

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

INFORMATION ON SEX AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION
IN THE SWEDISH SCHOOL



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What is sex and relationship education?

Sex and relationship education is about much more than sex. The subject includes learning about human anatomy: how the body changes when we reach puberty, how children are conceived, how to protect yourself from sexually transmitted infections, what happens in the body during sex. Equally important are relationships of various kinds, sexual equality, what it's like to be in love, and how it feels when a relationship ends. Another goal of sex and relationship education is to prevent discrimination and sexual harassment. The topics covered are adapted to the students' age and the issues and questions they face.

Sex and relationship education is based on facts and knowledge, but it's equally important to give students an opportunity to reflect, discuss and formulate values. This reflection – on how to behave in various situations, for instance – is necessary so that students can put their knowledge in context. Discussion topics may range from manifestations of love to condoms to sexual harassment to pornography.

It's up to each school to determine which methods to use, but common methods include value-clarification exercises of various kinds, moderated discussions and group conversations. This is usually the students' favourite part of sex and relationship educa-

tion – they are curious and interested to know what their friends and adults think. Students and teachers often say that these discussions and exercises build trust between the teacher and students, creating a better atmosphere in the classroom during other lessons too.

Alongside value-clarification exercises, discussions and visits to the youth clinic, a common teaching method is the “question box.” Students write their questions anonymously on slips of paper and place them in a box, and the teacher or instructor reads them and responds.

In RFSU’s many years of experience in sex and relationship education, both in Sweden and internationally, we have found that the questions do not differ much from one country to another. On the whole, children and young people the world over wonder about the same things.

Another starting point for sex and relationship education is respect for children’s and young people’s own sexuality. The goal is to provide them with support on the road to adulthood. Even young children have thoughts and questions about the human body and sexuality, such as “Where did I come from?” Children and young people encounter sexuality in many different ways: through TV, books, the Internet, siblings, friends, and so on. Relatives or parents may get pregnant, fall in love, become jealous

or have their heart broken. Sexuality is always present in people's lives, in many forms besides actual sexual activities. If you ask young people what they want sex and relationship education to cover, they may well tell you: "Everything!"

Common questions include:

How do you know when to have sex?

What is love?

How long does puberty last?

Does it hurt the first time?

Is it dangerous to masturbate a lot?

How often is it normal to masturbate at age 14?

Where is the clitoris?

Can you get pregnant or infected with HIV by swimming in a public pool?

Does penis size matter in terms of enjoyment?

Why are my breasts growing at different rates?

Is it abnormal to have a crush on a teacher?

How do you know if you're homosexual?

What do you do if you fall in love with a friend?

How do you break up?

Can you get HIV from making out?

How do you know if your partner is enjoying sex?



Riksförbundet får senare upplysning.

Jag tillåter mig att fråga eder,
om vad jag skall göra, då jag lider
av stark känslig upphetsning. Jag är
en 17 års pojke. Orsaken är att söka
onanin, som jag bedriver, sedan jag
var 14 år. För något år sedan läste jag
en bok, i den bokhandel jag nu är, att
onanin var en last med fuktansvärda följ-
der, och då förstod jag, att om jag inte
slutade, skulle jag ödelägga mitt liv.

From a letter to RFSU, 1924:

"I dare allow myself to ask you what I should do, as I suffer from highly sensitive arousal. I am a 17 year-old boy. The reason for this letter regards masturbation, which I have been doing since I was 14 years old. A few years ago, I read a book in the bookstore where I am now, that masturbation carries with it terrible consequences. At that moment I realized that if I did not quit, I would ruin my life."

The reply to the letter:

“Stockholm, April 18th 1934

Dear Mr. ---,

Oh, poor you! It is such a shame, and the worst part is that you have gone and tortured yourself for three years without any reason –like thousands of other boys like yourself, who are victims of books of the kind you mention. I am enclosing a booklet, “Popular magazine for sexual education” which addresses, among other things, the masturbation problem. If you read the article you will see that, first of all, masturbation is not some burden, but rather a fully natural phenomenon and, secondly, that it is not harmful as long as you just don’t go around worrying about it.

Ejaculation is the body’s natural way to dispose of produced semen when it is not exhausted during intercourse or masturbation. Some weakening of the testicles need not worry you, testicles have a two-part elimination; part sperm that leaves the body, and something we call hormones that is added to the blood and thus stays in the body. It is the hormones that have the ability to remain in the body. Masturbation has, as mentioned before, no harmful effects, neither related to the nerves or the body in general, but your concern is understandable, after the frightening images that come to life in those unscientific books you read.

