

Relationships, feelings and emotions

Introduction

In this chapter we will talk a lot about the importance of vocabulary and definitions. We, of course, offer the results of our own research, referring to thinkers, such as Brene Brown or bell hooks and do not pretend to tell the ultimate truth. We aim to raise awareness on how languages shape the concepts and how deeper understanding of certain vocabulary can help avoid conflicts and can enrich our communication.

Why do we start with friendship you might say?

When opening a topic about relationships, we would like to touch different kinds of them, see their role and importance from different prisms. Friendship is not only an important base for a more intimate relationship but also is a social network that helps young people learn about their sexuality. Friends are the ones we *go to* when we need to share something, ask for advice; it is less frequent to refer to parents and guardians (according to research) and even less – to educators (even though that is our big hope for change here).

Understanding that friends can influence one another positively and negatively can help a young person identify whether the friend they reach out for is the right person to talk to.

Reflection

Ask your group what they think the role of friends are and what are the indicators of a positive or negative influence of friends.

Do you speak openly and sincerely with one another?

What do you do if you feel that there might be jealousy involved?

How do you contrast ideas and beliefs on sexuality?

When it comes to intimate relationships, as we have already seen in the previous chapter, our values system and cultural and ethical frames play a big role here. They shape a young person's understanding of an intimate relationship: what kind of commitment it involves, what kind of sensual practices and expressions, which words name it as well.

Now, talking about words, let us identify which vocabulary we use to talk about intimate relationships.



It is very common to get confused between **attraction, desire, falling in love and love**. Let's put some clarity on it.

As a society we are embarrassed by love. We treat it as if it were an obscenity. We reluctantly admit to it. Even saying the word makes us stumble and blush... Love is the most important thing in our lives, a passion for which we would fight or die, and yet we are reluctant to linger over its names. Without a supple vocabulary, we cannot even talk or think about it directly.

Indeed, love is something so important yet so absent from debates among young people and absent from educational programmes in youth work. Not only in the context of Comprehensive Sexual Education but as a philosophical dimension of understanding life and connections within the natural world, including among humans. Whatever the reason and the background of silence about love in youth work, let's break it! It truly has revolutionary power to bring it into education.

D. Ackerman: All About Love: [LINK](#)

Attraction. Before you continue reading, make a short exercise yourself and take some time to reflect on it. From your life experience, what is attraction? What kind of attractions exist? Does it involve desire or not? Does attraction lead to anything else?

Finished? How did it go? Did you find anything surprising along the way?

Attraction is an action that evolves interest. It happens INVOLUNTARY (meaning we cannot control it) and has many variations:

- Emotional attraction (appreciation of someone who makes us feel safe, their personality might be attractive to us, their attitudes and/or shared values).
- Social attraction (status of another person, their position in the society, their recognition by others, etc).
- Attraction based on interests (professional or artistic, maybe the talents of another person might make them attractive to us).

Desire goes a bit further. It is a strong wish for something to happen, and in our case, in intimate relation – a wish for sexual contact to happen. Bodies are involved, hormones are involved, smells and tastes and some other invisible elements as well. As we can see, desire is not an unconditional component of attraction, it is part of it but attraction itself can exist without desire for sexual relationship.

Falling in love is a process, a journey of getting to know another person and involves attraction and desire. Falling in love doesn't necessarily stop anywhere on its way: even a long-term relationship couple can be experiencing falling in love every day if they invest time and energy into it. But in general terms, this period is prior to an established feeling of love, which involves other elements, such as **commitment and a conscious choice**.



Ask your group what they think about the expression *falling in love*? Is it the same in their mother tongues as in English? How do they characterise this period? Have they ever experienced clear differences between feeling attracted to someone (how?), feeling desire, and falling in love? What do they think is the difference between these feelings and love?

Interestingly, in other languages we work with (for example, Spanish or Italian) the expression *falling in love* does not involve the verb *to fall*, it rather refers to an action, to a start, using the word love as a root directly *enamorarse* (ES), *innamorarsi* (IT). The expression *to fall in love* is being criticised by some thinkers as it *reflects a peculiar attitude towards love and life itself – a mixture of fear, awe, fascination, and confusion. It implies suspicion, doubt, hesitation that is not fully reliable* as noticed by Thomas Merton. The idea is fully supported by Erich Fromm in the book *All About Love*, who believes it continues to invest into the fantasy of effortless union. Very much of the investment into the myth of Romantic Love that is being constantly represented in the media, in many movies and songs. While for Fromm, *to love somebody is not just a strong feeling – it is a decision, it is a judgement, it is a promise*. Now, imagine bringing this into a room full of young people between 15 and 17 years old. How interesting to hear their reactions!

