



Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) saves young lives in South Africa

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is a critical intervention, shown to reduce HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, gender based violence and teen pregnancies. As an organisation working with children and youth across the country, NACOSA supports the Department of Basic Education's CSE scripted lesson plans as critical to saving lives and supporting the health and wellbeing of young South Africans.

South Africa has the highest number of people living with HIV in the world at 7.7 million people. Most new HIV infections occur among young adults and adolescents, with HIV prevalence among young women nearly four times greater than that of men their age. Gender based violence and child sexual abuse are well-publicised and widespread in communities across the country – over 1 in 3 girls and boys experience sexual violence before the age of 17. Teen births remain unacceptably high and impact on learning and teaching. Only one third of girls stay in school during their pregnancy and return following childbirth.

The latest research indicates the lowering of the age of sexual debut (the age at which a person first has sex) and an increase in risky sexual behaviour amongst adolescents. HIV prevention knowledge has declined amongst learners. The number of adolescent girls who have sexual relationships with older sexual partners continues to increase.

As a country, we simply cannot afford to put our heads in the sand and ignore these issues.

While it is a parent's job to guide their children safely to adulthood, many parents or caregivers do not have the necessary conversations about sex and sexuality with their children. Parents and young people report a number of obstacles to open dialogue, including lack of knowledge and skills, as well as cultural norms and taboos. There are also many children who are growing up with little or no parental support. Schools, through the Life Orientation curriculum, therefore have a critical role to play in helping children and youth navigate their way through adolescence safely.

The core aim of CSE and the new structured lesson plans is to help learners build an understanding of concepts, content, values and attitudes around sexuality, sexual behaviour as well as leading safe and healthy lives. The Department of Basic Education has worked hard to develop a comprehensive curriculum that seeks to address real world challenges and issues faced by learners in their day-to-day lives. The global evidence base for CSE is significant and the Department of Basic Education's rigorous review of the literature found that CSE:

- Does not sexualise children
- Does not increase sexual activity, sexual risk-taking behaviour or STI/HIV infection rates. On the contrary, CSE *delays* sexual debut and promotes safe sexual behavior, increases knowledge of different aspects of sexuality and the risks of early and unintended pregnancy, HIV and other STIs.
- Decreases the number of sexual partners

- Reduces sexual risk taking
- Increases use of condoms and other forms of contraception

NACOSA works with children and youth, particularly adolescent girls and young women, to increase retention in school, decrease HIV incidence, teenage pregnancy and gender based violence. One of the ways we achieve these aims is through the provision of clear, non-judgmental information about sexual and reproductive health, working alongside schools and caregivers to ensure no young person is left behind.

Our experience over almost 20 years of working in this field has been that access to this information not only protects young people but can literally save lives.

Notes to editors:

- NACOSA is a network of over 1,900 civil society organisations working to turn the tide on HIV, AIDS and TB. NACOSA promotes dialogue, builds capacity with accredited training, mentoring and technical assistance and channels resources to support service delivery on the ground, particularly among children and youth, key populations and women and girls. NACOSA's programmes reach around 270,000 people affected by HIV, AIDS and TB annually. For more information visit www.nacosa.org.za
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