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It's Not A Sex-Ed Curriculum, It's A Health Curriculum, And Our Kids Need It

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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Last year, like many kindergarten students, my daughter played with hula hoops. Not only as a toy, but as a tool to teach her about personal space. The teacher explained, “if ever someone is inside your hula hoop and you feel uncomfortable, say something.” It’s a basic principle of social interaction, and for a five-year-old, it has nothing to do with sex.

Recently, Ontario’s new Premier, Doug Ford, followed through on one of his campaign promises to repeal the previous provincial government’s “sex-ed curriculum” (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-sex-ed-plans-1.4742523>) and reverting to the version that was last updated in 1998. But there is no such thing as a “sex-ed curriculum.” What Ontario does have is a robust and research-based

curriculum in Health and Physical Education that spans 12 grades. Everything described within its pages, from teaching kids how to throw a ball to introducing the idea of personal space, has this as its goal: “promoting the healthy development of all students.”

Relevant Reading: What We're Telling Our Kids About Pleasure

(<http://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/what-were-telling-our-kids-about-pleasure>)

Calling it a “sex-ed curriculum” does a disservice to parents who might be worried about what their kids are actually getting taught in school. It sounds like students are being taught how to have sex. Nothing could be further from the truth. The section of the curriculum that deals with "sex"

(<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/health1to8.pdf#page=40>) talks about health and focuses overwhelmingly on communication, consent and building healthy relationships.

Places that have implemented modern health curricula like this have seen lower levels of sexual violence

(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262975699_A_Systematic_Review_of_Primary and less miscommunication between people on what constitutes consent. The curriculum is far better suited to address the concerns of the #MeToo era than the version from 1998.

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Young people in countries like the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, France and Germany — where they have curricula like Ontario's — have far better sexual health practices (<http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/40/3/wake-up-and-smell-the-condoms-an-analysis-of-sex-education-programs-in-the-united-states-the-netherlands-sweden-australia-france-and-germany>) than they do in the U.S. where education around sexual health is pitiful. In countries with modern health curricula, they tend to have lower levels of STIs

(<https://www.gutmacher.org/journals/psrh/2001/01/sexually-transmitted-diseases-among-adolescents-developed-countries>) and adolescent pregnancies

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4852976/>), and are practicing

safer sex.

Across Canada, provincial governments are tasked with creating curricula that guide teachers on how to cover themes and skills deemed crucial for child development in that province. The process of researching, writing, reviewing and testing new curricula takes years and is based on the latest educational research, consultation with parents, teachers and community leaders. All of that happened in Ontario (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ontario-s-new-sex-ed-curriculum-the-most-up-to-date-in-the-country-1.2969654>) for the new Health and Physical Education curriculum, over a period of almost ten years.

Relevant Reading: Thanks to #MeToo My Daughters Don't Have to Ignore the Behaviour I Did (<http://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/thanks-to-metoo-my-daughters-dont-have-to-ignore-the-behaviour-i-did>)

Provincial curricula generally include two broad classes of “expectations” for students: “general expectations” which are mandatory and “specific expectations” which are not. The general expectations are vague and non-prescriptive and can be achieved in many ways. This is where a teacher’s professionalism comes in: they can tailor the teaching experience to the students’ cultural and ethical lives. In fact, the Ontario Health & Physical Education curriculum explicitly states (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/health1to8.pdf#page=38>), “some topics within the Healthy Living strand need to be approached with additional sensitivity, care and awareness because of their personal nature and their connection to family values, religious beliefs or other social or cultural norms.”

A curriculum is not a script. It is not a document that tells teachers what to say, or how to say it. It does not prescribe what activities they should do with their students or what textbooks to use. It might include “prompts” (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/health1to8.pdf#page=97>) for teachers to consider how they might best introduce a topic. It is in these sections where hot-button words like ‘masturbation’ appear. But these prompts are not meant to be read line-by-line; they are examples of discourse that might unfold in the classroom and they suggest possible responses to student questions. In fact, the Ontario curriculum reads, in italics (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/health1to8.pdf#page=22>): “*The examples and prompts do not set out requirements for student learning; they are optional, not mandatory.*”

Relevant Reading: Embracing Kiddo — Talking To Kids About Gender (<http://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/embracing-kiddo-talking-to-kids-about-gender>)

The curriculum isn't like a recipe, to be followed exactly in order to produce an identical product — and the aim isn't that students will lose their identity in the process. Canadian students come from the widest background of cultures imaginable, and teachers do an admirable job of creating meaning out of the curriculum that meshes with their lives. So the next time you hear people picking words out of the new curriculum, remember that there is no law saying teachers must say those words. A curriculum is merely a guide that leaves the teacher enormous room for adapting to student culture. And this is something Canadian teachers do exceptionally well and will continue to do.

Ontario's Health & Physical Education curriculum as it existed just last week has some good advice for parents

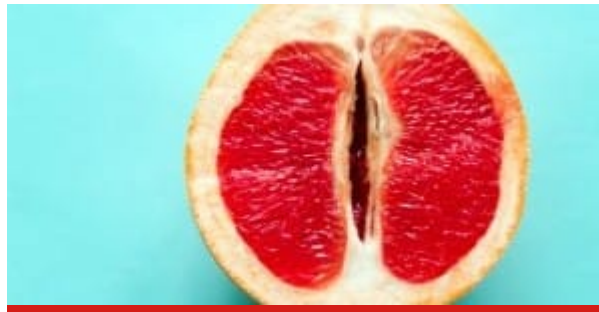
(<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/health1to8.pdf#page=15>) even before laying out the content of the courses: "By becoming familiar with the curriculum, parents can better appreciate what is being taught in each grade and what their children are expected to learn." I hope this sentence becomes a part of every curriculum across Canada.

Are you a writer? Are you a parent? Do you feel differently about this subject? Feel free to reach out to us with a pitch at cbcparents@cbc.ca.

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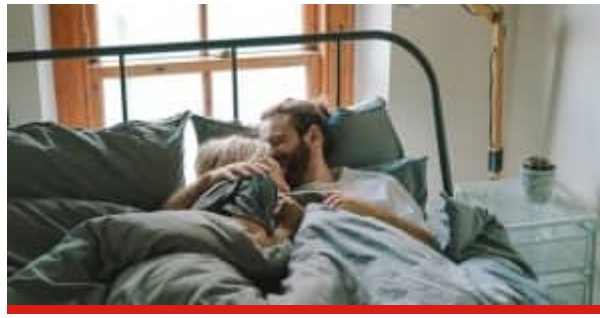


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