Age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education in Finland: Delivery, advocacy and building support

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Legislation in Finland

- The Abortion Law 1970, contraceptive counselling became obligatory
- The Public Health Law (1972) guarantied free primary health care and preventive counselling for all
- Contraceptive counselling units were founded throughout the country.
- SE was integrated in school programs in 1970 to ensure practice of safer sex, which refers to avoiding pregnancy and STI, and to permit the development of a positive sexuality.
- School health developed, school health nurses participated in SE
- Close connection between education and services
Abortions and deliveries (per 1000) in 15-19 yr old girls in Finland 1975 - 2017

SE and health services developed

SE and health services were reduced

SE developed again

Based on: D Apter, Recent development and consequences of sexuality education in Finland. BZgA FORUM 2011, 2, 3-8

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Since 2003, SE has been a part of a larger topic: Health Education

• Planning and producing text books
• Training of teachers
• A normal topic among others (tests in Matriculation examination)
• Teachers interested, self-select
• Works well!
Sexual experiences of 14–20-year-olds in Finland

School Health Promotion Study 2010–11

Kissing
Light petting
Heavy petting
Intercourse

Age

0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%

14 15 16 17 18 19 20
National Core Curricula
Legally binding norms, define the objectives and core contents

- **0–6–y–olds (Early education & Pre-primary education)**
  - New curriculum 2016-18

- **7–8–y–olds (Grades 1–2)**
  - Health Education integrated into Environmental and Natural subjects, 2014
  - “Safety skills; emotional skills; understanding of body parts and lifespan; Familiarization with the basic requirements of life.”
National Core Curricula
Legally binding norms, define the objectives and core contents

• **9-12-y-olds (Grades 3-6)**
  - “Sexual development and human reproduction are dealt with in accordance to the age level.”

• **13-15-y-olds (Grades 7-9)**
  - 114 lessons of Health Education as an independent subject over 3 years, of which about 20h SE.
  - Sexual health core contents consist of human relations, sexuality, behavior, values and norms.
Lobbying for SE Early Education curriculum

• Direct contact to the Agency to include SE to the curriculum

National core curriculum includes elements of age-appropriate SE (all 8 topics of WHO’s Standards’), however without the word ‘sexuality’.

• Municipalities were obliged to construct local curricula.

16 municipalities have written SE into their local curriculums.
National curriculum for Early education 2016. What there is?

• Children will be taught to respect and protect their own and others’ bodies.

• Children are encouraged to ask questions, and children's questions are answered.

• Children must have the opportunity to explore the world with all their senses and with their entire body.

• The child has the right to receive information in many ways in order to deal with emotions and conflicts as well as to learn new things.

• The learning environments are designed and developed in such a way that they strengthen equality and gender equality. This allows for the infringement of traditional gender stereotypes.
Young Children’s (0–6 years) SE in Finland
**Situation analyse and needs assessment studies 2013-14**

**DAY-CARE PROFESSIONALS (nurses, preschool teachers) for 0-6-year olds**

- 2013, N=507
- 5 background questions
- 91 multiple choice questions
- 13 open questions

**PARENTS of 0-6-year-old children**

- 2014, N=614
- 14 background questions
- 85 multiple choice questions
- 25 open questions

- If and what kind of expressions children show
- What children ask and how adults respond
- What are problems in supporting and protecting healthy (sexual) development
What children say?
According to our study:

- SE occurs occasionally, usually unplanned.
- The WHO's Standards are not known by professionals nor by parents.
- Children often do not receive age-appropriate responses.
According to our study, adults’ challenges for SE:

- Lack of information, models & materials – even the words
- People provide education, but don’t like the word “sexuality education”
- Professionals and parents don’t talk about SE with each other
- Own SE history
According to our study:

- Adults' competencies and willingness to implement SE vary.
- Normal sexual behavior and curiosity may even be punished.
- Symptoms of health problems or abuse may remain ignored or judged. Not safe for children and families!
Day-care professionals’ ways to respond to the need of SE