From what has been said above, it is clear that you should not take any medicine for the ejaculation. It is normal, and it stops after you have had sexual intercourse or masturbated.

The fact that you blush for nothing may well be due to the "burden". Thus far, you have thought of it as a burden, but now that you know better it will probably disappear by itself.

Pimples are not related to masturbation. Pimple are something very common at your age and it usually gets better when you get older."

Stockholm den 18. april 1934.

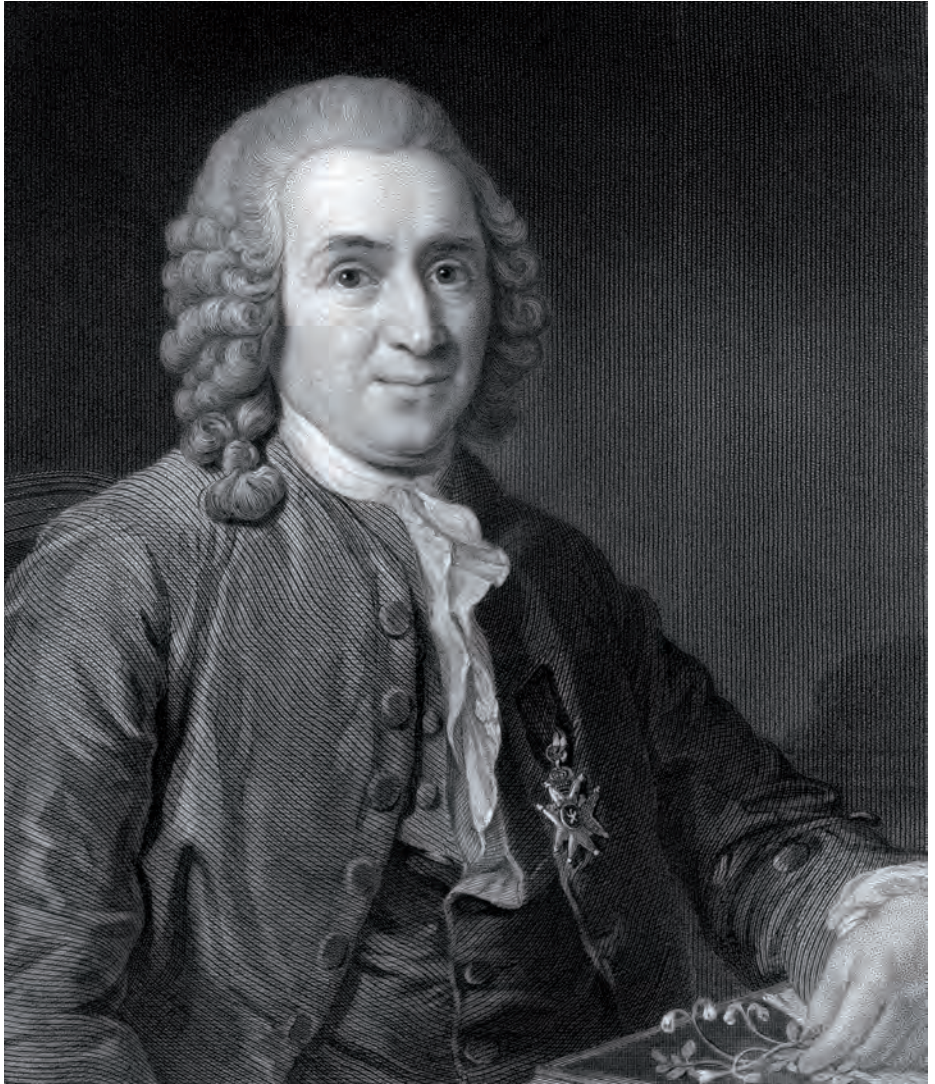
Bäste [REDACTED]

