

**Sexual Health Education in Canada and its Societal Impacts**

by

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### **Abstract**

This capstone explores the significant gaps in comprehensive sexual education across Canada and the impact of inconsistent and patriarchal influences on adolescents. The research delves into how these deficiencies disproportionately affect subgroups such as girls, LGBTQ+ individuals, and boys, highlighting the ways systemic gaps expose young people to physical and emotional harm, as well as heightened vulnerability to online sexual predators. Building on these findings, the capstone examines what a truly comprehensive sexual education program should encompass, using a feminist theoretical framework. This approach emphasizes the importance of an inclusive, equitable curriculum that challenges traditional gender norms, acknowledges diverse sexual identities, and empowers youth to make informed decisions about their sexual health. Additionally, the capstone emphasizes the crucial roles of counsellors, educators, and parents in mitigating the harms caused by inadequate sexual education. By breaking down stigmas surrounding sexual health and equipping key stakeholders with effective tools and resources, this study advocates for fostering open dialogue and informed support systems. Through its exploration of these interconnected elements, this capstone aims to provide a roadmap for advancing sexual education in Canada, ultimately creating safer, more equitable environments where young people can navigate their sexual health with confidence and autonomy.

*Keywords:* comprehensive sexual education, digital consent, LGTBQ+ individuals, sexual pleasure, sexual transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancies.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Canada's sexual health education system is at a critical crossroads. While many provinces have made strides toward providing young people with the information they need to navigate relationships, intimacy, and personal health, the reality is that for many students this information remains fragmented and incomplete (Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights ["Action Canada"], 2020b). Despite Canada's commitments to equity and inclusion, its current sexual health curriculum falls short in preparing youth for the complexities of modern relationships, consent, and power dynamics (Leung et al., 2019).

The absence of comprehensive sexual health education for youth can have serious consequences. This paper will explore how gaps in sexual health education across Canada reinforce harmful power imbalances, limit sexual autonomy, and hinder the development of healthy relationships (Action Canada, 2020b; Leung et al., 2019). These deficiencies can lead to lifelong implications.

### **Overview of Topic**

Comprehensive sexual education is a fundamental human right (Action Canada, 2020b). It provides youth with the vital knowledge and skills they need to make informed, healthy, and empowered choices about their sexuality and sexual well-being (Illes, 2012). This education goes beyond just anatomy, contraception, and STIs; it fosters a deeper understanding of gender, consent, healthy relationships, and the social and cultural influences that shape sexual experiences (Albert Sekhar et al., 2024; Değer & Balci, 2018; Rowe et al., 2018). Research has consistently shown that offering students a well-rounded approach to sexual health education is essential for supporting their overall physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Aggleton & Crewe, 2005; Koyama et al., 2009; World Health Organization [WHO], 2010). Comprehensive

sexual education programs have been linked to positive outcomes like delayed sexual activity, increased use of contraception, and reduced rates of STIs and unintended pregnancies (Robinson et al., 2019).

The right to access comprehensive sexual education is also upheld by international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2018). This type of education is also supported by major United Nations agencies, such as the WHO, UNESCO, UNAIDS, and UNFPA (Action Canada, 2020b; UNESCO, 2018). Moreover, governments have a responsibility to uphold the rights to health, well-being, and equality for all individuals, which means providing unbiased, scientifically accurate sex education (WHO, 2023). In Canada, the 2019 Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education emphasized the critical role that comprehensive sexuality education plays in promoting the sexual and reproductive health of all Canadians (Sex Information & Education Council of Canada [SIECCAN], 2019).

Although comprehensive sexual education is recognized as a fundamental human right and a vital part of holistic healthcare, it remains a highly contentious and often neglected issue in many parts of the world, including Canada (Ezumah, 2003). The debates surrounding age-appropriate content, safeguarding children's innocence, prioritizing religious beliefs, and addressing children's exposure to explicit material through media and the internet are numerous and ongoing (Bruce, 2021). As it stands, Canada's sexual health education system is in disarray, failing to meet both international and national standards. The reasons for this are complex, but a major factor is that sexual health education is not treated as a federal government issue, leaving

each province to develop its curriculum independently. This approach has led to a fragmented system, with significant variations in curricular requirements and content across provinces and territories (Action Canada, 2020b).

For example, in British Columbia, sexual health education starts as early as Grade four, covering topics like anatomy, puberty, and basic reproductive information (Robinson et al., 2019). In contrast, Alberta delays the introduction of sexual health education until Grade seven, and even then, the content is limited to only the most fundamental aspects of anatomy and physiology. Recently, Alberta Premier Danielle Smith suggested that parents should have the option to opt out of sexual health education for their children entirely (French, 2024). This could severely restrict young people's access to crucial information and resources, particularly for those already facing barriers to comprehensive sexual health education. In Ontario, the curriculum has faced significant backlash and revisions in recent years, with conservative and religious groups pushing for a more abstinence-focused approach (Davidson, 2015). Politics and personal beliefs are obstructing youth from accessing the essential information they need to safeguard their health.

To complicate matters further, there's no regulatory body overseeing sexual health education in Canada—not nationally and not even within individual provinces. This lack of oversight means that the content delivered varies widely across and within provinces (Robinson et al., 2019). As a result, the quality and comprehensiveness of sexual health education young people receive depends heavily on where they live. Some benefit from a more inclusive curriculum, while others—especially those in rural areas—are left with a much less comprehensive education (Hallum-Montes et al., 2016; Leung et al., 2019; Polivka, 1996). Additionally, the curricula across Canada are outdated and primarily focused on biomedical

concerns like preventing teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and other adverse sexual outcomes. Many schools still lean heavily on abstinence or promote condom use strictly for contraception, neglecting to offer a more holistic understanding of sexuality and sexual health (Action Canada, 2020a; Farmer et al., 2019).

This narrow approach not only fails to meet the comprehensive sexual health education needs of students but also perpetuates patriarchal ideologies that seek to control, restrict, and suppress female sexuality and autonomy. By ignoring a more holistic view of sexuality, including diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, the curriculum reinforces harmful societal norms that prioritize male perspectives and experiences over those of women, girls, and LGBTQ+ individuals. This approach denies students the chance to develop a nuanced understanding of the complex sociocultural factors that shape sexual behaviours and experiences, leaving them disempowered and less capable of making informed, autonomous decisions about their sexuality and well-being (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017).

In addition to this, even if we were to achieve standardized comprehensive sexual education across Canada, significant challenges would persist due to the lack of formal training and the discomfort many educators feel when discussing sexual health topics. This discomfort is often rooted in the stigma surrounding adolescent sexuality, heavily influenced by religious beliefs (Santelli, 2008) and prevailing social norms. Research has shown that parents, family members, and teachers often feel embarrassed or fearful about discussing sexual topics, worrying that such information might be seen as age-inappropriate or could encourage promiscuity (Achen et al., 2023). Moreover, this stigma is deeply embedded in patriarchal structures that aim to control and suppress the sexual experiences and expressions of women and LGBTQ+ individuals (Achen et al., 2023; Raychouni, 2023).

Addressing these entrenched attitudes requires a systematic and sustained effort to shift social norms and empower marginalized groups to advocate for their right to comprehensive sexual health education. Without such efforts, these individuals will continue to be further marginalized and excluded from receiving the thorough education they deserve (Action Canada, 2020b). What makes matters worse is that youth are acutely aware that the lack of comprehensive sexual health education is impacting them negatively. Many young people express deep frustration over the glaring disconnect between the content taught in class and their real-life experiences. They see the gaps in the curriculum and recognize that it doesn't fully address the complexities of their lives. This disparity is especially stark for those who have endured sexual dating violence. These students often find that their specific needs and experiences are overlooked in the creation of sexual health education initiatives. The curriculum fails to address the realities of consent, boundaries, and the nuanced dynamics of relationships in a way that resonates with them or provides the support they need. As a result, these young people are left feeling even more isolated and underserved by an education system that should be equipping them with the knowledge and tools to navigate their world safely and confidently (Action Canada, 2020b; Bruce, 2021; French, 2024; Oswald, 2010; Phipps, 2008; SIECCAN, 2019; Vanner & Almansori, 2021).

### **Purpose of the Paper**

The purpose of this capstone is to explore how the lack of comprehensive sexual education across Canada has contributed to harmful power imbalances and limited the sexual autonomy of marginalized groups. In the literature review, I will examine the challenges arising from inconsistent sexual education, particularly how patriarchal influences in the current system create gaps that negatively affect youth—especially for girls, the LGBTQ+ community (Hobaica

& Kwon, 2017)—as well as boys (Watkins et al., 2020). I will also discuss how these gaps leave young people more vulnerable to online sexual predators, who exploit their lack of knowledge and put their safety at risk (Brayboy et al., 2018).

Furthermore, I will highlight what is needed for a truly comprehensive sexual education program, grounded in a feminist theoretical framework (Corinna, 2007). Which calls for a curriculum that is inclusive, equitable, and empowering—one that challenges traditional gender norms and acknowledges the full spectrum of sexual identities and orientations. By adopting this framework, we can begin to dismantle the harmful structures that perpetuate inequality (Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021). Additionally, this capstone will emphasize the pivotal roles of educators, parents, and counsellors in mitigating the harms caused by inadequate sexual education. These individuals play a critical role in shaping young people’s understanding of their bodies, relationships, and rights. By equipping them with the tools and knowledge to support comprehensive sexual education, we can work toward a more equitable and informed society (Achen et al., 2023; Bakaroudis, 2014; Phipps, 2008). Practical applications will be provided to start closing the gap to bring a truly comprehensive sexual education program into real-world settings. These applications will cover the steps needed to tackle the barriers holding us back and explore strategies for weaving inclusive, equity-based approaches into schools and communities. By focusing on these practical pieces, the chapter aims to lay out a roadmap for building a program that empowers all youth to make informed, confident, and safe decisions about their sexual health.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

As this paper advocates for comprehensive sexual education in Canada, it builds on several well-established theories and models that highlight the importance of an inclusive,

gender-equitable, and holistic approach to sexual health education. However, the primary focus of this paper will be on feminist theory. I will explore how sexual education can be reimagined to challenge traditional gender roles, empower students of all genders, and create a more just and inclusive educational environment (Corinna, 2007). Feminist theory looks at how gender, power, and social structures intersect to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities. It calls for dismantling patriarchal systems and promoting gender equity. Comprehensive sexual education plays a key role in this by challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, encouraging respect and equality in relationships, and empowering marginalized groups, including women and LGBTQ+ individuals, by providing them with the knowledge and tools to make informed decisions about their sexual health and well-being. It also encourages students to critically examine societal norms and power structures that influence sexual health and relationships, helping to foster a more inclusive and equitable society (Grosz, 2010). Feminist theory enhances comprehensive sex education by challenging traditional gender roles, promoting equity and empowerment for marginalized groups, and fostering critical awareness of societal power structures to create a more inclusive and equitable society. The Feminist theoretical framework underscores the critical need for comprehensive sexual education in Canada and guides educators and policymakers in designing programs that effectively promote sexual health, reduce risks, and build a more equitable society.

