

# Skills for Sexual Health and Wellbeing in Youth Work

## Introduction

In this chapter, we will explore essential skills for promoting sexual health and well-being among young people in the context of youth work. Our aim is to provide a comprehensive framework that can be applied by youth workers in various settings, including youth centres, street youth work, schools, and international youth exchanges and events. We recognize that as youth workers, we play a vital role in the education and support of young people, and we want to share with you the necessary knowledge and tools to address these topics effectively.

With the knowledge gained from the previous chapters, we can approach the topic of sexual health by acknowledging the interplay between the multifaceted cultural factors and their impact on attitudes towards sexuality, and with an informed perspective to better navigate the complexities of sex education.

Throughout this chapter, we will focus on specific skills that will enable youth workers to foster an environment where young people can explore their sexuality, relationships, and well-being in a safe and non-judgmental space.

Through these collective efforts, we can empower young people to make informed decisions, navigate relationships with confidence, and embark on their journey towards a healthy and fulfilling sexual life. We seek to create a holistic approach to comprehensive sex education, one that respects and embraces the diversity of young people's experiences worldwide.

As we embark on this journey together, let us remember that our role as youth workers extends beyond imparting information; we also serve as advocates, listeners, and allies to the young individuals we work with.

Let us now explore the essential skills for promoting sexual health and well-being, which encompass norms and peer influence, decision-making with a focus on voice and choice, communication skills, media literacy, the responsible use of technology, and finding help and support. By integrating these skills into our youth work practices, we can foster an environment that fosters growth, understanding, and empowerment for the young people we work with.



## Understanding Norms and Peer Influence

Sexuality is a fundamental aspect of human life, and young people often seek to understand their own identities and behaviours within the context of societal norms and peer influence. We will explore the concept of sexuality, emphasizing its fluidity and diversity. Understanding the norms surrounding sexuality can help youth workers create an inclusive and non-judgmental environment that respects all individuals' experiences.

Social norms and peer influence both play significant roles in shaping individuals' attitudes, behaviours, and decision-making. Let's explore each of these factors separately.

### Social Norms

Social norms are unwritten rules and expectations that guide behavior within a specific society or group. (American Psychological Association, 2020). They are the accepted standards for how people should behave, and individuals often conform to these norms to be accepted and avoid social disapproval. Social norms can influence various aspects of life, including:

**Behavior:** how people act in different situations. For example, norms dictate appropriate behavior in public spaces, at work, or during social gatherings.

**Attitudes:** people's attitudes and beliefs about certain topics, such as politics, religion, or social issues.

**Values:** reinforce certain values within a community, shaping individuals' understanding of what is important and valued in their society.

**Gender Roles:** roles and expectations based on gender, defining how men and women should behave and what is considered appropriate for each gender.

**Cultural Practices:** guide cultural practices, rituals, and traditions within a community.

It is important to note that social norms can change over time and may vary across different cultures and societies. Challenging harmful norms and promoting positive ones can lead to progressive social change.

### Peer Influence

Peers, or individuals within the same age group or social circle, impact each other's thoughts and actions. Peer influence is a major factor in shaping behaviors during adolescence and young adulthood. Here's how peer influence can play a role:

**Behavior Adoption:** Adolescents and young adults may adopt behaviours and attitudes exhibited by their peers. This can include adopting certain fashion trends, hobbies, language, and even risk-taking behaviours.



**Social Identity:** Peers contribute to the shape of an individual's social identity. They can influence who someone chooses to associate with and how they perceive themselves within their social group.

**Decision Making:** Peer pressure can influence decision-making processes. Young people might engage in risky behaviours or make choices they would not typically make due to the desire to fit in or be accepted by their peers.

**Social Validation:** Peer approval and acceptance are powerful motivators. Many individuals seek validation from their peers, which can impact their choices and actions.

**Support and Influence:** Peers can provide emotional support, encouragement, and motivation to pursue certain goals or aspirations. Conversely, negative peer influence can lead to negative outcomes.



