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## Consent and Respect: Teaching knowledge and values in sex education in girls' schools

The importance of sex education for students has been recognised to improve health and wellbeing outcomes, including increased confidence and benefits for self-identity. Yet much of the research on this topic is focussed on medical and public health outcomes. Often this is focussed on “before” and “after” data surrounding student knowledge and health outcomes. But what happens in the classrooms that leads to these results? And how can we provide girls with the knowledge they need to be informed and safe, while also ensuring their wellbeing is holistically supported beyond improvements in statistics alone?

Dr Georgia Carr from the University of Sydney has responded to this challenge with her new book based on a study of an all-girls public school in Sydney, Australia. Her book *The Language of Sex Education* helps explore sex education programmes and how schools can approach this topic to holistically support girls' wellbeing. Based on a school cohort that included mainstream as well as “gifted and talented” classes, the project behind the book included a significant proportion of students who spoke languages other than English, including both migrants and refugees. This provides unique insight into tackling challenging and complex topics amidst a wide variety of student beliefs and views.

Much of the focus on sex education is scientific or medical, which is one of the main complaints often received from students. But schools can offer girls an alternative approach by designing sex education programmes around both knowledge *and* values. This allows educators to support girls with a values-based approach to learning, while accommodating and supporting different beliefs in the classroom. Two key concepts that are central to this goal are consent and respect.

So often, we talk to girls about consent in its legal sense, as a notion tied to a technical definition. In this way, consent continues to be a very technical, legal concept. While it is important that students understand how to legally define consent, it is also crucial that girls know how to apply their understanding of consent in everyday life. They need to understand whether consent is present or absent. Yet they also need to understand and explain situations where there is no consent.

This gives educators an opportunity to unpack and repack consent. Unpacking understandings of consent is vital. Repacking is equally important and allows girls the opportunity to explore how consent works and appears in real life. This is an essential juncture where schools can support girls by offering education interventions that intentionally link understandings of laws of consent with how this can be applied in real life situations. This allows girls to combine “feeling right” with “acting right” – because neither can occur in isolation if a healthy understanding of consent is to be achieved.

Respect is the second pillar on which Dr Carr bases her suggested approach to sex education. Respect needs to be more than merely a concept in a sex education class. It has many meanings – something you do,

something you are, and a concept of its own that is widely considered to be “important”. It applies to everyone, and all situations, and this becomes a significant part of sex education.

Despite these many meanings, respect can still be established as a shared value within the class and broader school community. This is especially important when discussing topics where there are different opinions. By teaching respect as a value that the class and the whole school absorbs, girls can be supported to develop and draw on strategies for navigating the complex topics that are covered in sex education and in their education and lives more broadly.

Girls are facing increasingly complex questions as they navigate the complexities of sexualisation, relationships and a healthy approach to these topics. Even if students have negative feelings on a topic, mixed feelings or are just unsure about a situation, a healthy understanding of respect can help them learn and understand how to behave toward others when navigating these scenarios. Respect can be a difficult concept to teach because of the presence of varied opinions, values and beliefs in a class. It is important to help students develop support for respect as a values system – both in terms of girls’ understanding of the sex education content, but also more holistically, as a member of society.

Strategies that can support girls in this area include recognising different opinions and learning how to separate feelings from behaviours. Teachers can also help girls by aligning or realigning the class around a particular meaning of respect to guide discussions and learning. It is also essential to consider the difference between talking about a topic and assuming students understand the content. This includes providing girls with the space to explore and understand the topics at hand – even when faced with complex and challenging questions.

Teachers who were involved in Dr Carr’s research felt positive about this approach to consent and respect, and what it means for girls. They felt that the students engaged and interacted with sex education in a positive way, including better understandings of the concepts like consent. Beyond sex education alone, educators also felt this gave girls strategies to navigate a diversity of views and opinions among students. This highlights important ways to holistically incorporate sex education into the broader wellbeing initiatives already supporting students at girls’ schools.

Dr Carr has developed resources to assist educators in this journey with students. Some of these resources are mapped to the relevant curriculum and syllabi for Australian states and territories. Schools outside of Australia are likely to find Dr Carr’s resources valuable as a compare and contrast/review tool for their existing provision. You can access a complimentary copy and [read more about Dr Carr’s resources here](#).

## References

Carr, G. (2025). *The language of sex education: With respect to consent*. Bloomsbury Academic.