

report summary

Sexual education.

passing grade?



Queerowy Maj

Authors

Miko Czerwiński

Artur Maciejewski

Magdalena Dropek

Katarzyna Niemiec

Toni Kania

Anna Tereszko

Editing

Katarzyna Niemiec

Graphic design & typesetting

Artur Maciejewski

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Introduction

Sexual education in recent years has been perceived by some as intended to instill fear and panic, with the aim of 'sexualizing' the youth and diminishing the role of parents and legal guardians. What is the current status of sexual education today? What do young people and parents expect, and how do teachers navigate this entire discussion? After years of pushing the topic to the sidelines, followed by intimidation and even attempts at penalization, we are now examining the state of sexual education in Poland, asking those involved, talking to educators, and analyzing educational materials used in schools.

In 2019, two days after the parliamentary elections, the Law and Justice party supported a bill banning sexual education, also proposing penalties for educators. The Polish Sexology Society reacted negatively to this legislative initiative, recalling its stance from 1997, stating, "Sexual education is important for the healthy development of individuals, promoting sexual health, preventing various forms of sexual violence, preparing for functioning in marital, partnership, and parental relationships." In many cities, including Krakow, numerous demonstrations have taken place in recent years in defense of comprehensive sexual education that addresses the needs of young people.

Some local authorities tried to take matters into their own hands, but nationwide, we returned to informal and grassroots actions around this issue. Today, in the autumn of 2023, we find ourselves in a completely new political and social situation, opening up a centralized discussion about sexual education with the hope of change.

It is worth remembering that politicians may instill fear, but Poles have no doubts – sexual education should be present in Polish schools. Let's recall the IBRiS study from 2019, revealing that 80% of our compatriots share this opinion, and 47% believe that sexual education should be available from elementary school. Poles also understand that young people should not obtain information about sexuality from the internet and peers. In 2020, we investigated the situation of LGBTQIA individuals in Krakow's secondary schools, also inquiring about sexual education classes – two-thirds of respondents chose not to participate, and 54.6% of those who did participate said that the LGBTQIA-related topics were included in the curriculum.

Sexual education. passing grade?

This brochure is a concise summary of our efforts in addressing the frequently raised issue of the lack of sexual education in Poland. Sexual education whose elements are superficially hidden under the term "Family life education." Many non-governmental organizations describe the content of these lessons as insufficient, full of prejudices, not responsive to contemporary challenges, and above all, discriminatory towards LGBTQIA individuals.

For many years, we have been organizing and building LGBTQIA youth communities, understanding their needs and expectations, including those regarding sexual education in Poland. This year, we examined them even more thoroughly, also analyzing current government policies, the core curriculum prepared by the Ministry of Education, and the ways it is implemented in schools. As part of this work, we also assessed the quality of textbooks recommended by the Ministry of Education for Family life education classes. Our goal was to understand the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers responsible for conducting these classes, using surveys directed at these three groups. We also spoke with activists, educators, and compared the state of sexual education in Poland with standards in Iceland and Norway.

What kind of education do young people, as well as parents, teachers, and educators, want? We can answer: comprehensive, conducted by experts, open to diversity, safe, but above all present. What else do we learn? Sexual education must also be mandatory! In the age group where young people should be most interested in sexual education, around the age of 15, the percentage attending family life education classes drops from 55% to 17%. Stereotypes, archaic and stigmatizing knowledge, such as in the context of sexually transmitted infections, myths instead of facts – all of this does not encourage young people to attend Family life education classes. Young people need comprehensive sexual education, led by adequately prepared individuals, who are open minded, and rely on professional educational materials.

Will the upcoming changes in the roles of educational curators at the local level be a good time to discuss sexual education in Poland? This topic is also crucial in places like Krakow and Malopolska region, marked by curators who do not hide their prejudices. Through our research and analysis, we aim to provide politicians, local authorities, but above all, teachers with arguments – because comprehensive sexual education saves lives.

