



## OPEN ACCESS

## EDITED BY

Nelly Lagos San Martin,  
University of the Bio Bio, Chile

## REVIEWED BY

Kevin Davison,  
University of Galway, Ireland  
Michelle Finestone,  
University of Pretoria, South Africa

## \*CORRESPONDENCE

Sobh Chahboun  
✉ sch@dmhh.no

RECEIVED 16 December 2024

ACCEPTED 03 March 2025

PUBLISHED 13 March 2025

## CITATION

Lehn EW and Chahboun S (2025) Breaking taboos! From silence to support: understanding children's sexuality in early childhood pedagogical practice. *Front. Educ.* 10:1546431. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1546431

## COPYRIGHT

© 2025 Lehn and Chahboun. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

# Breaking taboos! From silence to support: understanding children's sexuality in early childhood pedagogical practice

Elisabeth Walsøe Lehn and Sobh Chahboun\*

Queen Maud University College, Trondheim, Norway

Sexual education has been a subject of scholarly focus for over three decades, yet addressing sexuality as an integral aspect of human development remains a persistent challenge. In early childhood education, the topic is often stigmatized, leaving educators without the tools or confidence to approach it constructively. Recognizing sexuality as a natural and developmental process is essential for fostering respect, healthy relationships, and personal growth in children. This article explores kindergarten teachers' practices and perceptions concerning children's sexuality, examining societal taboos and the critical gaps in teacher education. By integrating insights from policy documents and empirical research, this study underscores the necessity of incorporating comprehensive sexuality education into teacher training programs. It advocates for a shift from silence to proactive engagement, empowering educators to address children's natural expressions with empathy and respect.

## KEYWORDS

kindergarten, sexuality, sexual health, sexual development, education, taboo

## Introduction

Sexuality is an integral part of human development, encompassing aspects of identity, bodily awareness, interpersonal relationships, and emotional well-being ([World Health Organization, 2010](#)). While public discourse often emphasizes sexuality during adolescence and adulthood, evidence highlights that sexuality begins in early childhood as a natural process of exploration and learning ([Bhana, 2015](#)). Recognizing and supporting this dimension in children is crucial for fostering positive self-concepts, understanding boundaries, and developing healthy interpersonal relationships throughout life ([Lehn et al., 2023](#); [Balter et al., 2021](#); [UNESCO, 2018](#); [Vildalen, 2014](#)).

The [World Health Organization \(2010\)](#) and [UNESCO \(2018\)](#) highlight early childhood as a critical phase for social, emotional, and cognitive development. During this period, children begin to form foundational attitudes toward their bodies, boundaries, emotions, and interpersonal relationships. However, the absence of structured, age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) leads to misconceptions, confusion, and heightened vulnerability ([Cacciatore et al., 2019](#); [Lehn et al., 2023](#)). If children have parents who systematically overlook their sexual expression or meet it with fear or anger, that part of the child's development will be problematic ([Vildalen, 2014](#)). [Robinson and Davies \(2017\)](#) emphasizes that children who are denied open, positive conversations about sexuality struggle with body awareness, emotional intelligence, and the ability to recognize and communicate personal boundaries ([Cacciatore et al., 2019](#)).

In Norwegian kindergartens, the Framework Plan for Kindergartens promotes a holistic approach to child development, asserting the inherent value of childhood and emphasizing

children's rights to active participation in shaping their learning experiences (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). Despite these progressive directives, discussions around children's sexuality often remain shrouded in societal taboos and discomfort, both in educational settings and in broader social contexts (Lehn et al., 2023; Brouskeli and Sapountzis, 2017; Barr et al., 2014). Kindergarten teachers report uncertainty and discomfort when addressing children's natural expressions of sexuality, resulting in avoidance, misinterpretation, or even stigmatization of age-appropriate behaviors (Byers et al., 2024; Mælan and Fjeld, 2024; Lehn et al., 2023; Balter et al., 2021; Aasland, 2020; Skundberg, 2020; Thorkildsen, 2015; Skarpsno, 2013; Kimerud, 2009).

The reluctance to address children's sexuality in early education is compounded by societal norms that often conflate children's natural curiosity with inappropriate behaviors, reinforcing taboos and misconceptions (Noh and Bakar, 2023; Lehn et al., 2023; Balter et al., 2021). Research underscores the significant role educators play in shaping children's understanding of their bodies, emotions, and social relationships. Educators equipped with training and resources are more likely to provide supportive environments that affirm children's experiences while challenging misconceptions and biases (Balter et al., 2021; Robinson and Davies, 2017; Kaeser et al., 2000).

This article aims to deepen the understanding of children's sexuality as a natural, essential, and integral component of development. Drawing on Norwegian and international studies, including recent insights into kindergarten teachers' reflections on age-normal sexuality (Byers et al., 2024; Mælan and Fjeld, 2024; Lehn et al., 2023; Brouskeli and Sapountzis, 2017;), it explores how early childhood educators can address this aspect of development while navigating societal taboos and professional uncertainties. By advocating comprehensive sexuality education in teacher training programs, this work seeks to equip educators with the knowledge and confidence to foster children's positive sexual health and holistic development; this way healthy children's development is framed, and explicit and transparent learning is outlined.

## Clarifying key concepts: sexuality, sexual development, and sexuality education

To ensure clarity in discussions on CSE in early childhood education, it is essential to distinguish between the terms sexuality, sexual development, and sexuality education. These concepts are often conflated, yet they encompass distinct dimensions of human growth and identity, influencing how sexuality-related topics are approached in educational settings (Indryani Utami et al., 2024; Utami et al., 2023).

Sexuality is a broad, multidimensional concept encompassing biological, psychological, social, emotional, and cultural aspects of human identity and relationships (World Health Organization, 2010). It extends beyond sexual behaviors to include gender identity, sexual orientation, bodily autonomy, intimacy, and self-expression across the lifespan. In early childhood, sexuality does not refer to adult notions of sexual activity but rather to children's natural curiosity about their bodies, relationships, and societal norms related to gender and affection (UNESCO, 2018).