Peer influence is not inherently negative; it can also be positive and supportive. Encouraging positive peer relationships and fostering environments where young people feel accepted for their authentic selves can lead to healthier development and decision-making.

It is essential to recognize the impact of social norms and peer influence on young people and to provide guidance and education that promotes critical thinking, independent decision-making, and the ability to challenge harmful norms when necessary. Youth workers and educators can play a crucial role in empowering young individuals to make informed choices that align with their values and well-being.

### Tips for Youth Workers

Encourage open discussions about sexuality and challenge stereotypes.

Foster a safe space where young people can share their experiences without fear of judgment.

Address the impact of peer pressure on sexual behaviours and decision-making.

*R. Cialdini: Influence, New and Expanded: The Psychology of Persuasion: ISBN 9781665076579.*



## Decision Making – Voice and Choice:

Empowering young people to make informed decisions about their sexual health and behaviour is a crucial aspect of comprehensive sex education. We will delve into decision-making processes, emphasizing the importance of agency, autonomy, and consent. Youth workers can play a significant role in promoting self-advocacy and supporting young people in exercising their voice and choice regarding sexual matters.

Here are some key points to consider:

- 1. Consent:** Emphasize the importance of informed and enthusiastic consent in all sexual activities. Youth should be aware that they have the right to say no or stop any sexual activity at any time.
- 2. Protection and STI Prevention:** Educate young people about the use of condoms and other barrier methods as effective ways to prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies.
- 3. Contraception:** Provide information about various contraceptive methods available, such as birth control pills, Intrauterine Devices (IUDs), patches, injections, and implants. Make sure youth understand their options and where to access these methods.
- 4. Healthy Relationships:** Share and practice with young people about the components of a healthy and respectful relationship, including communication, trust, and mutual respect.
- 5. Gender and Sexual Identity:** Promote an inclusive and accepting environment where young people feel comfortable discussing their gender identity and sexual orientation. Provide resources for LGBTQ+ youth and address their specific concerns.
- 6. Sexual Decision-Making:** Encourage young people to think critically about their sexual choices, taking into consideration their emotional readiness and potential consequences.
- 7. Sexual Anatomy and Reproductive System:** Provide accurate information about sexual anatomy, the reproductive system, and how they work. Understanding one's own body is crucial for informed decision-making.
- 8. Sexual Health Services:** Inform youth about the availability of sexual health services, such as testing for STIs, access to contraception, and counselling. Point them to local clinics or organizations that can offer support.
- 9. Pleasure and Communication:** Encourage open communication about pleasure and sexual preferences in relationships. Help youth understand the importance of clear communication with their partners.



**10. Consistent Messages:** Ensure that all information shared is based on evidence-based research and avoids promoting myths or stigmatizing attitudes.

**11. Online Safety:** Address the potential risks of online sexual activities, sexting, and sharing intimate content. Educate youth about the importance of protecting their privacy and the potential consequences of sharing explicit content.

**12. Reproductive Rights:** Discuss the importance of reproductive rights and access to safe and legal abortion and family planning services. Youth should be aware of their rights and how to advocate for themselves.

**13. Sexual Health and Substance Use:** Address the risks of combining alcohol or drugs with sexual activities, as it can impair judgment and lead to risky behaviours.

**14. Support Systems:** Encourage young people to seek support from trusted adults or professionals if they have questions or concerns about sexual health.

*Talking About Sexuality in Canadian Community: Sexual Decision Making:* [LINK](#)

*See also: Options for sexual health: Sex and decision making:* [LINK](#)

Remember that discussing sexual behaviour and reproductive rights with youth requires a non-judgmental and open approach. Creating a safe space for dialogue can empower them to make healthy decisions and respect the choices of others. Additionally, it is essential to stay up to date with current information and adapt messaging to address any cultural or regional variations across Europe.

