

# WHY GIRLS?

## WHY SEXUAL HEALTH?

### WHAT IS HEALTHY SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL HEALTH ANYWAY?

Imagine if all girls and young women could explore their sexuality free from violence and sexual shame. What if all girls and young women appreciated and loved their bodies in every shape and size? Imagine the strength and confidence that comes with knowing exactly how your own unique body works, and how to communicate your needs, limits, and desires. Imagine if all girls were empowered with support, information and resources to access relevant health care that reflected their diversity. Imagine if girls and young women were no longer judged because of their sexuality.

“ We have the right to talk about our culture, our spirituality, and our own communities when we talk about our bodies.”

- Native Youth Sexual Health Network

“ I often wondered where my sexual orientation fit into sex ed. For a long time I assumed that queer women just didn't have a place. That sex ed. was for heterosexual folks and that the information didn't apply to anyone else.”

- Joy, Edmonton, AB

## LET'S BE HONEST, LET'S GET CRITICAL

Let's be honest, girls and young women have sexual desires and curiosities. This isn't about to change. Nor should it! Sexuality is an important part of our mental and emotional health.

If we want to support the healthy sexuality of girls and young women, we need to start by listening to them. The actual experiences of girls and young women often contradict popular and over-simplified accounts of their sexual health and sexuality.

It's time to get critical about the panic surrounding girls' and young women's sexuality. It's time to get upfront with ourselves and the girls and young women in our lives about sexuality and sexual health if we really care about their well being, health, and happiness.



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# SEXUAL HEALTH IS MORE THAN A “PERSONAL” ISSUE...

“ So we build up the courage to go to the school nurse to ask for condoms, but she gave us a lecture on how we weren't ready for sex and that we should really think about it. We left without the condoms.”

- **Young Woman, Inuvik, NWT**

“ Honestly, I don't get STI or PAP tests because the doctors get weird when I tell them I sleep with women. This one doctor didn't even want to test me because she said “lesbian sex” doesn't carry any STI risk - which is totally a myth! And it's even harder to talk about it because they don't speak my first language.”

- **Young Woman, Edmonton, AB**

Teenage girls report high levels of fear of rejection from families, peers, and communities due to “shameful” sexual behaviour.

- **Jean A. Shoveller et al., “Socio-cultural influences on young people's sexual development”**

The lack of multi-racial and multi-lingual healthcare workers is a major problem in the healthcare system if we want to meet the needs of all young women in Canada.

- **Women's Health in Women's Hands, Community Health Centre**

Members of minority groups often face institutionalized racism in the healthcare system. This is characterized by language barriers, stereotypical views held by some health professionals, lack of cultural sensitivity, absence of cultural competencies, barriers to access and utilization, and inadequate funding for community health services.

- **Public Health Agency of Canada, “The Social Determinants of Health: Social Inclusion as a Determinant of Health”**

A large and increasing portion of HIV infections are occurring in young Aboriginal women between 15-29 years old. Intensive and sustained efforts on the part of the government to colonize Canada's Aboriginal peoples have had adverse affects on the socioeconomic status of Aboriginal women. These socio-economic conditions are strongly associated with a positive HIV test result for Aboriginal women, and they contribute to the creation of harsh living environments which increase HIV risk.

- **Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, “HIV/AIDS and Aboriginal Women, Children and Families”**

Nearly twice as many girls than boys report being pressured into having sex when they did not want to.

- **William Boyce et al., “Canadian Youth, Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Study”**



Young people are disproportionately represented in the affected population, with the highest STI rates among young women between the ages of 15-24.

- Gudrun Schultz, “It’s time to face the hidden epidemic of STIs”

Youth we spoke with are generally frustrated by sex ed. offered through school and community networks. Some complained about receiving inaccurate information from teachers, while others talked about feeling bored, uncomfortable, or unengaged. One stated, “Pamphlets are useless, we need real people connecting to the communities.”

- Sarah Flicker, et al., “It’s Hard to Change Something When You Don’t Know Where to Start’: Unpacking HIV Vulnerability with Aboriginal Youth in Canada”

Sexual health is more than just decisions and choices made by individual girls and young women about their sexual lives. Sexual health is influenced by unrealistic social and gender norms, stigma, assumptions (like everyone is straight), access to information and resources (or lack thereof), worry and fear around girls’ and young women’s sexuality (like hypersexualization). It is equally affected by community marginalization and the effects of discrimination, violence, poverty, isolation, immigrant and refugee status and so much more. Sexual health needs to be understood in relation to communities, schools, health services, and governments. We need to take responsibility to recognize and act on issues that hinder girls’ and young women’s sexual health.

# WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

## WHAT WE KNOW

Girls' and young women's healthy sexuality is composed of many facets:

- A mind, body, and community free of emotional and physical violence.
- The opportunity to be listened to (rather than talked at).
- Access to accurate information, services, resources and people who will take her questions and concerns seriously and without judgment.

Girls and young women face barriers when it comes to accessing relevant and accurate information that they can relate to.

Girls and young women face pressure to abstain from sex and pressure to have sex (and subject to name calling if they do either), as well as pressure from adults telling them what they should (and should not) do.

In European culture, sexual desire has traditionally been understood as a male-focused trait, while girls are expected to seek love and romance. Because of this double standard, girls are often directed away from sexual self-interest, with damaging effects on self-esteem, self-respect, and assertiveness.

- M. Fine, "Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire"

Most safer-sex information is designed for straight, middle-class, European-descendent, suburban and urban youth. As this information makes assumptions about sexuality, culture, ability, location, and access to financial resources, many girls and young women do not get the information that speaks to their realities.

Sexual education needs to be grounded in the experiences of a diversity of girls and young women. Educators need to talk in empowering ways about different sexual orientations, social locations, gender identifications, and sexual acts.

Girls and young women may need support in challenging ideas about sexuality that are rooted in presumptions about their desires, and in the widely-held opinion that they need to be protected.

# WE SUPPORT GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S SEXUAL HEALTH THROUGH...

## POPULAR EDUCATION: GIRLS EMPOWERING THEMSELVES

Applying a popular education approach to sexual health means that we see girls as experts in their own experiences and of their own bodies, desires, and needs. Girls and young women have a voice in determining what they need to know and what they want: we should listen.

Supported with relevant information and tools, girls and young women can take action against prescribed sexual and gender norms, misinformation, harmful assumptions and expectations. They can become trusted sources of information and knowledge for their peers and community, raise awareness, and take action in creating new sexual health initiatives.

## GIRLS & SOCIAL JUSTICE

We know that there are multiple and ever-changing experiences of sexuality. We also know that discrimination, in all its forms, can negatively impact sexual health choices and access to resources.

Supporting the sexual health of girls and young women means working within each of their unique contexts, life histories, choices, and experiences. Empowering sexual education requires an understanding of the diversity of community, cultural, social, and religious contexts.

Canada is a multicultural society. Multiculturalism is the view that all cultures are equal in value. Using a “one size fits all” approach to health promotion in a multicultural society is not only ineffective; it does not support this idea of equity.

– Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, “Culture Counts: A Roadmap to Health Promotion”

## GIRLS MAKING CHANGE

Healthy sexuality is not only beneficial for individual girls and young women- but it can lead her to be a change-maker in her relationships, her school and community, in policies and laws.

Girls speaking up and engaging in sexual health initiatives is transformational. They are leading discussions to address and shape alternative sexual education and attitudes, as well as opening up new spaces for conversation.

Sexual health is tied to larger social justice issues such as poverty, violence against women, racism, homophobia, immigration and migration, criminalization, and colonization. Working towards the healthy sexuality of girls and young women means addressing all of these issues at some level.

## THE POWER OF GIRLS: ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

It is healthy for girls and young women to have sexual curiosity and desire. Feeding the moral panic about girls and young women's sexuality is not productive.

Girls and young women need to be respected as agents in their own sexual lives. They may need support developing boundaries and understanding what is going on in and around them.

## ALL-GIRL SPACES

Gender-specific spaces allow for more openness and trust than mixed groups. Openness and trust are two key ingredients when fostering conversations about sex.

All-girls spaces break isolation and silence. Issues and feelings are shared and become a collective issue. The burden of confronting something alone is lifted. This creates opportunities to take action together.

“ Because sometimes you can't really say things... you need to talk to a girl. You can't really talk to anyone else, like a boy or even your parents.”

– Girl, Montreal, Qc.

Puberty is really hitting... girls' club is helping her understand that she is normal, she's not different, it's not wrong.