What children won't see in schools?

on the curriculum and WHO standards

category	topic	sexuality education standards by WHO	family life education curriculum
anatomy and physiology	reproductive organs	✓	✓
	functioning of the reproductive system	✓	✓
	functioning of the hormonal system	✓	✓
	menstrual cycle	✓	✓ ¹⁾
	personal hygiene	✓	✗
gender	gender identity	✓	✗
	gender differences	✓	✓
	gender norms and roles	✓	✓
	social inequality related to gender	✓	✗
puberty	physical changes during puberty	✓	✓
	psychological changes during puberty	✓	✗
	accepting changes in own body	✓	✗
body image	body image and self-esteem	✓	✗
	acceptance of one's body	✓	✗
	media and body diversity	✓	✗
	eating disorders	✓	✓
relationships	respect	✓	✓
	intimacy and closeness	✓	✓
	camaraderie and friendship	✓	✓
	love	✓	✓
	relational diversity	✓	✗
	sexual orientation	✓	✗
family	functions of the family	✓	✓
	marriage	✓	✓
	family diversity	✓	✗
	planning a family	✓	✗
	childlessness	✓	✗
	adoption	✓	✓
	assisted reproduction	✓	✗

1) exclusively for girls

category	topic	sexuality education standards by WHO	family life education curriculum
reproduction	fertilization	✓	✓
	course of pregnancy	✓	✓ 2)
	contraception	✓	✓ 3)
	termination of pregnancy	✓	✗
sex and sexuality	sexual intercourse	✓	✓ 4)
	types of sexual activities	✓	✗
	sexual arousal and stimulation	✓	✗
	sexual initiation	✓	✓ 5)
	pleasure and orgasm	✓	✗
	pornography	✓	✗
	masturbation	✓	✓ 6)
	sexuality and disability	✓	✗
sex work	✓	✗	
sexual health	sexually transmitted infections	✓	✓
	prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections	✓	✓
sexual rights	the right to privacy	✓	✗
	the right to pleasure	✓	✗
	setting and enforcing boundaries	✓	✓
	informed consent	✓	✗
violence	sexual violence	✓	✓
	domestic violence	✓	✓
	seeking support when experiencing violence	✓	✗
	self-defense	✓	✗

- 2) without the risks associated with pregnancy
3) only the risks associated with the use of contraception
4) only in marriage
5) only in marriage
6) exclusively for boys

Wandering towards stereotypes

on polish
textbooks

"Role of condoms in the prevention of HIV/AIDS is significant, but often exaggerated in the media" this is a quote from one of the Family life education textbooks. The analysis of textbooks available in Poland, along with a comparison to those in other European countries, is an important part of our efforts.

The content of recommended textbooks is conservatively centered around the concept of family and procreation. Such assumptions result in the exclusion of minority groups from the curriculum, limiting a list of topics covered during sexual education classes. Instead of an inclusive and comprehensive sexual education, there is a narrow concept of "sexual integration," rooted in a Christian model of understanding human sexuality and not based on empirical data. It also emphasizes sexual education only during adolescence.

The Polish curriculum completely overlooks relational diversity, omitting representations of rainbow families, patchwork families, single parenthood, or polyamorous relationships. Marriages are glorified, ignoring informal relationships prevalent in Poland.

Chapters on sexuality contain information inconsistent with current scientific knowledge and perpetuate stigmatizing language. Intersexuality is also absent as a natural phenomenon, even though it is acknowledged, e.g., in EU documents.

These textbooks also lack information on external genital organs and ways to maintain one's sexual health (including preventing cancer). Key topics for sexual education such as "safe sexual contacts," "orgasm," "clitoris," "foreskin," or "sexual orientation" are absent.

Regarding reproductive aspects, the only sensible method presented for treating infertility is natural procreative technology, promoted by the Polish government in recent years but discredited in the scientific community. In vitro fertilization is reduced to the rights of embryos, stated as "equally valuable as the lives of naturally conceived children, entitled to all human rights, especially the most important one – the right to life," as mentioned in the textbook "Heading Towards Adulthood."

These textbooks do not reference contemporary knowledge but rather spirituality, reinforced by a patronizing tone and infantilization of adolescents. Moreover, they not only promote a narrow, normative understanding of life choices but also only consider cisgender, heterosexual individuals without disabilities and belonging to majority groups in Polish society. The existence of people with disabilities, and consequently their psychosexual development, needs, and sexual life, is erased.