Sexual development refers to the age-appropriate progression of a child's understanding, experiences, and behaviors related to their body, emotions, and relationships (Aasland, 2020; Ministry of Health and Care,

2016; Skarpsno, 2013; Schalet, 2011; Kimerud, 2009). This process begins at birth and evolves through various stages, influenced by biological, cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural factors (Vildalen, 2014).

Sexuality, or sexual, education, involves the structured process of teaching about human sexuality in a manner that is both developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive (World Health Organization, 2010; UNESCO, 2018). In early childhood education, this does not entail discussions about sexual activity but instead focuses on foundational concepts such as body awareness, self-respect, emotions, relationships, consent, and diversity in gender roles and family structures. It also includes developing critical thinking skills regarding media and cultural messages about gender and relationships. CSE is an evidence-based, age-appropriate approach designed to equip children with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to make informed decisions about their well-being and relationships (UNESCO, 2018). In early childhood, CSE primarily fosters self-awareness, bodily autonomy, and respectful social interactions rather than addressing explicit sexual content.

Understanding the distinctions between sexuality, sexual development, and sexuality education is crucial for educators, parents, and policymakers. Sexuality education, particularly in early childhood, provides children with the tools to understand emotions, boundaries, and social norms in a manner that aligns with their developmental stage.

## Theoretical perspectives on sexuality education in early childhood

A robust theoretical framework is essential for contextualizing sexuality education in early childhood within established academic paradigms. By integrating foundational theories, it becomes possible to examine how societal structures, discourse, and developmental systems influence educators' perceptions of childhood sexuality. This discussion explores the barriers to addressing sexuality in early childhood education, particularly the cultural taboos that generate discomfort among educators and caregivers. To analyze these challenges, this section applies Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Foucault's discourse on sexuality, providing a structured approach to understanding the obstacles and potential strategies for implementing CSE in early childhood teacher training.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological systems theory offers a valuable framework for analyzing the various environmental factors—ranging from individual beliefs to broader societal norms—that shape educators' responses to childhood sexuality. Foucault's discourse on sexuality provides a critical perspective on how power and societal norms regulate discussions about sexuality, often reinforcing silence and stigma. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this discussion situates itself within broader academic conversations on child development, power dynamics, and educational reform, advocating for a structured and evidence-based approach to CSE in early childhood education.

## Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and sexuality education in early childhood

Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological systems theory (1979) conceptualizes development as occurring within nested environmental

systems, from immediate interactions to broader societal influences. Applied to early childhood sexuality education, this model highlights structural barriers and the varying levels of support that educators encounter.

At the microsystem level, children's direct interactions with parents, teachers, and peers play a central role in shaping their understanding of sexuality. Kindergarten educators serve as key figures in fostering age-appropriate discussions on bodily autonomy, boundaries, and relationships. However, many educators report feeling unprepared or uncomfortable addressing these topics due to personal experience or inadequate training (Lehn et al., 2023), often resulting in avoidance or misinterpretation of children's natural curiosity.

The mesosystem consists of interactions between significant institutions, such as the relationship between educators and parents, which significantly influences how sexuality education is approached. If parents are unsure about the topic, or resist discussions on sexuality, educators may feel pressure to avoid the topic, further reinforcing societal taboos. Strengthening communication between teachers and families through workshops and structured dialogues can help create a more supportive environment for addressing children's natural curiosity.

At the exosystem level, policies and teacher training programs shape educators' capacity to engage with CSE. Although the Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017) promotes a holistic approach to child development, it does not explicitly integrate sexuality education. Without clear policy support and structured training, educators often lack both the confidence and the pedagogical strategies necessary to incorporate these discussions into their classrooms effectively.

The macrosystem encompasses the cultural values and dominant discourses that influence societal attitudes toward childhood sexuality. Scandinavian educational frameworks prioritize children's autonomy and rights, yet sexuality remains a culturally sensitive and underexplored subject. Misconceptions equating sexuality education with premature sexualization contribute to stigma, discouraging educators from addressing the topic in an age-appropriate manner.

Finally, the chronosystem highlights how shifting societal norms, policies, and educational frameworks impact sexuality education over time. While global organizations such as UNESCO (2018) and World Health Organization (2010) advocate for early and comprehensive sexuality education, national and institutional implementation remains slow and met with resistance. Recognizing how perspectives on childhood sexuality evolve is essential for promoting long-term reforms in teacher training and curriculum development.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's model reveals that educators' reluctance to engage in sexuality education is not an isolated issue but rather the result of multiple interacting influences. Addressing these challenges requires systemic change at the policy, institutional, and societal levels to create a more supportive environment for early childhood educators.

## Foucault's discourse on sexuality: power, knowledge, and taboos in early childhood education

Foucault's (1978) analysis of sexuality highlights how power operates through discourse, shaping what can and cannot be said

about sexuality within societal institutions. His work is particularly relevant in explaining why early childhood educators struggle to address childhood sexuality and why sexuality education remains a culturally sensitive topic despite being a natural aspect of human development.

The regulation of discourse is a key factor in the silencing of sexuality education. Discussions about sexuality in early childhood education are often suppressed due to cultural discomfort and the prevailing belief that childhood should be associated with innocence and asexuality (Lehn et al., 2023; Skundberg, 2020; Aasland, 2020; Heiman et al., 1998). According to Foucault, institutions regulate knowledge through discourse, and the absence of sexuality education in teacher training perpetuates a culture of silence. This discourages educators from engaging with children's natural curiosity, leading to avoidance or even the stigmatization of developmentally appropriate behaviors.

Power and control within educational institutions also shape discourse on childhood sexuality. Educators often experience institutional pressure to conform to dominant narratives that frame discussions of sexuality as inappropriate for young children. This reluctance is exacerbated by fears of parental backlash, as teachers navigate implicit power dynamics that challenge their authority in the classroom (Skundberg, 2020; Robinson and Davies, 2017).

