

Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Pellizzari, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough County-City Health Unit

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Ontario's New Sexual Education Curriculum: Keeping Kids Safe and Healthy

My memory of my time as a sleep-deprived parent of young children is a little foggy but what is clear is the good dose of reassurance I got from knowing that my kids were learning about “good touch” and “bad touch” and that “no means no” at school. These were all messages they were getting at home of course, starting from the time they could sit up in the tub on their own, but keeping a child safe does truly take a village, and I counted their teachers as part of my village. It wasn't lost on me that my generation would have been a great deal less vulnerable and more empowered had we engaged in those important discussions growing up. But, unlike my husband and me, my parents were far too busy with earning a living in a new country, in a foreign language no less, to even have sex education on their radar.

Fast forward to 2015, and times have changed. Our kids today are plugged into the internet and accessorized with devices in ways that my children never even imagined. Fifteen to 28% of teens report having sent a sexually explicit image or message to someone. One in four kids has been unintentionally exposed to sexual content online and 23% of grade 7-11 students have admitted to seeking out pornography online. The world has changed, but the curriculum had not – that is, until now.

Seventeen years is too long to wait for an updated physical and health education curriculum. The last one was released in 1998 and teachers have had to fend for themselves when the hard questions were asked. Finally, they will now have the training and the resources to proactively tackle critical issues such as affirmative consent or how to stay safe online. And so will parents – with great fact sheets on topics such as “healthy relationships and consent” and “online safety, including risks of sexting”.

Some things about the curriculum have not changed: there is an age and developmental stage approach to learning that one must honour when working with children. It is also comprehensive, covering three major themes: active living, skills for movement, and healthy living. The healthy living stream includes healthy eating, personal safety and injury prevention, substance use and addictions, and healthy sexuality and human development. Concepts are introduced and then unpackaged according to the grade level of the child. For example, learning the names of body parts in grade one is a good foundation to support both healthy sexuality and physical safety in years to come.

I like this new curriculum. Students will learn to appreciate and respect both visible and invisible differences and will be encouraged to be comfortable in their own skin. Teachers will be provided with the answers to questions that might arise in a classroom setting – our public health nurses have found that there are all sorts of conversations to be had, including ones that can normalize feelings and

experiences, or shoot down myths and misconceptions. Inquisitive minds will ask the darndest questions, sometimes to test, sometimes to push, sometimes just to make sure all is well.

Comprehensive sexual health education, when taught in school, leads to less risky sexual behaviour in kids. We see this same effect when parents are more engaged in this aspect of their children's lives. At the Health Unit, we see more than 400 cases of sexually-transmitted and blood-borne infections each year, and we hope with better sexual education these numbers will eventually drop. This new curriculum provides the information and support to parents so that they can take the lead in imparting values and sharing information with their children. It also helps parents by ensuring that vital information is not missed through-out their child's life as they grow and learn. And the most important bottom-line of all: it will help keep our children safe. And healthy. Now that was worth waiting for!

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