**Topic:** Sexuality Education

**Sexuality Education – A Contest Of Views and Values**

In recent years, discussion about Singapore’s sexuality education in public (Ministry of Education, MOE) schools has intensified and picked up in frequency. Fundamentally, the debate is between what some might call a ‘value-based’, ‘abstinence-only’/’sexual risk avoidance’ (SRA) approach and the other camp called science-oriented comprehensive curriculum/comprehensive sexuality education (CSE); a ‘sexual risk reduction approach’ (SRR).

While some might pit this as a flashpoint between [religion and science](https://www.ricemedia.co/current-affairs-opinion-is-singapores-secular-sex-ed-an-illusion/) ([subjective values VS science/objectivity](https://www.aware.org.sg/2013/09/harmful-constructions-of-women-in-sex-education-curricula/)), it is perhaps not an accurate view of the conflict. Both camps utilise ‘science’ and various evidence to back their pedagogy and offered content. While much can be debated about the ‘science and evidence’, the biggest dividing line is in the kind of values each approach/programme seeks to impart or champion. The entire debate over sexuality education is, in fact, a contestation between completely different worldviews and their derived values.

This understanding that the debate over the type of sexuality education programme in public schools as one that’s over the kind of values that will be propagated through the public system is crucial. It allows parents, who are primary stakeholders in this debate, to consider the stakes and approaches more thoroughly, as well as to seriously consider their own role in their child’s sexuality education.

**The Approaches and Their Values**

Much is available online about the various [SRA](https://weascend.org/) or [SRR](https://csetoolkit.unesco.org/toolkit/getting-started/what-comprehensive-sexuality-education) programmes. Depending on which site one visits, the presentation of ‘evidence’ for the effectiveness of SRA/SRR and the harms of the other is going to differ. Perhaps then, it is more helpful for us to zoom out and understand the two approaches through the kind of views that drives it and the values it seeks to impart.

Here’s a quick summary of the two approaches\* and their focus, values and views on matters relating to sexuality and gender identity.

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|  | **Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA)** | **Sexual Risk Reduction (SRR)** |
| **Common Names** | Abstinence Education  Sexual Responsibility | Teen Pregnancy Prevention  Comprehensive Sexuality Education |
| **Core Values/Focus** | Long-term Human flourishing  Personal Stewardship/Responsibility  Complementarity between the two sexes | Human agency  Sexual Pleasure and Risk Avoidance  Consent as supreme sexual ethic |
| **View of Teens/Students** | Beings that are capable of exercising restraint from sexual experimentation for greater purposes.  People to be nurtured into sexually responsible ‘society-perpetuators’ (i.e. form stable families and have children) | Sexual beings that will sexually experiment or will fail to remain sexually chaste before marriage.  People to be nurtured into activists to ‘fight for SOGI and abortion rights’ |
| **View of Abstinence** | Taught as an ideal – a core value.  Portrayed as realistic and the wiser choice for teens to make. | Taught only as another method of risk reduction.  Not ideal and portrayed as ‘unrealistic’. |
| **View of sexual experimentation** | Explicitly discourages sexual experimentation.  Champions personal responsibility and benefits of being non-sexually experimental  Sexual experimentation and activity outside of marriage as damaging and morally wrong | Expects teens to sexually experiment.  Emphasises that it is a human right to sexually explore/experiment  Nothing inherently wrong with being sexually active and experimental |
| **View of Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity (SOGI)** | Heteronormative.  Two sexes are complementary.  Gender to be aligned with a person’s biological sex and binary. | Heteronormativity is wrong.  No essential complementarity between the two sexes.  Gender exists on a spectrum and is not related to one’s biological sex. |
| **View of non-heterosexual sexual activity** | Not all sexual activities are equal – morally and health/risk-speaking.  Differentiates sexual activity by their risks | All sexual activities as equal and undifferentiated.  Homosexual sexual activity as normal and moral.  Tends to downplay the risks. |
| **View of contraceptives** | As a secondary method of protection (primary is abstinence before marriage and faithfulness in marriage) from sexual risks.  Tends to downplay its efficacies. | As primary method of protection that eliminates sexual risks.  Tends to downplay its failures. |
| **View of abortion** | As a risky thing that has consequences  Avoids speaking of it as something positive | As a solution to a problem (unwanted pregnancy)  Tends to downplay its risks and negative consequences  Champions pro-abortion laws |
| **View of pornography** | Pornography is inherently wrong  All pornography/sexually explicit material should be avoided | Nothing inherently wrong.  Only some types are wrong/bad and should be avoided |

It is important to note that the above are broad summaries of the two approaches. In reality, every curriculum has its own variation in emphasis and content. Concerned individuals should take some time to ask for and explore what a particular sexuality education programme is offering before concluding about that particular programme.

**Key Stakeholders – Parents Need to Step Up**

While public schools can seek to offer ‘gold-standard’ sexuality education, [studies](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16750265/) and [surveys](https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/teens-say-parents-most-influence-their-decisions-about-sex-167680825.html) show that parents are both the most influential and crucial when it comes to their own child(ren)’s sexuality education. [MOE takes this view](https://www.moe.gov.sg/programmes/sexuality-education/overview) as well, mentioning “Parents play the primary role in educating their children and are responsible for teaching and transmitting values on sex and sexuality” as one of its 6 guiding principles of sexuality education.

It is unfortunate that in our fast-paced society, [many parents feel ill-equipped and not comfortable](https://www.aware.org.sg/2020/07/parents-comfortable-sex-ed-consent-abstinence-aware-blackbox-survey/) to speak with their children on matters of sexuality. While some suggest that schools should therefore takeover the primary role as educators on sexuality, a less mentioned alternative could be considered – education for parents.

Parenting is a difficult and life-long activity that all parents need to undertake responsibly, yet parents are rarely taught how to parent. Parenting programmes can benefit parents by equipping them with a wide range of applicable skills that could serve well in strengthening the marriage as well as imparting values to their young. Equipping to engage children in the area of sexuality education would therefore only be a part of this programme for parents. This empowers parents to play their role well as primary sexuality educators for their children while alleviating the undue stress that is increasingly mounted on the public system.

All things said, sexuality education is never just about sex, gender or relationships. It involves a way of viewing one’s self, sexuality, gender and ideals to strive for. No sexuality education programme is void of values, it’s just the kind of values that it seeks to impart and champion. As key stakeholders with the primary responsibility of imparting preferred values and views on sexuality, parents need to step up and be supported to play their roles well, in nurturing the next generation of Singaporeans.