



Manifesto for better sexuality education

Sexuality education in schools must be better. Much better. That is what young people. And it's what teachers, learning institutes and educational experts think as well. Recent Dutch events around sexually transgressive behaviour show how important it is for young people to learn to respect each other's desires and boundaries. Sexuality education must be delivered with an understanding of diversity, and it should have sexual pleasure as its starting point. It is up to the government to make better education possible.

“By repeating and providing information more often, it will become more normal to talk about it [sexual health] from an early age.” Louis, 18 years old

Much to improve

Since 2012, the curriculum in the Netherland requires schools to pay attention to sexuality, including sexual diversity. However, schools are free to fill in the details themselves, which means that the level of attention these themes get and the content of the lessons differ per school and sometimes even per teacher.

Comprehensive sexuality education discusses relationships and sexuality, promotes sexual health, sexual issues such as STIs, HIV and consent and promotes an understanding of diversity.¹ Unfortunately, not every school pays attention to these issues.

In a national study, **young Dutch people** reported that their sexuality education lessons lack important information and rated them with a score of 5.8 out of 10. They said they would like to receive more frequent, extensive and diverse sexuality education.² In addition to the biological aspects, they would like to learn about the pleasurable, social and relational aspects of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE), diverse relationships, sex in the media, consent, and how to communicate and recognise each other's desires and boundaries.³

As well as the content of lessons, the timing of sexuality education also needs to be improved. The obligation in the curriculum to pay attention to sexuality and diversity applies to primary education, secondary education (lower grades) and special education. This obligation does not apply to upper secondary education, even though young people say they need education about sexuality and diversity at this stage as well.

Teachers and school management also want to give more attention to sexuality education, but they are bound by the limited space offered by the government - often they simply do not have enough time.

“Just a nice atmosphere where you can feel comfortable. That you don’t have to be afraid of who you are. That you can just be yourself.”

Nikki, 22 years old

Research with teachers conducted by Rutgers and Soa Aids Nederland indicated that their regular biology, social studies and citizenship lessons do not pay enough attention to relationships and sexuality.⁴ Six out of ten teachers further indicated that they were dissatisfied with the

content of these lessons, while three quarters were in favour of additional teaching methods and recognised educational interventions in the area of relationships and sexuality. But these additional interventions were still used too few: only four out of ten teachers.

As early as 2016, the **Education Inspectorate** found that sexuality education is fragmented, not goal-oriented enough, teacher-dependent and lacks continuity. As a result, not all topics that are appropriate to the age and development of children and young people are covered.⁵ The Education Inspectorate also found that most schools are lacking a vision or policy on promoting the respectful treatment of sexuality, resilience and sexual diversity.

Research among students and new teachers on **teacher training programmes** shows that many programmes do not deal with, or barely deal with, SOGIE, diverse relationships or diversity in general. Nor are these topics usually included in the compulsory curriculum.

In short, it is high time more structural attention is paid to sexuality education so that all children and young people have access to the same important information, and they all experience school as a safe place where they can be themselves.

Why sexuality education?

Sexuality education contributes to the healthy sexual development of young people, and it promotes active citizenship, social cohesion and a positive, safe school climate. It prevents unintended pregnancies, abortion, sexually transgressive behaviour, STIs, HIV and negative behaviour towards LGBTQI+ people. Sexuality education is about safe, pleasurable and desirable sex. It is also about discovering who you are, who you want to be, learning how your body works and navigating your relationships and interactions with others.

School is the place to reach all children and young people, regardless of their background. By teaching children, early on, age-appropriate knowledge, values, standards and skills they are better able to build positive relationships, now and later, make healthy choices and enjoy their sexuality when they are ready.⁶ This leads to self-confident, sexually healthy young people who respect each other’s wishes, who accept each other’s boundaries and who celebrate diversity and differences.



Government: take the lead!

The teaching profession cannot do this alone. It needs support and, above all, guidance from the government to be able to meet the wishes of their pupils and of society. Only then can a generation of young people grow up to respect each other's boundaries and makes healthy choices. It is now up to politicians in The Hague to make this a reality. In the National Action Plan on Sexual Transgression and Violence (2022), the government emphasises the importance of sexuality education. What do we need from the government to make comprehensive sexuality education in Dutch schools happen?

1 Improve key objectives

The curriculum's current core objectives are formulated in such a broad and ambiguous way that many schools are not clear what is expected of them. To support young people in positive, healthy relational and sexual development, it is necessary for the core objectives to elaborate on relationships, SOGIE and sexual resilience in concrete terms. This needs to happen for primary education, the first years of secondary education and (secondary) special education. The core objectives must commit all schools to teach, develop and maintain positive, non-negotiable social norms in which everyone is accepted.