### **Contribution to the Field**

The counselling field has long recognized the importance of addressing various aspects of an individual's well-being, including emotional, mental, and social health (American Psychological Association, 2022). However, sexual health—a critical component of overall wellness—has often been overlooked or inadequately addressed, despite its deep connections to

mental health, self-esteem, relationship satisfaction, and overall quality of life. Many counselling professionals lack the training or confidence to tackle sexual health issues with their clients, leading to incomplete treatment plans and unresolved issues that continue to affect clients' lives (Piatt et al., 2022). When sexual health discussions are absent in counselling settings, it can perpetuate stigma and misinformation, leaving clients without the support they need to navigate their sexual well-being. By emphasizing the inclusion of sexual health topics in counselling curricula, future counsellors will be better equipped to handle a wide range of issues related to sexual health, including the complexities of sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual dysfunctions, and the impact of trauma on sexual health (Moore, 2018; Phillips, 2022). Enhanced training will not only boost counsellors' confidence in addressing these topics but also ensure that clients receive more comprehensive and empathetic care. Additionally, the lack of emphasis on sexual health in counselling has led to a scarcity of research in this area. This paper calls for more empirical studies to explore the intersections between sexual health and counselling outcomes. By fostering a research culture that values sexual health, the counselling field can develop evidence-based practices that better serve diverse client populations (Moore, 2018).

This paper also advocates for a paradigm shift not only in counsellor education and training but also in the support provided to educators and parents. Underscoring the importance of equipping educators and parents with the tools and resources they need to effectively support young people's sexual health education. Educators often feel uncomfortable or unprepared to discuss sexual health topics confidently, which can create gaps in the information students receive. Similarly, parents may struggle to initiate these conversations at home, often due to their own discomfort or lack of knowledge (Achen et al., 2023). By providing targeted support and education for both educators and parents, we can create a more cohesive and supportive

environment for youth, ensuring they receive consistent and accurate information both at school and at home. Ultimately, taking a comprehensive approach to sexual health will lead to more holistic and effective counselling practices, benefiting clients, the counselling field, and society as a whole. By tackling these issues, this capstone aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts to reform sexual education in Canada—not just to meet international standards, but to act as a catalyst for social change and empowerment for all youth (SIECCAN, 2019).

### **Reflexivity and Positionality Statement**

In my role as a facilitator for Safeteen, a violence prevention program for youth, I have witnessed firsthand the significant gaps in the Canadian sexual education program and the harm these gaps inflict on young people, particularly women and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Over the past two years, I have led sessions in junior high and high schools, engaging in discussions with young women and LGBTQ+ students about healthy sexual relationships, boundaries, and consent. Despite the unique context of each session, one troubling pattern consistently emerges: at nearly every school, students share experiences of sexual assault, rape, or physical violence. This recurring issue underscores a critical failure in the current educational system and highlights the profound consequences of inadequate sexual health education. The challenging nature of this work is compounded by the awareness of the severe and lasting harm that sexual trauma can cause, particularly when experienced at a young age. The emotional and psychological effects of such trauma are profound, often resulting in long-term consequences. While I am committed to addressing these issues, the facilitation efforts are not without significant limitations. Firstly, the cost of these educational sessions often places a financial strain on schools. In some cases, teachers have had to cover these expenses out of their own pockets. This financial burden is exacerbated by the fact that these sessions are often

reactive, occurring only after incidents have already happened. This reactive approach to sexual health education reflects a systemic failure to prioritize prevention.

Additionally, the duration of these sessions is limited—typically just three hours per school each year—which is insufficient to cover the comprehensive range of topics necessary for effective education and prevention. This time constraint limits the depth of discussion and reduces opportunities for meaningful engagement with students, undermining the potential impact of these sessions. There is also an urgent need to introduce sexual health education earlier in students' lives. By the time these crucial conversations occur, many students have already encountered the very issues we aim to address. Early and consistent education is essential to prevent these situations and to equip students with the tools they need to make informed, healthy decisions about their sexual health and relationships. The challenges I have encountered in this role emphasize the pressing need for a more robust and proactive approach to sexual health education. Addressing these gaps through earlier and more frequent education, while also providing adequate financial and structural support to schools, can better equip students to navigate their sexual health and well-being. Such efforts are essential for fostering a safer, more informed, and empowered generation.

### **Outline of the Capstone Project Chapters**

The remainder of this paper will consist of two additional chapters. In chapter two, I will explore the challenges posed by inconsistent sexual education, particularly how patriarchal influences within the current system create gaps that disproportionately affect youth—especially girls, LGBTQ+ individuals, and boys. These gaps not only hinder their understanding of sexual health which can cause physical and emotional implications but also make young people more susceptible to online sexual predators who exploit their lack of knowledge, compromising their

safety and well-being. This chapter will also outline the essential components of a truly comprehensive sexual education program, grounded in a feminist theoretical framework (Corinna, 2007). This framework calls for a curriculum that is inclusive, equitable, and empowering—one that challenges traditional gender norms and acknowledges the diversity of sexual identities and orientations. Implementing such an approach can help dismantle harmful structures that perpetuate inequality (Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021).

Additionally, I will emphasize the critical roles played by educators, parents, and counsellors in addressing the harms caused by inadequate sexual education. These stakeholders are instrumental in shaping young people's understanding of their bodies, relationships, and rights. By providing them with the tools and knowledge to support comprehensive sexual education, we can create a more informed and equitable society (Achen et al., 2023; Bakaroudis, 2014; Phipps, 2008). In chapter three, I will shift the focus to practical solutions, detailing how a workshop for parents can help to bridge the gap and implement a comprehensive sexual education program in real-world settings. This chapter will address the barriers to progress and offer strategies for integrating inclusive, equity-based approaches. By emphasizing actionable steps, the chapter aims to provide a roadmap for empowering youth to make informed, confident, and safe decisions about their sexual health.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

As discussed in chapter one, significant issues arise from the gaps in sexual health education. When programs omit crucial topics such as pleasure and power dynamics, they fail to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of their sexual health (Oswalt, 2010). This omission is particularly concerning, as Oswalt emphasized the importance of teaching students about the full spectrum of sexual health—not just the risks—so they can make informed and responsible decisions. When students lack a comprehensive understanding of the situation, the consequences can be significant, potentially leading to both physical and psychological harm (Santelli et al., 2017). Hay et al. (2019) has explained that this issue is especially prevalent in patriarchal societies, including Canada, where power imbalances and gender norms heavily influence sexual health outcomes. When the education system overlooks how power dynamics affect sexual relationships and decision-making, it continues to reinforce these imbalances.

In this chapter, I will explore the consequences of power imbalances and their negative effects on youth. I will begin by examining how these issues impact girls, followed by a discussion on their implications for the LGBTQ+ individuals. Next, I will address how boys are affected and conclude with an analysis of how all these groups are vulnerable to online sexual predators. By breaking down each subgroup, we can gain a deeper understanding of why comprehensive sexual health education is so important. With the ultimate goal of giving young people the tools they need to navigate their sexual lives with confidence and safety. This literature is organized into two sections: the first examines the effects of inadequate sexual health education, while the second explores ways to reimagine sexual health education to meet contemporary needs.

## **Examining the Impact of Inadequate Sexual Health Education**

This section opens with an analysis of the impact of inadequate sexual health education on girls, LGBTQ+ individuals, and boys, concluding with an examination of the challenges faced by young people in navigating a digitally connected world.

### ***Implications for Girls***

Being a teen girl is challenging enough, with navigating hormonal changes, and social issues such as friendships, and discovering one's identity (Forney et al., 2019). However, when young women do not receive adequate sexual health education, they face additional risks, including a variety of physical and mental health challenges that can significantly affect their well-being (Leung et al., 2019). Without comprehensive education, many remain uninformed about critical aspects of sexual health, leaving them more vulnerable to a myriad of issues, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Elflein, 2024). STIs are infections transmitted primarily through sexual contact and the most common STIs include chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, genital herpes, and human papillomavirus (HPV) (Torgovnik, 2024).

**Impact of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).** Although education about STIs is included in the sexual health curriculum, the rates of several sexually transmitted infections have continued to rise in Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2023). This increase may be attributed to the fact that the information is often presented through an abstinence-focused lens (Leung et al., 2019). According to PHAC (2023), chlamydia rates have risen by 26%, gonorrhea by 171%, and infectious syphilis by an alarming 389% between 2011 and 2019. Chlamydia remains the most commonly reported STI (Elflein, 2024). In addition, the rising rates of infectious syphilis in females have led to more cases of congenital syphilis, which has very serious health implications (PHAC, 2023). Congenital syphilis occurs when a pregnant woman

with syphilis transmits the infection to her baby, either during pregnancy or childbirth. This condition can have devastating effects on the newborn, including stillbirth, premature birth, or serious health issues such as deformed bones, severe anemia, jaundice, blindness, deafness, or meningitis (Elflein, 2024). According to Elflein, the increase in congenital syphilis cases suggested that many women may not be receiving adequate prenatal care or that syphilis is not being detected and treated early enough in pregnancy. Both explanations highlight the gaps in healthcare access and sexual health education, as well as the need for improved screening and treatment protocols for pregnant women.

Singh and Singh (2021) stated that receiving a diagnosis of an STI can have significant mental health implications, often leading to feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety, or isolation, which can further hinder individuals from seeking timely care. For mothers, having a baby born with syphilis or any other congenital illness can be devastating, intensifying feelings of guilt, fear, and helplessness. This emotional burden can contribute to postpartum depression and anxiety, affecting both the mother's mental health and her ability to bond with her baby (Tavares et al., 2021). Addressing these emotional and mental health challenges, alongside physical health, is crucial in public health interventions aimed at reducing the spread of syphilis among women of childbearing age to prevent the transmission of the infection to the next generation (Vermund et al., 2021). Inadequate sexual education not only contributes to the rise in STIs but also leaves many women uninformed or vulnerable to misinformation about the variety of contraceptive methods available, how to use them effectively, and where to access them. This gap in education has significant consequences, as understanding contraceptive options is critical for making informed decisions about reproductive health (Rabbitte, 2020). In the absence of comprehensive sexual education, many teens turn to social media as a primary source of sexual health

information. While social media can provide accessible and relatable content, it also carries the risk of spreading misinformation (Sunkara, 2021). For example, inaccurate or incomplete information about contraceptive methods on these platforms can lead to confusion or misuse.

