

SEXUALITY: JUST WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

From the time we are born, until the time we die, every one of us is a sexual person. Whether we practice celibacy and abstinence our whole lives, marry and have children, or remain single and develop significant relationships at different times in our lives, we are all sexual. We are born male or female; we are heterosexual, gay/lesbian, bi-sexual. We relate to others, we wrestle with issues of sex roles. We want and need to be significant to others. We want and need to be touched and held. Whether we ever have intercourse or not, we are sexual people. Now why is this important?

Most of the time, when we think about sexuality education, we think only of the specifically genital parts of our bodies and lives. Our sexuality is a much larger concept than that: our sexuality is about who we are, our sense of identity as men or women, how we see our places in the world, and what we believe about our potentials and capabilities. It has to do with biology and psychology, with pleasures and values, and with relationships; relationships with ourselves, our friends, and those who might become our partners.

We also often think about sexuality as a commodity: something we "get, have, or do," rather than as a cumulative process, continuing throughout our lives. We are all involved in a lifelong learning process about our sexuality. As we grow and mature our needs change, our capabilities change, our desire for intimacy and closeness changes. Our experiences and the experiences of people close to us shape and mould our expectations and our values about sexuality.

Our sexuality has many dimensions, or elements. And it is only sometimes that our sexuality is expressed in specific genital acts or behaviours such as intercourse or masturbation. You might think of sexuality this way:

Sex	Am I biologically male or female?
Gender Identity	Do I identify myself as a male or female (which may or may not be the same as my biological sex)?
Gender Role	What roles do men and women take on? What's different? What's the same?
Sexual Orientation	To whom will I be erotically and emotionally attracted?
Biology	What changes will I go through at puberty? What effect will my hormones have on me? What changes will I experience at different life stages?
Relationships	How do I know who I am? How will I relate to others?
Values and Beliefs	What is right, what is wrong to me? How do I make those choices? What is the basis for my sexual decision making?

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Reproductive Decisions	Will I become a parent? If so, when, and with whom? If not, what will I do to prevent that?
Sexual Health	How will I remain sexually healthy? What do I need to do to protect myself, my partner, my future, from diseases and emotional harm?
Feelings	What feelings do I have about sexuality and sexual relationships? Is this scary, exciting, repulsive? How do I experience intimacy?
Physiological Feelings	What feels pleasurable to me? What sexual expressions or behaviours feel good to me? What kinds of touch are pleasant; what arouses me? What sexual behaviours do not feel pleasant to me; what would I rather not do?
Social Skills	How comfortable do I feel in social situations? Do I know the appropriate boundaries?
Thoughts, Fantasies, Daydreams	Sometimes I will just wonder about things, imagine them, think about them. Would I feel comfortable with them? Would I think they were silly? Is it something I would choose to do, or not? How would I handle this?

And Sometimes...Only Sometimes...Sexuality Includes Genital Behaviour

Adapted from: **Commitment Of The Heart: Conversations Between Parents and Teenagers About Sexuality, Pregnancy and AIDS**, Maggi Ruth P. Boyer, League of Women Voters of Bucks County, PA.