

Sexual Health Education in Schools Across Canada



Ontario students deserve a current, research-based curriculum that meets their needs in today's complex and ever-changing world.



By now it's common knowledge: Compared to their parents' generation, today's kids are less healthy and are facing greater health risks than ever before.ⁱ

Kids need the knowledge and skills to make informed choices about their health and well-being. We know that scare tactics, negative messages and out-of-date teaching methods don't work. Kids need to learn about themselves as a whole and how the myriad of choices that they make each day impact their health and their community.

We all have a role to play – parents, educators, healthcare professionals and policymakers – in helping them lead healthy, active lives. With more than 2 millionⁱⁱ children and youth attending public schools in Ontario, the most logical place for the change to begin is in the school system.

Unfortunately we have a big problem in Ontario. The elementary and secondary Health and Physical Education (H&PE) curricula have been in a state of limbo for three years* pending further consultations on the human development and sexual health component of this curriculum.

One important component of healthy, active living involves sexual health. Across Canada and around the world, the approach being taken to sexual health education is evolving. Curricular changes are responding to research and guidelines such as the Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education which describe a combination of educational experiences that help individuals to develop:

- a deeper understanding of themselves, their specific health needs and concerns
- the confidence, motivation and personal insight needed to act on that knowledge
- the skills necessary to enhance sexual health and to avoid negative sexual health outcomes
- a safe, secure and inclusive environment that is conducive to promoting optimal sexual health.ⁱⁱⁱ

The following report illustrates how Ontario's 15-year-old curriculum expectations for sexual health education align with, or differs from, approaches across Canada. A comparison has also been made to the expectations that were set out in the 2010 H&PE curriculum as originally released.

As it stands, while the 1998 Ontario curriculum contains valuable information, youth are being left to fill in some important gaps on their own. Students have reported that sexual health education does not focus strongly enough on building skills related to different types of relationships, personal experience, positive sexual health and sexual emotions.^{iv}

Revisions to the H&PE curricula are overdue and Ontario teachers and students have waited long enough, especially given the state of child and youth health across the province.

* In April 2010, after misinformation was used to attack the Human Development and Sexual Health section of the elementary health and physical education (H&PE) curriculum, the Ministry of Education withdrew that portion of the document. A few months later, they also backed away from releasing the secondary H&PE curriculum. Ever since, teachers have been using all or part of a 15-year-old document 1998 (elementary) and 1999/2000 (secondary) to teach sexual health and all other components of the grades 9-12 H&PE curriculum which is now out-of-date and well behind the standards set in other provinces.

SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION

SEXUAL HEALTH IN CANADA:

"The prevalence of sexually transmitted infections among Canadian young people is unacceptably high and poses a significant threat to their current and long-term health and well-being."^{iv}

Sex, in and of itself, is not unhealthy. However, early sexual onset has been connected to negative consequences in adulthood including an increased number of risky sexual partners, having sex while intoxicated, a greater history of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and increased denial of the risks of HIV transmission.^{vi}

Moreover, students are having sex, curriculum or no curriculum. According to a 2010 survey of Canadian students, just over a quarter of male students and just under a quarter of female students reported having had sex by grade 9 or 10. Twenty-five percent of those who responded as having had sex did not use a condom.^{vii}

SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION IS A RIGHT:

"In principle, all Canadians, including youth, have a right to the information, motivation/personal insight, and skills necessary to prevent negative sexual health outcomes."^{viii}

Sexual health does not just include physiology and reproduction. Comprehensive sexual health requires a broader framework that incorporates aspects such as the development of a positive self-image and the integration of sexuality into rewarding and equitable interpersonal relationships.^{ix}

SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS ACROSS CANADA:

In every province BUT Ontario, the sexual health curriculum has been updated since 2000.