When discussing a reliable, contemporary, and youth-adapted sexual education, it is crucial to note that what is found in Polish textbooks is education dominated by private opinions that are hard to separate from facts. This diminishes their educational value, and young people treat them more as curiosities than comprehensive knowledge about human sexuality and relationships. Trust in materials that do not provide sources for the conveyed knowledge, especially in times of widespread access to scientific publications, is challenging.

Erasing and painting natural diversity in terms of identity, characteristics, needs, and life choices as pathological, alienates a wide group of students who do not fit into the narrow framework presented by the textbook authors as the only "correct" model.

Here be dragons and gender on inclusive education in Europe

It turns out that sexual education can not only be supported by the government and local authorities but, above all, be reliable and mandatory. Talking to sexual educators in Iceland and Norway, hearing about the experiences of LGBTQIA organizations in Scandinavian countries, it is hard not to be amazed. In Iceland, alongside regular sexual education in schools, lessons focusing solely on aspects of gender, sexuality, and relationships take place at various stages of education.

The educators themselves do not see what they do as "sexual education," but rather as discussing different aspects of topics such as social groups, diversity in families, parents, and children. The content is tailored to the age of the audience, and education on diversity begins in the early primary school, introducing basic concepts of queer education while emphasizing self-respect.

This does not mean there are no challenges: online hate, increasingly aggressive behavior among young people, and the use of prejudices in peer groups are issues faced irrespective of geographical location. However, what resonates and holds significant importance is the support from politicians, government-funded programs, and engaged local authorities

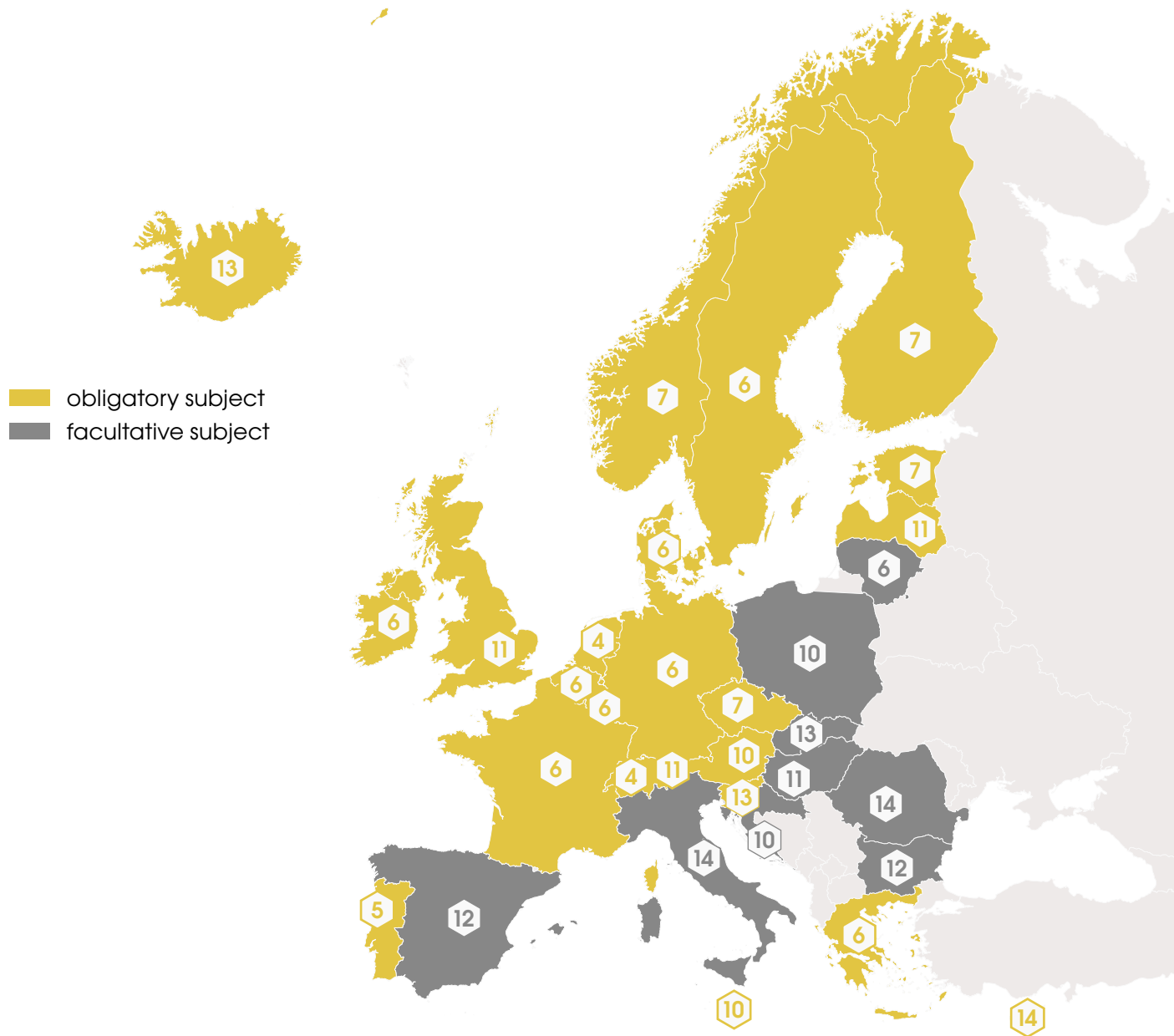
all of which impact the quality of sexual education and the approach towards it.