E. Fromm: *All About love*. Page 171: [LINK](#)

Reflection

Ask your group what *love* means to them?

See how they define love through different media (drawing, collage, music, movement, or words.) Invite them to explore first and share what they think and feel and only then try to build a common ground.



To help you build it, we have collected some very interesting reflections from researchers:

*We cultivate love when we allow **our most vulnerable and powerful** selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honour the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness, and affection. Love is not something we give or get; it is **something that we nurture and grow**, a connection that can be cultivated between two people only when it exists within each one of them – we can **love others only as much as we love ourselves**. Shame, blame, disrespect, betrayal, and the withholding of affection damage the roots from which love grows. Love can survive these injuries only if they are acknowledged, healed and rare”.*

When exploring the topic of love with young people we of course should be ready for a huge diversity of opinions and influences they get from their families, friends, communities, pop culture society. But we also should be aware that we have an incredible opportunity to challenge their ways of thinking, inviting them to understand love as a transformative power, as an investment of time and commitment for the sake of deeper relationships, being a place of acceptance, mutual growth, even a spiritual one.

Connect it as well to the natural world.

Do you remember what we discussed in the previous chapter about Deep Ecology and Sexuality? Love does not and should not only be understood by young people through the prism of romantic relationships. Love is a feeling that extends through all networks of our existence. We grow in our ability to love and receive love if we also practise it with taking care of nature around us. With kindness to people, we barely know that we might meet on the bus when we go to work or study. It is a way to Belong. If you are interested in the topic of Belonging and Love and would like to discover more, we invite you to read an [article](#) from another project.

Photography taken from: [LINK](#)

B. Brown: Atlas of the Heart: Mapping meaningful connection and the language of human experience. Page 171: ISBN 9780399592553

Feelings and Emotions

As we mentioned previously, the emotional part of the neurobiological development of youth is stronger than the rational one. They are guided by their emotions and feelings all the time! Learning to recognise the feelings and emotions is crucial for them to orient better in the relationships. And again, the importance of vocabulary plays a big role here. Brene Brown and her team made research with more than 75.000 people where they asked them to identify their primary emotions depending on the situations given as examples. Surprisingly (or not) three main emotions appeared: happy, sad, and pissed off (angry in other words). The question arose from this: *is it that everything is so simple or maybe we do not get educated with a richer vocabulary to express our feelings and emotions?* The second answer was more appealing to Brown, so they



wrote a wonderful book, called *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping meaningful connection and the language of human experience* with an easy-to-read analysis of more than a hundred emotions and behaviours that they have analysed.

What is the difference between Emotions and Feelings?

Emotions are physical states that arise as a response to external stimuli.	Feelings are mental reactions and associations to emotions.
Emotions arouse before feelings.	Feelings are caused by emotions.
Emotions are physical states.	Feelings are mental associations and reactions.
Emotions can be observed through physical reactions.	Feelings can be hidden.

Graphic element taken from: pediiaa.com: *Difference between emotions and feelings*: [LINK](#).

We believe that understanding these differences helps young people to better identify their unconscious reactions to certain situations and reflect on their emotions (expressed or not expressed) and allow time and space to detect their feelings, process them and learn to express them. Learning what kind of emotions and feelings exist, naming them and playing around with them (especially through activities in non-formal learning or conversations and debates) is very beneficial for young people.

The key word here is learning.

Being *emotionally wise* requires a lot of self-work. Emotional awareness needs to be cultivated and developed to nurture connections and thus, healthy sexuality will benefit greatly from this. This is why we would like to invite you to explore further the book of B. Brown *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping meaningful connection and the language of human experience*, that we have referred to previously. We have chosen several chapters that we think are closer related to the Comprehensive Sexual Education, as those are emotions and feelings that young people of our target group can come across with. Each chapter includes definitions and very interesting reflections. It is like a road, a map that can guide.



