SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN GERMANY: AN EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION TO SUPPORT THE SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH (SRH) OF PEOPLE ACROSS THE LIFESPAN

In Germany, sexuality education is considered to be a public task. The Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA), as a government organization, and the authorities of the 16 federal states are by law assigned to implement and conduct sexuality education, in close cooperation with German family counseling institutions and other organizations working in the field. In this process, BZgA has a recognized role in developing concepts for sexuality education and in quality assurance. This multisectoral approach ensures high quality sexuality education for different age and target groups.

In a jointly published framework (1), BZgA and all federal states agreed that sexuality is to be regarded as a natural part of human development through every phase of life and that sexuality education, as a consequence, is relevant for the whole population, including all ages.

On the one hand, sexuality education in Germany aims at increasing knowledge of issues related to SRH, including, but not limited to, physical aspects like body changes in puberty, the reproductive cycle and the effectiveness of different contraceptive methods. On the other hand, sexuality education aims to enable the general population (and specific target groups) to develop a positive self-responsible and partner-responsible attitude towards sexuality. Sexuality education is meant to support the development of a self-determined identity, of a personal value system and of a personal life perspective. It therefore connects the goals of reducing rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancies with the broader concept of well-being throughout the life-course. This approach has proven to be effective at several levels. For example, teenage pregnancies in Germany have dropped by half within the last 10 years from 15000 in 2004 to 7500 in 2013 (2).

Several key actors, at various levels, are responsible for ensuring that everybody in Germany has full access to information and counseling regarding sexuality, including topics such as sexual health, relationships, family planning and many more. These actors include:

2 Governmental level: BZgA is designated by law to provide sexuality education for different target and age groups and to disseminate its materials for free to the general population and certain stakeholder groups such as teachers and counseling centres. Ensuring a multisectoral approach, BZgA works in the portfolio of the Federal Ministry of Health and is technically supervised by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. Together with the WHO Regional Office for Europe, BZgA, as a WHO collaborating centre for SRH, developed the Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe (3).

2 Federal state level: The implementation of sexuality education in schools all over the country is mandated by legislation and comes under the authority of each federal state. When to begin sexuality education, how to include the content in the curricula and which topics to emphasize may differ, depending on the Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerium) of the respective state. However, in general, sexuality education is understood in a comprehensive sense, including physical, emotional, social and interpersonal aspects. “Soft” topics such as gender equality, sexual diversity and sexual and reproductive rights have become more prominent in many German classrooms over the last decade.

2 Community level: A large number of governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), with more than 1600 counseling centres, work actively in the field of sexuality education and SRH counseling. The Federal Association of Family Planning and Counseling (pro familia) is a well-established NGO working in this area, focusing on issues such as contraception, pregnancy, infertility, sexual relationships, abortion, sexual violence and women’s and men’s health. Pro familia has around 180 counseling centres in Germany addressing different target groups. The German AIDS help (Deutsche AIDS-Hilfe) is yet another example of a well-established NGO that provides sexuality education.

These key actors are all interconnected with each other, offering opportunities for open discourse and the exchange of opinions and viewpoints. This process, in which BZgA plays a leading role, has resulted in jointly developed concepts for sexuality education in Germany (1, 4). Different actors work together in the field. Counseling institutions, for example, can dispatch experienced sexuality educators to support teachers in the classrooms.

Despite the diversity of actors working on different levels (and their autonomy in their special field of work), there is a common understanding of the principles of sexuality education in Germany. Sexuality education should encourage children and adolescents to develop a positive attitude towards sexuality as well as a value system, based on principles of equality, empowerment and self-respect. Sexuality education can also support young people by helping them develop life skills, such as problem solving and communication skills. Development of these attitudes, values and skills help establish, along with other factors, the foundation for a healthy life as an adult.

From an ecological perspective, many different factors such as individual attitudes and experiences, prevailing norms and values in the family and society and political, as well as, structural aspects are important influences that shape an individual’s health status. Sexuality education is one of these influencing factors as it supports individuals in making informed decisions about their sex life. Data on sexual behaviour and attitudes of young people and their experiences with sexuality education from the survey “Youth Sexuality”, which has been conducted eight times by BZgA since 1980, supports this. The current survey included 5750
adolescents and young women and men aged 14 – 25 (5). Analysis of the data demonstrates that good quality sexuality education is not associated with earlier sexual debut, but rather with higher levels of knowledge regarding physical aspects of sexuality, responsible contraceptive behaviour and the ability to communicate openly and productively with both partners and parents about sexuality. Recent survey results indicate that today, most young people in Germany feel that they are well informed about sexual issues (6).

Age and development appropriate communication about sexual issues within the family is promoted and widely accepted in German society. Adolescents are most often satisfied with both the method and content of parental sexuality education. However, adolescents holding German citizenship feel more comfortable when talking with their parents about sexuality than do their peers with a migration background. To be able to communicate openly is important for adolescents when learning about the physical aspects of sexuality. Yet, the impact of communication goes far beyond this learning process. Communication skills can also enable and empower young people to speak more freely about their own desires and barriers in relation to sexuality and support them in the process of shaping their own attitudes and values.

In order to prevent unwanted pregnancies and STIs, the use of contraception (and in regard to the prevention of STIs the use of condoms in particular) is crucial. Young Germans aged 14 – 17 years use contraception today more often during first sexual intercourse than 35 years ago (5). In 1980 about every third male did not use any kind of contraception during his first sexual intercourse while this has dropped to only about one in 16 in 2014. The number of young females at the same age not using contraception during their first sexual intercourse has decreased by half since 1980. Overall, in 2014, only one in ten young people in Germany reported not having used contraception during their first sexual encounter (5).

Today, the majority of young people in Germany have their first sexual experience with someone from within their social circle as shown in Figure 1 (5). Also, most young people in Germany feel that they had their first sexual relationship at an appropriate time. Only very few (one in 20) feel that they engaged in a sexual relationship too early (5).

These examples from Germany demonstrate that high quality sexuality education is an effective life-course intervention, which impacts the sexual and overall health of individuals. The impact can be especially positive when actors from different levels of society and government work together and when information provided on sexuality and contraception is customized to meet the needs and educational levels of target groups and can be accessed easily.

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References
2. Special analysis of BZgA based on data of the Federal Statistical Office (Statistisches Bundesamt).