Stackars pojke. Det är synd om Er. Och det värsta är att Ni gått och plågat Er i tre år nu utan någon som helst anledning -- liksom tusentals andra pojkar som likaså råkat ut för böcker av det slag Ni talar om. Jag skickar med ett häfte av "Populär tidskrift för Sexuell Upplysning" som behandlar bland annat onaniproblemet. Om Ni läser den artikeln så rinner Ni för det första onani inte är någon last utan en fullt naturlig förreteelse och för det andra att den inte är skadlig om man bara inte går och ångslas för den. Sädessavgången är kroppens naturliga sätt att göra sig av med den producerade sädessvåtskan när den inte utömmes vid samlag eller genom onani. Någon krafttrösklust behöver Ni inte vara ångslig för; testiklarna ha dubbel utsöndring, dels säd som lämnar kroppen, dels något som vi kalla hormoner som tillföres blodet och alltså stannar i kroppen. Det är hormonerna som innehålla kraiten de bli ju kvar i kroppen. Onani har som sagt inga skadliga följder, varken för nerverna eller kroppen i övrigt, men att man kan bli förtrörd av ~~att~~ de skräckmålningar^{den} som man får till livs i sådana ovetenskapliga böcker som Ni läst är självklart.

Av det nu sagda framgår att Ni inte skall ha någon medicin mot sädessavgången. Den är normal, och den upphör när Ni får könssamgång eller om Ni onanerar.

Att Ni rodnar för ingenting kan mycket väl bero på "lasten". D. v. s. så länge Ni tror att det är en last, men nu när Ni vet bättre så går det nog bort av sig själv.

Kvisslorna beror inte på onania. Det är ju något mycket vanligt i Er ålder och det brukar gå över när man blir äldre.



Carl von Linné, 1707-1778, världsberömd botaniker och professor vid Uppsala Universitet.

A long tradition of sexuality education

Sex and relationship education became compulsory in Sweden in 1955, but its history goes back a lot further. From as early as the 18th century, the world-famous scientist Carl von Linné was lecturing to students at Uppsala University on sexuality as a source of joy and pleasure. Linné impressed upon students his belief that sexuality and reproduction were not just good in their own right, but were decreed by God.

In the late 19th century Karolina Widerström, Sweden's first female doctor, gave lectures on sexual hygiene at the teachers' college. In her work as a doctor, Widerström observed a great need for knowledge about the human body among both young and old women. She encountered a lot of women who didn't know how they had gotten pregnant and others who had picked up sexually transmitted infections.

Widerström's patients had many more questions concerning anatomy and sexuality and her lectures were a way of answering those questions. She also fought to include sex and relationship in schools, for all students. In 1908 a motion was passed in the Swedish parliament calling for health education lessons to cover sexually transmitted infections and the appearance and function of the genitals.

The big breakthrough for sex and relationship education came in the 1920s when Elise Ottesen-Jensen, a journalist and women's rights defender known as "Ottar", toured the rural parts of Sweden lecturing on sexuality and desire. The response was huge – people needed knowledge, and women in particular wanted to learn about contraception. Large families were the norm in rural areas, often placing a heavy burden on parents who already had a hard job feeding themselves.

Before embarking on her tour, Ottar had written about relationships and sexuality in the women's pages of the *Arbetaren* newspaper and had received thousands of letters from men and women asking for advice on sexual problems and other issues. Ottar also received letters from many people distressed by their homosexuality or by pregnancies they couldn't afford (homosexuality and abortion were both illegal in those days).