A notable trend in contraception is the steady decline in combined oral contraceptive pill (COCP) prescription and usage rates over the past decade in several Western European countries (Schneider-Kamp & Takhar, 2023). This decline may reflect changing attitudes towards the COCP or a shift towards alternative contraceptive methods, but without adequate education, individuals may lack the necessary knowledge to evaluate these options critically. Addressing these educational gaps is crucial for empowering young people to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health. This lack of knowledge can also increase the likelihood of unintended pregnancies, which can be particularly challenging for young women or those in less stable circumstances. Roter mann and McKay (2020) estimated that around 180,700 pregnancies, or 40% of all pregnancies in Canada each year, are unintended. Despite this significant impact, there are no comprehensive studies that fully capture the financial or mental health burden of unintended pregnancies in the Canadian context (Black et al., 2023).

**Unintended Pregnancies.** The implications of an unintended pregnancy are extensive, affecting the individual, their family, and society as a whole. Health risks for both the mother and child are heightened, with unintended pregnancies often leading to delayed or inadequate prenatal care, increasing the likelihood of complications such as preterm birth and low birth weight (Yazdkhasti et al., 2015). Mental health issues, like postpartum depression and anxiety, are also more common among women who experience unintended pregnancies (Abbasi et al., 2002). Socioeconomically, these pregnancies can disrupt a woman's education and career, reducing earning potential and perpetuating cycles of poverty. Financial strain is another

significant consequence, particularly for families already facing economic challenges. In addition the stress of an unplanned pregnancy can strain relationships and lead to difficulties in parenting, potentially impacting the child's development. On a societal level, unintended pregnancies can drive up healthcare costs and contribute to rapid population growth, which can strain public resources. Moreover, these pregnancies raise important legal and ethical questions about access to contraception and abortion (Yazdkhasti et al., 2015). The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the U.S. has reignited debates around reproductive rights, potentially influencing policies worldwide and restricting access to safe abortion services for many women (Coen-Sanchez et al., 2022).

Women who experience unintended pregnancies may also face stigma and discrimination, both socially and institutionally, which can further exacerbate feelings of isolation and contribute to mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression. This stigma often arises from societal attitudes that shame women for becoming pregnant outside of socially accepted norms, such as being unmarried or under certain economic conditions. In some cases, women may also be judged for seeking abortions or for choosing to carry the pregnancy to term, leading to a no-win situation where they face judgment regardless of their choice (Herd et al., 2016). Yazdkhasti et al. (2015) discussed how this discrimination can have ripple effects, limiting access to supportive resources such as healthcare, counseling, or financial assistance. When women feel shamed or ostracized, they may be less likely to seek the help they need, compounding their emotional and psychological burden. Ultimately, this erosion of support undermines a woman's bodily autonomy and the right to make decisions about her own reproductive health, emphasizing the vital need for consent-based education and policies that protect and respect individual choices.

**Bodily Autonomy & Sexual Violence.** Inadequate education about consent and bodily autonomy leaves women particularly vulnerable to sexual coercion and violence. Without a clear understanding of their rights within sexual relationships, women may not recognize situations where their consent is being ignored or manipulated, making it easier for others to exert pressure or force them into unwanted sexual activities. This lack of awareness can also contribute to a sense of helplessness or confusion in these situations, preventing women from asserting their boundaries or seeking help when they experience coercion or violence (Schneider & Hirsch, 2020).

Additionally, the lack of education on these topics reinforces harmful societal norms that restrict women's right to make decisions about their bodies, perpetuating cycles of abuse and neglect. Sexual violence is a widespread form of gender-based violence that remains a serious issue both in Canada and around the world. It can happen in all kinds of situations—between intimate partners, within families, among friends, at work, and even with strangers (Women and Gender Equality Canada [WAGE], 2022). WAGE discussed that while some instances of sexual violence provoke outrage and prompt action, others are often dismissed or, worse, result in victim-blaming. This dismissive attitude perpetuates the problem and obstructs efforts toward achieving gender equality. Sexual violence includes any non-consensual sexual contact, such as sexual assault—ranging from unwanted touching to rape—and sexual harassment, which can involve inappropriate comments, jokes, or unwanted physical interactions.

Unfortunately, this violence is not confined to hidden places but often occurs in public and familiar environments. Alarming statistics have revealed that one in three women in Canada has experienced unwanted sexual behaviour in public, and one in four has faced inappropriate sexual conduct in the workplace. Overall, nearly 4.7 million women in Canada have been

sexually assaulted since the age of 15, underscoring the widespread and critical nature of this issue (WAGE, 2024). According to Murphy-Oikonen et al. (2022), women who are not informed about their right to consent and bodily autonomy are less likely to report instances of sexual violence, leading to underreporting and a lack of accountability for perpetrators. This not only endangers the victims but also perpetuates a culture where sexual violence is normalized or overlooked, potentially resulting in a lifetime of mental and physical health issues.

**Impact on Mental & Physical Health.** Overall, the absence of comprehensive education on consent and bodily autonomy not only increases the immediate risk of sexual violence but also has long-term implications for women's physical and mental health, highlighting the critical need for improved sexual education programs that empower women to understand and assert their rights (Schneider & Hirsch, 2020). Schneider and Hirsch further explained that the mental consequences of being unprepared for sexual experiences are profoundly serious. Women who lack necessary sexual knowledge often experience heightened anxiety and stress, driven by deep uncertainty about their bodies, relationships, and sexual expectations. This uncertainty can create a pervasive sense of insecurity, leading women to question their self-worth and competence in sexual situations. As a result, feelings of shame and guilt can come up, particularly if they perceive their experiences as falling short of societal norms or expectations. These negative emotions can become deeply internalized, leading to long-term impacts on mental health.

Mark et al. (2021) stated that without proper education about sexual pleasure, communication, and consent, women are more likely to experience lower sexual satisfaction. This dissatisfaction can spill over into other areas of their lives, contributing to decreased self-esteem and dissatisfaction within relationships. When sexual experiences are consistently unfulfilling or stressful, it can lead to a disconnection from partners, further exacerbating

feelings of loneliness and isolation. Mark et al. went on to say that these emotional and psychological strains significantly increase the risk of developing mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety. The stigma surrounding sexual health, particularly in conservative or judgmental environments, can intensify these issues, as women may feel unable to discuss their concerns openly or seek support. The isolation accompanying these experiences can deepen the emotional toll, making recovery more difficult. This highlights the urgent need for comprehensive sexual health education that goes beyond basic biological information to include discussions on sexual pleasure, communication, consent, and emotional well-being. Such education empowers women with the knowledge and confidence to navigate their sexual lives safely, reduces the likelihood of mental health issues, and fosters healthier, more satisfying relationships. Although sexual violence affects everyone, some populations are more likely to experience higher rates of sexual violence, in particular the LGBTQ+ Community.

### ***Implications for LGBTQ+ Individuals***

Sexual health education is essential for everyone, but it is especially crucial for LGBTQ+ individuals due to their unique needs and challenges. Effective sexual health education should go beyond basic biological information and encompass aspects of sexual pleasure, communication, consent, and emotional well-being. This comprehensive approach not only helps individuals make informed decisions but also fosters safer, healthier, and more satisfying relationships (Action Canada, 2020b; Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021; O'Farrell et al., 2021).

**Gaps in Sexual Health Education.** Rabitte (2020) has explained that traditional sexual health education often centers on heterosexual and cisgender norms, marginalizing LGBTQ+ experiences in the process. This heteronormative focus can leave LGBTQ+ individuals feeling excluded or invisible, leading to a significant lack of information regarding their specific sexual

health needs. As a result, these individuals often face substantial gaps in their education, such as not receiving adequate information about safe sex practices relevant to same-sex relationships, hormone use, or the unique challenges surrounding mental health and sexuality. These omissions can lead to higher risks of negative health outcomes, including STIs, mental health issues, and barriers to seeking healthcare. In addition to this, when information about LGBTQ+ individuals is not shared, it limits the education of heteronormative teens, fostering narrow-minded thinking and potentially contributing to prejudice, discrimination, and even violence against LGBTQ+ people (Blackburn et al., 2023).

**Violence and Vulnerabilities for LGBTQ+ Individuals.** LGBTQ+ individuals often face ongoing cultural stigma and prejudice, which marginalizes them and increases their vulnerability to sexual violence. This stigma manifests in various forms, including discriminatory attitudes, hate crimes, and microaggressions (Action Canada, 2020b; Blackburn et al., 2023). According to Blackburn et al. (2023), it is critical for the vulnerabilities faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly transgender and non-binary people to be addressed, as they experience significantly higher rates of sexual violence compared to their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts.

Frost and Meyer (2009) have highlighted that the fear of facing further discrimination or not being believed often prevents LGBTQ+ survivors from coming forward, contributing to the underreporting of sexual violence and leaving them without the support they need. Additionally, internalized homophobia and transphobia can exacerbate these challenges, severely undermining self-esteem and a sense of personal safety. When LGBTQ+ individuals internalize negative societal messages about their identities, they may experience feelings of shame, guilt, and self-rejection, which further complicate their ability to assert boundaries in relationships or resist

abusive behaviour. Frost and Meyer further stated that consequently, LGBTQ+ individuals may hesitate to recognize or report instances of sexual violence, believing they somehow deserve mistreatment or fearing additional judgment. This struggle with self-acceptance and self-worth not only increases their vulnerability to sexual violence but also isolates them from seeking essential support. For those grappling with internalized homophobia or transphobia, emotional and psychological barriers to accessing resources—such as counseling, support groups, or basic healthcare—are often higher, leaving them at greater risk for continued harm.

Legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals remain inadequate or nonexistent in many areas, leaving them vulnerable without proper recourse when they experience sexual violence. The lack of a robust legal framework can discourage victims from reporting incidents, as they may fear their complaints will not be taken seriously or that they will face further discrimination within the legal system. Even in regions where legal protections exist, LGBTQ+ individuals encounter significant barriers when navigating the legal process. Challenges such as misgendering, a lack of understanding from legal professionals, and limited access to LGBTQ+ friendly resources often hinder their pursuit of justice and support (Tillewein et al., 2020).

LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly youth, also experience higher rates of homelessness compared to their cisgender and heterosexual peers. Economic vulnerability, often resulting from family rejection, discrimination, and limited access to resources, creates instability in their lives. Unhoused individuals are at an increased risk of sexual violence due to precarious living conditions and reduced access to safe spaces. Additionally, systemic inequities—including limited healthcare access, employment discrimination, and inadequate social services—further exacerbate the vulnerabilities of LGBTQ+ individuals. These structural inequalities contribute to cycles of instability, increasing the risk of violence (Fraser et al., 2019).

Multiple marginalizations—such as race, disability, socioeconomic status, or immigration status—can further compound the experiences of sexual violence among LGBTQ+ individuals. Those belonging to more than one marginalized group face even greater risks and encounter more significant barriers in accessing support and justice. Furthermore, victims of sexual violence often endure long-term trauma, which is intensified by stressors unique to LGBTQ+ individuals. These stressors include higher rates of mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety, which can further hinder their ability to seek help or navigate the recovery process (Tillewein et al., 2020; Veldhuis, 2022). Just as it is for women, it is essential for members of the LGBTQ+ community to understand that sexual pleasure is a fundamental aspect of comprehensive sexual health education and should be addressed in ways that are inclusive of all orientations and gender identities.

**Sexual Pleasure, Communication & Consent.** Gruskin et al. (2019) has emphasized that for LGBTQ+ individuals, learning to experience and articulate pleasure is essential for building healthy sexual relationships. As such, it is particularly important for sexual health education to include a diversity of sexual experiences and preferences, enabling individuals to explore and understand their bodies and desires in a positive and affirming way. Equally important is the ability to communicate effectively about sexual needs, boundaries, and desires, which is critical for maintaining healthy relationships. LGBTQ+ individuals often face unique challenges, such as societal stigma or internalized shame, that make openly expressing their needs more difficult. Developing strong communication skills empowers individuals to negotiate sexual activities with partners, fostering greater intimacy and relational satisfaction. Sexual health education programs should provide tools and strategies for discussing these topics openly and respectfully, thereby enhancing the overall well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Understanding consent is a cornerstone of sexual health, but its practice can vary depending on the relationship and context. For LGBTQ+ individuals, especially those in non-normative relationships, consent often involves navigating complex dynamics related to power, identity, and societal expectations. Comprehensive sexual health education should address these nuances, emphasizing that consent is an ongoing, enthusiastic, and informed agreement applicable to every interaction (Action Canada, 2020b; Gruskin et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2020). Emotional well-being also plays a critical role in the sexual health of LGBTQ+ individuals, as factors such as discrimination, stigma, and social isolation can profoundly shape their experiences. Incorporating discussions of emotional health into education helps individuals recognize the impact of these challenges on their sexual and relational lives. Additionally, addressing mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression, is essential, as these issues can significantly affect sexual well-being and relationship dynamics (Frost & Meyer, 2009). The lack of comprehensive sexual health education impacts not only LGBTQ+ individuals but also boys and men. Kim et al. (2023) argued that such programs often fail to address the emotional and relational needs of boys and men, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and leaving them ill-equipped to navigate healthy relationships and sexual well-being.

### ***Implications for Boys***

A lack of comprehensive sexual health education negatively impacts boys in numerous ways, affecting their emotional, physical, and relational well-being. Without proper education on consent, many boys grow up with a limited understanding of how to navigate sexual boundaries in relationships, leading to confusion about respectful behaviour, unhealthy dynamics, and even unintentional harm to partners. Teaching consent as an ongoing, mutual, and enthusiastic

agreement is crucial for fostering healthy attitudes toward relationships and boundaries (Action Canada, 2020b; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Leung et al., 2019; Schneider & Hirsch, 2020).

Traditional sex education also tends to reinforce harmful gender stereotypes that portray men as aggressive, emotionally detached, and always desiring sex, pressuring boys to conform to rigid ideas of masculinity. These stereotypes can create feelings of inadequacy or pressure to engage in sexual activities before they are emotionally ready, driven by societal expectations that men should be sexually dominant or experienced (Malonda-Vidal et al., 2021; Siegel & Meunier, 2019).

**Impact of Pornography.** Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive sexual health education leaves many men and boys turning to pornography as a primary source of information about sex, which can have detrimental effects on their understanding of healthy sexual relationships. Jhe et al. (2023) and Paulus et al. (2024) emphasized that without adequate guidance, boys often absorb the unrealistic and harmful portrayals of sex depicted in pornography, where consent, communication, and emotional connection are frequently absent or misrepresented. Pornography often objectifies women, depicts aggressive sexual behaviours, and reinforces toxic masculine ideals that portray men as dominant and emotionally detached, further skewing boys' perceptions of what constitutes a respectful and consensual sexual relationship.

Jhe et al. (2023) and Paulus et al. (2024) further stated that distorted representations can lead to unrealistic expectations about sexual performance, body image, and gender roles, which may contribute to feelings of inadequacy or anxiety. Additionally, relying on pornography as a primary resource can impede the development of healthy intimacy and emotional connection in relationships. Comprehensive sexual education should include discussions about the differences between pornography and real-life sexual relationships and teaching critical media literacy to

help boys recognize the potential harm in accepting pornography as a model for sexual behaviour. By addressing these issues, comprehensive sexual education can help combat the negative impact of pornography and promote more respectful, consensual, and emotionally fulfilling sexual relationships for boys.

**Boys and Emotions.** Additionally, men and boys are often not equipped with the tools to understand or express their emotions in healthy ways. Comprehensive sexual education should address emotional well-being, intimacy, and the importance of communication in relationships. However, boys are typically taught to prioritize physical aspects over emotional connections. Many sexual health programs also neglect male sexual and reproductive health issues, failing to cover crucial topics such as male anatomy, STIs, contraception, and sexual dysfunction. This lack of information leaves boys unprepared to take responsibility for their sexual health, which can lead to risky behaviours, untreated health issues, and unintended consequences such as STIs or unplanned pregnancies (Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021; Schneider & Hirsch, 2020).

**Lack of Knowledge about Women's Bodies.** In addition to this, the way sexual health education is often delivered fails to provide boys with sufficient knowledge about women's bodies, contributing to confusion and perpetuating gendered misunderstanding in regard to menstruation, fertility, and female sexual health, which can lead to discomfort or even harmful attitudes in relationships (Leung et al., 2019; Rabbitte, 2020). Without a comprehensive understanding of women's bodies, boys may struggle to empathize with or support their female partners in matters related to sexual health. This gap in knowledge can reinforce stereotypical ideas that sexual responsibility, such as contraception and STI prevention, is solely a "woman's issue." Additionally, boys who are not taught about women's health are less likely to recognize or

address issues such as consent violations, sexual pain, or other health concerns that may affect women (Brown, 2014).

Brown (2014) emphasized that comprehensive sexual health education should include accurate and inclusive information about all genders' bodies to foster mutual understanding, respect, and empathy. By teaching boys about women's bodies and sexual health, education programs can play a crucial role in challenging gender stereotypes, improving relational communication, and encouraging shared responsibility in sexual and reproductive health.

When sexual education does not address healthy behaviours, boundaries, or emotional connection, it can perpetuate toxic masculinity, which objectifies women, normalizes aggressive behaviour, and frames sex as a conquest. This mindset fosters a culture of sexual violence and harassment, negatively affecting both men and their partners. LGBTQ+ boys face additional challenges, as traditional sexual education is often heteronormative, failing to address same-sex relationships, diverse gender identities, or the specific health needs of LGBTQ+ individuals. This gap leaves them feeling isolated and lacking the information necessary to engage in safe, healthy sexual relationships, increasing their vulnerability to risky behaviours and sexual violence (Gupta et al., 2023; Rowland, 2020).

**Mental Health Implications.** The connection between sexual health and mental health is also crucial. When boys receive limited or inaccurate information about sex and relationships, it can lead to feelings of anxiety, shame, and confusion, which in turn contribute to low self-esteem, depression, and difficulties in forming healthy attachments. Furthermore, the absence of comprehensive education represents missed opportunities to introduce positive role models who exemplify healthy and respectful attitudes toward relationships. Without these examples, boys

miss the chance to understand that masculinity can include empathy, vulnerability, and emotional intelligence (Gupta et al., 2023).

**Men and Sexual Violence.** The sexual health education rarely addresses the reality that boys and men can be victims of sexual violence, perpetuating the myth that men cannot be sexually victimized. This oversight makes it difficult for male survivors to seek help or even recognize their experiences as abuse, leaving them without the necessary support and fostering feelings of shame and isolation. Ultimately, the absence of comprehensive sexual education results in boys growing up with distorted views of relationships, sex, and gender roles. These distortions can make it harder for them to maintain healthy, fulfilling relationships as adults and may lead to struggles with communication, conflict resolution, and understanding emotional needs within partnerships, all of which impact long-term well-being and life satisfaction (Denver Men's Therapy [DMT], 2024).

It is clear that the lack of comprehensive sexual health education does a disservice to all adolescents failing to equip them with the tools necessary for healthy, respectful, and emotionally fulfilling relationships. It reinforces harmful gender norms, leaving teens uninformed about their sexual health, and ultimately perpetuates toxic masculinity. In addition to this it leaves them open and vulnerable to online sexual predators.

### ***Challenges in Navigating a Digitally Connected World***

Another critical consequence of inadequate sexual health education is the heightened vulnerability of adolescents to online sexual predators. As digital platforms become central to teenagers' social lives and exploration of identity, the lack of education addressing digital safety and sexual health leaves them exposed to significant risks. While the internet offers valuable

opportunities for connection and learning, it also presents dangers, particularly when adolescents are not equipped with the tools to navigate online interactions safely (Brayboy et al., 2018).

**Limited Awareness of Digital Consent and Coercion.** One of the key gaps in traditional sexual health education is the absence of discussions about digital consent. Adolescents may not fully understand that consent extends to virtual interactions, such as sharing personal photos or engaging in private conversations. Without guidance, they may fail to recognize coercive tactics that predators commonly use online, such as flattery, manipulation, or building false trust over time. This lack of awareness increases the likelihood of teens becoming victims of exploitation, often without realizing they are being groomed until the situation escalates (Jones & Biddlecom, 2011). Additionally, Savoia et al. (2021) stated that adolescents may struggle to identify the blurred boundaries between consensual interactions and predatory behaviours online. For instance, they may perceive unsolicited messages, repeated attempts at communication, or requests for private information as harmless rather than recognizing these as red flags. Comprehensive sexual health education that explicitly addresses these scenarios would provide teens with the knowledge to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate online interactions.