### Tips for Youth Workers

Teach young people about the importance of consent and boundaries in relationships.

Provide accurate and age-appropriate information about sexual health and contraception.

Encourage critical thinking skills to help young people navigate complex situations.

## Communication Skills – Negotiation, Refusal, and Consent

Effective communication skills are essential for establishing healthy relationships and navigating sexual encounters. We focus on sharing communication techniques, including negotiation, refusal, and the significance of enthusiastic consent. These skills empower young people to communicate their boundaries and desires clearly.

Effective communication is at the heart of fostering healthy relationships and ensuring safe and consensual sexual encounters. Developing strong communication skills is vital for young people



to navigate the complexities of intimate relationships and make informed decisions about their own bodies and boundaries.

## Negotiation

In the context of sexual health, negotiation refers to the ability to have open and honest conversations about desires, boundaries, and expectations with a partner. It is about finding common ground where both parties feel comfortable and respected.

Youth workers can facilitate role-playing activities that simulate real-life situations where negotiation is necessary. These activities help young people practice assertiveness and effective communication, preparing them to advocate for their needs in intimate relationships.

See also: *amaze.org*: [LINK](#)

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

## Refusal

Teaching young people how to say *no* confidently and respectfully is crucial. Refusal skills empower them to decline unwanted advances or activities without feeling pressured or guilty. Addressing the challenges of refusal in the digital age is especially important. Youth workers should discuss scenarios like online peer pressure, sexting, and boundary violations that can occur through digital platforms. Equipping young people with strategies to handle these situations is essential.

### Activity

Strategies to say NO assertively from Birds & Bees Training Course.

I would appreciate...

Body language to set boundaries.

Moving and create physical space.

Safe space (awareness about hierarchy and power relation in the group) from different perspectives

Share clearly needs, desires, boundaries.

Active listening. No judge other people options

Set boundaries sharing what could happen if you cross the boundaries.

Group/friends/sport mate involved to overcome critical situation.

Support system.

Standard code to underline violence (i.e. lilla point in Italy)

Put yourself at the same physical level (i.e. stand up).

I am not used to be talked like this.

The Basics of Nonviolent Communication:





- (1) Observations. “I observed.../I see.../I hear.../ I notice that...” Free from interpretation or evaluation, stay on facts, on what eyes or ears have caught.
- (2) Feelings. How you felt (emotion or sensation rather than thoughts) in relation to what you observed. “I feel...”.
- (3) Needs. Which needs (yours or someone else’s) are met or not met. What you need that causes your feelings. “... because I need/value.../... I imagine...”.
- (4) Requests “I would like.../Next time I would appreciate if...” offer suggestions and advice. Try to express requests clearly and concretely (what, who, where and when). “We are dangerous when we are not conscious of our responsibility for how we behave, think, and feel.”

## Consent

Consent is a fundamental aspect of healthy sexual relationships. It means that all parties involved willingly and enthusiastically agree to engage in any sexual activity. Understanding the importance of clear and ongoing consent is paramount.

Youth workers can promote open and non-judgmental discussions about sexual desires and preferences. Encouraging young people to communicate their desires and boundaries, as well as to respect those of their partners, creates an atmosphere of trust and respect.

Through these communication skills, young people can develop the ability to express themselves confidently, seek consent, and maintain boundaries in intimate situations. Moreover, they will be better equipped to recognize and respond to situations that might compromise their sexual health and well-being. As youth workers, your guidance in these areas can contribute significantly to the development of healthy and respectful relationships among the youth you serve.

The *tea consent* analogy is a well-known and straightforward way to explain consent. You can use this example to make the concept of consent clear and easy to understand:

See also: *Youth Empowerment: Effective Communication*: [LINK](#)

Lila Point [LINK](#)

M. B. Rosenberg: *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*: [LINK](#)



## Activity

### Making Tea and Consent

Imagine you are discussing consent with a group of young people. You can say:

Let's talk about consent using a simple example – making a cup of tea.