2 Include relationships and sexuality in attainment targets

Currently, sexuality education is only compulsory during the first years of high school, even though half of all young people do not have sex until they are 18 or older.⁷ In the latter years of high school young people also want and need to talk about these topics, so that they can learn from one another in a safe environment. We therefore call on the government to promote comprehensive sexuality education, including SOGIE, into

the attainment targets. This will enable students to learn about and discuss sexuality throughout their entire high school education, not only in lessons such as biology but also in social studies and citizenship.

3 Extra focus for secondary vocational education students

Research has shown that students in secondary vocational education are more vulnerable to violence in relationships, unintended pregnancy, sexually transgressive behaviour, STIs, HIV⁸ and negative reactions to their sexual identity⁹ than their peers. Comprehensive sexuality education prepares young people not only for their own lives and future, but also for their future role as a professional in education or healthcare, for example. To ensure a healthy and happy future for our young people, it is essential for the government to increase its focus on secondary vocational educational students in relation to sexuality education. Knowledge and skills in the areas of relationships and sexuality should be explicitly included in citizenship education and in the graduation qualifications of secondary vocational education.

4 Use effective teaching methods

A one-off guest lecture on contraception or a classroom discussion on SOGIE is not enough. To make a real and lasting contribution to sexually healthy and respectful behaviour, it is essential to work structurally on positive attitudes, inclusive social norms and communication skills. This can best be done by using existing effective and inclusive teaching methods within a continuous learning trajectory, investing in the renewal and implementation of these methods, and explicitly including sexuality education in the school plan.

"In sex education, there is more talk more about ovaries and all the practical things. No attention is given to how does it feel? Or what do you like? Or how do you talk to each other about it?"

Izy, 22 years old

5 Better tools for implementation and review social safety

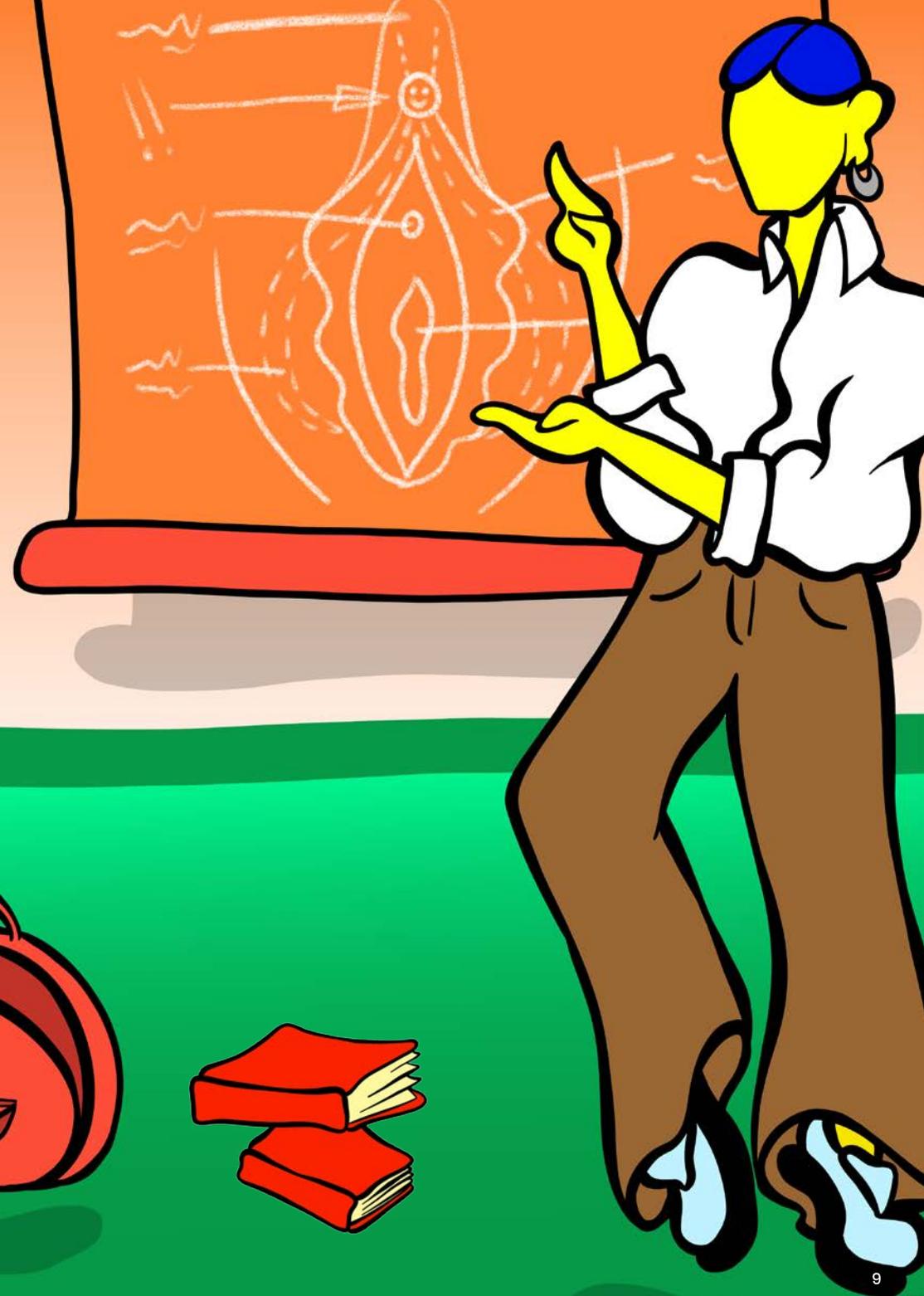
The quality of social safety assessment tools must be improved. Questions should be added about relationships, healthy sexual behaviour, resilience, SOGIE, and the prevention of STIs, HIV and unintended pregnancies. In the current set-up, there is too limited a picture of the social safety experienced at school, as a result of which concrete policy is still too often lacking. The Education Inspectorate must be able to monitor this more strictly. In addition, schools must be supported to develop and implement policy on social safety so that the social safety of their students can be monitored and a clear position of, and mandate for, the school counsellor can be provided.