Education on relationships, sexuality, and health is a mandatory subject for students in primary and secondary schools in England. It is divided into two stages: relationships education (primary school) and sexuality and health education (secondary school). In primary school, relationships education teaches children about healthy, safe relationships, including how to communicate their own boundaries, recognize others' boundaries, stay safe online, and differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate or unsafe contact.

Furthermore, knowledge about various family models (e.g., single parenting, adoption, and patchwork families) and relationships of the same sex is included. Through relationship education, schools should convey essential knowledge for recognizing and reporting various forms of violence and abuse, focusing on boundaries, physical integration, privacy, and the ability to seek help.

Within health education, topics related to puberty (including menstruation) are addressed to equip students with knowledge about physical maturation before entering this developmental stage. It also includes elements of teaching about taking care of one's physical and mental health. One of the crucial aspects is the normalization of a positive approach to one's own mental well-being.

In secondary schools, education on relationships and sexuality includes content related to informed consent, sexual violence, domestic and online abuse, grooming, harassment, forced marriages, honor-based violence, and genital mutilation. Knowledge about sexual contacts, sexuality, sexual health, gender identity, and relationship building (including same-sex relationships) should be presented in an age-appropriate and inclusive manner. Attention is also given to forms of social exclusion such as sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and stereotypes. Schools also have an obligation to tailor relationship, sexuality, and health education to the needs of people with disabilities.



At what age elements of sexual education are taught at school in current and former member states of the European Union and European Free Trade Association.

Grade given on opinions regarding Family life education

Individuals conducting family life education classes

Based on the information gathered in surveys, we can presume that individuals conducting Family life education classes often simultaneously teach several other subjects, which may affect their availability and engagement. According to the surveyed teachers, alongside regular teachers, psychologists, doctors, sexual educators, and experts should also conduct sexual education classes.

In the teachers' opinion, individuals learning about sexuality obtain information from peer groups, families, as well as from erotic and pornographic materials. According to one of the respondents, "sexual education is one of the basic and essential elements of children's and youth education." However, in line with the indications, classes addressing sexuality should be optional at every stage of education, and they should be entirely absent in preschools.

An example of positive changes in the context of sexual and equality education in Polish schools is a comment from one teacher who told us that she conducts Family life education classes "without referring to the program and ministry guidelines, only focusing on scientific achievements." In history classes (which she also teaches), she weaves equality themes, showing, for example, the consequences of hateful actions, such as the introduction of "LGBT-free zones," using the example of the Third Reich's policy towards Jews in creating Judenfrei zones.