Schools are not just a logical place for sexual health education but a critical environment for meaningful health promotion. "Since schools are the only formal education institution to have meaningful (and mandatory) contact with nearly every young person, they are in a unique position to provide children, adolescents and young adults with the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes they will need to make and act upon decisions that promote sexual health throughout their lives."^x

What's more, sexual health education in schools works. Research has shown that "well planned and implemented sexual health education programs are effective in helping youth reduce the risk of STI/HIV infection and unplanned pregnancy."^{xi}



PARENTS WANT SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION TAUGHT IN SCHOOL:

Studies conducted in different parts of Canada have consistently found that over 85% of parents agreed with the statement "Sexual health education should be provided in the schools."^{xii}

SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION DOES NOT INCREASE SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR:

A meta-analysis of 174 studies examining the impact of different types of sexual health promotion interventions found that these programs do not inadvertently increase the frequency of sexual behaviour or number of sexual partners. More specifically, in a review of 83 studies measuring the impact of curriculum-based sexual health education programs, it was concluded that "The evidence is strong that programs do not hasten or increase sexual behaviour, but, instead, some programs delay or decrease sexual behaviours or increase condom or contraceptive use."^{xiii}

STUDENTS WANT UP TO DATE INFORMATION:

Students in Ontario do not feel that sexual health education is meeting their needs. In fact, 45% of students did not feel that sex education classes adequately addressed topics of a sexual nature that they had or expected to encounter.^{xiv}

ONTARIO IS FALLING DANGEROUSLY BEHIND:

The current Ontario curriculum that addresses sexual health is 15 years old. In 2010, the Ontario government released an updated curriculum that was the result of a comprehensive two year process that involved gathering of evidence and best practices from around the world and consultations with thousands of experts, parents, and for the first time, students themselves. In addition, the original version of the 2010 H&PE curriculum has the support of many different religious groups, administrators, principals, public health professionals and parent groups.

DEVELOPING HEALTH LITERACY IN ONTARIO'S CURRICULUM:

The focus of education related to Healthy Living in the revised curriculum is on learning **health concepts** (which includes a range of health topics including sexual health), using this information to develop the skills to make **healthy choices** and **making connections** for healthy living. Throughout the revised curriculum, students would learn about themselves and others and develop critical and creative thinking skills through the integration of **living skills**.

Naming Body Parts

What's At Issue:

To help students develop the skills necessary to know and take ownership for their body, the 2010 revised Ontario curriculum proposed that students in grade 1 would be able to name their body parts, including genitalia. This is important for students at this grade level to learn in order for them to be able to communicate clearly to get help if needed in cases of abuse or injury.^{xv}

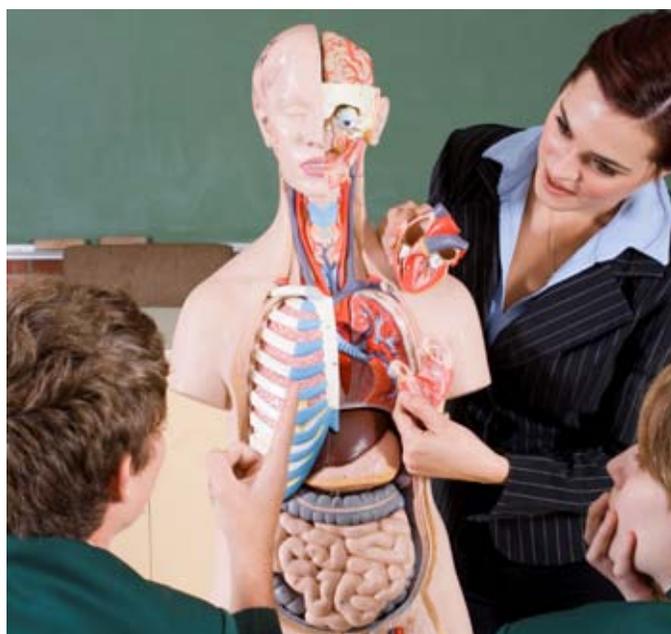
Ontario's 1998 Curriculum:

Grade 1

- identify the major parts of the body by their proper names

Comparison:

- **2010 Revised Ontario Curriculum** requires students in grade 1 to identify body parts including genitalia (e.g. penis, testicles, vagina, vulva), using correct terminology.
- **Alberta** requires students in Kindergarten to identify external body parts and their function, and in grade 1 identify physical characteristics that make them similar to and different from others.
- **Manitoba** requires students in Kindergarten to identify body parts by their appropriate name (e.g. penis, vagina, breasts).
- **New Brunswick** requires students in Kindergarten to be aware of and describe their own physical changes. The Teaching Strategies associated with this expectation highlight the opportunity for teachers to introduce differences between girl and boy babies (e.g. vagina and penis). Students in grade 1 describe physical changes and growth, using the correct terminology for all parts of the body. Teachers are advised to clarify when students use alternative terms. In grade 2, students are expected to describe changes in humans as they grow and identify private parts of the body.



Manitoba requires students in Kindergarten to identify body parts by their appropriate name (e.g. penis, vagina, breasts).



- **British Columbia** requires students in Kindergarten to use appropriate terminology of female and male private body parts (e.g. nipples, breasts, vulva, vagina, penis, testicles, buttocks (bottom, bum)).
- **Saskatchewan** does not include correct terminology for body parts until grade 5. It requires grade 5 students to identify and use correct and respectful language and terminology in relation to sexual anatomy and gender identity as it relates to changes in puberty.

What Does this Mean for Ontario:

The Ontario 2010 revised curriculum expectations include specific reference to the correct terminology for body parts. Provinces such as Alberta, Manitoba, British Columbia and New Brunswick are addressing these expectations in Kindergarten and Saskatchewan addresses these expectations later. The Ontario 2010 revised curriculum expectations are consistent with standards being set in other provinces. Examples are optional and are included to help clarify the expectations and provide guidance for teachers.

Age-Appropriate Information

What's At Issue:

Research and medical experts say that children are entering puberty between the ages of 8 and 14 which is much earlier than previous generations.^{xvi} The 2010 revised Ontario curriculum was structured so that students developed skills and learned factual information before they reached an age where they were likely to need the information to make decisions related to their health and well-being.^{xvii}

Ontario's 1998 Curriculum:

Grade 5

- describe physical, emotional, and interpersonal changes associated with puberty
- describe the secondary physical changes at puberty (e.g., growth of body hair, changes in body shape)

Comparison:

- **2010 Revised Ontario Curriculum** requires students in grade 4 to describe the physical changes that occur in males and females at puberty and the emotional and social impacts that may result from these changes.
- **Alberta** requires students in grade 4 to describe physical, emotional and social changes that occur during puberty.
- **Manitoba** requires students in grade 5 to identify the physical changes associated with puberty and the importance of personal hygiene practices.
- **New Brunswick** requires students in grade 5 to identify changes that occur as a result of puberty. In grade 6, students are required to understand the changes that occur in the body during puberty.
- **British Columbia** requires students in grade 4 to describe the physical changes that occur during puberty. In grade 5, students are required to describe the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual changes associated with puberty.
- **Saskatchewan** requires students in grade 5 to examine physical, social, emotional, and spiritual changes that occur during puberty.

British Columbia requires students in grade 4 to describe the physical changes that occur during puberty. In grade 5, students are required to describe the physical, emotional, and social changes associated with puberty.



What Does this Mean for Ontario:

Information about changes associated with puberty and the related emotional and social impacts are included in the revised 2010 Ontario curriculum beginning in grade 4. Similar expectations are included in grades 4, 5 and 6 in other provinces. In Ontario, the Ministry of Education has included detailed teacher prompts to help teachers respond to questions that may arise from the curriculum. The Manitoba and British Columbia curricula include detailed examples with specific language (e.g., nocturnal emissions) to guide teachers. The information being taught to children in Ontario (1998 expectations) needs to be updated.



