



SERC Responds to Calls to Ban 2STLGBQ+ and Sexual Education Books

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Winnipeg, MB- Sexual health education has a history of being contested, debated, and questioned, and this continues to happen in the present day. On May 1, the CBC published an article detailing a recent Southwestern Manitoba movement targeting puberty and sexual health books for children and youth at the South Central Regional Library in Winkler. We know this is happening in other places in Manitoba too. For example, at a recent Brandon School Division board meeting, there was a recommendation made by a former school board trustee to remove books that address gender identity and sexual health from BSD school libraries. As leaders in sexual health education in Manitoba, we at the Sexuality Education Resource Centre (SERC) would like to stress the vital role of comprehensive sexuality education in the lives of children and young people and, by doing so, clarify the misinformation in these campaigns.

Comprehensive Sexual Education is a right and has proven to be an essential part of health care to promote positive health outcomes and prevent negative ones. Comprehensive Sexuality Education, or CSE, is a way of understanding and teaching human sexuality and reproductive health that recognizes the mental, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality and how all aspects interconnect with the other parts of our lives. Where school sexuality education in the 80s and 90s was fear-based and focused on preventing teen pregnancy and disease, today's methods of teaching sexuality education have moved from a negative, fear-focused approach to emphasizing the importance of wellness, pleasure, and choice. The books that are in question explore these concepts. Provide name, department, phone number, and email address for subject matter expert and any other key characters in the story.



Why did the strategy for sexual health education change? The approach changed because it was recognized that we need to support healthy sexual development among children and youth proactively. Only learning how to use a condom or teaching abstinence alone does not answer young people's questions about what is happening in their lives. It does not prepare them with the skills they need to keep themselves physically safe and emotionally well. A comprehensive, strength-based approach to sexuality education recognizes the complicated, conflicting messages youth receive about how to feel, act, look, and behave.

At SERC, we connect with organizations like [SIECCAN](#) and [Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights](#), whose mission is to provide the latest research in sexual health to organizations like ours. Evidence-based research is at the core of our work, and time and time again, the evidence shows us that there are many benefits of CSE for children and youth. Research shows that the best way to provide sexual health education to youth is not to focus on risk or teach from a place of fear, but to include education about gender, power, and relationships, because these factors play big roles in shaping sexuality and sexual experiences. Over our many years of operating, youth have told us that the CSE that SERC provided had a positive impact on their lives. The outcomes for CSE go far beyond preventing sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. They also include:

- Prevention of child sexual abuse
- Prevention of dating and intimate partner violence
- Appreciation of sexual diversity, including reduced homophobic attitudes, reduced bullying and/or harassment
- Increased safer learning environments for 2STLGBQ+ youth
- Increased safety for students often targeted by those attitudes, expanded understanding of gender/gender norms
- Improved healthier relationships
- Increased empathy and respect for others
- Improved skills for managing feelings



- Improved body image and sense of self
- Increased media literacy, including media deconstruction skills

Every person has a right to receive relevant and accurate health information to make and act on important health decisions. This information needs to be accessible to people when they need it and needs to be accessible and appropriate depending on age, maturity, and capacities.

A common barrier to the delivery of CSE in public spaces, including schools, libraries, and elsewhere is the assumption that it may encourage young people to be more sexually active; this worry has driven much of the pushback against CSE and reinforced stigma around sexuality. There is no evidence to support this assumption; the opposite is true. Research shows that CSE does not increase sexual activity, sexual risk-taking behavior, or STI (Sexually Transmitted Infection)/ HIV rates. CSE leads to improved knowledge and more positive attitudes around sexuality, including increased understanding of rights within a sexual relationship, more communication with parents and caregivers about sex and relationships, and tools to better manage situations that involve risk. These factors help youth advocate for themselves and give them the tools they need to keep themselves safe and healthy. In other words, CSE does not groom children for sexual predators. A lack of representation, dignity, and agency is what really “grooms” young people, as it makes them more easily manipulated. CSE makes children and youth less vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Despite all evidence supporting CSE being beneficial to children and youth, the CBC article said that some community members in Winkler have used strong language like "grooming" and "pedophilia" to describe librarians for having CSE books on their shelves. Books that have been the object of controversy, such as *It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, Gender, and Sexual Health*, aim to proactively support healthy sexual development by giving children and youth vocabulary to identify changes and be comfortable in their bodies and gender expression throughout puberty.