Students

Individuals learning most commonly indicate that they obtain information about sexuality from materials on social media, followed by their peer group (friends, classmates). Unfortunately, the vast majority of surveyed individuals did not discuss sexuality in their family homes.

What does participation in Family life education classes look like? Only 3 people out of all those surveyed declared that they attend Family life education classes. Most individuals who currently attend or attended them in the last 5 years associate the classes with compulsion. Among the reasons for not participating in the classes, some include: "I am afraid that the teacher will impose a conservative value system," "I believe that accurate knowledge consistent with the current state of scientific knowledge will not be conveyed," "I am afraid of discrimination or unequal treatment." Most respondents rate Family life education classes as "rather poorly" or "definitely poorly."

From the conducted interviews, it emerges that Polish schools do not address a long list of concepts and issues related to sexuality: sexual orientation, gender identity, masturbation, sexuality as a source of pleasure, pornography, abortion, or contraception.

One thing that is certain is that learners almost unanimously want sexual education classes to take place in school. Most of those we spoke to want mandatory classes in grades VII-VIII and in secondary school, and they also want to be able to independently decide whether to participate in them or opt-out. We also learned that, in the students' opinion, classes should not be divided based on gender. Opinions regarding the level of preparation of the person conducting the classes and the accuracy of the information conveyed are divided. Among the individuals who, according to learners, should conduct sexual education classes are psychologists, sexual educators, and experts from outside the school.

Parents and legal guardians

Parents and legal guardians, more often than the surveyed students, declare that the family is the most important source of information about sexuality for their children. Equally often, they cite the peer group as a source, followed by social media materials, and fictional movies and TV series. In the majority of households of the surveyed individuals, sexuality was not discussed. The vast majority of the wards of the surveyed individuals do not participate in Family life education classes. Among the reasons mentioned are: "Classes took place at an inconvenient time," "[Children] were not interested, the classes were conducted in a boring way," or "I am afraid that the teacher will impose a conservative value system." When asked who should conduct such classes, parents point to doctors, individuals involved in sexual education, experts from outside the school, and - as the only group surveyed - individuals active in non-governmental organizations.

All respondents believe that sexual education in schools is necessary. According to parents, with few exceptions, sexual education classes should be mandatory at the IV-VI and VII-VIII grade levels of primary school, as well as in secondary school.

Asked about who should decide on the student's participation in sexual education classes, the majority respond that the learners themselves should make the decision.

Masters Of sex

on the experiences of individuals conducting sexual education classes

"It's difficult to assess something that doesn't exist," say sexual education experts about the quality of the Family life education classes. The Ministry of Education does not evaluate nor verify content which is being delivered during the latter. According to the curriculum, teachers have the right to refer to other sources. The quality of these sources is a completely different matter.

The benefit of having sexual education taught by external experts is often a unique opportunity for students to bring forth questions about intimacy and sexuality questions they might be hesitant to discuss with their peers, parents, or teachers. Unfortunately, these classes, however interesting, are not widely available. They are conducted sporadically and often ad hoc, making it challenging to build understanding and trust between the students and the educators.

Educators talk about the so-called "freezing effect," which affects not only themselves but also the school staff. School principals, facing the prospect of scrutiny from authorities, withdrew from the possibility of organizing sexual education classes on their premises. These withdrawals occurred both during changes in the official curriculum, personnel changes in the position of the minister responsible for education, and the processing of amendments to education laws.

As a result, organizations were invited by parents themselves to conduct sexual education workshops outside of school hours, often due to crises arising from the Family life education classes. It is essential to use and build on the institutional knowledge developed by non-governmental organizations conducting sexual education. To achieve this, it would be advisable to strengthen collaboration between social organizations, the teaching staff, school management, and education authorities. It is important to remember that students themselves are also part of the school community, and for them, a collaborative approach to learning with the so-called "sex pros" is often the first opportunity when they are treated as equal partners.

What kind of sex ed we want on the needs of students

Safety, intergenerational dialogue, relationship-orientedness, and responsiveness to needs – these are the slogans that resonate most strongly among the youth in the context of sexual education. Young people think about previous generations and want to build a dialogue, believing it to be an important context for discussing sexual education in Poland. They pay attention to who conducts Family life education classes, what competencies and motivations they have. Many people we talked to had negative experiences because the subject was either taught by catechists or treated as an additional activity for teachers.