**Risks of Sharing Personal Information and Engaging in Risky Behaviours.** The Canadian Centre for Child Protection Inc. (C3P, 2017) highlighted that adolescents often underestimate the permanence and potential consequences of their digital actions, such as sharing personal information or intimate images. Without proper education, they may not understand how such information can be used against them by predators, ranging from blackmail to further exploitation. This lack of awareness can also lead to risky behaviours, such as engaging in sexting without understanding the potential for these images to be shared beyond

their intended audience. C3P stated that predators exploit this digital naïveté by encouraging adolescents to share private content or engage in behaviours that compromise their safety. For example, a predator might pose as a peer or romantic interest to gain trust, gradually pressuring the adolescent to provide photos or engage in explicit conversations. Without the tools to identify and resist these manipulative tactics, teens are left vulnerable to exploitation, which can result in lasting emotional, psychological, and social harm.

**Psychological Impact of Online Exploitation.** The psychological impact of online exploitation can be profound. Adolescents who experience online grooming or exploitation often grapple with feelings of shame, guilt, and fear, which can prevent them from seeking help. They may blame themselves for their actions, particularly if they were unaware of the manipulative strategies employed by predators. Such experiences can lead to long-term mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and difficulty forming trusting relationships (Schmidt et al., 2023). Schmidt et al. further emphasized that education about digital safety and online predators is essential to mitigating these risks. By understanding the dynamics of online manipulation, teens are better equipped to seek help and recognize that exploitation is not their fault. This education can also foster resilience by helping teens set boundaries, identify unsafe situations, and reach out to trusted adults for support.

**The Role of Comprehensive Education in Digital Safety.** Integrating digital literacy and online safety into sexual health education is crucial for preparing adolescents to navigate an increasingly digital world (Brayboy et al., 2018). Topics such as recognizing online grooming behaviours, understanding digital consent, and knowing how to report predatory activities can empower teens to protect themselves. Schools must also address the role of social media platforms and gaming communities, where many predators operate, to provide practical tools for

staying safe in these environments (Schmidt et al., 2023). By combining traditional sexual health topics with digital safety, in our sexual health education program, we can provide a comprehensive sexual health education that reflects the realities of adolescent lives. This approach empowers adolescents with this knowledge and can build healthier, more respectful relationships both online and offline, reducing their vulnerability to harm.

### **Reimagining Sexual Health Education Through a Feminist Lens**

From a feminist theoretical perspective, comprehensive sexual education extends beyond biological aspects to address power dynamics, challenge gender norms, promote equality, and ensure that individuals of all genders and sexual orientations have the knowledge and skills to navigate relationships and sexuality in healthy, consensual, and empowering ways. Feminist theory advocates for a holistic, inclusive, and intersectional approach that prioritizes well-being, autonomy, and agency for everyone (Corinna, 2007). This perspective emphasizes the centrality of consent in sexual education, framing it as an ongoing, enthusiastic, and mutual agreement. It also explores various dimensions of consent, including recognizing verbal and non-verbal cues, understanding how power dynamics influence consent, and respecting boundaries. A feminist lens also challenges power structures, encouraging students to critically examine how societal norms related to gender, race, class, and sexuality shape their perceptions and behaviors in sexual relationships. Breaking down gender roles and promoting emotional literacy for everyone is central to this approach, fostering empathy, equality, and mutual respect in relationships (McClain, 2006).

Feminist sexual education also underscores bodily autonomy, ensuring that everyone has the right to make decisions about their bodies free from coercion or pressure. It embraces a pleasure-positive approach, ensuring that discussions about sexual pleasure are inclusive,

affirming, and empowering, equipping individuals to understand and communicate their desires.

The intersectionality inherent in feminist theory ensures that marginalized voices, particularly those of LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities, are included in discussions about sexual health and agency (European Women's Lobby [EWL], 2020; Mark et al., 2021).

Additionally, feminist sexual education promotes media literacy by encouraging critical thinking about how media and cultural narratives shape ideas about sex, gender, and relationships. It teaches students to deconstruct harmful representations while promoting media that supports equality, consent, and diverse sexualities. Furthermore, the focus on health and reproductive justice includes equitable access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, ensuring individuals can make informed choices about their bodies (Scull et al., 2022). In promoting healthy relationships and mutual respect, feminist sexual education emphasizes the importance of communication, consent, and emotional intimacy in relationships rather than reinforcing power imbalances. It also works to destigmatize menstruation and sexual health, fostering openness and ensuring access to menstrual products, particularly for marginalized communities. Additionally, feminist sexual education includes discussions on preventing gender-based violence, teaching strategies for bystander intervention and recognizing abuse, while promoting safe spaces where students can openly discuss these issues (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2024; Mark et al., 2021).

From a feminist theory perspective, comprehensive sexual education is holistic, inclusive, and grounded in social justice. It seeks to empower individuals with the knowledge and skills to navigate relationships and sexuality in ways that prioritize mutual respect, consent, and equality. By challenging harmful gender norms and addressing the intersections of identity, feminist sexual education ensures that all individuals have the tools they need to make informed,

autonomous, and empowered decisions about their sexual health (EWL, 2020). Although the framework for a comprehensive sexual health education program is well understood, the likelihood of its widespread implementation remains slim due to political and religious opposition (Chavula et al., 2022). Meanwhile, as these debates persist, students continue to be harmed by inadequate education. This raises a critical question: how can we mitigate this harm in the interim? Mitigating harm and supporting comprehensive sexual health education requires collaboration among counsellors, educators, and parents, as each plays a unique and complementary role in ensuring the health and well-being of individuals, especially youth (Chavula et al., 2022; SIECCAN, 2019).

### ***Role of the Counsellor***

Counsellors are essential in creating environments where open and honest dialogue about sexual health is normalized and free from judgment. This is particularly important because many individuals experience discomfort or fear when discussing sexual health topics, often due to societal stigma or personal trauma (Phillips, 2022). Counsellors provide a safe, nonjudgmental space for clients to express concerns about their sexual health, relationships, and experiences with trauma. By fostering such spaces, counsellors can help clients explore sensitive issues like consent, boundaries, and sexual identity, which are often overlooked in broader discussions (Podolan & Gelo, 2023). These supportive environments not only encourage clients to share their struggles but also empower them to seek appropriate resources, whether medical information, therapeutic interventions, or legal advocacy (PHAC, 2024).

Beyond creating supportive spaces, counsellors play a proactive role in advocating for comprehensive sexual health education within schools and communities. Many sexual health curricula remain limited in scope, often neglecting topics such as healthy relationships, consent,

and the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ individuals. With their expertise in the psychosocial aspects of sexuality, counsellors are well-positioned to advocate for more inclusive and well-rounded curricula (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021). This advocacy includes addressing topics such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs), contraception, and sexual autonomy. By doing so, counsellors help ensure that students are equipped not only with factual information about sexual health but also with an understanding of its emotional and relational dimensions.

Counsellors can also integrate sexual health education into therapeutic settings, which is critical because sexual health and mental health are deeply interconnected (Leung et al., 2019, WHO, 2023). Many clients may be unaware of how their sexual health affects their emotional well-being or how their relationships impact their mental health. For example, unresolved issues related to sexual trauma, lack of sexual confidence, or confusion about sexual identity can manifest as anxiety, depression, or relationship difficulties. By addressing sexual health within therapy, counsellors help clients explore these connections and work toward healing. This holistic approach enables individuals to better understand themselves and make informed decisions about their sexual health and relationships (Choi et al., 2023).

A key aspect of a counsellor's role in mitigating harm is the application of trauma-informed care. Sexual trauma, in particular, can leave long-lasting psychological scars, impacting an individual's sense of safety, trust, and bodily autonomy. Trauma-informed care involves not only addressing the traumatic event but also ensuring that the approach to sexual health education is sensitive to past trauma. This includes recognizing potential triggers, offering choices and control during discussions, and empowering individuals to regain a sense of autonomy over their bodies. In practice, this may involve allowing a survivor of sexual violence

to set the pace of discussions or providing resources to manage their trauma in a way that feels safe and supportive. The overarching goal is to prevent re-traumatization during discussions about sexual health while empowering survivors to reclaim their bodies and sexual autonomy (Sweeney et al., 2018).

Additionally, counsellors play a vital role in breaking down the barriers of shame and stigma surrounding sexual health, particularly in communities where discussions about sexuality remain taboo. Counsellors can help shift the narrative by normalizing these conversations and educating clients on how to have open, respectful discussions about sex and relationships with their partners, families, and within their communities. This not only benefits individuals but also creates a ripple effect, fostering a culture of openness and acceptance that promotes healthier attitudes toward sex and relationships across society (AAP, 2024; Mohd Tohit & Haque, 2024).

Counsellors mitigate harm in sexual health education by providing safe spaces for discussion, advocating for more inclusive curricula, integrating sexual health into therapeutic practices, and applying trauma-informed care. Their role is fundamental in ensuring that individuals receive the emotional support and factual information needed to make empowered, informed decisions about their sexual health, relationships, and overall well-being. Through their efforts, counsellors contribute to a broader cultural shift toward healthier, more open conversations about sexuality, consent, and respect (Leung et al., 2019; Menschner & Maul, 2016). However, counsellors cannot undertake this work alone; it requires collaboration and active support from others within the education system, such as teachers or educators, to drive the necessary changes in sexual health education.

### ***Role of Educators***

Educators play a central role in mitigating harm and supporting comprehensive sexual health education by delivering inclusive, well-rounded curricula that empower students to make informed, healthy decisions. Their involvement extends beyond providing information; they help shape students' understanding of their bodies, relationships, and identities. By fostering an educational environment that is open, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse needs of students, educators lay the foundation for a more informed and equitable society (AAP, 2024; Action Canada, 2020b; Vancouver Coastal Health [VCH], n.d.).

A key responsibility of educators is to deliver comprehensive, inclusive curricula covering a wide range of essential topics that goes beyond what is currently mandated, including anatomy, consent, contraception, STI prevention, healthy relationships, and LGBTQ+ inclusion. Comprehensive sexual health education incorporates emotional, relational, and social dimensions as well. For example, teaching students about consent involves more than understanding "yes" or "no" in a sexual context; it encompasses recognizing boundaries, communicating effectively, and respecting others' autonomy. By addressing these topics, educators ensure students are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate relationships in a healthy, respectful way (Leung et al., 2019; SIECCAN, 2019; WHO, 2023).

