

Tools for Empowerment

Mobilizing Emotional Intelligence to
Support Adolescent Sexuality

SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICES OF SASKATCHEWAN | SASKATOON SEXUAL HEALTH



Context

"THE COMPLEXITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S STRATEGIC NEGOTIATIONS REQUIRES A CHANGE IN SEXUALITY EDUCATION TO MEET THE LIVED REALITIES AND ACTUAL CHALLENGES FACING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS AND AFFILIATIONS TO SUPPORT THEM IN DEVELOPING SEXUAL AGENCY OVER THEMSELVES. IT IS CRUCIAL THEREFORE TO VIEW SEXUAL AGENCY IN THE FULL MULTISYSTEMIC CONTEXT OF PERSONAL DESIRES, INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS, AVAILABLE NARRATIVES, SOCIAL NORMS AND SOCIAL INEQUITIES" (CENSE, 2019)

Young people in Saskatchewan have complex needs, including recurrent sexually transmitted blood borne infections diagnoses, unintentional pregnancies, and ongoing trauma related to sexual violence. For educators wishing to work with young people it is important to acknowledge these barriers, in order to provide effective interventions in sexuality education.

Saskatchewan currently faces very poor outcomes directly related to sexual health. Saskatchewan has the highest rates of HIV and Hepatitis C infection in Canada (more than twice the national average); the highest provincial rate of chlamydia infection; second highest provincial rate of gonorrhea infection; and between 2016 and 2021 the province saw a 929% increase in the rate of syphilis infection.

According to the most recent data, the province also has the highest provincial rate of adolescent pregnancy, and second highest provincial rate of sexual assaults reported to police. These alarming rates provide a critical context for the fear, isolation, and confusion that inform adolescent girls' individual struggles navigating their sexual experiences. These immediate challenges are exacerbated by the long-term impacts of HIV, untreated STBBI, or sexualized violence, not only on the individual, but also on the overall health of the community.

It is important for professionals to recognize that pregnancy and STBBI are not the only risks young people face in exploring their sexuality—there are many other social, emotional, and physical risks and consequences to consider.

Identity

Young people have multi-faceted identities, which have tangible impacts on their lives. Marginalization produces inequitable health and social outcomes, exacerbating the challenges of navigating healthy adolescent sexuality.

GENDER

From a very early age, young people are socialized into gender roles that influence the way they speak, behave, and interact with the world around them. Traditional masculinity emphasizes dominance, toughness, and assertiveness, while traditional femininity conveys submissiveness, gentleness, and passiveness. This socialization forces young people into potentially harmful narratives around sex, and must be unpacked with a critical lens.

RACE

Race also impacts youth in relationship to their sexuality. Racialized youth may face hypersexualization or fetishization which may be used to justify their victimization. In other circumstances, perceptions of racialized youth may create false narratives of aggression or violence. It is critical that we are able to recognize how harmful these prejudicial attitudes may be.

GENDER & SEXUAL DIVERSITY

2SLGBTQ+ youth are often neglected in conversations about sexuality, with their particular needs and concerns going unaddressed. If queer issues are mentioned, there is a tendency to tokenize and pathologize. An inclusive approach helps queer youth to feel celebrated and affirmed, which is critical to nurturing full empowerment.



INTERSECTIONALITY

A framework for understanding individuals as being impacted by multiple identities with overlap and compound on one another creating varying experiences and oppressions within society.

SEX-POSITIVITY

An attitude that celebrates sexuality as an enhancing part of life. Sex positivity strives to achieve ideal experiences, rather than solely working to prevent negative experiences.

Emotional Intelligence

"EFFECTIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION IS CONCEPTUALIZED WHEN EDUCATORS CAN BE OPEN, CANDID, AND COMFORTABLE TALKING ABOUT SEXUAL ISSUES" (ALLEN, 2005)

Emotional intelligence can be described as your understanding and skill in dealing with emotions and interpersonal relationships; the capacity to be aware of, manage, and express your emotions, and to handle interpersonal situations in an intelligent, judicious, and empathetic manner. Being able to understand their emotions is a critical form of literacy, which young people need to develop positively as they mature. Emotional intelligence is also beneficial as a teaching tool because it provides a simple and effective opportunity to impact the outcomes of sexuality education.

Research on emotional intelligence has found that it is helpful not only to teachers in the classroom, but also to their students, as it enhances the learning process. For educators, incorporating emotional intelligence as a teaching and learning strategy may allow them to better address their own discomfort and emotional biases when teaching, and also to recognize the social and emotional barriers with which their students may be struggling.