Reflection

Chapters we propose to explore:

#Places we Go when we Compare. *Jealousy, Envy and Schadenfreude.*

#Place we Go when Things don't go as Planned. *Disappointment, Regret.*

#Place we Go when It's Beyond US. *Wonder, Confusion, Curiosity.*

#Place we Go when We're Hurting. *Hopelessness, Sadness.*

#Places we Go with Others. *Empathy, Boundaries.*

#Place we Go when Our Hearts are Open. *Love, Heartbreak, Trust, Betrayal, Hurt*

What do you think of this list? Has anything caught your attention? From our experience, going through each of the chapters has been eye-opening.

To start this work with young people we suggest you first invite them to have conversations (or individual work) about: How they identify their emotions and feelings, what helps them to do that; how they express them and if it's an easy task or not? Have a chat about the importance of developing their emotional sensitivity, becoming more aware of their challenges, of understanding others, etc.

Once you have gone through this preparation, you can start exploring some of the emotions, feelings, and behaviour step by step. Being in the place of the unknown is also very interesting, so, first, map the definitions with your group only based on their experience. Then, give them more, share what you will have learned from the Atlas of the Heart. Trust us, it is worth it!

Expressing our emotions and feelings is very important for the development of healthy relationships. Young people need to be aware though, that not all situations allow this to happen in a safe environment and vulnerability can sometimes lead to a complete panic zone, when another person rejects us, and this can become a traumatic experience.

Identifying **safe space** is a key step: *Do I feel confident and safe in expressing how I feel?* If the answer is No, we are in the wrong place. There can be many reasons for that, but the evident result is that communication cannot take place. This is so important when it comes to consent and decision making.



Families and Parenting



Photography taken from: [LINK](#)

Families play a crucial role in Sexual Education of their children. With their attention and support they can become pillars of trust for a young person. Love, caring and mutual support are important for healthy family functioning and can help build a solid network for a young person to refer to. Not always this is the case though and there are many families where sexuality is completely ignored or even tabued, never talked about, shamed and full of prejudices. We should remember that parents of many contemporary teenagers have not received comprehensive sexual education themselves, thus they might be lacking tools and knowledge on how to approach this topic with their children. Our role as youth workers is to help young people understand that misunderstanding and conflict might happen, it is not the end of the world and there are ways of how to deal with it.

Reflection

Invite young people to discuss the strategies to approach this gap. What attitudes, tools, and skills they might need to approach their parents and the discussions that might arise? What kind of support they might need and from whom?

To help you approach this, we have identified several key attitudes and skills:

- Understanding the cultural context of parents.
- Being able to listen to parents' arguments without judging them.
- Getting knowledge and being informed on young people's rights as well as needs.
- Transforming this knowledge into arguments that are respectful and clear.
- Finding solutions and compromises for both sides.

Summing up, the attitude of flexibility, openness, and kindness, with developed skills of listening and communicating respectfully and clearly are some of those elements that require reflection, learning and practice. Your role now is to help guide young people in this task!



There is no such school as *How to become a parent*. It is a biological and social transition some people go through, and the learning happens along the way. Patience, mutual acceptance, love are those milestones parenting is built on and it is very important that sexual education you offer in youth work builds bridges among parents, young people, and yourself in the role of a youth worker.

In cases when you might be working with a young person in foster care, be sure you know first who the legal guardians of this young person are. Is it the social workers, educators, or the institution itself? Who would you need to talk to if something alarming arises from the work on Comprehensive Sexual Education you are doing? Make sure you are aware of this before you start any programme on Comprehensive Sexual Education, as your self-care is also important in this process.

Conclusion

There is so much more to say about relationships, feelings and emotions, families, and parenting! Supporting young people in learning about these topics and challenging them to think critically and act responsible is not an easy task. Your role here is to inspire them, awaken their curiosity to learn more about them-selves and how they deal with their emotions and feelings for example, on how they understand such words as desire, or love, and what are their successes and challenges with their parents. Make sure you create a safe space for young people to express themselves. The opportunity to discuss these topics is priceless. If you make it fun, dynamic, with lots of tools for them to be able to follow – you can be proud of yourself! Youth work is for this, for creating change in young peoples' lives for the better.

References

- D. Ackerman: *All About Love*: [LINK](#)
- B. Brown: *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping meaningful connection and the language of human experience*. Page 171: ISBN 9780399592553
- E. Fromm: *All About love*. Page 171: [LINK](#)