The most important and often-discussed issue was safety understood both as strengthening discourse around self-care, body care, and health, but above all, enhancing competencies in the context of safe touch. The latter was often emphasized – "Zetki" (a term used to refer to young people) are aware of challenges and threats around them and feel that they lack words and tools to talk about them and counteract what is negative. However, their parents and grandparents feel that they cannot keep up – and this is another issue that arose both in the workshop in Krakow on communication around sexual education and in conversations with people on the street, which the workshop participants conducted.

How to find a common language and courage, but also how to involve older generations, who did not have sexual education? Young people emphasize the role of direct conversations and co-creating a space for them in this regard.

Another issue raised by the youth was the focus on sex positivity and thinking about relationships in a good, positive way, of which sex is a part. Young people lack discussions in Family life education about diversity, diverse families, and it is also an element of building a sense of belonging to communities.

There is a lack of knowledge, but above all, language. Talking about sex "from word to word" is one of the narratives that emerged during the workshops in Krakow. Face-to-face meetings, passing on knowledge, using word of mouth, the visibility of the topic in public space (campaigns, posters, stickers) – all of this came up during conversations with people about sexual education. And these conversations showed that sexual education is not a taboo subject for Poles – so how to convince decision-makers to engage with it?

Words you won't hear in the classroom

about the sexual
education campaign

In response to the diagnosis of the situation around sexual education, we decided to conduct a campaign about words that are missing in schools and in life when learning about one's sexuality. This campaign was co-created and inspired by the voices of young people who have fresh experience with low-quality sexual education. Together with them and experts, we prepared a list of 100 words and concepts that are missing in Family life education classes but would be valuable to hear and discuss in a safe atmosphere with qualified staff.

Participants in the discussion often emphasized that the issue of setting boundaries is not addressed during the lessons, and without external knowledge, it is impossible to ensure one's safety and the safety of others. It is also challenging to make responsible decisions about one's health when contraception or abortion is only discussed in a derogatory manner. Based on these conversations, specific words were selected and placed on billboards throughout Poland and online.

100 words you won't hear in the classroom

patchwork family • sanitary pad • belonging • orgasm • transgender
viral hepatitis • sexuality • bulimia • diversity • petting • menstruation
acceptance • support • fear • sexting • self-discovery • sex work
prevention • bodily autonomy • abortion • sexual characteristics
contact • informed consent • uncertainty • relationship • coming out
setting boundaries • privacy • body hair • sexual rights • disability
reproductive justice • clitoris • condom • parenthood • infatuation
pornography • choice • fantasies • ejaculation • safety • pleasure
reproductive rights • circumcision • transition • sexual orientation
AIDS • curiosity • equality • mental health • romance • violence
love • neurodiversity • penis • oral sex • lust • self-care • gonorrhea
contraception • care • shame • masturbation • bodily integrity
lubrication • anorexia nervosa • intersex • jealousy • surrogacy
hygiene • HIV • satisfaction • closeness • phimosis • chlamydia
partnership • HPV • expression • intrauterine device (IUD)
empathy • body positivity • queerness • self-esteem • surprise
kiss • joy • individuality • self-confidence • needs • responsibility
in vitro • communication • identity • sexual initiation
miscarriage • trust • sadness • understanding • rape • vagina

Recommendations

- Replacing Family life education classes with comprehensive sexual education, following the standards of the World Health Organization – mandatory and conducted from the very beginning of education.
- Placing the needs of the learners at the center of sexual education, ensuring it relates to the real-life situations young people face.
- Making the system of conducting sexual education classes in schools more flexible – increasing the autonomy of schools, emphasizing subsidiarity, and fostering collaboration with non-governmental organizations.
- Standardizing teaching programs, expanding them to include issues related to access to health services and mental health protection.
- Changing the training system for individuals conducting sexual education classes to be based on current and proven scientific facts and human rights (sexual and reproductive), incorporating anti-discrimination and anti-violence training.
- Implementing continuous education and awareness programs for parents and legal guardians.



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