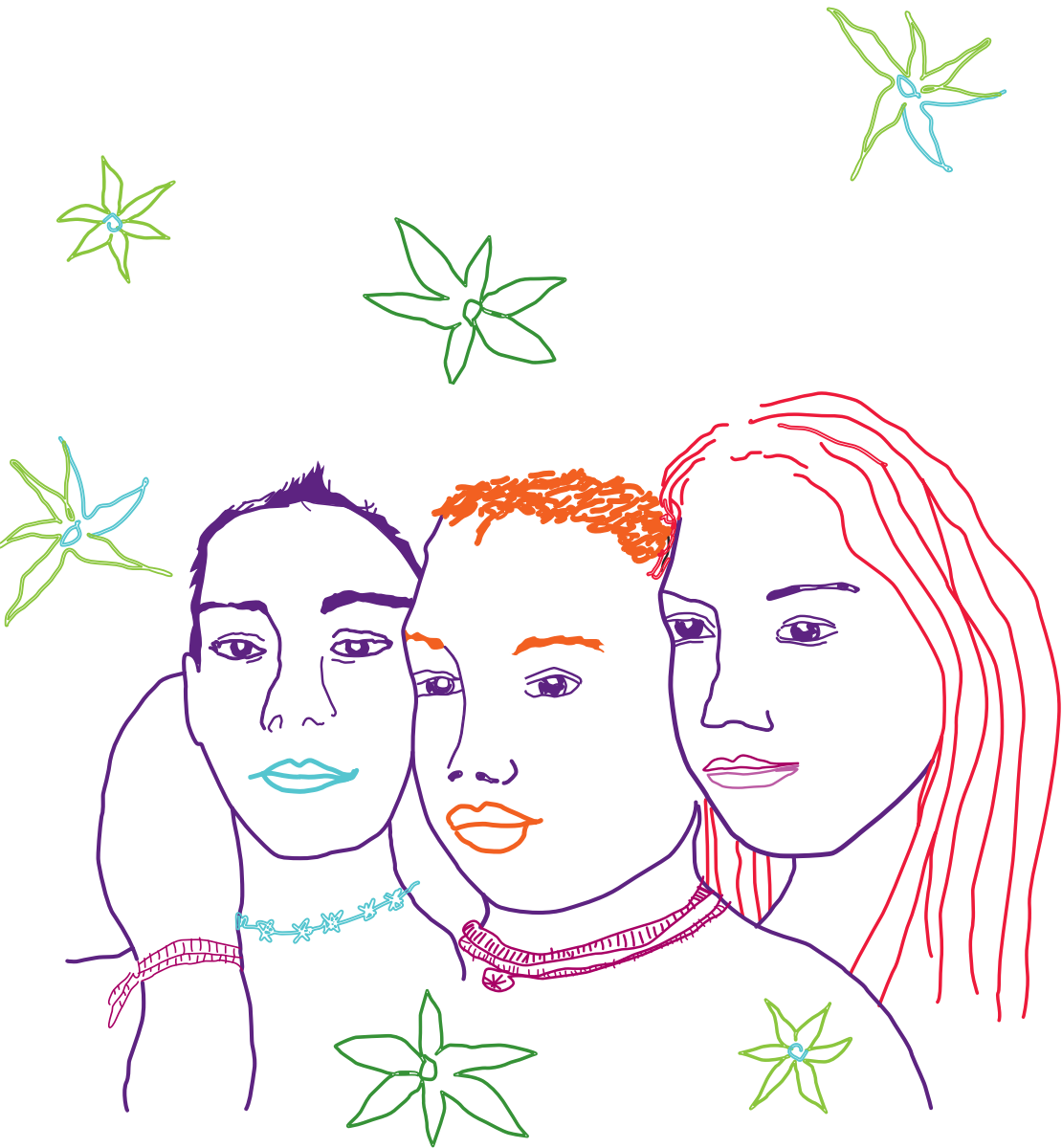
In 1933, Elise Ottesen-Jensen joined forces with a group of doctors and trade union representatives to found RFSU (Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning, the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education) in Stockholm. The founders' principal aim was to fight for abortion rights, the introduction of sex and relationship education in schools, and abolition of the law prohibiting information on contraception.



RFSU:s grundare Elise Ottesen-Jensen talar på en av sina föreläsningsturnéer.

Over the decades that followed, sex and relationship education was the subject of much discussion in Sweden. In the early '30s, RFSU campaigned for young people's right to sex and relationship education – a demand supported by many teachers and their unions. Eventually, in 1942, the Swedish parliament unanimously recommended that schools should provide sex and relationship education, which became compulsory in 1955.

Under Swedish law, no student may suffer discrimination at school based on gender, transgender identity or expression, ethnic background or sexual orientation. Every school is required to draw up an equality action plan, setting out the steps to be taken to counter discrimination. The school has a duty to intervene if, for example, a student is harassed for being homosexual. Students who feel they are being discriminated against can report their school to the Children's and Students' Ombudsman at the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (www.skolinspektionen.se/BE0).



Sex and relationship education and its content

In simple terms, we can say that sex and relationship education covers six naturally overlapping topics: sexuality and society, human development, sexual expression and behaviour, sexual health, relationships, and skills. The topics are intertwined and cannot be clearly separated.

Sexuality and society

Under this topic, schools examine the sexual rights that all human beings have. Examples include the right not to suffer discrimination on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation or gender identity, and the right to abortion and contraception. With these rights come responsibilities: No-one should exploit another person or make them have sex against their will. Anyone suffering from certain sexually transmitted infections, such as chlamydia and gonorrhea, must tell their health-care provider the names of everyone they have had unprotected sex with recently.