**No Consent:** Imagine you ask someone if they want a cup of tea, and they say, *No, thank you*. In this case, you would not make them tea because they did not give consent. You respect their decision.



**Revoked Consent:** Now, let's say someone initially wanted tea, so you start making it. But while you are preparing it, they change their mind and say, *Actually, I do not want tea anymore*. You would not force them to have it, right? You respect their decision to change their mind, even if you have already started making the tea.

**Clear and Enthusiastic Consent:** On the other hand, if they say, *Yes, I would love a cup of tea*, and they genuinely want it, that's when you make the tea. It is because they have given you clear and enthusiastic consent.

The same principles apply when it comes to any intimate activity. Consent should always be freely given, can be revoked at any time, and should be enthusiastic and clear. Just like making tea, it is about respecting someone's choice and never doing something they don't want to do. Consent is about ensuring that both people are comfortable and on the same page."

The *tea consent* analogy simplifies a complex concept and highlights the importance of respect for personal boundaries and the enthusiastic agreement of all parties involved. It is a practical way to make the idea of consent relatable and easy to remember.

### Tips for Youth Workers

Facilitate role-playing activities to practice communication skills in various scenarios. Address the challenges of communicating in the digital age, such as sexting and online relationships. Promote open and non-judgmental discussions about sexual desires and preferences.





# Media Literacy and Technology Use: Navigating the Digital Landscape

In today's digital era, young people have unprecedented access to information about sex and relationships through media and technology. The influence of media on perceptions of sexuality and body image is substantial and can significantly impact how young people view themselves and their relationships. Here, we'll explore the importance of media literacy skills in helping young people critically analyse and challenge unrealistic portrayals of sex and relationships in the media.

*Tea Consent:* [LINK](#)

*See also: Teen Talk:* [LINK](#)

*S. Livingstone, A. Blum-Ross:* Parenting for a Digital Future-How Hopes and Fears about Technology Shape Children's Lives. [LINK](#)

## Understanding Media Literacy

Media literacy involves the ability to critically assess the information presented in various forms of media, from TV shows and movies to social media and online articles. It empowers individuals to question and evaluate what they see and read, enabling them to make informed choices and interpretations. In the context of sexuality and relationships, media literacy is an essential tool for young people to navigate the digital landscape responsibly.

## Media's Impact on Perceptions

Media often perpetuates unrealistic ideals of beauty, sexuality, and relationships. Young people can be bombarded with images and messages that create unrealistic expectations and negatively affect self-esteem. Therefore, youth workers should emphasize the need for young people to critically evaluate the media they consume.

## Tips for Youth Workers

**Helping Discernment:** Encourage young people to question the credibility of online sources. Teach them how to identify reliable sources of information related to sex and relationships.

Emphasize the importance of fact-checking and verifying information before accepting it as true.

## Promoting Body Positivity and Self-esteem

Facilitate discussions about body positivity and self-esteem in the context of media influences. Encourage young people to recognize that the images they see in media often do not reflect real-life diversity. Empower them to challenge unrealistic beauty standards and appreciate their bodies for what they are.



## Responsible Technology Use

Highlight the responsible use of technology and social media for fostering healthy relationships. Discuss the potential traps of online dating, sexting, and sharing explicit content. Stress the importance of setting boundaries online, respecting others' privacy, and recognizing the risks associated with online interactions.

## Media Literacy for Gender Equality

Key to media literacy is understanding that negative and inaccurate media portrayals of men and women can be challenged to influence behaviour positively and promote gender equality.

## Young people should

Critically assess media messages about sexuality and sexual relationships, recognizing both their positive and negative influences.



Propose ways in which the media can contribute positively to promoting safer sexual behaviour and gender equality.

Recognize the potential power of media to positively impact perceptions of sexuality, sexual relationships, and gender.

Demonstrate ways to challenge gender stereotypes and inaccurate portrayals of sexuality and sexual relationships in the media.