6 Invest in the promotion of expertise, continuing education and training

Teachers are crucial for quality education, a safe school culture and the promotion of positive social behaviour. The Dutch government should therefore invest in increasing the expertise and competence of teachers in relation to sexuality education. Teacher training programmes should include topics such as relationships, sexual resilience, SOGIE, diverse relationships and diversity in general, and pay more attention to competence-based education.

“It is important to us that children experience that there are forms of living together and that nothing is crazy and that we don’t have to laugh about anything. That we have respect for choices.”

Era Kling, Nursery teacher and confidential advisor at KC ‘t Ven, Rosmalen



This manifesto is supported by:

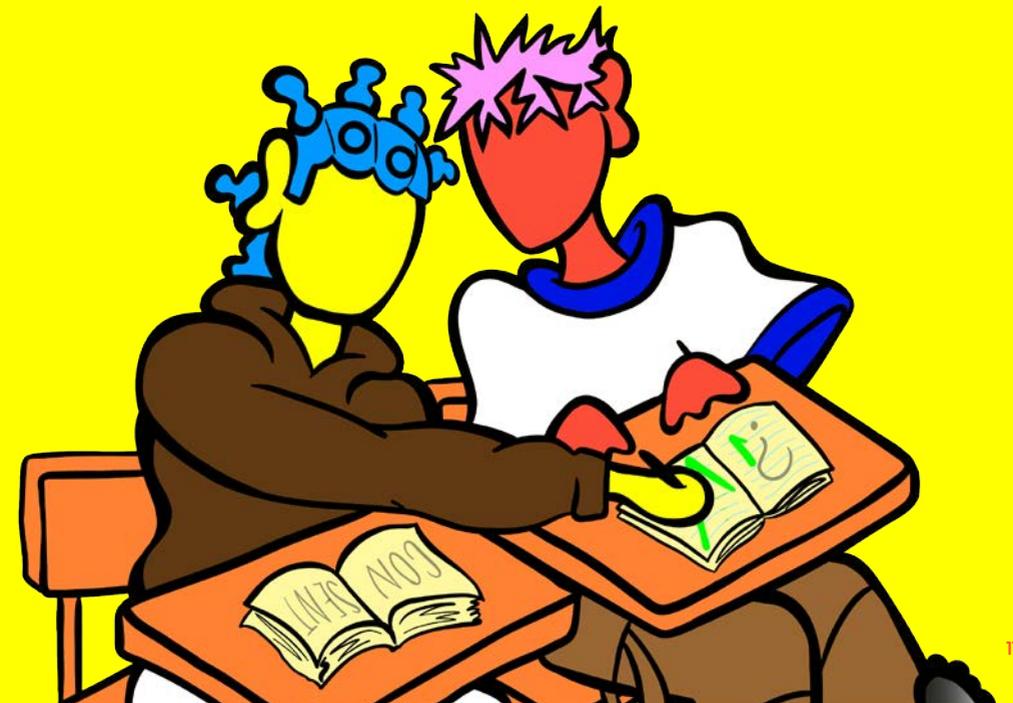


“I want to prepare young people well for their professional future in healthcare, where it is especially important that this group also receives sexual education because they must be able to guide others.”

Bjørn Ciggaar, teacher of the Healthcare MBO, Hilversum College

Sources

- ¹ Unesco, Why comprehensive sexuality education is important: <https://en.unesco.org/news/why-comprehensive-sexuality-education-important>; RIVM, Wat werkt dossier seksuele gezondheid op school: <https://www.loketgezondleven.nl/gezondheidsthema/seksuele-gezondheid/wat-werkt-dossier-seksuele-gezondheid-op-school>
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