

Is Ontario's Sex-Ed Curriculum Age-Appropriate?

An Evidence-Based Analysis



From a very young age, kids exhibit curiosity about their bodies, and ask questions about reproduction and relationships. Sexuality takes different forms over the life cycle, but it is a natural part of being human – for children, adolescents, and adults alike.

The role of sexual education is to empower students to know and appreciate their bodies, as well as to help them navigate the confusing world of intimate relationships. By providing scientifically-accurate, age-appropriate information, sex-ed gives students the tools to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health.

This factsheet uses a variety of evidence to examine whether selected topics from the 1998 and 2015 Ontario sex-ed curricula are developmentally and age-appropriate.



Body Awareness & Growth

Get to know your changing body



Experts recommend teaching young children the correct terminology for genitalia, as this knowledge can help them disclose sexual abuse.¹⁻³



Children can reach puberty at as early an age as 8,⁴ and are asking questions about sex and related topics at a young age.⁵



Masturbation is common among preteens: by the age of 14, 63% of boys and 43% of girls had engaged in the activity.⁶



Masturbation does not cause physical or emotional harm, but feelings of shame and guilt can be detrimental to health and wellbeing.⁷

Healthy Relationships & Sexuality

Develop healthy intimate and sexual relationships



Experts recommend teaching consent in middle school, when many young people start dating and engaging in sexual activity.⁸



One quarter of Grade 7-12 students have engaged in sexual activity.⁹ By the age of 15, 22% had engaged in oral sex and 16% in intercourse.¹⁰



Evidence shows that even brief education programs on healthy relationships can reduce dating violence, as well as improve knowledge and relationship skills.¹¹⁻¹⁴



The majority of young women have experienced sexual harassment, and 1 in 5 will experience sexual assault at college or university.¹⁵

Online Safety

Safely and responsibly use the Internet



99% of students in Grades 4-11 have access to the internet outside of school.¹⁶



One quarter of students in Grade 4 have their own cell phone and two thirds are “rarely” or “never” online at home with an adult.¹⁷



Sexting is on the rise: more than 1 in 4 teens are receiving sexts,¹⁸ and nearly 1 in 8 have forwarded a sext without consent.¹⁹



Household rules about treating people online with respect do not reduce a young person’s likelihood of forwarding sexts.²⁰

Gender & Sexual Diversity

Respect differences and build a positive self-concept



Children can discriminate between men and women as toddlers, and begin developing a gender identity in preschool (ages 3-5).²¹



Some children start identifying as transgender as early as the age of 3.²²



Experts recommend introducing concepts of gender identity and sexual orientation to students aged 5-8, with an emphasis on respect and tolerance.²³⁻²⁴



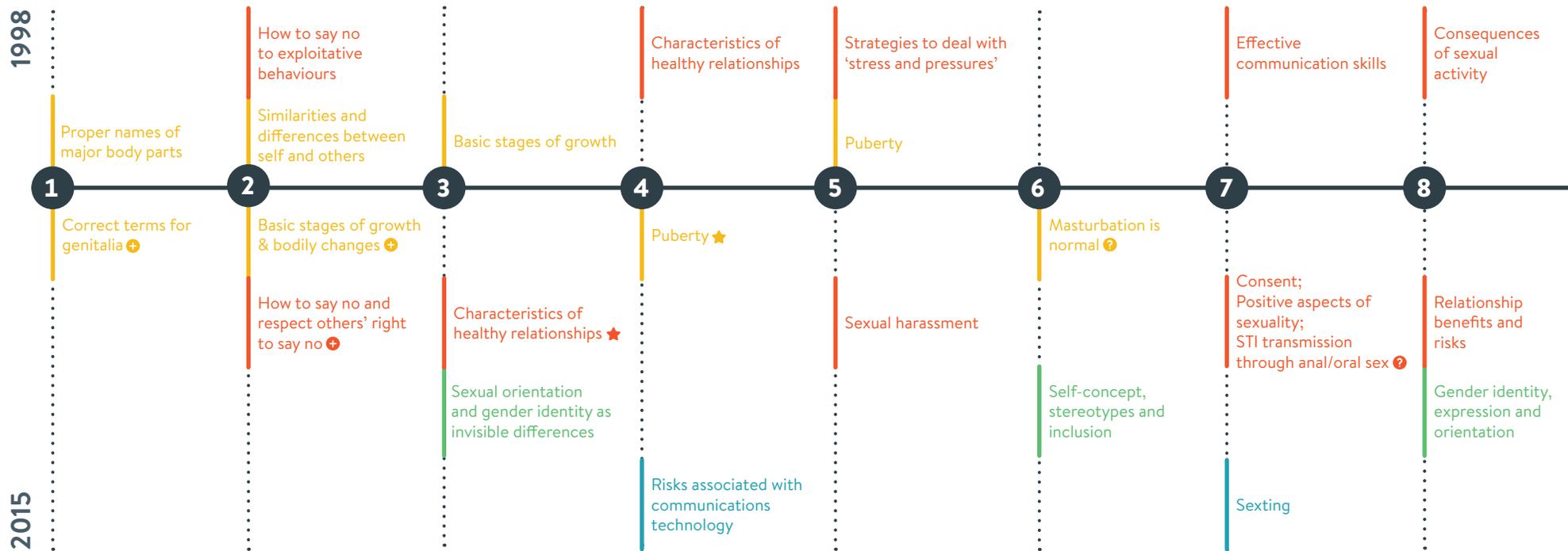
Around 8% of high school students in Toronto identify as non-heterosexual (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer) or “not sure/questioning”.²⁵

Sex-Ed Topics by Grade

What are students learning in Grades 1-8?
When are key topics introduced?