Since the media often covers sexuality in various ways, it's a good idea to give students a chance to discuss the images they encounter almost daily. What message do these send? Who is portrayed as desirable? How are men and women portrayed? It's also good to have a general discussion of how we are expected to be and to



By the end of the 6th Grade, students should have knowledge about puberty, reproduction, identity, relationships, love and responsibility. They should also have had the time and possibility to reflect and discuss these issues. By the time the students reach puberty, they should have learned what it entails.

“Sexuality is an integral part of every human personality – man, woman or child. It is a basic need and an aspect of being human that is inseparable from other aspects of life. Sexuality is not the same as sexual intercourse, it is not about our ability to have orgasms, nor is it the sum of our erotic life. These may be part of our sexuality, but not necessarily. Sexuality is much more: it is the energy that drives us to seek love, contact, warmth and affection; it is expressed in the way we feel and arouse emotions and deal with one another. Sexuality affects our thoughts, emotions, actions and responses, and thus our mental and physical health.”

Definition of sexuality by the World Health Organization (WHO)



behave by virtue of being either male or female, and how this affects us.

Pornography is also among the images of sexuality that children and young people may encounter. Huge amounts of pornographic material exist, especially online, and people can easily come across them unintentionally. It's therefore important to discuss pornography and its depiction of sex and sexuality.

Human development

What happens in the body during puberty? How do the genitals function, and what do they look like? How do you get pregnant? How does menstruation work? As well as teaching students about anatomy and how the body works, this topic covers sexual identity – hetero-, homo- and bisexuality – and gender identity; some people, for instance, feel that their body doesn't match the person they feel themselves to be.

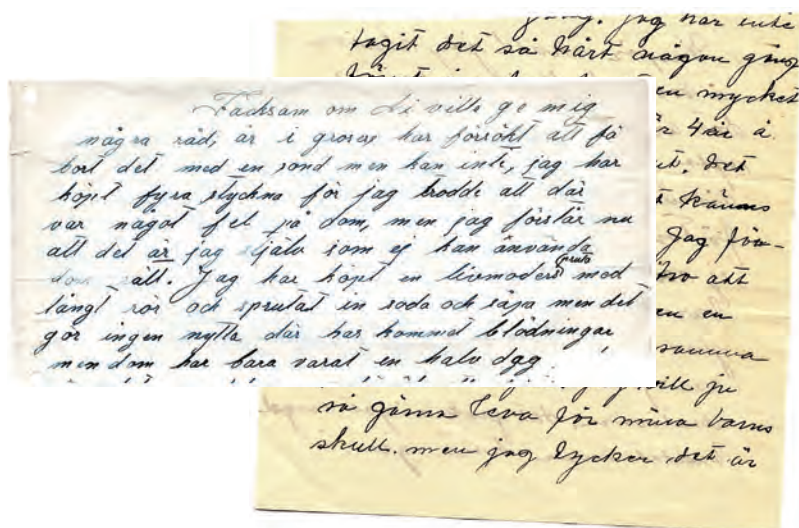
It's also good to talk about body image: about how people perceive their own body, and the fact that bodies can look very different; about past and present ideals of beauty, and what the world at large thinks people should look like.

Sexual expression and sexual behaviour

Human beings are sexual creatures throughout their entire lives, despite the clear distinction between child and adult sexuality. Even very young children masturbate, for example, and they can fall in love and feel affection. For slightly older children, kissing someone can be a cause for great excitement. In sex and relationship education, students learn that our sexuality changes over the course of our life. They also learn about various forms of sexual activity such as intercourse, masturbation, fondling and oral sex, and how the body reacts to touching and other sexual stimuli.

Sexual health

Sexuality is a source of pleasure, but it's important that people protect themselves and others from sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Knowing how STIs, especially HIV, are spread and how to protect against them is essential. An STI such as chlamydia can cause infertility and other problems later on. As well as knowing how children are conceived, it's equally important to know how different contraceptives work, what the rules on abortion are and how one is performed. But sexual health is about more than preventing infections; it also involves the right not to be sexually harassed or assaulted. It's essential that children and young people know where to turn if they suffer sexual assault or harassment.



