

Sex Education

Gender equality, sexuality and
human relationships
in the Swedish Curricula



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THE NATIONAL AGENCY FOR EDUCATION

The National Agency for Education is the central administrative authority for the public school system, publicly organised preschooling, school-age childcare and for adult education.

The Swedish Parliament and the Government set out the goals and guidelines for the preschool and school through i.a. the Education Act and the Curricula. The mission of the Agency is to actively work for the attainment of the goals. The municipalities and the independent schools are the principal organisers in the school system, allocate resources and organise activities so that pupils attain the national goals. The Agency supervises, supports, follows up and evaluates schools in order to improve quality and outcomes. All pupils have the right to an equivalent education.

NATIONAL SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

The Agency provides support to preschools, schools and principal organisers for their development. The support to be given should be nationally prioritised. This may involve general development initiatives, which are justified on the grounds of shortcomings and problems that have been identified by means of different national and international studies, such as in mathematics, languages, and reading and writing skills. It can also deal with other issues such as mobbing and bullying, gender equality, minority languages and the position of newly arrived pupils in Sweden.



1. Sex education in Sweden

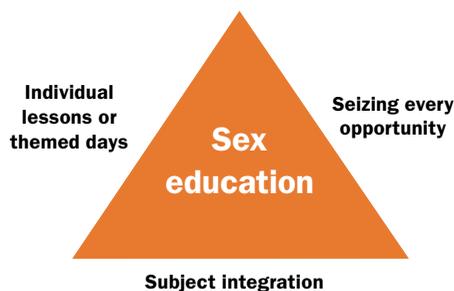
THERE IS A long history of sex education in Sweden, with the role of teaching becoming increasingly strong in the first half of the twentieth century. Compulsory sex education was introduced into Swedish schools in 1955. The motivation behind this teaching has varied with each passing decade. Any time a problem linked to sexuality has emerged, voices have been raised about the quality of sex education. This teaching is expected to promote gender equality and the equal dignity of all, while preventing social problems; everything from HIV/AIDS, chlamydia and rising abortion rates to the use of sexual language, sexual exploitation, honour-related violence and oppression. Despite having been compulsory for many years, the quality of sex education has varied over the years, with great differences both between and within schools. Consequently, measures such as national initiatives need to be implemented to further reinforce this work.

Sex education can address several different perspectives that together provide the pupils with a complete picture of what human sexuality and relationships may involve. This can involve anything from a historic perspective on human sexuality and relationships, how different religions approach these issues, what we can learn from literary descriptions and how norms relating to gender and sexuality manifest in advertising, to what legislation governing relationships there is in Sweden today.

Terms such as sexuality, relationships, gender, gender equality and norms have been included since 2011 in several of the course and subject syllabuses for compulsory and upper secondary school and adult education. This means that the responsibility for this subject falls on several teachers and that it will be brought up within the scope of multiple courses and subjects.

2. The three aspects of sex education

SEX EDUCATION IN schools can be said to consist of three parts. It is important to consider every one of these parts when planning, monitoring and developing sex education as they all contribute to providing complete picture of this subject.



1. Subject integration

The majority of the work will take place in subject teaching, through the teacher-led discussions and elements in the classroom. The aim is to give the pupils perspective and knowledge, get them to see context and realise how the view of gender equality, sexuality and relationships has an impact on entire societies and people's life chances, while making them aware of the norms and values that affect individuals and groups in society.

2. Everyday efforts – seizing every opportunity

The second part involves everyday school work, i.e. seizing opportunities to bring up the subject. A lot happens over the course of a school day. This may involve positive and constructive contributions involving pupils being eager to discuss and talk about moral and existential issues relating to gender, sexuality or relationships; often in connection to current issues in the media or their everyday lives.

Unfortunately, there is also a flip side to what happens in everyday life – for example insults, threats and rumour-mongering. Preschools and schools are obliged to act fast when a member of staff finds out that a child or a pupil feels subjected to any form of harassment, such as sexual harassment or degrading treatment. The organisation must investigate what has happened, and take measures to prevent any further violations.