Incorporating LGBTQ+ inclusion into sexual health education is particularly important. As previously mentioned, the current sexual health curriculum in Canada fails to address the unique experiences and needs of LGBTQ+ students, leaving them feeling excluded or invisible. Educators can address this gap by ensuring the curriculum reflects diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. This approach provides LGBTQ+ students with relevant information about their sexual health and fosters a culture of acceptance and respect among all students. Inclusive

education challenges heteronormative assumptions and creates an environment where diversity is celebrated rather than marginalized (Action Canada, 2020a; O'Farrell et al., 2021).

Beyond delivering factual content, educators also play a critical role in helping students critically analyze media and societal messages about gender norms, relationships, and sexuality. Students are often exposed to media portrayals that reinforce harmful stereotypes, unrealistic expectations, and unhealthy power dynamics in relationships. By teaching media literacy, educators empower students to question these portrayals and understand how they shape perceptions of sex and relationships. For instance, students can learn to identify media that portrays men as dominant and women as passive or that idealizes certain relationships in ways that do not reflect reality. Developing these critical thinking skills helps students challenge harmful narratives and foster healthier, more balanced views of relationships and gender roles (Gruber & Grube, 2000; Suryajaya & Ortega, 2022).

Much like counsellors, educators can play a role in fostering open dialogue in the classroom. Sexual health topics are often surrounded by stigma and silence, making it difficult for students to ask questions or express concerns. By creating a classroom culture where discussions about sexual health are normalized and welcomed, educators reduce stigma and encourage engagement. Open dialogue allows students to ask questions and share their thoughts without fear of judgment. This approach also helps students feel more comfortable discussing these topics in other settings, such as with peers, family members, or healthcare providers. Normalizing these conversations is key to creating an informed and supportive environment for students as they navigate their sexual development (Tam, 2020).

Educators can also be instrumental in reducing stigma around sexual health by promoting an inclusive and supportive environment. When students feel seen and respected in the

classroom, they are more likely to feel confident discussing and exploring their sexual health. Educators can help dismantle shame surrounding topics like menstruation, contraception, and sexual identity, making it easier for students to seek information and support. By addressing sexual health education respectfully and matter-of-factly, educators demonstrate that these are important, natural aspects of life deserving thoughtful consideration rather than secrecy or embarrassment (AAP, 2024; VCH, n.d.).

Engaging with communities helps educators understand cultural, social, and religious contexts that influence students' perspectives on sexual health. This enables them to tailor their approach to respect these influences while promoting comprehensive education. Educators can also collaborate with parents and communities to create a comprehensive, consistent approach to sexual health education. While schools are crucial for delivering factual, structured information, parents and communities reinforce these messages. By partnering with parents, educators can ensure classroom teachings align with the values and information shared at home, fostering continuity and consistency. (Lee & Gu, 2024; Leung et al., 2019).

### ***Role of Parents***

Parents play an equally crucial role in supporting comprehensive sexual health education by creating a home environment where open and ongoing conversations about bodies, relationships, and consent are normalized. Initiating these discussions early in a child's life lays the groundwork for healthy communication about sexuality as children grow and face new experiences. These conversations should not be viewed as a one-time "talk" but rather as part of an evolving dialogue that adapts to the child's age, maturity, and developmental needs. By being approachable and nonjudgmental, parents foster an atmosphere where their children feel

comfortable asking questions or expressing concerns about their sexual health, relationships, or bodily changes (Action Canada, 2023; Saskatchewan Prevention Institute, 2017).

Modeling healthy, respectful relationships in their own lives is one of the most powerful ways parents can influence their children's understanding of relationships. Children learn not only from what they are told but also from what they observe. By demonstrating respectful communication, mutual respect, and boundary-setting in their own relationships—whether with a partner, family members, or friends—parents provide real-life examples of healthy relationships. This modeling helps children internalize concepts of consent, empathy, and equality, which they can carry into their own friendships and future romantic relationships (Frosch et al., 2019).

Another essential responsibility of parents is providing accurate, comprehensive information about sexual health. As previously mentioned, in the digital age, misinformation is prevalent, making it critical for parents to offer factual, reliable information to counter myths and harmful narratives that children may encounter through peers, media, or the internet. By providing clear, accurate explanations about topics like puberty, sexual orientation, contraception, and STIs, parents equip their children to make informed, safe decisions about their sexual health. Parents who feel unequipped to address these topics can guide their children to trusted resources, such as educational books, websites, or healthcare professionals, to ensure access to accurate, age-appropriate information (Action Canada, 2024; Aventin et al., 2020; Kantor et al., 2023).

Parents also play an advocacy role by supporting school-based sexual health programs. By engaging with schools and ensuring that sexual health education aligns with their values while remaining comprehensive, inclusive, and fact-based, parents can help shape curricula that benefit their children. Open communication with educators is essential in this process. When

parents maintain a dialogue with teachers and school administrators, they ensure that the sexual health information their children receive at school complements what is being discussed at home. This alignment creates a cohesive understanding of sexual health for the child, reducing confusion and fostering consistency between home and school (Aventin et al., 2020; Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021).

Supporting comprehensive sexual health education across parents, counsellors, and educators involves advocating for programs that emphasize critical themes such as consent, healthy relationships, inclusion, and diversity. By advocating for such programs, parents ensure that children of all backgrounds and identities see themselves reflected in the curriculum, whether they identify as LGBTQ+, come from diverse cultural or religious backgrounds, or live with disabilities. This inclusive approach validates each child's unique experience and fosters a sense of belonging, which is crucial for development and self-esteem. Additionally, ensuring children have access to resources such as contraception, STI testing, and sexual health counseling empowers them to take control of their health and well-being (AAP, 2024; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Leung et al., 2019).

Parents play a significant role in teaching children about their rights and bodily autonomy, emphasizing that they have the right to make decisions about their bodies and relationships. This education is key to empowering young people to advocate for themselves, whether by setting personal boundaries, seeking help when they feel unsafe, or navigating healthcare and legal systems when needed. Encouraging children to advocate for themselves instills confidence and agency, essential tools for maintaining healthy relationships and protecting their sexual health (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016; Simperingham, 2017).

In essence, counsellors, educators, and parents working together can equip young people with the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to make informed, safe, and healthy decisions about their sexual health. This collaborative effort fosters a unified culture of respect, consent, and well-being, ensuring that children grow into adults who value healthy relationships and sexual autonomy. By modeling, educating, and advocating, parents—alongside counsellors and educators—contribute to a future where sexual health is approached with openness, inclusivity, and empowerment (Leung et al., 2019; Tam, 2020).

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have examined the challenges arising from inconsistent sexual education, particularly how patriarchal influences in the current system create gaps that negatively affect youth—especially girls, the LGBTQ+ community (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017)—as well as boys (Watkins et al., 2020). I also discussed how these gaps leave young people more vulnerable to online sexual predators, who exploit their lack of knowledge and put their safety at risk. Furthermore, I highlighted what is needed for a truly comprehensive sexual education program, grounded in a feminist theoretical framework (Corinna, 2007). This calls for a curriculum that is inclusive, equitable, and empowering—one that challenges traditional gender norms and acknowledges the full spectrum of sexual identities and orientations. This framework dismantles the harmful structures that perpetuate inequality (Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021). Additionally, this chapter emphasized the pivotal roles of educators, parents, and counsellors in mitigating the harms caused by inadequate sexual education. These individuals play a critical role in shaping young people’s understanding of their bodies, relationships, and rights. By equipping them with the tools and knowledge to support comprehensive sexual education, we

can work toward a more equitable and informed society (Achen et al., 2023; Bakaroudis, 2014; Phipps, 2008).

### **Chapter 3: Discussion and Applied Practices**

The purpose of this capstone was to investigate how the lack of comprehensive sexual education in Canada had contributed to harmful power imbalances and limited the sexual autonomy of marginalized groups. It sought to address how gaps in educational approaches, influenced by patriarchal structures, left youth vulnerable and inadequately prepared to navigate issues of sexual health and safety. This work advocated for a feminist theoretical framework to guide the development of inclusive, equitable, and empowering sexual education programs that challenged traditional gender norms and acknowledged diverse sexual identities. Additionally, it emphasized the critical roles of educators, parents, and counsellors in fostering an informed and equitable society.

#### **Discussion**

In the first chapter, I explored the numerous ways in which Canada's sexual health education system is failing our youth. By examining the intricate interplay of political influences, religious ideologies, and the pervasive double bind surrounding sex in society, I highlighted how these factors have coalesced to create a system that inadequately addresses the developmental and relational needs of adolescents (Action Canada, 2020b). The conflicting messages arising from these forces have fostered a confusing and contradictory environment, one in which young people are left without the tools to navigate the complexities of healthy relationships, personal boundaries, and sexual autonomy. This fragmented and inconsistent approach not only falls short of empowering youth but also perpetuates harmful cycles of misinformation, stigma, and silence, ultimately leaving adolescents more vulnerable to negative outcomes (Tam, 2020).

In the second chapter, I examined the specific harms caused by the gaps in sexual education, focusing on their disproportionate impact on key subgroups: girls, LGBTQ+

individuals, and boys. For girls, the lack of comprehensive sexual education often reinforces harmful gender norms, leaving them more vulnerable to coercion, exploitation, and sexual violence (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). LGBTQ+ youth, already marginalized in many areas of their lives, face unique challenges due to the heteronormative framing of sexual education, which often erases their identities and fails to address their specific needs, further alienating them from vital resources (Action Canada, 2020b; Blackburn et al., 2023). Boys, too, are negatively impacted by societal expectations that suppress emotional intelligence and fail to emphasize respectful, consent-based interactions, leading to gaps in their understanding of healthy relationships.

I also explored the long-term consequences of these deficiencies, including perpetuated power imbalances, restricted sexual autonomy, and diminished self-esteem. One particularly concerning consequence is the increased vulnerability of youth to online sexual predators. Without adequate sexual education, young people are less likely to recognize inappropriate behaviour, understand digital safety, or establish boundaries in online interactions. This lack of awareness, combined with the widespread use of social media and other digital platforms, creates a dangerous environment where predators can exploit their naivety. Comprehensive sexual education could equip youth with the tools to navigate online spaces safely, recognize red flags, and seek help when needed, thereby reducing their susceptibility to such threats.