The medicalization and pathologization of sexuality, or lack of knowledge to distinguish between normal and harmful sexuality (Skundberg, 2020) further contribute to societal discomfort surrounding childhood sexuality. Foucault's concept of biopower—the regulation of bodies through institutions such as schools and healthcare—explains how childhood sexuality has historically been treated as something to be controlled rather than understood. In many educational settings, children's natural expressions of curiosity about their bodies have been pathologized (Martin, 2014). This results in children internalizing shame and confusion rather than developing a healthy and developmentally appropriate understanding of their bodies (Vildalen, 2014).

Despite these barriers, resistance to dominant discourses has the potential to create progressive change. Challenging restrictive norms surrounding childhood sexuality requires reframing sexuality education as an essential component of holistic child development. Providing educators with theoretical and practical knowledge enables them to challenge restrictive discourses and advocate for evidence-based approaches to sexuality education.

By applying Foucault's discourse analysis, this discussion highlights the structural forces that contribute to educators' reluctance to engage with sexuality education. Breaking the silence surrounding childhood sexuality requires more than policy changes—it necessitates a broader cultural shift that legitimizes discussions on sexual development as an integral part of emotional, relational, and social education.

## The construction of childhood innocence and asexuality

A significant barrier to incorporating discussions about sexuality in early childhood education is the deeply rooted belief that young children is pure and asexual, and should be shielded from conversations regarding their bodies, relationships, and emotions. Many parents and policymakers perceive childhood as a period of purity, in which exposure to topics related to sexuality is deemed inappropriate or unnecessary (McGinn et al., 2016; Stone et al., 2013;

Heiman et al., 1998). The idea of the non-sexual child is deeply rooted in the culture, resulting in silence and avoidance rather than informed guidance (Skundberg, 2020; McGinn et al., 2016; Heiman et al., 1998), something we might term the “innocence paradigm.”

Related to this paradigm is that research emphasizes that societal norms frequently misinterpret children’s natural curiosity about their bodies as problematic or even deviant, reinforcing the avoidance of these discussions (Lehn et al., 2023; McGinn et al., 2016; Heiman et al., 1998). Similarly, UNESCO (2018) asserts that children as young as 3 years old begin forming understandings of their bodies, gender roles, and relationships. However, adults often dismiss or suppress these natural inquiries, reinforcing the notion that such topics are unsuitable for young children.

## Misconceptions about the content of CSE

Another significant source of resistance to CSE stems from misunderstandings regarding its content and objectives. Many parents express concerns that CSE will prematurely sexualize children or introduce them to inappropriate material, as well as concerns about abuse. Studies indicate that a common misconception among adults is that teaching children about their bodies and relationships will encourage premature sexual behavior (Kor et al., 2023; Aasland, 2020; McGinn et al., 2016; Martin, 2014; Stone et al., 2013).

## The influence of moral and religious beliefs

Religious and moral perspectives play a crucial role in shaping how sexuality is addressed—or ignored—in early childhood education (Utami et al., 2023; Mukonka et al., 2023). In more conservative communities, parents and educators even more assiduously avoid discussions about sexuality due to fears that early exposure may conflict with traditional family values. Additionally, in many societies, sexuality education is regarded as a private family matter rather than an essential component of formal education, reinforcing the belief that schools should not engage in these discussions (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2018). Such perspectives contribute to the continued reluctance to integrate CSE into early childhood education, despite evidence supporting its developmental benefits.

## The societal mandate of kindergartens: holistic development and the role of sexuality

One important arena for children to develop their understanding of sexuality is in play. The kindergarten framework is a cornerstone document that emphasizes the holistic development of children, integrating care, play, learning, and overall growth as fundamental components of early childhood education (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). This framework elevates childhood as a distinct and invaluable phase of human life, one that requires intentional and comprehensive support across all dimensions of development. It highlights the importance of creating environments where children can thrive emotionally, socially, and cognitively, ensuring their well-being is nurtured in a manner that respects their individuality and fosters their

potential to become competent, reflective, and empathetic members of society.

Within this holistic approach, the framework implicitly acknowledges the interconnectedness of various developmental dimensions. These include physical, emotional, and social growth, but one dimension remains notably overlooked: sexuality. As an innate and integral aspect of human identity, sexuality plays a pivotal role in fostering meaningful relationships and contributing to both physical and psychological health (Lehn et al., 2023; Aasland, 2020; Ministry of Health and Care, 2016). From an early age, children begin to explore and understand their bodies, form relationships with peers and adults, and navigate their emotions and boundaries. These experiences are foundational for developing a healthy sense of self and understanding interpersonal dynamics. Sexuality, therefore, is not limited to reproductive health or physical expression; it encompasses a broader spectrum, including bodily autonomy, emotional intelligence, and relational skills (UNESCO, 2018).

Despite the critical importance of addressing sexuality as part of early childhood development, it remains a significantly underrepresented topic within teacher education programs (Byers et al., 2024; Mælan and Fjeld, 2024; Noh and Bakar, 2023; Svendsen and Furunes, 2022). Many educators lack the formal training necessary to navigate this sensitive and complex subject effectively. This gap in training has profound implications, as teachers are frontline professionals who directly influence children’s understanding of themselves and their interactions with others (Vildalen, 2014). Without adequate preparation, educators are often ill-equipped to respond to children’s natural expressions of curiosity about their bodies, emotions, and relationships (Lehn et al., 2023; Aasland, 2020).

Moreover, the omission of sexuality from teacher education programs undermines the broader goals of holistic development outlined in the Norwegian Framework Plan (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). By neglecting this fundamental aspect of human identity, the educational system fails to provide children with the tools they need to develop healthy attitudes toward their bodies, understand boundaries, and build respectful relationships. Research underscores the importance of addressing sexuality in early education to prevent misconceptions, support emotional well-being, and lay the foundation for lifelong relational skills (UNESCO, 2018). Educators who receive comprehensive training in this area are more confident and capable of fostering environments where children feel safe, respected, and valued (Brouskeli and Sapountzis, 2017). To fulfill the mandate of the framework plan, it is essential to recognize sexuality as a critical dimension of development. By integrating sexuality into teacher education, educators can be better prepared to approach the topic with sensitivity, accuracy, and respect, thereby aligning with the principles of holistic education and ensuring that no aspect of a child’s development is neglected (Lehn et al., 2023).