From a letter to RFSU, 1937:

"I would be grateful if you could give me some advice. I am pregnant and have tried to get rid of it with a tube, but cannot. I bought four pieces because I thought there was something wrong with them, but now I understand that it's me that cannot use them right. I bought a uterine syringe with a long tube and injected soda and soap, but it doesn't work. It bleeds, but this only lasts for half a day..."

"...I have not taken it as hard before. I've had a very difficult time, the youngest is 4 years old and I have had my hopes up before. That's why it feels worse now. I'm trying to work up the courage and faith that everything will be fine again once, but it's the same misery again. I want so much to live for my children's sake, but I think it's..."

The reply to the letter:

"Mrs. --- ---

---, Sweden

Dear Mrs. ---,

We see that you are having a hard time, and in addition to that, you have once again been part of a sad story. You wonder if there is no effective medicine that could help you to abort the fetus. If it were so easy, no one would be happier than we, who have so many unhappy people come to us to ask for help. Unfortunately, the current laws are so strict that one cannot get expert help. A quack doctor is also not recommended; they are often very unskilled and often unsuccessful. You can read the enclosed circular about which risks exist. However, what we would advise to you is that in the future to get reliable protection so that it need not be repeated."

Fru [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Kära Fr. [REDACTED]!

Vi ser att Ni har det svårt ,och dessutom åter har råkat ut för en ledsam historia.

Ni undrar om det inte finns någon effektiv medicin som skulle kunna hjälpa Eder att bli av med fostret. Vore det så enkelt så skulle ingen vara gladare än vi som har så många olyckliga människor som kommer till oss och ber om hjälp.

Tyvärr är de nuvarande lagarna så stränga att man inte kan få sakkunnig hjälp.Någon kvacksalvare kan man heller inte rekommendera,då de ju oftast är mycket okunniga och misslyckas ofta.Ni kan läsa av bifögade cirkulär vilka risker det är.

Vad vi emellertid vill råda Er till är för framtiden skaffa Er tillförlitliga skyddsmedel så att saken inte behöver upprepas.

Hälsningar

Relationships

Relationships with other people play a major role in children's and young people's lives. Their questions often centre on relationships: How can you show someone that you like them, or that you're jealous of your best friend who is in a relationship? Young people may also be afraid of being inadequate and not worthy of love. Sex and relationship education provides a good opportunity to discuss topics such as starting a relationship, breaking up, infidelity, unhappy relationships, what makes a good relationship, and the need for reciprocity. Relationships with parents, siblings and friends are also discussed.

Skills

How do you use a condom? How do you talk about sexuality with your partner? What does self-esteem have to do with sexuality?

Condoms not only prevent unwanted pregnancy but also provide the only reliable protection against sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Good sex and relationship education is not only about letting students practise putting condoms on penis-shaped props; through discussions and value-based exercises, it also equips students to make the decision to use a condom. High self-esteem, coupled with knowledge of the options in various situations, helps young people listen to their own desires, wishes

and free will, giving them the strength to say yes or no to sex. What's more, a person with high self-esteem respects the integrity and free will of others.

Many schools take students on a visit to the local youth clinic, if there is one. This gives students an opportunity to ask questions, as well as showing them where they can go for advice and support.

According to the curriculum, by the end of 9th Grade the students should:

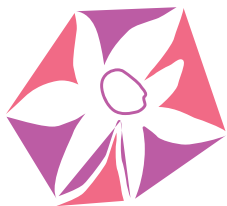
- Know about reproductive biology, contraceptive methods and sexually transmitted infections
- Be familiar with their own bodily organs
- Be able to discuss sexuality and relationships and, in so doing, show respect for other people's opinions and different relationship types

What does the curriculum say?

Teaching in Swedish schools is governed by curricula and syllabuses. The curricula, laid down by parliament, set out the school's values, mandate and goals. The requirements include each principal taking responsibility for integrating sex and relationship education into the teaching program. Syllabuses contain more detailed targets for the teaching program in each subject. However, there is not a separate syllabus for sex and relationship education, since the idea is that the topic should be integrated in other subjects, including those for which there are no explicit targets for sex and relationship education.

The targets for sex and relationship education are set out most clearly in the biology syllabus, but they are also present in social science subjects such as civics, history and religion.

For more information on syllabuses go to www.skolverket.se, where they are available in multiple languages.



