discussions of gender in the context of power and the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment, central to an intervention.** Studies of this approach showed **reduced adherence to gender norms and gender-related power structures.** Such programs also had notable **positive impacts on sexual health, personal safety, and bystander intentions.**
- Programs **addressing gender and power in relationships were five times more likely to be effective in reducing STI and pregnancy rates** than those that did not address these topics.
- **Fourth- and fifth-grade students exposed to LGBTQ literature, history, and current events** were successful in discussing and understanding issues of social justice and equity for LGBTQ people. **They had the capacity to understand LGBTQ discrimination and lack of power and how they are related to oppression based on race, religion, culture, and other identities.**
- In a study of a **preschool class** that used literature to discuss marriage equality and LGBT rights, 4-year-olds expressed an **inclusive understanding of marriage and a social justice stance on LGBTQ rights.**

Recommendations for Schools and Educators

- Starting in kindergarten and scaffolding lessons thereafter through Grade 12, young people should receive lessons that explore their ideas and understanding of gender, gender expression, and gender norms in learning about social equity, power and privilege, and healthy relationships.
- Sex education programs should include lessons to increase knowledge, awareness, and appreciation of gender equity and sexual rights, and awareness of discrimination and oppression based on gender, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation.
- Topics of gender, gender expressions, and gender norms should be inclusive of LGBTQ identities to promote positive acceptance of gender equity and nonconformity, to increase understanding of LGBTQ discrimination and civil rights, and to reduce gender-based bullying.
- **The Professional Learning Standards for Sex Education** can help educators to identify areas where they may need professional development to successfully teach this content. Links to professional development programs can be found at <https://sexeducationcollaborative.org/offerings>.

Reference

Goldfarb E. and Lieberman L. Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2021; 68, 1: 13--27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.036>