## The current state of CSE in Norway: gaps and policy implications

CSE in Norway is shaped by national educational policies, societal attitudes, and international frameworks. Despite Norway’s progressive stance on gender equality and children’s rights, there remains a gap in the systematic integration of CSE within ECE. This omission has significant implications for children’s early understanding of bodily autonomy, relationships, and emotional development.

## Introduction of CSE in the Norwegian primary school curriculum

CSE is formally introduced in Norwegian primary education but remains minimal in early childhood education. Its coverage increases with age, with more comprehensive content in later schooling stages.

In primary education (ages 6–13), CSE is integrated into subjects like Science, Social Studies, and Health Education under the “Life Skills” framework (LK20), focusing on bodily autonomy, emotions, relationships, and gender identity (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2020). However, little attention is given to early sexual development, leaving gaps in foundational knowledge. The preparedness of teachers also varies significantly depending on how individual universities structure their curricula. Research conducted by Svendsen and Furunes (2022) indicates that many Norwegian teachers feel unprepared to deliver sexuality education, often citing insufficient training in CSE during their initial education.

In lower secondary education (ages 13–16), sexuality education expands to cover sexual identity, contraception, and consent, with an inclusive approach addressing LGBTQ+ issues, gender norms, and digital safety.

In early childhood education (ages 1–6), the Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens promotes holistic child development but does not explicitly include CSE. Because of this, many kindergarten educators lack the pedagogical tools necessary to address children’s natural curiosity regarding their bodies and relationships. While topics like emotions and bodily autonomy are encouraged, sexuality and relationships are largely avoided, leaving educators with little guidance and leading to inconsistent or absent discussions on the subject (Lehn et al., 2023).

## Implications of the delayed introduction of CSE

The delayed incorporation of sexuality education means that children commence primary school with varying levels of knowledge and preparedness. As has been intimated, this is problematic because research indicates that earlier interventions are instrumental in fostering a healthy understanding of bodily autonomy, personal boundaries, and interpersonal relationships (UNESCO, 2018; World Health Organization, 2010). The absence of a structured approach to CSE in early childhood education risks reinforcing misconceptions, limiting children’s ability to develop informed perspectives on their bodies and relationships. Given the established benefits of early sexuality education, there is a pressing need for policy revisions to ensure a more systematic and comprehensive introduction of CSE from early childhood onwards.

## Educators’ fears and conflicts in addressing sexuality in early childhood education (ECE)

The importance of early education on the subject is problematic because of the reticence experienced by many educators. A significant challenge in this regards is the lack of formal training and pedagogical tools for addressing sexuality in a developmentally appropriate manner. The absence of structured teacher education in this domain leads to uncertainty and discomfort. For instance, many early

childhood educators experience anxiety when addressing sexuality due to concerns about potential negative reactions from parents, administrators, or policymakers. Research by Lehn et al. (2023) indicates that teachers often feel unprepared to respond to children’s questions about their bodies, fearing parental complaints or stigmatization. Consequently, the avoidance of educators inadvertently reinforces societal silence on the topic (Lehn et al., 2023; Svendsen and Furunes, 2022; Skundberg, 2020).

Even educators who recognize the importance of CSE often struggle with conflicting professional expectations. Many experience moral and ethical dilemmas when discussing sexuality, feeling torn between supporting children’s natural development and adhering to societal norms that discourage such conversations. Additionally, the pressure to maintain “professional distance” further complicates efforts to foster open, age-appropriate discussions on sexuality and relationships (Lehn et al., 2023; Balter et al., 2016; Brouskeli and Sapountzis, 2017).

A prevalent concern among educators and parents is that discussing sexuality would destroy the magic of childhood (McGinn et al., 2016). Failing to talk to the children will lead to them, for example, not problematizing the culturally created gender role patterns that girls are socialized into (Moore and Reynolds, 2018). This fear, however, contradicts research findings indicating that withholding information only leads to greater confusion and makes children more vulnerable to misinformation and exploitation (Aasland, 2020; Søftestad, 2018; Thorkildsen, 2015). This is also rooted in the paradigm of innocence, which needs to be challenged in order to foster a more open approach to sexuality education, early childhood educators can help create an environment where children receive accurate and developmentally appropriate information, ultimately promoting their well-being and safety.

## Consequences of neglect in teacher training

A critical consequence of neglecting these topics in teacher training is the missed opportunity to equip children with the tools they need to navigate their own development and relationships. For example, educators who are unprepared to discuss bodily autonomy or boundaries with children may inadvertently fail to provide them with the vocabulary and concepts necessary to articulate their needs and recognize inappropriate behavior. This lack of foundational understanding can have lasting impacts, including confusion about one’s body, difficulties in forming healthy relationships, and vulnerabilities in situations that require clear communication of boundaries (Utami and Putri, 2025; Skundberg, 2020; Robinson and Davies, 2017).

The discomfort or avoidance exhibited by educators also limits the creation of safe spaces where children feel respected and valued. In this way, educators reinforce taboos rather than challenge or dismantle them. Research suggests that open and age-appropriate discussions about bodies and boundaries are not only essential for fostering children’s confidence and self-awareness but also play a protective role against exploitation and abuse (World Health Organization, 2010; UNESCO, 2018). By equipping children with a positive understanding of their bodies and relationships, educators can help them build resilience, emotional intelligence, and the skills needed to navigate the complexities of interpersonal dynamics throughout life.

## Addressing barriers: the need for comprehensive sexuality education

### The case for earlier implementation of CSE in early childhood education (ECE) -the rationale for introducing CSE in kindergarten

As has been intimated, a significant challenge in embedding CSE within early childhood education lies in its limited presence in teacher training programs. Research highlights that many education curricula either exclude discussions on sexuality altogether or present them in ways that are disconnected from the realities of early childhood settings.