Drawing on a feminist lens, I proposed how to mitigate such threats with what a truly comprehensive sexual health education framework could look like—one that prioritizes inclusivity, equity, and empowerment. This framework would provide youth with a holistic understanding of sexual health, encompassing not only biology but also consent, boundaries, and respectful communication. Such an approach would equip adolescents with the knowledge and

confidence to foster healthy, fulfilling relationships. I also emphasized the critical roles that parents, educators, and counsellors play in mitigating the harm caused by current deficiencies. By actively engaging with young people and addressing these gaps, they can provide a more balanced and supportive foundation for sexual health education.

One of the most significant barriers to achieving this vision, however, lies in the lack of preparedness among parents, educators, and counsellors themselves. Many adults grew up within the same flawed system of sexual education, leaving them ill-equipped to discuss these topics openly or effectively. Studies show that feelings of discomfort, embarrassment, and inadequate knowledge often prevent adults from engaging in meaningful conversations about sexual health with the younger generation (Chavula et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2019). These challenges perpetuate a cycle of silence and misinformation, further exacerbating the issues faced by today's youth (Action Canada, 2020b; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Leung et al., 2019; Schneider & Hirsch, 2020).

To address this pervasive barrier, I propose an eight-week group designed to empower parents with the skills, resources, and confidence to talk about sexual health with their children. This program will offer a safe, supportive space for parents to unlearn harmful myths, build their knowledge base, and practice having these conversations in age-appropriate and inclusive ways. By breaking the cycle of misinformation and fostering open communication, this initiative aims to create a ripple effect—equipping parents to support their children in making informed, confident decisions while fostering a culture of openness and understanding within families and communities (Action Canada, 2020b).

### **Applied Practices: Empowering Parents to Talk About Sexual Health**

This eight-week workshop series is thoughtfully designed to empower parents with the tools, knowledge, and confidence needed to engage in open, age-appropriate, and inclusive conversations about sexual health with their children. Each two-hour session builds on the previous one, fostering a supportive, judgment-free environment that encourages learning, self-reflection, and growth. The workshop aligns with the key areas discussed in chapter two, where the elements of a feminist theory, comprehensive sexual health education were explored in depth. To enhance engagement and practical application, the workshop incorporates interactive components such as icebreakers, group discussions, and hands-on activities, complemented by curated resources for parents to take home and continue their learning journey. These activities are paired with psychoeducation around sexual health, providing parents with both the knowledge and practical strategies needed to address these important topics effectively.

The goal is to create a safe and welcoming environment where parents feel encouraged to fully engage, share their experiences, and embrace vulnerability. This sense of openness is crucial for building the trust and connection necessary to have meaningful and empathetic conversations with their children (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). By the end of the workshop, parents will not only acquire valuable insights but also develop the confidence and skills to approach their children's sexual health education in a positive, informed, and impactful way.

#### ***Week One: Understanding Sexual Health and Overcoming Barriers***

The first week sets the foundation for the workshop by helping parents understand the broad scope of sexual health and identify the barriers that may prevent them from engaging in open conversations with their children. The session begins with an overview of what sexual health truly encompasses, going beyond biology to include emotional, relational, cultural, and

societal aspects. Participants will learn how sexual health education contributes to overall well-being, fostering self-awareness, mutual respect, and informed decision-making.

The session begins with an interactive presentation that outlines the components of sexual health, emphasizing its critical role in fostering healthy relationships and personal autonomy. This presentation covers key topics such as physical health, emotional well-being, boundaries, consent, and the importance of inclusivity in discussions surrounding gender and sexuality. Participants will then address common misconceptions and fears about discussing sexual health, including the belief that such conversations might encourage early sexual activity. By exploring evidence-based insights, they will challenge these myths and gain a deeper understanding of the positive outcomes that result from open and honest communication.

Group discussions will provide parents with an opportunity to reflect on their own upbringing and experiences—or lack thereof—with sexual health education. In small, supportive groups, participants can share personal barriers, such as discomfort, embarrassment, or a lack of knowledge, and explore how these obstacles have shaped their approach to discussing sexual health with their children. This reflection sets the stage for a brainstorming session led by myself as the facilitator, where parents will consider the importance of these conversations. Topics will include fostering trust, preparing children for real-world challenges, and combating misinformation. Parents will also discuss how their role as a trusted source of information can empower their children and strengthen their relationship.

To support continued learning, participants will receive a curated resource list at the end of the session. This list includes foundational sexual health concepts, reputable books, websites, and tools that parents can use to build their confidence and knowledge throughout the program. Interactive elements, such as the icebreaker activity “What I Wish I Had Learned,” will

encourage parents to reflect on gaps in their own sexual health education and identify areas they hope to address with their children. The session concludes with an open questions and answers (Q&A), offering participants the chance to seek clarification and engage in meaningful dialogue about the material covered. By the end of week one, parents will leave with a clearer understanding of the importance of sexual health education, an awareness of their own barriers, and practical tools to begin addressing them. This foundational work will set the stage for the more targeted topics in the weeks to come.

### ***Week Two: Building Comfort and Confidence***

This session is designed to help parents overcome feelings of embarrassment and discomfort when discussing sexual health, equipping them with the confidence and tools to approach these conversations with greater ease. The session emphasizes the importance of creating a safe and open dialogue with their children, breaking down the stigma that often surrounds these topics. The session begins with a brief discussion on the roots of discomfort. Parents will reflect on how societal taboos, cultural norms, and their own experiences with inadequate sexual health education have contributed to feelings of awkwardness or unease. The facilitator will guide parents in recognizing how these barriers can hinder their ability to engage in meaningful conversations and how addressing them can positively impact their children's understanding of sexual health.

Participants will then explore the importance of using accurate and inclusive terminology. A presentation will highlight how proper language—such as using anatomically correct terms for body parts—promotes clarity, reduces shame, and empowers children with knowledge. As the facilitator I will provide examples of how language can shape perceptions of sexual health and encourage parents to practice reframing conversations to ensure they are age-appropriate and

nonjudgmental. To put learning into practice, parents will engage in role-playing exercises designed to build empathy and improve communication skills. These exercises will simulate common scenarios that parents might encounter, such as responding to a child's unexpected question or addressing sensitive topics like puberty or consent. Through guided practice and group feedback, parents will develop strategies to remain calm, empathetic, and approachable, even during challenging conversations.

As a takeaway, participants will receive a "cheat sheet" that includes age-appropriate language, key topics to address at different developmental stages, and tips for starting conversations. This resource will serve as a practical guide to help parents feel more prepared and confident as they continue to engage with their children on these topics. The session concludes with a group discussion where parents can share their experiences, ask questions, and reflect on what they've learned. By the end of week two, participants will have a deeper understanding of how to approach sexual health conversations with openness and authenticity, fostering a supportive environment for their children's growth and learning.

### ***Week Three: Age-Appropriate Conversations***

This session focuses on equipping parents with the knowledge and skills to address their children's sexual health needs at different developmental stages, from early childhood through adolescence. The goal is to empower parents to provide accurate, timely, and age-appropriate information that aligns with their child's cognitive and emotional maturity. The session begins with a presentation that outlines the key milestones in a child's understanding of sexual health, including the types of questions and behaviors that typically arise at various stages. For example, early childhood might involve curiosity about body parts and basic privacy, while preteens and adolescents may require more nuanced discussions about consent, relationships, and sexual

decision-making. Parents will learn why addressing these topics proactively is essential for fostering confidence and healthy attitudes in their children.

Participants will then break into small groups for collaborative brainstorming sessions. In these breakout groups, parents will share their experiences, challenges, and concerns about discussing sexual health at specific ages. Guided by facilitators, each group will develop strategies for handling tricky questions, such as “Where do babies come from?” or “What does it mean to be gay?” Emphasis will be placed on responding with clarity, empathy, and honesty, while avoiding oversharing or providing information that is too advanced for the child’s developmental stage. A Q&A session will allow participants to address their most pressing concerns and seek personalized advice from the facilitator and fellow parents. This portion of the workshop will encourage open dialogue and provide a space for parents to gain reassurance and support as they navigate these important conversations.

As a key takeaway, parents will receive a practical, age-by-age discussion guide. This comprehensive resource will outline what children need to know at different stages, along with tips for introducing topics in a way that is accessible and relatable. The guide will also include examples of conversation starters, responses to common questions, and strategies for checking in with children to ensure they feel comfortable and informed. The session will conclude with a group reflection, where parents can share insights and lessons learned. By the end of the session, participants will feel more confident tailoring sexual health discussions to their child’s needs, setting the stage for ongoing, open communication as their children grow and develop.

#### ***Week Four: Teaching Boundaries and Consent***

This session emphasizes the critical importance of teaching children about boundaries and consent from an early age, laying the foundation for healthy relationships and personal

autonomy. Parents will learn how to introduce these values in ways that are age-appropriate, relatable, and integrated into daily life. By the end of the session, participants will feel equipped to model and reinforce these concepts with their children consistently. The session begins with an overview of boundaries and consent, highlighting why they are essential for fostering respect, safety, and trust. The facilitator will explain the difference between physical, emotional, and digital boundaries, and how teaching children to recognize, set, and respect boundaries can empower them to advocate for themselves and others. The presentation will also define consent in practical terms, emphasizing its role in everyday interactions and relationships—not just in a sexual context.

Parents will then explore practical strategies for modeling consent in daily life. Examples include asking for permission before hugging a child, respecting their "no" in non-safety-related situations, and teaching them to do the same with others. As the facilitator, I will lead a discussion on how these everyday practices normalize the concepts of autonomy and mutual respect, making them second nature as children grow. To deepen understanding, participants will engage in group discussions and role-playing exercises. In small groups, parents will analyze real-life scenarios, such as a child refusing to share a toy or an adolescent navigating peer pressure. Role-playing activities will allow parents to practice responses that validate boundaries and reinforce consent, helping them build confidence in handling these situations effectively.

A key component of the session is addressing common challenges parents may face, such as dealing with family members who dismiss a child's boundaries or navigating cultural norms that conflict with consent education. The facilitator will provide practical tips and language parents can use to advocate for their children while maintaining respectful relationships with others. As a takeaway, participants will receive a comprehensive resource handout on consent

education. This handout will include age-appropriate language for discussing consent, tips for reinforcing boundaries in various contexts, and a list of books and media that support these lessons. The resource will also include conversation prompts to help parents check in with their children about boundaries and consent in an ongoing manner. The session concludes with a reflective discussion, where parents can share their insights, challenges, and takeaways from the activities. By the end of the session, participants will have a clear understanding of how to instill the values of boundaries and consent in their children, fostering a culture of respect and empowerment within their families.