3. Individual lessons or themed days

The third side of this triangle may involve individual lessons or themed days when the pupils have the opportunity to discuss different questions relating to sex education. This could involve organising a themed day about sexual and reproductive health, human rights or gender equality to clearly highlight these issues. Schools can also draw attention to for instance World AIDS Day or International Women's Day through various activities.

3. What does the curriculum say?

Education is to be designed in accordance with basic democratic values and human rights, such as the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal dignity of all people, equality and solidarity between people.

The Swedish Education Act, Section 5

ALL PRESCHOOLS SHOULD, according to the **Curriculum for the Preschool**, strive to ensure that each child develops an understanding that all people have equal dignity independent of social background and regardless of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief, sexual orientation or functional impairment. Preschools should counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles. Girls and boys in preschool should have the same opportunities to develop and explore their abilities and interests without having limitations imposed by stereotyped gender roles.

The preschool's head is responsible for the quality of the preschool, and within given constraints, has specific responsibilities such as establishing, carrying out, following up and evaluating the preschool's action programmes for preventing and counteracting all forms of discrimination and degrading treatment amongst children and employees. The head of the preschool also has the responsibility to ensure that the staff regularly obtain the competence development required to be able to carry out their tasks in a professional manner.

In accordance with the **Curriculum for the Compulsory School, Preschool class and the Recreation centre** and the **Curriculum for the Compulsory School for pupils with learning disabilities**, the headteacher has overall responsibility for ensuring that all pupils receive subject-integrated sex education.

The headteacher has specific responsibility for ensuring that “teaching in different subjects integrates cross-disciplinary areas of knowledge, such as the environment, traffic, gender equality, consumer issues, sex and human relationships, and also the risks inherent in tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs”

All schools should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathise. Concern for the well-being and development of the individual should permeate all school activity. No one should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment or other degrading treatment. Such tendencies should be actively combated. Xenophobia and intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures. All who work in schools should actively resist discrimination and degrading treatment of individuals or groups. This is also included in the curriculum for the Upper secondary school.

All schools should actively and consciously further equal rights and opportunities for women and men. The way in which girls and boys are treated and assessed in school, and the demands and expectations that are placed on them, contributes to their perception of gender differences. Schools has a responsibility to counteract traditional gender patterns. It should thus provide scope for pupils to explore and develop their ability and their interests independently of gender affiliation.

The **Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School** and the **Curriculum for the Upper Secondary School for pupils for learning disabilities** describe the duty to combat discrimination and degrading treatment in similar terms to the curricula above. The same is true for the effort to combat stereotypical gender patterns. However, the requirements are somewhat stricter as all teachers should “ensure that teaching in terms of content and its organisation is typified by a gender perspective”.

It is the responsibility of all schools to ensure that all individual pupils have the ability to critically examine and assess what they see, hear and read in order to discuss and take a view on different issues concerning life and values, and the headteacher has a responsibility to ensure that “pupils receive information and knowledge about sex and human relationships, consumer and traffic issues, as well as the risks posed by tobacco, alcohol, narcotics and other drugs.”

FUNDAMENTAL VALUES, DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

The Swedish Education Act stipulates that education is to be designed in accordance with fundamental democratic values and human rights such as the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal dignity of all people, equality and solidarity with the between people. Preschools have to keep these values alive in their work with children, and function as both an interpreter and a means by which to convey them. Each and everyone working in the school should also encourage respect for the intrinsic dignity of each person and the environment we all share. Education must foster in the individual a sense of justice, generosity of spirit, tolerance and responsibility. The task of all schools is to encourage all pupils to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby be able to participate in the life of society by giving of their best in responsible freedom.

THREE PERSPECTIVES: ABOUT, THROUGH AND FOR

Children and pupils learn *about* equality, democracy and human rights when they work with the fundamental values. Fundamental values are also instilled *through* democratic working methods, equal treatment and efforts to actively combat violations against them. By taking part in this work, children and pupils develop the abilities they need to actively participate in a democratic society. This involves knowledge and the ability to act. Learning *for* democracy and human rights.

Accordingly, the work to instil fundamental values involves both using factual knowledge and ensuing that these values permeate the schoolwork itself. The three perspectives facilitate a holistic view, which contributes to integrating fundamental values into knowledge objectives.



