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The roles and responsibilities of national pediatric societies in relation to comprehensive sexuality education: a statement from the International Pediatric Society

Prepared by the IPA program area on Adolescent Health: Adolescent Sexuality: CSE and Gender Equality Subgroup

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(In alphabetical order)

Introduction

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is of paramount importance in today's society, as it plays a crucial role in promoting healthy relationships, informed decision-making, and overall well-being. CSE empowers individuals with accurate information about human anatomy, reproduction, contraception, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), allowing them to make informed choices about their bodies and relationships. It fosters a culture of consent, respect, and communication, helping to reduce instances of gender-based violence and harassment and preventing sexual abuse.

Comprehensive sexuality education equips young people with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate and understand their sexual health and development, leading to safer sexual practices. It is imperative to acknowledge that extensive international research of high quality has consistently demonstrated that CSE does not increase sexual activity, sexual risk-taking behavior, or STI rates; rather, studies have shown that its outcomes often include delay in sexual activity initiation, a decrease in the frequency of sexual intercourse, a decrease in the number of sexual partners, a decrease in risky sexual behaviors, an increase in condom usage, and an increase in the use of contraception methods. Table 1 highlights the research findings from 87 CSE programs from across the world that demonstrate effects on sexual behaviors, based on the main conclusions of two evidence review processes commissioned by UNESCO in 2008 and 2016.

CSE additionally supports the role of parents and families in setting expectations for their adolescents' behaviors, while ensuring that young people understand how to access sexuality related health services if and when they are needed. In essence, CSE is a fundamental tool for promoting physical and emotional health, fostering responsible behaviors and decision making, and ensuring a society that respects the autonomy and dignity of all individuals. However, despite the presence of substantial data supporting the advantages of CSE, there is a notable scarcity in the provision of such education to children and adolescents globally.

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National pediatric societies are composed of pediatricians and child health experts who possess a deep understanding of child and adolescent development, physical and mental health, and the unique healthcare needs of young people. Their expertise qualifies them to advocate for age-appropriate and evidence-based CSE that is tailored to the needs of children and adolescents, ensuring that it is integrated into school curricula and healthcare settings with cultural competence. They can also provide guidance to healthcare providers, educators, and parents on how to discuss sensitive sexual topics with children and adolescents, emphasizing the importance of open communication and non-judgement. Additionally, national pediatric societies can conduct research to better understand the specific needs and challenges faced by young people regarding sexual health, enabling them to develop targeted programs and policies that address these issues effectively in their specific context. By actively engaging in advocacy, education, and research, these societies contribute to creating a safer and more informed environment for children and adolescents to navigate their sexual development, ultimately promoting their overall well-being, which is a right of every child and adolescent.

By addressing the following recommendations, national pediatric societies can contribute to the development of CSE programs that are informative, culturally sensitive, inclusive, and respectful of individual differences, ultimately promoting the health and well-being of children and adolescents.

Recommendations by the IPA

1. Advocate for the use of age- appropriate CSE curriculum in all educational settings:

National pediatric societies should advocate for use of age- appropriate CSE curriculum in all educational settings starting from early childhood. Age-appropriate CSE is crucial because it recognizes the developmental stages and cognitive abilities of children and adolescents, ensuring that the information and skills provided are relevant, understandable, and supportive of their physical and emotional well-being. Children and adolescents go through various stages of physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development. Age-appropriate CSE respects these milestones, delivering information and discussions that align with the maturity level and comprehension abilities of the children. Providing CSE at the appropriate age helps prevent the spread of misinformation. When children receive accurate information early, they are less likely to rely on peer rumors or incorrect sources.

