

Being Sex Positive: Promoting Young People's Sexual Health

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Many sexual health promotion efforts have a "negative" emphasis. A negative approach focuses on sexual problems, risks and consequences and excludes the positive aspects of sexuality. Obviously, attention to the negative aspects of sexuality has value. It's important to teach youth about the risks associated with unprotected sexual activity and about establishing personal boundaries. Statistics remind us that many young people are sexually active and that the "dangers" of sexuality are indeed a part of their lives.

While attention to the risks is important, the emphasis is also problematic because it can undermine our sexual health promotion efforts. Accenting only the negative aspects of sexuality can reinforce victimization, perpetuate gender stereotypes and leave youth without positive sexual role models. If we don't focus on the positive aspects of sexuality, we miss out on a way to make our health promotion messages appealing and credible with youth. Young people know that sex isn't just about consequences and they ignore adults if that's all we talk about. Balancing our health promotion efforts to include an emphasis on the positive aspects is important.

Being sex-positive means:

- having a comprehensive definition of sexuality
- viewing sexual health as a basic human right
- focusing on the life-enhancing aspects of sexuality as well as attention to the negative aspects
- being non-judgmental and challenging narrow social constructs (e.g. the myth that sex = intercourse)

- using inclusive language rather than value-laden language which makes assumptions based on sexual orientation or gender stereotypes
- assisting individuals to be aware of the choices involved in sexual decisions (e.g., whether or not to be sexual and exactly what being sexual can mean)

There are many ways that a positive approach to sexuality can be incorporated into our health promotion efforts. Researchers can use inclusive definitions of sexuality and study the effectiveness of sex-positive initiatives. Some research suggests that positive approaches can be beneficial.

Counsellors can initiate sexual health discussions. Young people may not ask for fear of being judged. Being positive also includes asking people if their sexual experiences are enjoyable and getting them to strategize what might make their experiences better. In counselling sessions, we can focus on positive health behaviours. For example, with inconsistent condom usage, we can give positive feedback for the times when condoms were used and focus on factors that facilitated condom usage instead of concentrating on the times when condoms weren't used which can make clients feel guilty. We can also encourage youth to think about personal boundaries AND desires; what they want and don't want in sexual situations. We can provide comprehensive information, facilitate the development of communication and decision-making skills so that knowledge can be applied, and, to various extents, address behaviour motivators like self-esteem.

When we talk about "safer sex," we need to be specific about what that means; otherwise the only information we're conveying is that we're uncomfortable providing details. We can encourage young people to brainstorm a wide variety of safer behaviours (e.g., masturbation, sexual touch, fantasy, etc.) This challenges narrow conceptualizations of sexual activity and helps youth to be creative and realize the choices involved in being sexual. These choices can be enjoyable and also help reduce the risk of STIs. When we focus on choice, people are more likely to find forms of sexual expression that fit within personal boundaries and desires.

We must also recognize that safer sex options for young women especially require negotiation and communication. If her partner is not interested in safer sex options, a young woman may be in an unsafe situation. This points to the importance of facilitating skill development and of talking about power differentials in relationships.

Professionals working with youth undoubtedly have concerns about sexual health communications being misinterpreted as inappropriate. These concerns are certainly legitimate. Unfortunately, if we don't initiate these conversations, young people miss out on important information and they may also receive the message that sexuality is inappropriate or shameful. It is imperative that we find comfortable and safe ways of having these conversations with youth to benefit their sexual health. If we encourage youth to do their own thinking, they can be creative, strategize solutions and make their own decisions. As health promotion workers, we must be conscious of how we approach sexuality issues and whether we facilitate change in clients or perpetuate guilt and shame.

Of course, there are many challenges to a sex-positive approach, particularly when we are working with youth. Part of this is the mistaken belief that if we provide young people with comprehensive sexuality information, we'll promote experimentation. Research does not support this belief and actually shows that comprehensive information can help postpone sexual activity for those youth who are not already sexually active and gives those who are sexually active information so that they can practice safely.

Social taboos about sexual discussions provide further challenges to supplying a sex-positive approach. Funders, school boards and administrators, among others may need information about the merits of being sex-positive. It takes energy and commitment to make a paradigm shift and incorporate this approach, particularly if we are working within a risk-reduction or medical model or if we find ourselves continually dealing with crisis intervention. Being sex-positive also means that some of us have to challenge our own attitudes and values. We too are products of a society that has reinforced shame and guilt about sexuality.

Despite the challenges, a positive approach is well worth our effort. Incorporating the positive aspects of sexuality in our health promotion efforts can

help to normalize sexual health and relieve the guilt, shame and anxiety that act as barriers to sexually healthy attitudes and behaviours. Overall, being sex-positive can be an effective, appealing approach to health promotion. It can increase the likelihood that young people will achieve optimum sexual health.