1. Active
   - Common, important
   - Normal part of the work.

2. Enabling Reactive
   - Atmosphere to make it possible for children to ask.

3. Passive, Reactive
   - Only if the child asks.
   - Limited answers, only to that child.

4. Denier
   - In day-care SE is not needed.
   - Family issue.

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27 critical comments of the term ‘sexuality’

9 from professionals, 18 from parents

Comments in order of prevalence:
1. No ‘sexual tone’ in children’s actions
2. Children’s actions are natural, not ‘sexual’
3. ‘Sexuality’ has adult connotations
4. ‘Sexuality education’ is too complicated as a term for children
5. Children already receive too much information of sexuality

Let them be kids!
Using less sex-loaded terms (as Health education, Relation education, Life-skills education)

"Body & Emotion education"
NEW TERM: "Body & Emotion Education"

Talks in day-care

What questions or talks have you witnessed in day-care? (% of professionals) (daily, weekly)
Barriers towards implementation: ignorance, fears, misconceptions

- What is childhood sexuality?
- What is age-appropriate, developmentally adequate SE?

- Innocence is destroyed with any information.
- Information inspire children to do adult-sexual acts.
- SE predispose children to sexual abuse.

- Children should be answered only if they ask and the thing they ask.
- Sexuality is a private issue, not possible to teach about.
- Sexuality starts only in adolescence.
In 90 years no development?

“My child is too young.”
“My child is not interested in such things.”
“I don’t believe a child’s mind should be burdened with such things.”
“The type of neighborhood in which we live counteracts the need for consideration of this subject.”
“My child is too good. She would not listen to sex discussions.”
“I believe my own mother’s policy of silence was best.”
“Won’t information stimulate curiosity?”
“I give close supervision to my child. I know just where she is all the time.”
“Don’t you think sex knowledge just comes intuitively?”
“If the subject is once opened won’t the child ask too many questions?”
“Won’t information stimulate experimentation?”
“My husband thinks it is unnecessary to give this information.”
Resistance against SE

Because of the misconceptions and fears, parents & professionals have difficulties to promote sexual health of children.

Discussion is rare.

Responding to children’s needs and empowering are missing.
Fighting the barriers: Constructing information for parents & professionals

• Positivity, openness
• Opening myths, misbeliefs
• Child-centered, new word
• Drawings
• Web info for parents
  • Own studises
  • Easy Reading
  • Three ”hot potatoes”; What is normal
• Series of picture books
• Posters
  • To increase knowledge
  • As a tool to start talking

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POSTER: Age-appropriate SE For 0–6y (and 7–12 y-olds)

a) Development of the child –>
b) What the child may do or ask? –>
c) What can you do to support and guide the child?

https://www.hyvakysymys.fi/artikkeli/tulelapsen-kehitysta-juliste/

English, Russian, Estonian, Swedish, German, Finnish

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Posters provide knowledge, tool to discuss

SAFETY SKILLS AND YOUR BODY

Knowledge, Skills, and Attitude

SAFETY SURVIVAL KNOW. 

You can trust your body to protect you. When you feel unsafe, you can use your muscles to defend yourself.

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT: 

Your body is your own. 

You have the right to decide what to do with your body. You have the right to choose who can touch you and how.

SAFETY SKILLS KNOW. 

You have the right to say no. If someone tries to hurt you, you can use your muscles to protect yourself.

You are in danger if: 

1. Someone makes you feel uncomfortable. 
2. Someone touches you without your consent. 
3. Someone ruins your clothes or your property. 
4. Someone threatens you with violence.

SAFETY ISO KNOW. 

You should act to protect yourself. 

You should act to protect yourself by calling for help if necessary.