The teaching differs

Schools structure sex and relationship education in a variety of ways. In some schools, teachers team up with other professionals, such as doctors, nurses and counsellors. Schools may dedicate a “love week” or a series of theme days to sex and relationship education. Some schools cover sex and relationships in a wide variety of subject lessons, while others do so mainly in biology classes. Sometimes the students are involved in planning the lessons. At senior level, the biology teacher is usually in charge of sex and relationship education, while at junior and intermediate level this role normally falls on the class teacher.

Since there is no separate syllabus for the subject, the content of sex and relationship education varies from one school to another. The idea is that sex and relationships should be integrated into various subjects. Consequently, individual schools and teachers have a great deal of discretion as to which topics they cover, and in how much detail.

The best sex and relationship education programs mix knowledge with dialogue and reflection, incorporating many different aspects and teaching methods. A good program should be inclusive, so that students can identify with the program regardless of who they are, where they come from and what experience they have.

At some schools, however, students receive little or no sex and relationship education, even though they have a right to it. Parents can contact the principal and the teaching staff to find out what the school's program is like. If it seems inadequate, they are entitled to ask for improvements.

Studies have shown that quality can vary even within a school, with some classes receiving a good, in-depth education while others are equipped only with the most basic biological knowledge. Schools have an obligation to provide sex and relationship education, and it is the principal's job to ensure that all students receive equally good instruction.

Are you interested in sex and relationship education? Would you like to find out about the latest developments in the subject? Visit RFSU online at www.rfsu.se.



Why do we talk about sexuality in schools?

Sexuality has, throughout history, always been of significance in all societies. An obvious example of this is the rules and regulations that surround marriage and other relationships. Therefore, knowledge about sexuality has been vital in all times. In the old days, knowledge and ideas regarding sex and sexuality were passed on orally, through myths and legends, by the church or by family members. Various initiation rituals connected to the transition from childhood to adulthood also contained an element of sex education.

Sometimes the information was provided in a detailed, open-minded way, while other times it was far from adequate to enable people to avoid pregnancies and infections. As Sweden developed into a modern, centralized society, schools became an increasingly important venue for knowledge promotion. Not surprisingly, sex and relationship education was soon seen as an essential part of the citizenship skills that schools were supposed to instill in their students.

Another reason for this was a realization that it wasn't always easy for parents to educate their own children about sexuality. Likewise, most children find it hard to talk to their parents about sexuality once they become teenagers and reach puberty. This is

why it's so important that there are other adults available to talk to.

Schools are an excellent learning venue for children and young people, and not just because they spend a lot of time there. As centres of learning, schools provide a safe, professional environment for discussions and conversations, where students can get answers to their questions.

Students themselves – and boys especially – have indicated in surveys that they think school is a good venue in which to discuss sex and relationships.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child says that all children and young people have a right to sex education. And the World Health Organization (WHO) stresses the importance of good sex and relationship education. UNESCO, the UN's education agency, has published international guidelines on sex education at all levels of schooling, recommending that it should start at the age of five. The HIV/AIDS epidemic in many countries only strengthens the case for sex and relationship education.

Research also shows that young people who have received good sex and relationship education in school do not have sex any earlier or more frequently. What it does show is that they are better prepared and more likely to use protection if and when they

choose to have sex. Better knowledge of sex and relationship issues can also boost young people's self-esteem and enable them to figure out what's right for them.

Read more:

www.rfsu.se

International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education.

An evidence-informed approach for schools, teachers and health educators. UNESCO in collaboration with UNAIDS, UNFPA, Unicef and WHO, 2009

Olsson, Hans: A sextatlas for schools – a guide for the planning and implementation of teaching programmes in this area for primary, junior secondary and senior secondary schools. RFSU 2004

IPPF Framework – for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). IPPF 2010

From evidence to action – Advocating for comprehensive sexuality education. IPPF 2009

Breaking Through – A Guide to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. RFSU 2004

RFSU's aim, since it was founded in 1933, has been to give people the means to change their lives for the better. RFSU is a non-profit organisation independent of any political party or religion. We are dedicated to promoting a well-informed, open-minded attitude about sexuality and relationship issues. RFSU is founded on a firm belief that sexuality and relationships are central to the individual and to society. By informing and educating people and shaping opinion, RFSU aims to break down prejudices, overcome ignorance and improve sexual health in Sweden and abroad. RFSU views sexuality as a matter of individual liberty and human rights, in which all of us have the freedom to be ourselves, the freedom to choose and the freedom to enjoy.

For more information, visit www.rfsu.se.

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