This gap in training not only reflects societal discomfort with addressing children's sexuality but also perpetuates a lack of institutional support for educators who wish to engage with the topic constructively. For example, educators may fear backlash from parents or colleagues, further discouraging them from initiating conversations about boundaries or bodily autonomy. Addressing these barriers requires systemic change on multiple levels within teacher education programs, ensuring that topics related to sexuality are integrated into broader discussions on child development, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal skills (Lehn et al., 2023; Bhana, 2015). Policymakers must prioritize the inclusion of CSE in national education frameworks, aligning with international guidelines to provide clear and consistent guidance for educators. Teacher education programs should integrate topics related to sexuality into their core curricula, emphasizing their relevance to child development, emotional learning, and relational skills.

Extensive research underscores the significance of introducing CSE during early childhood education, as it provides fundamental knowledge and skills essential for children's development. Early implementation of CSE serves multiple critical functions:

- **Normalization of Discussions on Bodies and Relationships:** Educating young children about their bodies, boundaries, and emotions fosters open communication and reduces stigma associated with these topics (UNESCO, 2018).
- **Strengthening Protective Factors Against Abuse:** Children who are taught about bodily autonomy and the concept of consent demonstrate greater awareness and resilience, making them less vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.
- **Enhancing Emotional Regulation and Social Skills:** Early engagement in discussions about emotions, friendships, and gender identity promotes respect, inclusivity, and positive interpersonal relationships.

By integrating CSE into kindergarten curricula, children can develop a foundational understanding of bodily autonomy, respect for diversity, and strategies for healthy interpersonal relationships. The absence of structured CSE at this stage represents a missed opportunity to equip children with essential knowledge that will benefit them throughout their lives. However, it is necessary to give educators support in this endeavor. Lehn et al. (2023) found that educators who participated in professional development programs focused on CSE reported greater confidence in addressing children's natural behaviors and curiosity. They were also more likely to create inclusive learning

environments where children felt respected and supported in their explorations. Similarly, Bhana (2015) highlights the importance of equipping educators with culturally sensitive tools to navigate the diverse ways in which children express their emotions and understand relationships.

### Aligning early childhood education with global standards

International guidelines provide valuable frameworks for integrating CSE into early childhood education. For example, WHO's Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe (2010) advocate for a holistic approach that combines physical, emotional, and social dimensions of health. These standards emphasize starting CSE at a young age to build a foundation for lifelong learning, aligning with the developmental needs of children in their formative years.

Norwegian kindergartens, guided by the Framework Plan for Kindergartens, offer an ideal context for implementing these standards. The plan's emphasis on play, social interaction, and emotional learning aligns with the principles of CSE, which prioritize exploration, curiosity, and respect for individuality (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). By integrating international best practices into national policies and teacher training programs, Norway can serve as a model for how to address societal taboos and promote a culture of inclusion and respect in early childhood education.

### Research-based recommendations vs. current policies

The following Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of the current Norwegian approach to Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and research-based recommendations for its improvement. While CSE in Norway is introduced in primary school with minimal integration in early childhood education, research suggests that it should commence between the ages of 3 and 6 to align with child development principles. The curriculum currently emphasizes biology and health education but lacks explicit discussions on emotions, relationships, consent, and gender diversity in early years. Additionally, teacher training in CSE remains insufficient, leaving many educators feeling unprepared. Greater parental engagement through workshops and resources is recommended to address misconceptions and support early CSE implementation.

### Case studies: countries successfully implementing early comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)

The Netherlands has established a well-integrated approach to CSE, beginning in kindergarten through play-based learning and structured discussions that emphasize body awareness, respect, and emotions. A key feature of this model is the active involvement of parents in shaping the curriculum, ensuring that CSE is both culturally sensitive and widely accepted (UNESCO, 2018).

Similarly, Finland has successfully incorporated CSE into early childhood education by utilizing child-friendly teaching materials

TABLE 1 Comparative analysis of the current Norwegian approach to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and research-based recommendations.

Aspect	Current Norwegian approach	Research-based recommendations
Age CSE is introduced	Begins in primary school (age 6) with limited early discussions in kindergartens.	Should start in early childhood (ages 3–6) to align with child development research (World Health Organization, 2010; UNESCO, 2018).
Curriculum coverage	Focuses on biology and health education in primary school. Kindergarten focuses on general life skills but lacks explicit CSE content.	Should include age-appropriate discussions on emotions, relationships, consent, and gender diversity in kindergarten.
Teacher training	Limited CSE training in both kindergarten and primary teacher education. Many educators feel unprepared.	Teacher training should include practical pedagogical strategies for discussing CSE topics with young children.
Parental engagement	Parents often unaware or hesitant about discussing CSE in ECE. Some fear it is “too early”.	Schools should provide workshops and resources to help parents understand the developmental benefits of early CSE.

designed to foster open dialogue. A distinguishing characteristic of the Finnish approach is the mandatory training provided to teachers, equipping them with the necessary skills to address CSE topics effectively (World Health Organization, 2010).

Both the Netherlands and Finland demonstrate lower levels of stigma surrounding childhood sexuality education and have reported positive outcomes in children’s emotional and social development. Their proactive policies highlight the importance of early CSE in promoting healthy attitudes towards bodies, relationships, and personal boundaries.

## The need for policy and curriculum reform

Despite Norway’s progressive education policies, the lack of explicit CSE in early childhood education limits children’s holistic development. To address this, CSE should be mandated for ages 3–6, integrating discussions on bodies, emotions, and relationships into the Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens.

Teacher education programs must include CSE training to equip educators with strategies for addressing children’s questions in a non-stigmatizing way. Strengthening parental engagement through workshops and guidance can foster collaboration between schools and families.

Aligning early education policies with international best practices will help educators create inclusive, developmentally appropriate learning environments that support children’s well-being and social-emotional growth.