... walks over to Peter
... still on there, kissing. Neil leans in
... thoughts. He makes it full screen, b
... rrier.
... should go there," he finds him
... will give us



4. Subject integration in course and subject syllabuses

THERE ARE VARIOUS concepts included in the curriculum and the course and subject syllabuses that have some connection to the field of sexuality and human relationships. The term *human relationships* is included in the curriculum under *the headteacher's responsibility*, but in the course and subject syllabuses human relationships is termed simply *relationships*. *Gender, gender roles and gender patterns* are terms that recur in several places. Terms such as *norms, values* and *ethics* are also used, as are *gender equality, sexuality* and *sexual orientation*. The term *identity* can be found in, for example, the syllabuses for sports and health, and for religious studies in upper secondary school. The science studies syllabus also mentions the terms *lust* and *sexual health*.

The governance documents indicate that some subjects have a greater responsibility in the effort to impart knowledge about gender equality, sexuality and relationships as the corresponding course and subject syllabuses contain several aspects of sex education. At the same time, sex and human relationships, in the broader sense, are one aspect of the work to instil fundamental values; therefore, all teachers can be involved, regardless of subject.

Below are a few examples of the wording used with reference to gender equality, gender, gender patterns, sexuality and human relationships from the course and subject syllabuses. This mainly involves the core content that explicitly deals with these and other associated terms.

Biology and **Science Studies**, as before, are the subjects that deal with knowledge of the human body, reproduction, sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases. However, terms such as *gender equality, responsibility, global levels* and *historical perspective* have been added to the course syllabus, which reinforces the cross-disciplinary perspective.

Biology, school years 4–6

Human puberty, sexuality and reproduction and also questions about identity, gender equality, relationships, love and responsibility.

Science Studies, school years 1–6, compulsory school for pupils with learning disabilities.

Puberty and its effects on the individual. Sexuality, reproduction and different types of relationship.

Biology, school years 7–9

Human sexuality and reproduction, and also questions concerning identity, gender equality, relationships, love and responsibility. Methods for preventing sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy at individual and global levels, and from a historical perspective.

Science Studies, upper secondary school

Scientific aspects of, reflections on and discussions concerning norms, human sexuality, lust, relationships and sexual health.

Biology, upper secondary school

Links between living conditions, health and disease. Medical ethics.

What happens in the body during menstruation, infatuation, sex and pregnancy.

How sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies can be prevented.

In History, pupils should have the opportunity to learn more about how views on gender, sexuality and relationships have changed over time.

History, school years 7–9

Democratisation in Sweden. The formation of political parties, new social movements, such as the women's movement, and the struggle for universal suffrage for women and men. Continuity and change in views on gender, equality and sexuality

History, upper secondary school

Historical source material that reflects the role of people in political conflicts, cultural changes or attempts by women and men to change their own situation or that of others. Different perspectives based on, for example, social background, ethnicity, generation, gender and sexuality.

The teaching should use historical sources to address similarities and differences in the living conditions of women and men and give an impression of how values reflect the time and context in which they emerge.

Religion should address humanity, human rights, ethics and morals. The central ideas in the different religions, the varied interpretations that exist within different religion, their branches and how they are practised are other areas that will address ideas concerning gender equality, gender, sexuality and relationships.

Aim, the compulsory school

Teaching should help pupils to develop their knowledge of how different religions and other outlooks on life view questions concerning gender, gender equality, sexuality and relationships.

The core content contains several formulations that address this area:

Religion, school years 4–6

Daily moral questions concerning identities and roles of girls and boys, as well as gender equality, sexuality, sexual orientation, exclusion and violation of rights.

Religion, school years 7–9

Conflicts and opportunities in secular and pluralistic societies, such as issues concerning freedom of religious expression, sexuality and views on gender equality.

How different life issues, such as the purpose of life, relationships, love and sexuality, are depicted in popular culture.

Religion, upper secondary school

Religion in relation to gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity and sexuality. Individual and group identities and how these can be shaped in relation to religion and world-view, based on, for example, written sources, traditions and historical and contemporary events.