These books, which we have in our own libraries, do not sexualize children or expose children to pornographic imagery; the books include illustrations on how children can expect their bodies to grow and change as they become adults.

Earlier this week, a proposal was presented to the Brandon School Division Board of Trustees that used similar language to describe books that discuss gender diversity and queer identities. Using the word “pedophilia” to describe sexual health education is harmful. It creates misinformation, fractures communities, and stigmatizes people who are already marginalized for their identities. No matter what our personal values are, we need to learn how to get along in a world with other people with views different than our own. Using this term in this false way disserves children and youth by creating fear and trivializing true child sexual exploitation. Language is important; echoing false statements harms children and youth and does not keep them safe, which is the role that having access to good, evidence-based CSE can play.

Research from UNESCO states that the best way to ensure access to high-quality information on sexual and reproductive health and rights is to include it in a written school-based curriculum that guides educators. In addition, Canada is obligated to ensure that CSE is delivered everywhere it is needed. To ensure this, CSE needs to be available to everyone. CSE in publicly funded schools requires a strong and present role for parents and caregivers; we cannot understate the vital role of parents and caregivers. Understanding what children and youth are learning in schools enables educators and families to work together to ensure CSE has the support it needs within and outside of school. The cultural context of sexual and reproductive health is rapidly changing. Teachers within a publicly funded school system are supported to stay current on the trends and the resource landscape to help children and youth as they grow. Publicly funding CSE is necessary, and access to CSE needs to be promoted beyond schools, acknowledging that youth will access this education from communities, peers, and families.



People of all ages need access to information and safe spaces to ask vulnerable questions and receive answers without judgment. To exclude subjects like gender, pleasure, and choice from sexuality education is to ignore significant aspects of how sexuality is experienced and is to knowingly leave youth underprepared and ill-equipped to look after their sexual health. CSE takes a community. Libraries cannot do it alone.

At SERC, we're committed to advocating for the delivery of Comprehensive Sexuality Education in all schools throughout the province of Manitoba and supporting service providers, parents, and caregivers in maintaining an accessible youth sexual health curriculum. Please join us in supporting public libraries like the South Central Regional Library for keeping comprehensive sexuality education books on their shelves and speaking out against the censorship of books that recognize gender diversity, not only in the Brandon School Division but everywhere.

Sexuality Education Resource Centre Manitoba Inc. (SERC) is a community health agency in Manitoba and a leader in sexual health education, grounded in principles of consent, bodily autonomy, and equitable access to sexual and reproductive health services. Comprehensive sexuality education for youth and children is a fundamental and core component of our work. Without your support, we would not be able to offer this essential education to Manitobans. Please consider donating at serc.mb.ca/donate.

If you'd like to read more about the value of Comprehensive Sexuality Education, we recommend the resources below:

- [SIECCAN](#), the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada.
 - They have just released [Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Prevention within School-Based Comprehensive Sexual Health Education](#), which addresses the need to identify gender-based violence as a core health risk and how to implement it into CSE.
 - They also have [Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education](#).



- Their article Questions & Answers: Sexual Health Education in Schools & Other Settings specifically addresses the myth that sexual health education increases sexual activity.
- SIECCAN defines gender-based violence as including homophobia, transphobia, and queerphobia.
- MMIWG2S+ Calls to Justice.
- Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights. Action Canada has the following articles that are particularly relevant:
 - Is Sex-Ed a Human Right?
 - The State of Sex-Ed in Canada. This article specifically states the essential role that libraries play in getting CSE to rural communities.
- Sexual health education and different learning experiences reported by youth across Canada, an article published by the University of Toronto Press. This research asked youth what they wanted to learn about, and the findings showed that Gender and Sexual Diversity was the third most requested topic after Pleasure and Healthy Relationships.
- Homeless Hub has information about how 2STLGBQ+ youth experience discrimination that causes them to disproportionately experience homelessness.

For more details about SERC's programming in Winnipeg, please contact the Winnipeg office at 204-982-7800 or by email at info@serc.mb.ca. For details about SERC's programming in Brandon, please contact the Brandon office at 204-727-0417 or by email at brandon@serc.mb.ca.

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By respecting people's cultures and beliefs, and challenging only ideas and not people, the Sexuality Education Resource Centre has become Manitoba's primary source for sexuality and reproductive health information and advocacy. We are a pro-choice, feminist organization, committed to respectful and judgement-free safe spaces, and equitable access to fact-based information.