– Mom, Verdun, QC

# HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT GIRLS' AND YOUNG WOMEN'S SEXUAL HEALTH

Encourage a sex positive approach to sexual health and sexuality:

- Don't judge sexuality or sexual choices.
- Ensure access to information, resources, and support that meet each individual's needs.
- Value communication skills, agency, and consent as fundamental to healthy sexuality.
- Offer honest ways to reduce risk for all sexual acts and across orientations, including the use of condoms, dental dams, and gloves, or to choose less risky activities over high risk ones.
- Empower and support all sexualities, including lesbian, bisexual, queer, two-spirit, questioning, and straight.

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Offer all-girl spaces or moments that are facilitated by a diversity of women.  
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Create occasions for discussion and questions on sexual health and sexuality in an honest and non-judgemental atmosphere.  
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Provide girls and young women with opportunities to think critically about healthy and unhealthy relationships, as well as what enables each of them.  
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Offer occasions to develop communication skills, discuss rights in relationships, and improve familiarity with community resources.  
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Ensure you know about, and can provide a list of trusted sexual health resources in the girls' local community and online.

Challenge stereotypes, stigma, and messages that limit how girls see themselves.  
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Listen to what girls and young women are saying. Really listen.  
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Know that you do not have all the answers. Know that girls know a lot and are experts in their own sexual lives. Be ready to ask questions and to find external resources to help fill in any blanks.  
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Set up an anonymous question and answer box so that discussions on sexual health and sexuality can be approached in an informal way. Be ready to seek out external resources to provide thorough answers.  
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Invite women of different generations who are comfortable talking about sexual health and sexuality in an empowering way, and who are open to being challenged. This kind of inter-generational exchange can break isolation and offer positive role models.  
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Get to know what is happening in your school, community, and province around sexual education.  
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If you don't have the opportunity or knowledge to do a sexual health workshop yourself, invite a community group to do one instead. Good ones to look for will present accessible, peer-led, non-abstinence-based and empowering lesbian, bisexual, queer, and straight perspectives on sexual health. Be ready to offer more than one workshop, as it is hard to cover all perspectives and relevant information at one time.

# WHERE YOU CAN GO FOR SUPPORT

## **THE GIRLS ACTION RESOURCE CENTRE**

A comprehensive collection of documents, websites, and organizational listings that can help you start and strengthen girls' spaces. It includes information and strategies in popular education, anti-oppression, sexual health, facilitation, and program design.

## **AMPLIFY TOOLKIT**

Our user-friendly guide to creating and facilitating girls' programs. It includes a "how-to" Manual, Workshop Guide and even sections on sexual health and healthy relationships.

## **WHY GIRLS?**

Check out our other Why Girls? publications on topics such as Violence Prevention, Leadership, and Media & Pop Culture.

## **GREAT STUFF FOR GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN**

### **KICKACTION.CA**

A site by and for young women, check out the Sexual Health Resource Centre on [kickaction.ca](http://kickaction.ca). Not only can girls and young women find information about safer sex, puberty and health clinics - they can write their own blogs, post questions or read what other girls and young women across Canada are saying about sexual health. [www.kickaction.ca](http://www.kickaction.ca)

### **SCARLETEEN: SEX EDUCATION FOR THE REAL WORD**

Scarleteen is a pioneer and leading force in online sex ed for teens, and contains one of the most well-rounded sex information centres out there! [www.scarleteen.com](http://www.scarleteen.com)

### **NATIVE YOUTH SEXUAL HEALTH NETWORK**

A North American organization that promotes issues of healthy sexuality, cultural competency, youth empowerment, reproductive justice, and sex-positivity by and for Native youth. Includes a link to purchase the book *Sex Ed and Youth: Colonization, Communities of Colour, and Sexuality* published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and edited by Jessica Yee. [www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com](http://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com)

DOWNLOAD ALL OUR PUBLICATIONS FOR FREE AT [GIRLSACTIONFOUNDATION.CA](http://GIRLSACTIONFOUNDATION.CA)

**KICKACTION.CA** is a bilingual online community for girls and young women who think for themselves, take a stand, and act creatively to bring positive change to their communities and across the globe. Kickaction.ca is a Girls Action initiative.

**GIRLS ACTION FOUNDATION** is a national charitable organization. We lead and seed girls' programs across Canada. We build girls' and young women's skills and confidence and inspire action to change the world. Through our innovative programs, research, and support to a network of over 200 partnering organizations and projects, Girls Action reaches over 60,000 girls and young women.



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