Sexual Diversity

What's At Issue

Given that all students, including those from families with same-sex parents, should see themselves reflected in what they learn at school, references to families with same-sex parents or sexual orientation and gender identity were included in expectations, examples and/or prompts at all divisions (primary, junior and intermediate). In subjects across provincial curricula, diversity, mutual understanding and empathy are encouraged and celebrated.

Grades 1-3:

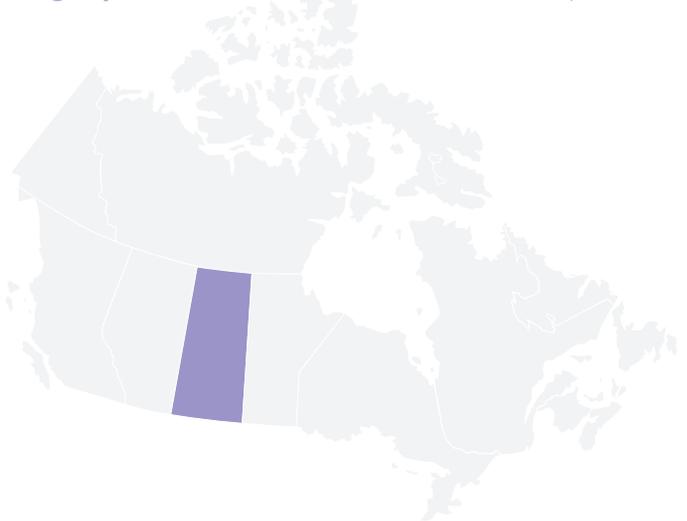
Ontario's 1998 Curriculum:

- distinguish the similarities and differences between themselves and others (e.g., in terms of body size or gender)

Comparison:

- **2010 Revised Ontario Curriculum** requires students in grade 3 to describe how visible and invisible differences make each person unique (including sexual orientation) and identify ways of showing respect for differences in others.
- **Alberta** requires students in grade 3 to recognize factors that influence unique body characteristics.
- **Manitoba** requires students in grade 2 to recognize that everyone is special and unique and able to succeed (e.g., families, interests, talents, feelings, desires) and determine the differences and similarities between self and others (e.g., gender, body parts, culture, beliefs and values).
- **New Brunswick** requires students in grade 4 to develop an understanding of various influences on body shape and size.
- **British Columbia** does not address this topic.
- **Saskatchewan** requires students in grade 1 to identify factors that influence one's sense of self (e.g., gender, culture). In grade 2, students are required to investigate what it means to be special and unique (e.g., families, interests, talents, culture, gifts, faith, feelings, desires, learning styles, confidences, appearances). In grade 3 students are required to become aware of the diversity in families (e.g., two-parent, single-parent, foster, extended, same-sex).

Saskatchewan requires students in grade 1 to identify factors that influence one's sense of self (e.g., gender, culture). In grade 2, students are required to investigate what it means to be special and unique (e.g., families, interests, talents, culture, gifts, faith, feelings, desires, learning styles, confidences, appearances). In grade 3 students are required to become aware of the diversity in families (e.g., two-parent, single-parent, foster, extended, same-sex).





Grades 4-6:

Ontario's 1998 Curriculum:

- Not included in the 1998 curriculum

Comparison:

- **2010 Revised Ontario Curriculum** requires students in grade 6 to assess the effects of stereotypes, including homophobia and assumptions regarding gender roles and expectations, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity or culture, mental health, and abilities, on an individual's self-concept, social inclusion, and relationships with others, and propose appropriate ways of responding to and changing assumptions and stereotypes.
- **Alberta** requires students in grade 4 to recognize that individuals can have a positive and negative influence on the feelings of others. In grade 5, students investigate the benefits of fostering relationships throughout the life cycle (e.g., cross-age relationships) and explore respectful communication strategies that foster group/team development
- **Manitoba** requires students in grade 5 to identify influences on sexuality and gender roles and identify how social and cultural influences affect sexuality and gender roles. In grade 6 students are required to describe individual characteristics (e.g., gender, race, family, religion, appearance) that contribute to the development of personal identity, self-confidence, and self-efficacy.
- **New Brunswick** requires students in grade 6 to understand that sexuality is an expression of one's "femaleness" or "maleness." (Elaboration: sexual stereotyping, self-esteem, sexual identity, and body image).