## The role of educators in addressing taboos

Discussions about sexuality in early childhood education (ECE) are often shaped by deep-rooted societal norms and cultural discourses that reinforce silence and stigma. Many societies construct childhood as a period of innocence and asexuality, positioning discussions of sexuality as inappropriate or even harmful (Lehn et al., 2023; Balter et al., 2021; Skundberg, 2020; Robinson and Davies, 2017). These cultural perceptions restrict open conversations in ECE settings, leaving educators unprepared to address children’s natural curiosity about their bodies, emotions, and relationships.

For instance, incorporating workshops on CSE into teacher training programs can equip educators with evidence-based strategies for engaging children in meaningful conversations about boundaries and relationships. These workshops can also address common misconceptions and cultural biases, helping educators navigate the complexities of children’s development with cultural sensitivity and professional integrity (UNESCO, 2018). Furthermore, creating platforms for peer learning and dialogue can foster a community of practice where educators share experiences and develop collective strategies for addressing challenges (Lehn et al., 2023).

## Conclusion

The discourse on children’s sexuality in early childhood education is a multifaceted and deeply significant subject that challenges traditional norms and societal taboos. As this article has demonstrated, recognizing sexuality as a natural and integral aspect of holistic child development is not only essential but transformative for both educators and children. By moving beyond silence and stigma, early childhood education can become a cornerstone for fostering positive attitudes, healthy relationships, and a comprehensive understanding of self and others.

Societal taboos surrounding children’s sexuality continue to pose significant challenges for educators and policymakers alike. These cultural barriers perpetuate discomfort, avoidance, and misinformation, which hinder the ability of educators to effectively support children’s development. However, as research highlights, educators play a pivotal role in reshaping societal attitudes and creating environments where children feel respected, valued, and understood (Lehn et al., 2023). Education systems, particularly in the early childhood phase, have the unique opportunity to challenge these taboos through evidence-based practices and professional training that emphasize inclusivity and respect.

By integrating Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory and Foucault’s discourse on sexuality, this manuscript provides a structured theoretical lens to analyze why sexuality remains a taboo in early childhood education and how systemic barriers influence educators’ engagement with this topic. Bronfenbrenner’s framework highlights the multiple layers of influence—from personal beliefs to institutional policies—that shape educators’ responses, while Foucault’s discourse analysis reveals how power and societal norms regulate discussions about sexuality, reinforcing silence and stigma.

Addressing these challenges requires structural changes at multiple levels, including policy reforms, teacher training improvements, and a shift in public discourse. By normalizing discussions of childhood sexuality as a fundamental part of early childhood education, we can empower educators to foster environments that support children's holistic development, bodily autonomy, and healthy interpersonal relationships.

Early childhood educators are on the frontlines of this transformation. Their interactions with children lay the groundwork for developing positive attitudes toward bodily autonomy, interpersonal boundaries, and emotional intelligence. Educators who are empowered with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to address topics related to children's sexuality can foster open and supportive environments that promote healthy development and lifelong relational skills (Bhana, 2015; Robinson and Davies, 2017). These efforts not only benefit children but also contribute to a broader cultural shift that normalizes discussions around sexuality as an essential part of human growth.

One of the most pressing issues identified in this article is the significant gap in teacher education programs regarding sexuality and its role in child development. Despite international guidelines advocating for CSE, many training programs fail to address this critical topic adequately, leaving educators unprepared to navigate children's natural expressions of curiosity and learning (UNESCO, 2018; World Health Organization, 2010). This gap perpetuates a cycle of discomfort and avoidance, where educators feel ill-equipped to engage with children's questions or behaviors constructively.

Closing this gap requires systemic changes in how teacher training programs are designed and implemented. Comprehensive training programs must integrate topics related to bodily autonomy, consent, and relational skills into their curricula, emphasizing the developmental significance of these subjects. Practical strategies, such as role-playing scenarios, guided discussions, and collaborative activities, can equip educators with the confidence to approach sensitive topics with empathy and cultural awareness (Lehn et al., 2023). Moreover, fostering peer learning and professional collaboration can create supportive networks where educators can share experiences and develop best practices for addressing challenges.

National education policies must align with international standards, such as those outlined by UNESCO and the WHO, to ensure that sexuality is recognized as a legitimate and essential component of child development. These frameworks advocate for starting age-appropriate CSE early, framing it as a lifelong process that evolves with children's cognitive and emotional maturity (World Health Organization, 2010; UNESCO, 2018). Aligning national policies with these standards can provide educators with the guidance and resources they need to support children effectively.

For example, the Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens, which emphasizes holistic development, offers an ideal foundation for integrating CSE into early childhood education. However, as this article has demonstrated, the omission of explicit references to sexuality within the framework undermines its broader goals of fostering inclusive and comprehensive development. Addressing this omission requires policymakers to prioritize CSE as an integral part of holistic education, ensuring that no aspect of a child's growth is neglected.

The benefits of CSE extend beyond the learning context contributing to children's long-term well-being and relational

competence. Research underscores that early and consistent guidance in areas such as bodily autonomy, consent, and emotional intelligence not only supports children's immediate development but also lays the foundation for healthy relationships and emotional resilience throughout life (Kaeser et al., 2000; Robinson and Davies, 2017). By normalizing discussions around sexuality, kindergarten teachers can help children develop the skills and confidence they need to navigate the complexities of human relationships, both now and in the future.

The journey from silence to support in addressing children's sexuality in early childhood education is both challenging and necessary. Breaking down societal taboos and integrating comprehensive sexuality education into teacher training programs are critical steps toward creating inclusive and supportive learning environments. These efforts not only benefit children but also enhance the professional capacity of educators, enabling them to fulfill their roles as advocates for children's holistic development.

As this article has highlighted, early childhood represents a unique and formative phase of life, where foundational attitudes, skills, and understandings are developed. By addressing the barriers that hinder the inclusion of sexuality in early education, policymakers, educators, and researchers can work together to ensure that children receive the support they need to thrive. This shift not only aligns with global standards for comprehensive education but also reflects a commitment to fostering a society that values respect, empathy, and lifelong learning.

