

**THE PEI CAUCUS
ON YOUTH HEALTHY
SEXUALITY
PRESENTS:**

Consultations with
Parents, Schools, the
Health Sector and Youth

Research Team:
Department of Education

PEI Interministerial
Women's Secretariat

Parents and Youth

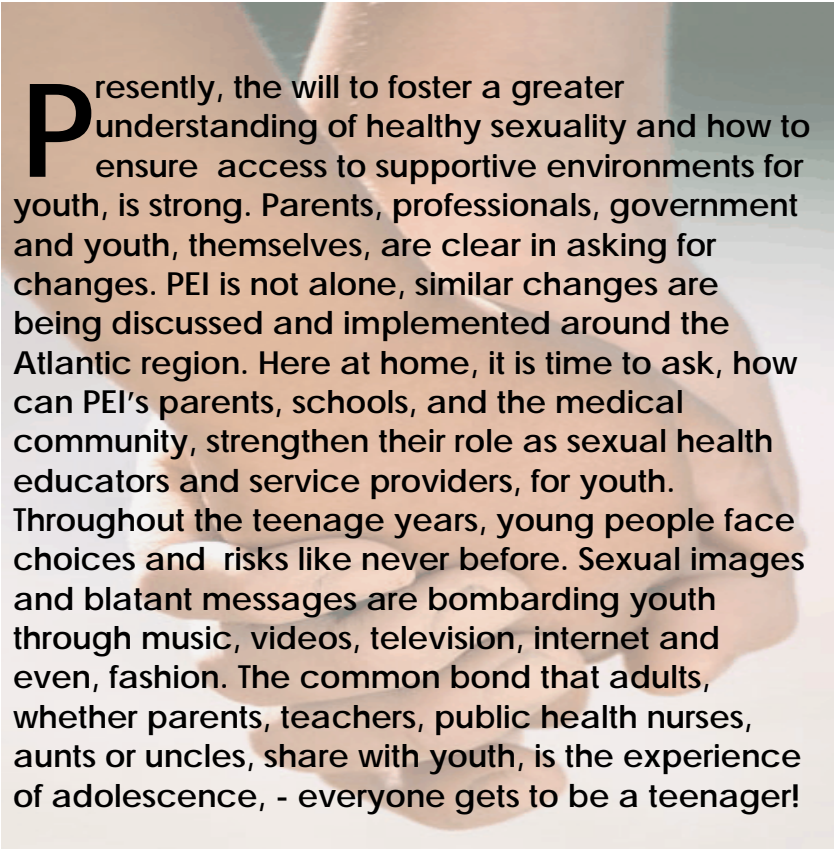
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consultations.**

**HOW CAN PARENTS,
SCHOOLS, AND THE HEALTH
SECTOR STRENGTHEN OUR
ROLES AS SEXUAL HEALTH
EDUCATORS AND SERVICE
PROVIDERS FOR OUR
YOUTH?**



Presently, the will to foster a greater understanding of healthy sexuality and how to ensure access to supportive environments for youth, is strong. Parents, professionals, government and youth, themselves, are clear in asking for changes. PEI is not alone, similar changes are being discussed and implemented around the Atlantic region. Here at home, it is time to ask, how can PEI's parents, schools, and the medical community, strengthen their role as sexual health educators and service providers, for youth. Throughout the teenage years, young people face choices and risks like never before. Sexual images and blatant messages are bombarding youth through music, videos, television, internet and even, fashion. The common bond that adults, whether parents, teachers, public health nurses, aunts or uncles, share with youth, is the experience of adolescence, - everyone gets to be a teenager!

"If I asked my parents about sex, I would get into trouble"

"Adults don't want to talk about it."

- Comments from Youth Participants

THE FACTS

Of PEI high school students who have engaged in sex, 33% said they had unplanned sex while under the influence of drugs or alcohol(1)

The most common STI in PEI is chlamydia. In 2002 close to 300 cases were reported in the PEI Health and Social Services Report

Females between the ages of 15-19 are the population with the greatest incidence rate of chlamydia

Youth under the age of 25 years are a primary risk group for Sexually Transmitted Infections

In 2000, women under the age of 20 make up 34.9% of births in PEI(2)

In 2003-2004, a total of 93 sexual assault referrals were made to PEI Victim Services. 60% of these involved people under the age of 20 years; 90% were female. 41 referrals represent 12-20 years old and 15 under 12. It is strongly believed that not all sexual assaults are reported

1 in 4 women are the victims of rape or attempted rape in a dating situation, the majority of these women are teens or college age women(3)

Prince Edward Island was ranked the lowest in the Atlantic Provinces for sexual health services, let alone youth tailored services

Youth are the critical population group dealing with sexual health issues in the Atlantic Provinces.(4)

From this commonality we can remember discovering ourselves through a wide range of exploration, including relationships, socializing, drinking alcohol, first crushes, first girl/boy friend, challenging our parents, and finding a voice when in conflict with our peers. We were faced with the questions, "What's right for me? Do I want more than holding hands? kissing? making out? How do I tell someone that I like him/her? How do I deal with it when he/she doesn't like me back?" Figuring out "who am I" and how to express it, is fundamental to a successful transition from the teenage years to adulthood. Perhaps it is one of the most intense and hopeful stages in human development.