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- **British Columbia** requires students in grade 6 to demonstrate an understanding of the harmful effects of stereotyping and discrimination and identify school, local, provincial, national, and international strategies for preventing and responding to discrimination, stereotyping, and bullying. Grade 6 students are also expected to apply appropriate individual strategies for responding to discrimination, stereotyping, and bullying.
- **Saskatchewan** requires students in grade 5 to describe the qualities that are important in a person, regardless of their gender, culture, appearance, sexual orientation, abilities, and/or language, define stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, and they are required to explore and describe what one can think, say, and do to develop and/or support a positive self-image in both self and others. In grade 6 students are required to explore stereotypes and beliefs (including but not limited to those related to age, culture, religion, family structures, and sexual orientations), both past and present, that might limit the number and kinds of healthy relationships.

Sexual Diversity

Grades 7-8:

Ontario's 1998 Curriculum:

- Not included in the 1998 curriculum

Comparison:

- **2010 Revised Ontario Curriculum** requires students in grade 8 to demonstrate an understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation, and identify factors that can help individuals of all identities and orientations develop a positive self-concept.
- **Alberta** requires students in grade 7 to identify the effects of social influences on sexuality and gender roles and equity.
- **Manitoba** requires students in grade 7 to identify the effects of social influences on sexuality and gender roles and examine the effects of stereotypes based on a variety of factors and ways to promote acceptance of self and others.
- **New Brunswick** requires students in grade 8 to discuss sexual orientation issues (examples include defining terms, identifying facts and figures, and engaging in reflection activities) The New Brunswick curriculum specifically references sexual orientation.
- **British Columbia** contains extensive work on bullying, discrimination, harassment, and intimidation, but no specific examples are given (implied because it is prior knowledge from grade 6).

Manitoba requires students in grade 7 to identify the effects of social influences on sexuality and gender roles and examine the effects of stereotypes based on a variety of factors and ways to promote acceptance of self and others.



- **Saskatchewan** requires students in grade 7 to demonstrate interpersonal skills, including assertiveness skills, to effectively and skillfully manage peer pressure. Students in grade 8 are required to describe a variety of family structures, analyze gender roles that exist in many families, and recognize, name, and challenge instances of inequity, bias, intolerance, and discrimination related to family identities, structures, roles, and responsibilities.



What Does this Mean for Ontario:

Families with same-sex parents, gender identity, and sexual orientation are included in curriculum across Canada. Consistently across Canada in the earlier grades a focus is placed on respecting differences and in later grades the focus is on stereotypes, assumptions, gender roles and the impact on self-concept. Ontario's revised 2010 curriculum is consistent with expectations in other provinces. The 1998 curriculum does not include references to sexual orientation, gender identity, homophobia or families with same-sex parents and is not in alignment with a number of existing provincial policies (i.e. Accepting Schools Act, Equity and Inclusive Education policy).