In conclusion, addressing children's sexuality in early childhood education is not merely a matter of professional competencies, it is a reflection of societal values and priorities. By embracing a holistic and inclusive approach, we can ensure that children are supported in all aspects of their development, preparing them for a future where they can navigate relationships, emotions, and identities with confidence and understanding. This transformation requires a collective effort, but the potential benefits—for children, educators, and society as a whole—are immeasurable.

## Future research directions

Addressing the complexities of children's sexuality within early childhood pedagogical practice requires a comprehensive and forward-thinking research agenda. This agenda must address critical gaps in knowledge and practice to empower educators, engage families, and foster environments that respect and support children's developmental needs. Future research priorities include several interconnected themes aimed at enhancing understanding and creating evidence-based strategies.

A key priority is the establishment of longitudinal studies that track children's sexual development from early childhood through adolescence. These studies are crucial for identifying normative behaviors and developmental milestones, offering educators a robust framework to differentiate between typical and atypical expressions of sexuality. Such knowledge supports the design of age-appropriate interventions and helps educators address developmental concerns effectively in educational settings.

Additionally, equipping educators with the skills and confidence to address children's sexuality is fundamental. Research must evaluate the effectiveness of various training programs, comparing



methodologies such as lecture-based approaches, interactive workshops, and peer-led discussions. By identifying the most impactful training practices, this research can enhance educators' comfort, knowledge, and ability to integrate discussions about sexuality into their classrooms appropriately.

Moreover, the influence of cultural backgrounds and societal norms on perceptions of children's sexuality underscores the need for culturally sensitive educational practices. Comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts can uncover variations in attitudes and beliefs among educators and parents. This knowledge can guide the development of tailored approaches that align with cultural values while promoting healthy sexual development.

Incorporating children's voices into research offers a more holistic understanding of their needs and experiences. Qualitative studies that engage children directly in discussions about their bodies, relationships, and feelings can inform educational content that resonates with their perspectives. This approach ensures that sexuality education reflects the lived realities of children, making it more effective and meaningful.

It is vital as well to highlight that families play a pivotal role in reinforcing messages about sexuality. Research into strategies for effective family involvement can identify barriers and opportunities for collaboration between educators and parents. Studies should explore methods to foster open communication, develop resources for parents, and align family and educational perspectives on sexuality, creating a consistent and supportive framework for children.

Furthermore, as educational institutions adhering to national and global policies and standards, examining existing policies related to sexuality education in early childhood settings is vital to identifying gaps and areas for improvement. Policy analysis can evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of current guidelines, ensuring alignment with best practices and international standards. This research can inform the creation of policies that better support educators and address children's developmental needs comprehensively.

Trial and error are not unusual practices in research. Developing and testing targeted educational interventions is essential for normalizing discussions of sexuality in early childhood. Pilot programs that introduce foundational concepts such as bodily autonomy, consent, and healthy relationships should be rigorously evaluated. These interventions can provide evidence-based practices that educators can adopt confidently, fostering healthier attitudes and behaviors among children.

Efforts to address taboos and stigma surrounding children's sexuality must be informed by research into effective strategies for public awareness, professional development, and community engagement. By challenging societal misconceptions, such initiatives

can promote open and constructive dialogues about sexuality in early childhood education.

By advancing research across these priority areas, the field can develop a more informed and supportive approach to children's sexuality in early education. This research will enable educators, families, and policymakers to create environments where children feel respected, valued, and empowered, laying the groundwork for their overall well-being and healthy development.

Finally, by integrating these research priorities and practical strategies, educators can create a supportive and inclusive environment that nurtures all aspects of children's development. Comprehensive sexuality education not only equips children with the knowledge and skills to navigate relationships but also fosters self-esteem and emotional intelligence. This holistic approach ensures that early childhood education serves as a foundation for healthy relationships and lifelong well-being, contributing to a more informed, respectful, and inclusive society.

## Author contributions

EL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SC: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

## References

- Aasland, M. W. (2020). Barna og seksualiteten. Norway: Cappelen Damm Akademiske.
- Balter, A.-S., van Rhijn, T. M., and Davies, A. W. J. (2016). The development of sexuality in childhood in early learning settings: an exploration of early childhood educators' perceptions. *Can. J. Hum. Sex.* 25, 30–40. doi: 10.3138/cjhs.251-A3
- Balter, A., van Rhijn, T., Gores, D., Davies, A. W., and Akers, T. (2021). Supporting the development of sexuality in early childhood: the rationales and barriers to sexuality education in early learning settings. *Can. J. Hum. Sex.* 30, 287–295. doi: 10.3138/cjhs.2021-0034
- Barr, E. M., Moore, M. J., Johnson, T., Forrest, J., and Jordan, M. (2014). New evidence: data documenting parental support for earlier sexuality education. *J. Sch. Health* 84, 10–17.
- Bhana, D. (2015). Childhood sexuality and AIDS education: The price of innocence. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). The ecology of human development experiments by nature and design. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Brouskeli, V., and Sapountzis, A. (2017). Early childhood sexuality education: future educators' attitudes and considerations. *Res. Educ.* 99, 56–68. doi: 10.1177/0034523717740149
- Byers, E. S., O'Sullivan, L., and Burkholder, C. (2024). How prepared are teachers to provide comprehensive sexual health education? *Am. J. Sexual. Educ.*, 1–24. doi: 10.1080/15546128.2024.2344518