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2. Advocate for use of culturally appropriate CSE information

National pediatric societies should ensure that the CSE is tailored so that it is culturally appropriate and sensitive for that society. Different cultures have varying beliefs, values, and norms regarding sexuality. This approach ensures that education is sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of children, youth and their families. Culturally relevant CSE is more relatable. It uses examples, language, and scenarios that resonate with their cultural experiences, making the content more engaging and meaningful. It demonstrates a willingness to understand and respect cultural values, which can lead to more open and constructive discussions. Culturally appropriate CSE recognizes and integrates diverse cultural viewpoints into the curriculum, while also upholding the rights of children. This includes addressing themes such as child marriages and female genital mutilation.

3. Advocate for use of inclusive and diverse CSE content:

National pediatric societies should promote inclusive CSE that addresses diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, and cultural backgrounds. Inclusive CSE recognizes that individuals have diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. It respects and acknowledges the existence of LGBTQ+ individuals, ensuring they receive information that is relevant to their experiences and needs. Inclusion helps reduce stigma and discrimination. When CSE includes discussions about diverse sexual orientation and identity, it fosters empathy, understanding, and acceptance among students, promoting a more inclusive and tolerant society.

4. Advocate for use of medically accurate information in CSE curricula:

To ensure that CSE is medically accurate, it is important that national pediatric societies collaborate with educational institutions, curriculum developers, other healthcare professionals, and health and education ministries to develop and deliver the content of the education delivered. Accurate information about sexual health, reproduction, contraception, development of identity, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is essential for making informed decisions that protect one's health and well-being. Misinformation can lead to risky behaviors and negative health outcomes. National pediatric societies can play a crucial role in ensuring CSE material is evidence-based and grounded in the latest scientific research and medical guidelines. Additionally, it should be continuously updated to reflect advancements in medical knowledge and changes in healthcare guidelines and ensure that the information presented is free from biases, myths, or inaccuracies.

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5. Advocate for parent and caregiver involvement:

National Pediatric Societies should advocate for parental and caregiver involvement in sexual education programs, emphasizing the role of parents in supporting their children's sexual health education and in setting moral and ethical expectations for their families. National pediatric societies can provide resources and guidance for parents to engage in age-appropriate discussions with their children. When CSE aligns with the discussions and values at home, messaging is consistent. This reinforcement helps children and adolescents better understand and internalize important concepts and values related to sexuality. CSE involving parents and caregivers fosters open and honest communication within the family. It encourages children and adolescents to feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics, reducing the likelihood of misinformation or reliance on peers. Involving parents and caregivers allows CSE to respect the values and cultural beliefs of each family. It acknowledges that different families may have unique perspectives on sexuality, ensuring that education remains sensitive to these differences.

6. Conducting research on CSE

Conducting research on CSE is essential for national pediatric societies to tailor education to the specific needs of children and adolescents and evaluate program effectiveness to promote the sexual health and well-being of young people specific to their country and its culture. Along with advocacy for use of the best-available evidence, continued research, evaluation and public health monitoring allows societies to better understand the unique needs, concerns, and challenges faced by children and adolescents regarding sexual health. This knowledge can inform advocacy for policies and resources and development of more tailored and effective educational approaches.

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Table 1: Research findings from CSE programs from around the world demonstrating their effects on sexual behaviors

Conclusion	Number of programs n=87 (%)
Initiation of sex	
• Delayed initiation	23 (37%)
• Had no Significant impact	40 (60%)
• Hastened initiation	0 (0%)
Frequency of sex	
• Decreased the frequency	10 (31%)
• Had no Significant impact	21 (66%)
• Increased frequency	1 (3%)
Number of sexual partners	
• Decreased the number	16 (44%)
• Had no Significant impact	20 (56%)
• Increased the number	0 (0%)
Use of Condoms	
• Increased the use	23 (40%)
• Had no Significant impact	35 (60%)
• Decreased the use	0 (0%)
Use of Contraception	
• Increased the use	6 (40%)
• Had no Significant impact	8 (53%)
• Decreased the use	1 (7%)
Sexual risk-taking	
• Reduced risk	16 (53%)
• Had no Significant impact	13 (43%)
• Increased risk	1 (3%)

Reference: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>

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