This easy-to-read timeline can help you decode the similarities and differences between the two curricula.²⁶⁻²⁷

- **Gender and Sexual Diversity**
Respect differences and build a positive self concept
- **Healthy Relationships & Sexuality**
Develop healthy intimate and sexual relationships
- **Body Awareness and Growth**
Get to know your changing body
- **Online Safety**
Safely and responsibly use the Internet



+ Topic expanded ★ Topic introduced earlier ? Optional

NOTE: This guide is not meant to be comprehensive.

References

- ¹ Buni, C. (2013, April 15). The case for teaching kids 'vagina,' 'penis,' and 'vulva'. *The Atlantic*.
- ² Klass, P. (2016, November 1). Teaching children the real names for body parts. *The New York Times*.
- ³ Martyniuk, H., & Dworkin, E. (2011). *Child sexual abuse prevention: Programs for children*. Enola, PA: National Sexual Violence Resource Center.
- ⁴ Biro, F. M., Greenspan, L. C., Galvez, M. P., Pinney, S. M., Teitelbaum, S., Windham, G. C., . . . Wolff, M. S. (2013). Onset of breast development in a longitudinal cohort. *Pediatrics*, *132*(6), 1019-1027.
- ⁵ Charmaraman, L., Lee, A. J., & Erkut, S. (2012). "What if you already know everything about sex?" Content analysis of questions from early adolescents in a middle school sex education program. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *50*(5), 527-530.
- ⁶ Robbins, C. L., Schick, V., Reece, M., Herbenick, D., Sanders, S. A., Dodge, B., & Fortenberry, D. (2011). Prevalence, frequency, and associations of masturbation with partnered sexual behaviors among US adolescents. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, *165*(12), 1087-1093.
- ⁷ National Health Service UK. (2016). Is masturbation normal? Retrieved from <https://www.nhs.uk/common-health-questions/sexual-health/is-masturbation-normal>
- ⁸ Abramson, P. R., & Dautch, L. (2014, November 23). Waiting until college to teach about affirmative consent is too late. *LA Times*.
- ⁹ Poon, C., Smith, A., Saewyc, E., & McCreary Centre Society. (2015). *Sexual health of youth in BC*. Vancouver, BC: McCreary Centre Society.
- ¹⁰ Poon, C., Smith, A., Saewyc, E., & McCreary Centre Society. (2015). *Sexual health of youth in BC*. Vancouver, BC: McCreary Centre Society.
- ¹¹ Wolfe, D. A., Crooks, C., Jaffe, P., Chiodo, D., Hughes, R., Ellis, W., . . . Donner, A. (2009). A school-based program to prevent adolescent dating violence: A cluster randomized trial. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, *163*(8), 692-699.
- ¹² Peskin, M. F., Markham, C. M., Shegog, R., Baumler, E. R., Addy, R. C., & Tortolero, S. R. (2014). Effects of the "It's your game Keep it real" program on dating violence in ethnic-minority middle school youths: A group randomized trial. *American Journal of Public Health*, *104*(8), 1471-1477.
- ¹³ Joppa, M. C., Rizzo, C. J., Nieves, A. V., & Brown, L. K. (2016). Pilot investigation of the Katie Brown Educational Program: A school-community partnership. *Journal of School Health*, *86*(4), 288-297.
- ¹⁴ Crooks, C. V., Scott, K. L., Broll, R., Zwarych, S., Hughes, R., & Wolfe, D. A. (2015). Does an evidence-based healthy relationships program for 9th graders show similar effects for 7th and 8th graders? Results from 57 schools randomized to intervention. *Health Education Research*, *30*(3), 513-519.
- ¹⁵ Weissbourd, R., Anderson, T. R., Cashin, A., & McIntyre, J. (2017). *The talk: How adults can promote young people's healthy relationships and prevent misogyny and sexual harassment*. Cambridge, MA: Making Caring Common Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- ¹⁶ Steeves, V. (2014). *Young Canadians in a wired world, phase III: Life online*. Ottawa, ON: MediaSmarts.
- ¹⁷ Steeves, V. (2014). *Young Canadians in a wired world, phase III: Life online*. Ottawa, ON: MediaSmarts.
- ¹⁸ Steeves, V. (2014). *Young Canadians in a wired world, phase III: Sexuality and romantic relationships in the digital age*. Ottawa, ON: MediaSmarts.
- ¹⁹ Madigan, S., Ly, A., Rash, C. L., Van Ouytsel, J., & Temple, J. R. (2018). Prevalence of multiple forms of sexting behavior among youth: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, *172*(4), 327-335.
- ²⁰ Steeves, V. (2014). *Young Canadians in a wired world, phase III: Life online*. Ottawa, ON: MediaSmarts.
- ²¹ Ruble, D. N., Taylor, L. J., Cyphers, L., Greulich, F. K., Lurye, L. E., & Shrout, P. E. (2007). The role of gender constancy in early gender development. *Child Development*, *78*(4), 1121-1136.
- ²² Fast, A. A., & Olson, K. R. (2018). Gender development in transgender preschool children. *Child Development*, *89*(2), 620-637.
- ²³ National Guidelines Task Force. (2004). *Guidelines for comprehensive sexuality education: Kindergarten-12th grade, third edition*. Washington, DC: SIECUS.
- ²⁴ UNESCO. (2018). *International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence-informed approach*. Paris, France: Author.
- ²⁵ Yau, M., Rosolen, L., & Archer, B. (2015). *Census portraits, understanding our students' backgrounds: Sexual orientation report*. Toronto, ON: Toronto District School Board.
- ²⁶ Ministry of Education and Training (2005). *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Health and Physical Education, 1998*. Toronto, ON: Author.
- ²⁷ Ministry of Education and Training. (2015). *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Health and Physical Education, 2015*. Toronto, ON: Author.