Sexual Health Choices

What's At Issue:

Terms such as oral, anal and vaginal intercourse, pleasure, and masturbation were included in optional examples and prompts of the revised 2010 Ontario curriculum in order to guide teachers to respond to questions from students with the specific language and information they need to make healthy choices. Information needs to be presented in a straightforward way to respond to a range of needs of students, now and in the future. There is also research which identifies the limitations of abstinence-only education.^{xviii}

Ontario's 1998 Curriculum:

Grade 7

- students will be able to describe age-appropriate matters related to their sexuality which include the male and female reproductive system, sexually transmitted diseases, the ability to communicate effectively with the opposite sex, abstinence as it applies to healthy sexuality, and identifying sources of support

Grade 8

- students will identify the physical, emotional, interpersonal and spiritual aspects of healthy sexuality

Comparison:

- **2010 Revised Ontario Curriculum** requires students in grade 7 to explain reasons for not engaging in sexual activity until one is older and the need to communicate clearly with each other when making decisions about sexual activity in a relationship. Students are required to demonstrate an understanding of physical, emotional, social, and psychological factors that need to be considered when making decisions related to sexual health. In grade 8, students are required to identify factors that can affect an individual's decisions about sexual activity and develop their understanding of sexual health, including safe-sex practices and contraception, seeking support, communication and refusal skills.
- **Alberta** requires students in grade 7 to examine abstinence and decisions to postpone sexual activity as healthy choices.
- **Manitoba** requires students in grade 7 to recognize the importance of sexual abstinence as a responsible decision for the adolescent male and female, to identify responsibilities (e.g., respect, abstinence...) and sources of support with regard to sex-related issues, and to apply decision-making/ problem-solving process in case scenarios for making informed decisions regarding responsible sexual behaviours. Manitoba's teacher and parent guide for human sexuality provides detailed background information on specific topics such as puberty, reproduction, sexual intercourse, HIV/AIDS, contraception, abortion, masturbation, homosexuality and sexual orientation.
- **British Columbia** requires students in grade 8 to identify factors that influence healthy sexual decision making and demonstrate an understanding of the consequences of contracting sexually transmitted infections. Suggested activities include creating a list of practices to reduce the risk of spreading STIs including abstaining from sexual activity. Students in grade 9 describe practices that promote sexual decision making. Abstinence is included as an example of a strategy to prevent or reduce risk.

- **New Brunswick** requires students in grade 8 to understand the choices and realize both the long and short-term consequences and responsibilities that exist with becoming sexually active.
- **Saskatchewan** identifies in their grades 6-8 Overview: "Teaching Health Education – Responding to Community Perceptions and Norms" that "Human sexuality research emphasizes abstinence from all sexual activity involving risk as the best and healthiest decision for adolescents. Research also indicates that students who decide to become sexually active now or in the future need information about effective protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections." Students in grade 6 demonstrate an understanding of how non-curable infections are transmitted and discuss standard precautions/strategies to prevent the transmission of infectious diseases (e.g., sexual abstinence).

Manitoba requires students in grade 7 to recognize the importance of sexual abstinence as a responsible decision for the adolescent male and female, to identify responsibilities and sources of support with regard to sex-related issues, and to apply decision-making/problem-solving process in case scenarios for making informed decisions regarding responsible sexual behaviours.



What Does this Mean for Ontario:

Information being taught to students in Ontario (1998 expectations) needs to be updated because it does not reflect the realities of the 21st century. The revised 2010 Ontario curriculum has expectations similar to other provinces with a focus on decision making and communication.

Sexual Health Education in Schools Across Canada



Provincial Ministry of Education Curricula Websites

British Columbia
www.bced.gov.bc.ca

Alberta
education.alberta.ca

Saskatchewan
www.curriculum.gov.sk.ca

Manitoba
www.edu.gov.mb.ca

Ontario
www.edu.gov.on.ca

Quebec
www.mels.gouv.qc.ca

Nova Scotia
www.ednet.ns.ca

New Brunswick
www.gnb.ca

Prince Edward Island
www.gov.pe.ca

Newfoundland and Labrador
www.ed.gov.nl.ca

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1 Concorde Gate, Suite 608
Toronto, ON M3C 3N6
T 416.426.7120 • 1.888.446.7432 • F 416.426.7373
advocacy@ophea.org • www.ophea.net