

PRINCIPLES FOR SEX EDUCATION

In 1993, *Streetwise to Sexwise, First Edition*, was the first publication to articulate the Center for Sex Education's core principles. As the principles have evolved, incorporating new priorities and best practices in the field of sex education, they have become the foundation of all CSE resources. It is important for educators to recognize these principles and act upon them, since they illustrate basic philosophical and pedagogical approaches to comprehensive sex education.

1. All people have a fundamental right to sex education.

They have a right to know about their own bodies and how they function. They have a right to know about any sexual changes that are occurring now and any others that may occur during their lifetimes. They have the right to have their many questions answered. People who have explored their own values and attitudes and have accurate information are in the best position to make healthy decisions about their sexual lives.

2. All participants need and deserve respect.

This respect includes an appreciation for the difficulty and confusion of addressing sexual issues and a recognition of the constellation of factors that contribute to those issues. It means treating all persons, both young people and adults, as intelligent individuals who are capable of making decisions in their lives.

3. Participants need to be accepted where they are.

This means listening and hearing what people have to say, though we as educators might sometimes disagree. In general, we are much better off helping individuals explore the possible pitfalls of their attitudes rather than telling them what they ought to believe.

4. Participants learn as much or more from each other as from the educator.

Often, if we let people talk, allow them to respond to each other's questions and comments, and ask for others' advice, they feel empowered and take responsibility for their own learning. It is much more powerful for a participant to challenge a peer's belief or attitude than for the educator to do so.

5. A positive approach to sex education is the best approach.

This means moving beyond talking about the dangers of sex and acknowledging in a balanced way the pleasures of sex. It means associating things open, playful and humorous with sexuality, not just things that are grave and serious. It means

offering a model of what it is to be sexually healthy rather than focusing on what is sexually unhealthy.

6. Honest, accurate information and communication about sex is essential.

For most of their lives, participants may have received messages suggesting that sex is hidden, mysterious, and something not to be talked about in a serious and honest way. Limiting what individuals can talk about and using vague terminology perpetuates the unhealthy “secrecy” of sex. Sexual information needs to be presented in an honest, accurate way.

7. All sexual orientations and gender identities must be acknowledged.

Comprehensive sex education recognizes that there are diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, and some participants may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or questioning. It is important to create an environment that recognizes the needs of these often isolated and invisible individuals. All people have a right to achieve their full human potential.

8. All sex education must be rooted in the concept of consent.

Consent is a bedrock in all relationships, especially romantic and sexual relationships. The assumption of consent is woven into all quality sex education and it should also be taught deliberately and directly. This is especially important to counteract gender role socialization that sets the conditions for sexual violence to occur and a media culture that sends mixed messages about what comprises sexual consent.

9. Sex education must be sensitive to the needs of participants with histories of trauma.

Experiences of trauma, including sexual trauma, are very common in the U.S. population, so it is likely that any sex education group will have participants that are trauma survivors. Sex education can be healing or retraumatizing for survivors. Trauma-informed sex education aims to create a climate and teach knowledge that contradicts the exploitive dynamics of trauma.

10. Sex involves more than sexual intercourse.

Acknowledging this concept reminds participants that not only are there many ways to be sexual with a partner besides vaginal, oral and anal intercourse, but also that most of these other behaviors are safer and healthier than sexual intercourse.