The teaching in **Civics** should address issues such as human rights, discrimination, population, political ideologies and current social affairs. All of these areas can be linked to gender patterns, sexuality and relationships. Living conditions and gender equality are recurring subjects in both aim and core content.

The core content contains several formulations that concretise the work with sexuality, gender equality and relationships:

Civics, school years 4–6

The family and different forms of cohabitation. Sexuality, gender roles and gender equality.

Dissemination of information, advertising and shaping public opinion in different media. How sexuality and gender roles are represented in the media and popular culture.

Civics, school years 7–9

Youth identity, lifestyles and well-being and how this is affected by factors such as socio-economic background, gender and sexual orientation.

Differences between people's financial resources, power and influence related to gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background. The relationship between socio-economic background, education, housing and welfare. The concepts of equality and gender equality.

Civics, school years 7–9, compulsory school for pupils with learning disabilities
Life issues that are significant to the pupil. Identity and identity-creation in relation to gender, sexuality and lifestyle.

The teaching in **Home and Consumer Studies** should address advertising and its influence on the consumption habits of individuals and groups, and highlight work in the home from a gender equality perspective.

Home and Consumer Studies, school years 7–9

Distribution of work in the home from a gender equality perspective.

The contribution of **Art** is to provide an additional perspective on messages in the mass media, and the analysis of images should address depictions of identity, sexuality and power. These perspectives should also be brought up in terms of the pupils' own visual production.

Art, school years 7–9

Pictures which deal with questions of identity, sexuality, ethnicity and power relations, and how these perspectives can be designed and communicated.

Physical Education and Health is a subject where gender and gender patterns are always topical. How does gender influence expectations, results, abilities, interests and, by extension, health? The teaching should address everything from health issues to physical ideals and the gender aspects in the choice of sports and other physical activities.

Physical education and health, school years 7–9

How the individual's choice of sports and other physical activities are influenced by different factors, such as gender.

Physical ideals in sports and society as a whole. Doping and the laws and rules regulating this.

The teaching in **Music** addresses expectations on musicianship that are linked to gender, and may also deal with how gender, sexuality and relationships are depicted in lyrics or music videos.

Music, school years 7–9

Sound and music's physical, conceptual and emotional impact on people. The functions of music to signify identity and group affiliation in different cultures, with a focus on ethnicity and gender.

Swedish and **Swedish as a Second Language** deal with these matters primarily when teaching literature, the themes of which often include love, sexuality and relationships. This may also involve expectations on language use, in terms of gender or how language can be charged. Ideas concerning gender patterns, sexuality and relationships can be the focus of, for example, reading comprehension, composition, discussions and conversations. One aim in both these subjects is:

Swedish, aim:

When encountering different types of texts, performing arts and other aesthetic narratives, pupils should be given the preconditions to develop their language, their own identity and their understanding of the surrounding world.



This is also stipulated in the core contents of Swedish:

Swedish, school years 7–9

Fiction for youth and adults from different periods, from Sweden, the Nordic area and other parts of the world. Literature that provides an insight into the conditions under which people live, issues related to life and identity. Poetry, drama, sagas and myths.

There is a similar wording for **Swedish as a Second Language**, school years 7–9:

Fiction, lyrics, drama, sagas and myths from different times and different parts of the world. Literature that provides an insight into the conditions under which people live, and issues related to life and identity

In **English**, the connection to this issue is more or less the same as for the Swedish subjects. In literature teaching, discussions about love, gender equality, relationships and sexuality may be central themes, and may then be taken up in connection with topical issues in the media or comparisons between different English-speaking countries.

English, school years 7–9

Interests, daily situations, activities, sequences of events, relations and ethical questions.

Living conditions, traditions, social relations and cultural phenomena in various contexts and areas where English is used.

In **Crafts**, these issues may arise if and when ideas about colour, materials and the type of craft are linked to notions of gender. What gender patterns can be distinguished here? The teaching should address fashion and its influence on the individual.

Crafts, school years 7–9

Fashions and trends, what they signify and how they affect the individual.