- Cacciatore, R., Korteniemi-Poikela, E., and Kaltiala, R. (2019). The steps of sexuality—a developmental, emotion-focused, child-centered model of sexual development and sexuality education from birth to adulthood. *Int. J. Sex. Health* 31, 319–338. doi: 10.1080/19317611.2019.1645783
- Chandra-Mouli, V., Garbero, L. G., Plesons, M., Lang, I., and Vargas, E. C. (2018). Evolution and resistance to sexuality education in Mexico. *Global Health* 6, 137–149. doi: 10.9745/GHSP-D-17-00284
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality* vol. I.
- Heiman, M. L., Leiblum, S., Cohen Esquilin, S., and Melendez Pallitto, L. (1998). A comparative survey of beliefs about “Normal” childhood sexual behaviors. *Child Abuse Negl.* 22, 289–304. doi: 10.1016/s0145-2134(97)00176-2
- Indryani Utami, W. S., Harianja, S. I., Rosyadi, A. F., and Rahayu, D. (2024). The use of SKIDU (sex kids education) game as an effort to introduce sex education in early childhood. *Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini Undiksha* 11, 354–361. doi: 10.23887/paud.v11i3.70668
- Kaesler, F., DiSalvo, C., and Moglia, R. (2000). Sexual behaviors of young children that occur in schools. *J. Sex Educ. Therapy* 25, 277–285. doi: 10.1080/01614576.2000.11074361
- Kimerud, A. T. (2009). Er små barns seksualitet et ikke-eksisterende og tabubelagt tema, og i tilfelle hva står i veien for åpenhet. Oslo, Norway: Doctoral dissertation, Master's Thesis, University College of Oslo.
- Kor, K., Simpson, H., and Fabrianesi, B. (2023). Strengthening schools' responses to students' harmful sexual behaviors: a scoping review. *Trauma Violence Abuse* 24, 2726–2742. doi: 10.1177/15248380221111483
- Kunnskapsdepartementet (2017). Rammepplan for barnehagen: Innhold og oppgaver [Framework Plan for Kindergartens: Content and Tasks]. Oslo: Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research.
- Kunnskapsdepartementet (2020). Læreplan i norsk (NOR01-06). Læreplanverket for Kunnskapsløftet: Fastsatt som forskrift, 2020.
- Lehn, E. W., Chahboun, S., and Page, A. G. (2023). Purity or perversion? From taboo to fact: kindergarten teachers' reflections on age-normal sexuality. *Front. Psychol.* 14:1212456. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1212456
- Mælan, E. N., and Fjeld, W. (2024). Barnehagelærere og læreres kompetanse i helhetlig seksualitetsveiledning og-undervisning. *Norsk Pedagogisk Tidsskrift* 108, 65–77. doi: 10.18261/npt.108.1.7
- Martin, K. A. (2014). Making sense of children's sexual behavior in child care: an analysis of adult responses in special investigation reports. *Child Abuse Negl.* 38, 1636–1646. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.07.002
- McGinn, L., Stone, N., Ingham, R., and Bengry-Howell, A. (2016). Parental interpretations of “childhood innocence”. *Health Educ.* 116, 580–594. doi: 10.1108/HE-10-2015-0029
- Ministry of Health and Care (2016). Talk about it! Sexual health strategy (2017–2022). Available online at: [https://health.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/National\\_Sexual\\_Health\\_Strategy\\_2025\\_2030.pdf](https://health.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/National_Sexual_Health_Strategy_2025_2030.pdf) (Accessed November 30, 2024).
- Moore, A., and Reynolds, P. (2018). *Childhood and sexuality: Contemporary issues and debates*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mukonka, R., Mushibwe, C., and Jacobs, C. (2023). The effect of culture and religion on the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education in selected primary schools of Zambia. *Eureka. J. Educ. Res.* 2, 1–14. doi: 10.56773/ejer.v2i1.15
- Noh, N., and Bakar, K. A. (2023). Implementation of sexuality education in preschool: challenges and obstacles. *Int. J. Acad. Res. Progressive Educ. Develop.* 12, 855–870. doi: 10.6007/IJARPED/v12-i1/15997
- Robinson, K. H., and Davies, C. (2017). Sexuality education in early childhood. *Palgrave Handbook Sexual. Educ.*, 217–242. doi: 10.1057/978-1-137-40033-8\_11
- Schalet, A. T. (2011). Beyond abstinence and risk: A new paradigm for adolescent sexual health. *Women's Health Issues*, 21, S5–S7.
- Skarpsno, H. E. (2013). *Barn og seksualitet: Utfordringer i barnehagen*. Oslo, Norway: SEBU Forlag.
- Skundberg, Ø. (2020). Hvordan forstå barns aldersnormale seksualitet i barnehagen? *Nordisk Tidsskrift Pedagogikk Kritik* 6:1. doi: 10.23865/ntpk.v6.1646
- Softestad, S. (2018). *Grunnbok i arbeid med seksuelle overgrep mot barn*. Oslo, Norway: Universitetsforlaget.
- Stone, N., Ingham, R., and Gibbins, K. (2013). ‘Where do babies come from?’ Barriers to early sexuality communication between parents and young children. *Sex Education* 13, 228–240. doi: 10.1080/14681811.2012.737776
- Svendsen, S. H. B., and Furunes, M. G. (2022). Mulighetsrom for helhetlig seksualitetsundervisning i lærerutdanningene En evaluering av kompetansebehov og mulige tiltak. NTNU. Available online at: <https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/3030540/Rapport%2bMulighetsrom%2bfor%2bhelhetlig%2bsksualitetsundervisning%2bi%2blutd.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (Accessed December, 12, 2024).
- Thorkildsen, I. M. (2015). *Du ser det ikke før du tror det*. Oslo, Norway and Bergen, Norway: Vigmostad & Bjørke.
- UNESCO (2018). *International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence-informed approach. Revised Edn*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Utami, W. S., Harianja, S. I., Rosyadi, A. F., and Rahayu, D. (2023). The Use of SKIDU (Sex Kids Education) Game as an Effort to Introduce Sex Education in Early Childhood. *J. Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini und.* 11, 354–361.
- Utami, W. S., and Putri, A. A. P. (2025). Team games tournament: a cooperative model for training prosocial behavior in early childhood. *Jurnal Ilmiah Potensia* 10, 24–31. doi: 10.33369/jip.10.1.24-31
- Vildalen, S. (2014). *Seksualitetens betydning for utvikling og relasjoner: Gyldendal Akademisk*.
- World Health Organization (2010). *Standards for sexuality education in Europe: A framework for policymakers, educational and health authorities, and specialists*. Cologne: BZgA and WHO Europe.