Until very recently, society has experienced sexuality as a taboo subject, cloaked in fear and shame. It could be said that this has clouded perceptions and communications of what is healthy sexuality and normal sexual development. Enhancing communication and dispelling taboo has been one of the objectives of a public policy project called **Positive Approaches to Youth Healthy Sexuality**, coordinated by the Women's Network. The guiding principle or philosophy of this project is, *healthy sexuality is a key component of overall health and well-ness, beginning at birth and continuing through the life cycle*. In 2003-04, consultations conducted with youth across PEI, provided insight into youths perceptions on sexuality and their suggestions for change. Youth described experimentation games which are remarkably different from generations of the past. Spin the bottle for kisses and maybe 2 minutes in the closet, to kiss and/or touch were standard experimental games. Today's generation describe "hooking up" "rainbow parties" or "bracelet games" all of which are activities which may not even involve kissing but may involve oral sex or sexual intercourse. Youth as young as 12 and 13 years are participating. Sometimes the location of these activities, and certainly the planning or recruitment for these activities, is more public than one might assume. School grounds and buses, parties, even with parents at home, empty parking lots, and other youth "hang outs", are not exempt.

1. Drug Use Survey of PEI Students, Dalhousie University; 2002.

2. PEI Perinatal Database Report 2000., Department of Health and Social Services.

3. Developing Understanding from Young Women's Experiences in Obtaining Sexual Health Services in Obtaining Sexual Health Services and Education in a Nova Scotia Community, Dept. of Community Health and Epidemiology, Dalhousie University; 1999.

4. Environmental Scan of Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Atlantic Provinces, Joan M. Campbell; April 1999.

WHAT YOUTH SAY

Youth continue to face a lack of open-ness and support for discussing their questions, hopes and fears. Barriers continue to exist for youth to access current and accurate sexual health information and education. Some youth report, it is more likely their encounters with sexual health services will be in response to a crisis, rather than as a point of prevention. These reported barriers to comprehensive, non-judgmental sexual health education and health services can have life long consequences. Some of these include unplanned pregnancy, contracting a sexually transmitted infection, sexual assault, stalking, sexual exploitation, stigmatization and/isolation, or emotional damage resulting from pressures, either internal or external, to participate in sexual activity. Youth between the ages of 12 and 23 participated in 4 focus groups across PEI.

Youth defined healthy sexuality as:

- Attraction, love, feeling good, communication, respect, honesty, trust, fulfilment and generally part of one's personal identity.
- Preparedness (i.e., using condoms), safety from STIs and AIDs, and protection from unwanted pregnancy.
- Leverage to get something, i.e. "revenge" and something to "kill time."

About their peer group, youth say:

- Alcohol is often involved in youth sexual activity.
- Some 12 and 13 year-olds engage in oral sex and/or sexual intercourse.
- Guys are taking something and girls are guarding it (sexuality) or giving it up.
- Youth feel pressure to part of the "in crowd" – for girls this could mean becoming sexually active when they are not ready.
- When girls are sexually active, they risk being called "loose" or "sluts." Boys receive more positive attention and are more likely to joke about sexual activity.
- Not only girls are at risk of sexual violence.
- Youth stated that "hooking up", "sexual favours" and "prosti-tots" – older males getting sexual attention from young girls – existed in their communities.

Suggestions for change, expressed by youth:

- Youth wish to be given the opportunity to be responsible for their sexuality and actions.
- Most youth wished to receive non-judgmental information and support, preferably from parents and teachers.
- Youth wish adults would stop thinking that expressions of sexuality, (thoughts, emotions, curiosity, accounts of sexual activity,) are bad, or even sinful.
- Youth want support in identifying their values and developing effective decision making skills to act on these values.
- Youth wish they could neutralize double standards they experience between males and females. Youth would like to replace such standards by encouraging both males and females to view sexual activity as something being given both genders prior to having sex
- Youth want to understand what influences gender beliefs. They ask, what is manly? Is it participating in "sex olympics"; the winner is the male with the most sexual conquests? How do they turn down the offer from "cool, hot" females and remain masculine? Youth would like to see better beliefs for "good, but cool, guys"
- Youth want sexual health and education centres that are youth-friendly and in youth environments, i.e., schools or malls.

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

Prince Edward Islanders are being invited to participate in a series of consultations to create options for change. Youth, parents, teachers, school officials, doctors, nurses, social workers policy makers have been invited. The Central question being asked is, **“How Can Parents, Schools and the Health Sector strengthen their role as sexual health educators and health service providers for PEI Youth?”**

These consultations are an extension of research, conducted to date, including the findings from the consultations with youth. The intention is to bring focus to common themes which reflect the issues youth face in attaining healthy sexuality. It is also hoped that the process of each consultation and the lessons learned from the summary of all, will assist parents, schools and the health sector, strengthen their roles as sexual health educators.

The following themes are based on a review of feedback from youth, public opinion and research. They are not the only themes options and we encourage you to offer others. You are being asked to discuss these themes for possible benefits and potential outcomes of each. Diversity of opinion is welcomed and encouraged. Finally, you will be asked to look for common themes, acknowledge tensions and talk about trade-offs during the discussion.

- Encourage broader understanding of sexuality and the stages of development along the life span in all sectors who work with children, youth and their families.
- Support parents in obtaining information on child and youth sexual development.
- Support schools in providing positive environments for sexual health education.
- Promote youth rights to access to current sexual health information and treatment services when they need it and in confidentiality.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS PROJECT OR TO OBTAIN THE ORIGINAL RESEARCH DOCUMENT [*PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES OF PEI YOUTH ON SEXUALITY*] PLEASE CONTACT:

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Women's Network PEI is a not-for-profit organization that works to strengthen and support the efforts of PEI women to improve the status of women in our society.