Technology should deal with gender patterns within the field of technology, and address how ideas about technology are affected by norms based on gender. The aim states:

Technology, aim

Through teaching, pupils should be given the opportunity to develop their understanding of the importance of technology and its impact on people, society and the environment. In addition, teaching should give pupils the preconditions to develop confidence in their own ability to assess technical solutions and relate these to questions concerning aesthetics, ethics, gender roles, the economy and sustainable development.

The core content includes the wording:

Technology, school years 7–9

How cultural attitudes towards technology have an impact on men's and women's choice of occupation and use of technology.

Geography includes core content that is linked to gender equality, sexuality and relationships, for example in terms of living conditions, population issues, provision of resources and reproductive health.

Geography, upper secondary school

Population growth, demographic distribution and spatial change. Urbanisation and the growth, function, structure and environmental impact of cities. The significance of migration, education, environmental change, strategies for the provision of resources, reproductive health and family planning when viewed from various perspectives, for example gender, sexuality, ethnicity and socio-economic conditions.

SUBJECT-INTEGRATED SEX EDUCATION IS NOTHING NEW

Subject-integrated, teacher-led sex education is not really anything new to Swedish schools. These ideas were already central when sex education became compulsory in 1955, and was written into the guidebook for teachers distributed in 1956. This document includes the following statement on subject-integration and the cross-disciplinary approach:

“In school, sex education should be addressed throughout, particularly in the subjects of home economics, science studies and civics in the earlier years, and in biology and health, Christianity studies and history with civics in the later years. Sex education should also be provided within the subject childcare. In reference to the subject-teacher system in secondary school, it may perhaps be argued that, in terms of sex education, some form of division would be appropriate with regards to the duties of the biology, Christianity and history teachers, so that those first mentioned devote their teaching exclusively to the medico-biological aspects, while Christianity teachers deal with the ethical (moral) aspects, and history teachers the socio-economic factors. However, such a strict division of tasks is neither possible nor appropriate. Every teacher with experience of sex education knows that the biological aspects must be accompanied by a discussion of the ethical opinions, and that it is impossible in the biological presentation of this material to leave out the socio-economic aspects.”

Who should be responsible for providing sex education has been another subject for debate over the years. Today, teachers have a central role in this work due to the cross-disciplinary perspective and the new wordings of the course and subject syllabuses. However, the fact that teachers were well-qualified for this work was already being highlighted in 1956:

“In order for sex education to be a innate aspect of teaching in schools, teachers should have this task assigned to them by the union. There are some who have argued that it would be preferable, whenever possible, for a doctor to provide sex education. However, it seems reasonable to assume that the teachers, by virtue of having particular educational qualification and being accustomed to communicating with young people, are generally those best suited to provide this teaching. It will then be fused organically with those subjects, within the framework of which it should be communicated.”

From: *Handledning i sexualundervisning* [Sex Education Handbook], 1956



5. Improved quality – some basic premises

SWEDISH AND INTERNATIONAL research shows that the most effective sex education is curriculum-based, lead by teachers from different disciplines, is based on the pupils' needs and has a holistic approach to the subject. Teaching should take place under safe conditions, be adapted to age, interests and experience, contain varied working methods and process the perceptions and norms that affect our attitudes and our sexual behaviour. Staff have to be well-trained and the school's management have to support their work.

The headteacher's governance and systematic quality management

To improve the quality of sex education, the headteacher needs to monitor and evaluate the teaching on a regular basis. The headteacher needs to ensure that the staff and pupils alike are involved in the planning, evaluation and development of this teaching. This may involve the methods and approaches used, how to document work or what further professional training is required. What this ultimately boils down to is that all pupils have the right to high-quality, equivalent sex education, an effort that requires supervision and governance.

Scientific Knowledge and Proven Experience

The perception that the teaching profession must be characterised by critical reflection has been reinforced, not least by the wording of the Education Act of 2010, which states that educational programmes must be based on scientific knowledge and proven experience.

Scientific knowledge and research is the systematic investigation of existence, its utmost aim being to provide an understanding of and perspective on the same. In scientific work there is a desire to critically review, test and place individual facts into context. Academia strives to have theoretical rooting, elaboration and development, as well as an empirical basis. An interplay between the theoretical and the empirical is a key element.