### ***Week Five: Navigating Technology and Sexual Health***

In this session, the focus shifts to the intersection of technology and sexual health, recognizing the significant role that digital platforms play in shaping the experiences and knowledge of today's youth. As children and teens increasingly engage with the online world, it is vital for parents to understand both the risks and opportunities presented by technology and how they can guide their children toward safe and informed digital behaviour. The session begins with an overview of the digital landscape, including the ways children and teens typically interact with technology—social media, gaming platforms, messaging apps, and online content. The facilitator will highlight how these spaces can provide opportunities for education, connection, and self-expression but also pose risks such as exposure to harmful content, cyberbullying, and exploitation.

Parents will then delve into three key topics to address the complexities of technology and sexual health. First, the session will explore the issue of online predators, providing an overview of common tactics such as grooming and catfishing, along with the warning signs parents should watch for. The facilitator will use case studies to illustrate real-life scenarios,

helping parents understand how to approach conversations about online safety in a way that empowers children rather than instilling fear. The focus will be on equipping children to recognize red flags, establish boundaries, and seek help when necessary. Next, the session will address the prevalence of pornography online and its potential influence on young people's perceptions of relationships, consent, and body image. At this point the facilitators will guide parents in developing age-appropriate approaches to this sensitive topic, emphasizing the importance of critical thinking and media literacy. Parents will learn how to help their children differentiate between fantasy and reality while fostering an open dialogue that allows for questions and clarifications without judgment.

The third key topic is sexting and digital boundaries. I as the facilitator, will discuss the risks associated with sexting, such as loss of privacy, legal implications, and emotional consequences. Parents will be introduced to strategies for setting clear expectations around digital behaviour, focusing on the importance of consent, respect, and self-awareness in digital communication. To reinforce these lessons, parents will participate in interactive activities, including group discussions and scenario-based problem-solving. These exercises will provide practical experience, such as how to respond if a child receives an inappropriate message or if a teenager seeks guidance after encountering harmful content online. By practicing these scenarios in a supportive environment, parents will build their confidence in navigating complex digital issues while fostering open, nonjudgmental communication with their children.

As a takeaway, parents will receive a Digital Safety Checklist. This comprehensive resource will include tips for setting boundaries around screen time and app usage, tools and resources for monitoring online activity while respecting privacy, conversation starters to facilitate open discussions about digital experiences, and guidance on creating a family

technology use agreement to establish shared expectations. These tools aim to help parents create a balanced approach to technology use that prioritizes safety, autonomy, and healthy exploration. The session concludes with a reflective discussion, where parents can share their concerns, insights, and strategies for navigating technology with their children. By the end of the session, participants will feel more equipped to guide their children through the complexities of the digital world, fostering a balance between safety, autonomy, and healthy exploration.

### ***Week Six: Gender and Sexuality***

This session is dedicated to equipping parents with the tools and understanding needed to engage in inclusive, affirming conversations about gender identity, sexual orientation, and challenging societal gender stereotypes. By fostering openness and acceptance, parents can create a supportive environment where all children, including those who identify as LGBTQ+, feel seen, valued, and safe to express their authentic selves. The session begins with an overview of the key concepts of gender and sexuality, breaking down terms such as gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and cisnormativity. The facilitator will address common misconceptions and highlight the importance of affirming language, emphasizing that understanding and respecting these concepts is crucial for children's mental health and self-esteem. To support this learning, participants will receive a comprehensive glossary of gender and sexuality terms, which will serve as an ongoing reference. Parents will then participate in interactive exercises designed to build empathy and deepen their understanding of the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth. For instance, they may engage in perspective-taking activities that explore scenarios where a child expresses their identity or faces discrimination. These exercises aim to help parents reflect on their own biases and learn how to respond in ways that affirm and validate their children's experiences.

Group discussions will offer a space for parents to share their questions, concerns, and personal experiences in navigating these topics. Facilitators will guide conversations on addressing societal gender stereotypes and breaking down harmful norms, such as the idea that boys must be tough or that girls should prioritize appearance. Parents will brainstorm strategies for challenging these stereotypes in their everyday interactions and modeling inclusivity in their language, behaviour, and values. The session will also provide practical guidance on creating a safe and welcoming home environment for all children. Topics will include how to support a child who comes out, how to advocate for inclusivity in schools and communities, and how to handle extended family or societal pushback. The facilitator will share resources such as LGBTQ+-inclusive books, media, and organizations that parents can introduce to their families to foster greater understanding and acceptance. As a takeaway, parents will leave with actionable strategies for promoting inclusivity and a deeper appreciation for the diversity of gender and sexual identities. They will also have access to the glossary and a curated list of resources to continue their education and support their children. By the end of the session, participants will feel more confident and prepared to create a home where all children feel empowered to express who they are without fear of judgment or exclusion.

### ***Week Seven: Tackling Sensitive and Challenging Topics***

This session focuses on helping parents navigate the often-challenging discussions surrounding complex sexual health topics, including STIs, contraception, and sexual violence. These subjects are essential for comprehensive sexual health education and addressing them with care and confidence can empower children to make informed, responsible decisions while fostering a sense of trust and safety within the parent-child relationship. The session begins with an overview of these topics to ensure parents have a clear and accurate understanding. The

facilitator will cover the basics of STIs, including how they are transmitted, prevented, and treated, emphasizing the importance of reducing stigma to encourage open conversations. The discussion on contraception will explore various methods, highlighting their effectiveness and role in family planning and protection. Sexual violence will be addressed sensitively, focusing on teaching children about consent, recognizing signs of coercion, and understanding their rights to bodily autonomy.

Next, parents will participate in role-playing exercises to practice having these conversations in a calm, composed, and empathetic manner. The facilitator will provide scenarios such as a teen asking about birth control, a child hearing about STIs from peers, or a young adult disclosing a difficult experience. These exercises will help parents develop responses that are nonjudgmental, supportive, and age-appropriate, reinforcing the importance of creating a safe space for open dialogue. Group feedback will offer participants the chance to refine their approach and gain confidence. To make these discussions more approachable, parents will receive a worksheet of conversation starters tailored to each topic. For example, when discussing STIs, a parent might say, “It’s important to understand how infections like these spread and how we can protect ourselves.” For contraception, they could begin with, “There are many options for preventing pregnancy, and it’s good to know how they work so you can make informed choices in the future.” When addressing sexual violence, a suggested approach is, “If someone ever makes you feel uncomfortable or crosses your boundaries, it’s okay to say no and to come talk to me about it.” These conversation starters are designed to be clear, nonjudgmental, and supportive, helping parents initiate these critical topics in a way that fosters openness and trust. These conversation starters are designed to be informative yet approachable, helping parents initiate discussions in a way that encourages curiosity and openness.

The session concludes with a group reflection, where parents can share their thoughts and ask questions about handling these sensitive topics. The facilitator will provide additional resources, including recommended books, websites, and local organizations that can support parents and children in navigating these issues. By the end of the session, participants will feel more prepared to address complex sexual health topics with their children, equipped with accurate information, practical tools, and the confidence to approach these conversations in a way that is supportive and empowering.

***Week Eight: Reflection, Goal-Setting, and Sustained Growth***

The workshop series concludes with a reflective and celebratory session that ties together the key lessons learned over the past eight weeks. This final session provides an opportunity for participants to recognize their progress, celebrate their growth, and solidify strategies for maintaining open communication about sexual health with their children. The session begins with a guided reflection, inviting parents to revisit their initial goals and concerns from the start of the program. Through group discussions, participants will share their personal journeys, including challenges they overcame, insights they gained, and the positive changes they've noticed in their confidence and approach to discussing sexual health. This shared reflection helps foster a sense of community and mutual support, highlighting the collective growth of the group. Next, parents will engage in a goal-setting activity to ensure the knowledge and skills they have developed continue to be applied. They will outline specific, actionable steps for fostering ongoing communication about sexual health, tailored to their family's unique needs and dynamics. The facilitator will guide participants in creating a personalized Family Communication Plan, which may include setting regular check-ins with their children,

establishing safe spaces for dialogue, and incorporating the use of resources and tools introduced throughout the workshop.

To support continued growth and learning, participants will receive a comprehensive resource packet containing all the materials covered in the program, along with additional tools for further exploration. The packet will include conversation guides, tips for addressing new challenges as children grow, and a list of reputable books, websites, and organizations for ongoing reference. The session concludes with a celebration of the parents' commitment to fostering open, inclusive, and supportive conversations about sexual health. Each participant will receive a Certificate of Completion as a symbol of their dedication and achievement. This moment of recognition reinforces the importance of their role as trusted guides for their children's sexual health and development. This workshop series offers a holistic and practical approach to breaking down barriers, fostering meaningful dialogue, and cultivating a culture of openness, trust, and understanding within families. By empowering parents with knowledge, skills, and confidence, it enables them to guide their children in making informed, confident decisions about their sexual health, ultimately promoting healthier relationships and well-being for future generations.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this capstone has highlighted the critical shortcomings of Canada's sexual health education system and the profound impact these deficiencies have on youth. Through an examination of the complex interplay of political, religious, and societal factors, it became clear that the current system fails to address the developmental and relational needs of adolescents. This failure perpetuates harmful cycles of misinformation, stigma, and silence, leaving young people ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of healthy relationships, personal boundaries,

and sexual autonomy. The consequences of this fragmented approach are far-reaching, disproportionately affecting subgroups such as girls, LGBTQ+ youth, and boys, while increasing the vulnerability of all adolescents to negative outcomes, including online exploitation.

This capstone has also outlined a vision for a truly comprehensive sexual health education framework that prioritizes inclusivity, equity, and empowerment. Such a framework would go beyond biological aspects to include essential topics such as consent, boundaries, and respectful communication, equipping youth with the tools they need to foster healthy, fulfilling relationships. Importantly, it emphasized the vital roles of parents, educators, and counsellors in bridging the gaps left by the current system, underscoring the need for these stakeholders to engage actively in providing a more supportive foundation for sexual health education.

Recognizing that many adults lack the preparation and confidence to address these topics due to their own inadequate education, this capstone proposes an eight-week parent group designed to empower parents with the skills and resources needed to have meaningful conversations about sexual health with their children. By providing a safe and supportive environment for parents to unlearn myths, build knowledge, and practice age-appropriate and inclusive communication, this program aims to break the cycle of silence and misinformation. Ultimately, it seeks to create a ripple effect, fostering a culture of openness, trust, and understanding within families and communities. By addressing these systemic and generational gaps, we can empower youth to make informed, confident decisions and build a healthier, more equitable society for future generation

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