Research has identified five behaviours which together form the basis of exercising emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, internal motivation, empathy, and social skills. Self-awareness and self-regulation can help teachers to understand their own emotions, while empathy and social skills can help them communicate effectively with students. Emotional intelligence encourages responsiveness and adaptiveness to students' needs.

Similarly, young people being supported in an environment where emotional intelligence is being incorporated will have the opportunity to explore the complex social circumstances in which they experience their sexualities, while learning strategies to navigate these experiences, and gaining tangible skills to implement their strategies effectively.

Cultivating applications of emotional intelligence in sexuality education is beneficial because it is an agile response to the complex needs of adolescents, and focuses less on broad expertise, and more on personal reactions, interactions, and emotional regulation in challenging situations. Modelling this capacity to teens provides them with a valuable skill set to negotiate challenging situations in the future.

Emotional Intelligence

(GOLEMAN, 2006)

01

Self-Awareness focuses on your inner emotional state. It means paying attention to your behaviour and the way it impacts those around you. It also pays attention to the ways that those around you influence your emotional state. Monitor your mood, emotions, and motivations when you are engaging in challenging conversations. How are you being perceived? Young people are very adept at determining whether or not an adult is going to be receptive to their needs.

02

Self-Regulation allows you to manage your needs and impulses. It helps you to remain calm in stressful situations and allows you to respond appropriately and to think before speaking. Effective self-regulators are trustworthy, comfortable with ambiguity, able to create judgement-free spaces, and are open to change. Approachable adults excel at self-regulation.

03

Internal Motivation allows you to reflect on the rationale behind your thoughts, behaviours, and actions. What is it that you are trying to achieve in your work? What values are you bringing to the table and how do you want to support the young people in your life?

04

Empathy is our ability to understand the emotional needs of others and to treat them accordingly. Adolescence is a remarkably challenging period in someone's life. Treat young people with the patience, kindness, compassion, and understanding that you would have required when you were young.

05

Social Skills include your ability to manage relationships, build rapport, and find common ground. Having strong social skills helps you to be more effective when supporting young people, as it makes you more persuasive and helps to foster change.

Applications

SEXUALITY EDUCATION

High quality sexuality education has the power to be transformative and liberatory. When it is done properly, it gives young people the tools they need to understand and navigate the world around them. It has the potential to address prejudice, discrimination, and violence against marginalized groups in society in meaningful ways contribute to a more equitable society. By mobilizing a reproductive justice framework, sexuality education can address the health of communities and the planet. Comprehensive sexuality education is unlike any other subject in its ability to provide solutions to both practical individual problems and larger complex societal problems.

PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCY

Emotional intelligence is a beneficial professional competency because it encourages individuals to assess their own emotional experiences and relationships to human sexuality. This strengthens their ability to empathize with young people, and supports self-awareness and emotional regulation, which in turn, assists with the delivery of challenging content. Mobilizing and facilitating emotional intelligence has the potential to improve health and social outcomes related to sexuality for youth, and also provides adults with a strategy for mitigating challenging emotions and uncomfortable conversations, creating an atmosphere where the concerns of young people are being met with care and compassion.



In Practice



Scenario – A student approaches you and asks if you can speak privately. They disclose that they may have been sexually assaulted on the weekend.

1. Before responding, take a moment to check in with yourself. Do you feel angry? Sad? Anxious? If you appear to be upset, the student is likely to sense that.
2. It is important that you respond in a calm manner. If you are unable to respond calmly in the moment, let them know that you are glad they came to you, and ask to continue the conversation at a later time. Follow-up once you've had a chance to collect your thoughts.
3. What kind of support does the student need? Are you pressuring them to disclose unnecessary information? Are you preoccupied with the reporting process?
4. Let them know they are not alone. Kindness and compassion will go a long way in these challenging moments. Be patient and follow their lead.
5. This is a critical time to use your active listening skills. Focus on what the student is saying, not on how you are going to respond. Communicate as clearly possible and clarify if you are unclear on information that has been shared.

This document was prepared by Natalya Mason, RSW for Sexual Assault Services of Saskatchewan and Saskatoon Sexual Health. It contains content from the 2021 thesis *Tools for Empowerment: Improving Sexual Health Outcomes for Adolescent Girls*©. All rights reserved.

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