Bipolar Disorder: 

You should act to protect yourself by speaking out.

https://www.hyvakysymys.fi/artikkeli/turvataidot-ja-lapsen-keho-juliste/

Väestöliitto
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English, Russian, Estonian, Swedish, German, Sami x3, Arabian, Finnish

Easy Reading
Knowledge

• Names to all body parts
• Bodies are diverse
• Hygiene
Skills
If someone touches or behaves towards you in an unpleasant way

1. Say NO!
2. Go away!
3. Tell an adult you trust!
Positive attitude

• My body is my own!
• Different kind of bodies are equal and must be respected
• All body parts are important and worthy
• Under the swimsuit are the most own and valuable places
POSTER:
Age-appropriate SE
For 7-12 y-olds

a) Development of the child. 

b) What the child may do or ask? 

c) What can you do to support and guide the child?

Based on WHO’s Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe

Svedish, Finnish

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Online DATABASE
‘Child and sexuality’

www.vaestoliitto.fi/lapsijaseksuaalisuus
www.hyvakysymys.fi/lapsijaseksuaalisuus

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Holistic SE in PICTURE BOOKS and a HANDBOOK

Relationships: Affection; Gender roles; Different families (adoption, one parent family); Playing with dolls (love, sex, getting married); Kiss tag (rights, touching, own will).

Body: Own body, names of body parts; Different bodies; Nudity; Hygiene; Poo and pee; “Playing doctor”; Masturbation.

Reproduction: Fertility, reproduction, pregnancy, delivery; Baby – closeness, emotions; Baby inside a mother’s tummy; Different ways to born; “When I was a baby”

• Handbook for professionals “Body and play”
• Content based on our surveys
• Written by 17 experts
• Research / Knowledge / Skills

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Training Days for Professionals:

- Participatory training for professionals dealing with 0 - 6 year olds in daycare and health services
- Lectures (video taped to web page)
- "Learning cafe" group works
- Follow up contacts with Supervised chat’s and questionnaire

Published in WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA:
Training Day for Professionals 2015

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Our experience: a powerful implementation requires

- official instructions
- involvement of the daycare principals
- involvement of parents
What we do in future?

Two projects:
- “Body, Emotions, Safety”
- ”Body and play”
“Body, Emotions, Safety” 2019–2021

• Funded by Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA) / The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (lottery funds)

• to create practical tools for kindergartens together with Early education teachers, Parents and 3–6–y–olds.
“Body, Emotions, Safety” 2019–2021

• Training model = Open online course including all produced materials, three languages
• Evaluation of the programme & implementation & outcome/impact, focusing on wellbeing (developing self-esteem, security skills, social skills and a positive body image).
• Daycare units in Southern Finland
“Body, Emotions, Safety”

Results:

- A model of Childhood SE for 3–6-y-olds
- Materials, videos etc.
- A tool to Child impact assessment
- An assessed participatory method for children, parents, teachers
- An assessed Parents’ evening model
- All materials free online, (easy reading Finnish, Swedish, Sami)

Training takes place in South–Finland.
“Body, Emotions, Safety”
A model for Childhood SE

Focusing on the development of the child’s
• Self-esteem
• Safety skills
• Social skills
• Positive body-image
“Body and play” 2019–2020

• Funded by: Finnish National Agency of Educatio
• Teachers of 3–8-y-olds (n=40–50)
Aim

1. To enhance the teachers skills to provide SE for young children
2. To enhance the work against harassment (including sexual harassment), violence and bullying.

\[ \rightarrow \text{Children’s emotional and social skills improve and respectful interactions are supported.} \]
Results:

- 10 ECTS credits online education: 4 modules
- 6 local contact days (incl. Introduction & parents evening) (at both cities)
- All materials free online
General situation in Finland

• Good feedback, apart from some single negative comments
• Atmosphere in Finland around SE open-minded (Sauna!)
• Väestöliitto is a trusted organization
• Before any delivering / advocacy we studied the needs, obstacles, fears, & risks → constructed positive, empathic responses.
The Lutheran Church Advisory Board for Family affairs unit

• Direct contact with the Lutheran Church (Lutheran 70%, Orthodox 1.1%, others 1.7%, none 27.4%)

• Church is supportive to SE

• Confessional schools teach SE
Laura Cacciatore, 4
“A woman in love”
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