In the context of technology use, especially social media and pornography, youth workers should facilitate discussions that address the potential benefits and drawbacks, emphasizing responsible and respectful online behaviour. By nurturing media literacy skills and promoting critical thinking, youth workers can empower young people to navigate the digital landscape with confidence and make informed choices regarding their sexual health and relationships.

*R. Hobbs: Media Literacy in Action: Questioning the Media. [LINK](#)*

*See also: Screenagers: Guidance for Digital Youth Work: [LINK](#)*

## Finding Help and Support

In the journey towards sexual health and well-being, youth workers hold a crucial role as guides and allies. Young people often turn to them when seeking help and support. In this section, we will delve into how youth workers can serve as vital resources and provide young people with the information and strategies they need to access the support they require.

## The Role of Youth Workers as Resources

Youth workers are uniquely positioned to offer guidance and assistance to young people navigating the complexities of sexual health and relationships. They are trusted figures who can provide a safe and non-judgmental space for discussions on sensitive topics. Here's how youth workers can effectively support young people:

### Familiarize with Local Services

Youth workers should take the time to familiarize themselves with local sexual health services and support organizations. Understanding the available resources ensures that youth workers can connect young people to the appropriate services when needed.

### Creating Safe and Confidential Spaces

Young people need a safe and confidential environment where they can openly discuss their concerns and questions about sexual health. Youth workers should establish a trusting relationship, assuring young people that their conversations will remain private.

### Understanding Limitations

It is essential for youth workers to recognize their limitations. While they can provide valuable guidance and support, there may be situations that require specialized expertise. Youth workers should be aware of when to refer young people to professionals with specific knowledge in sexual health, mental health, or other relevant areas.



### Tips for Youth Workers

**Build a Network of Support:** Youth workers can collaborate with local sexual health organizations, counsellors, and healthcare providers to establish a network of support. This network ensures that young people have access to a wide range of services and expertise.

## Empower Young People to Seek Help

Encourage young people to take the initiative in seeking help and support when they need it. Youth workers can provide information on how to access services both online and offline, including clinics, hotlines, and counselling services.

### Normalize Seeking Help

Reduce the stigma around seeking help for sexual health and well-being issues. Youth workers can facilitate discussions about the importance of seeking support when faced with challenges or questions related to sexual health.

See also: *European Youth Centre Budapest: Young People's Intercultural Dialogue on Sexuality, Politics and Human Rights*: [LINK](#)

### Ongoing Education

Stay updated on the latest information and resources related to sexual health. Ongoing education enables youth workers to provide accurate and up-to-date information to young people.

### Emphasize Inclusivity

Ensure that support services are inclusive and accessible to all young people, regardless of their background, identity, or orientation. Create an environment where everyone feels welcome and respected.

By being informed, empathetic, and responsive, youth workers can make a lasting impact on the lives of the youth they serve, ensuring that they have the resources and guidance to navigate the complexities of sexual health and relationships successfully.

## Conclusion

As youth workers, you can make a significant impact on the sexual health and well-being of young people. By incorporating the skills discussed in this chapter into your daily practices, you can create an inclusive and supportive environment that fosters healthy attitudes towards sexuality. Remember that comprehensive sex education goes beyond the transmission of information; it also involves creating spaces for open dialogue, critical thinking, and empowerment. Through



your dedication and commitment, you can contribute to the holistic development of the young people you work with, promoting their sexual health, well-being, and overall life satisfaction.

J. E. Lansford, P. Banati: *Handbook of Adolescent Development Research and Its Impact on Global Policy*. [LINK](#)

See also: P. Banati, J.E. Lansford: *Handbook of Adolescent Development Research and Its Impact on Global Policy*: [LINK](#)

## References

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- Screenagers: *Guidance for Digital Youth Work*: [LINK](#)
- Talking About Sexuality in Canadian Community: *Sexual Decision Making*: [LINK](#)
- Tea Consent: [LINK](#)