Proven experience here refers to generated knowledge based on the experience

of the practitioners within a specific profession. Proven experience is tried and constructed over time and shared by many.

Dialogue and opportunities to reflect

Using dialogue as an approach in the work with pupils in the various subjects may pave the way for reflection, which is an important and central aspect of pupils' learning and motivation. When pupils are asked what they would like to see more of in the sex education they receive, the answer is often discussion and conversations about relationships. There is a great need to discuss various questions about sexuality in a group led by a skilled teacher. The teacher is there to act as an adult support, moderator and sounding board, and the pupils can broaden their horizons by listening to the reflections of others.

Pupils' participation / questions

During childhood and the teenage years, questions concerning sexuality, gender equality and relationships are often central to the pupils. Children and young people's perspectives may contain completely different questions and thoughts than the perspectives of adults. All those who work in schools need to be perceptive to the thoughts of the pupils, and provide them with opportunities to learn more about these matters and, above all, to discuss them in a more structured way.

Balance between healthy and risky perspectives

Teaching that focuses on health has often used problems as its basis, but it is important for sex education to highlight the positive aspects. It is often easier to talk about what we want to prevent, e.g. sexual violence, degradation, honour-related violence, teenage abortion, sexually transmitted infections, etc., than to talk about what we want to promote and encourage, i.e. equal relationships, friendship/camaraderie, better mental and physical sexual health, self-esteem and strengthened identities, a positive school atmosphere, empowerment, etc. The positive aspects must be given more room in order to create balance in this work.

Progression

It is important to adapt the teaching to the target group. One way of doing this is to base it on the questions and thoughts of the pupils. There are certain themes within the subject-integrated teaching that recur at various stages, with this progression being clearly stated within different subjects. Some things need to be discussed continuously, and with new experiences, new perspectives and a deeper understanding, the knowledge can be consolidated and deepened as children progress through school.

Norm-critical perspective and approach

The teaching needs to highlight the opportunities, expectations and limitations that affect individuals and groups in society. This may involve such matters as restrictions and vulnerability based on gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, functional disabilities or ethnicity. Pointing out the particular norms that create restrictions, discrimination and exclusion allows us to tackle values and prejudices while creating a greater understanding and openness. It also creates more space for the pupils to be themselves and feel included.

Girls and boys – avoiding reinforcing differences

Schools have to actively and consciously promote the equal rights and equal opportunities of women and men. The way in which girls and boys are treated and assessed in school, along with the demands and expectations placed on them, contribute to shaping their perception of what is feminine and masculine. The school has a responsibility to counteract traditional gender patterns. It should thus provide scope for pupils to explore and develop their ability and their interests independently of gender affiliation.

6. Cross-disciplinary projects

WORKING WITH AN cross-disciplinary approach may interlink different aspects of the field sex and human relationships, and thereby more easily create a full picture for the pupils. The following are a few examples of this approach:

THE HISTORY OF SEXUALITY

In what way has the view of gender, sexuality, relationships and love changed over the years? Within this theme, the pupils get an opportunity to look back at the historical changes that have created the contemporary view of sex and thus also gain a perspective on these matters so that they can look forward.

History – addresses changes in the norms surrounding gender and sexuality in different historical periods. What kind of legislation has existed when it comes to men, women, various sexual orientations and transgender people?

What significance has the family had in different times? Contraceptives, abortions, family formation, sex before marriage, sexual acts and sexual rights.

Core content, school years 7–9

Democratisation in Sweden. The formation of political parties, new social movements, such as the women's movement, and the struggle for universal suffrage for women and men. Continuity and change in views on gender, equality and sexuality





Religion – addresses how different religions have influenced peoples' views of sexuality and relationships in different historical periods. What has changed, and what remains to this day?

Aim, compulsory school

Teaching should help pupils to develop their knowledge of how different religions and other outlooks on life view questions concerning gender, gender equality, sexuality and relationships.

Biology – can address changes in the view of contraception, unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, primarily in recent decades. Which methods have historically been used to avoid unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, and when were these methods introduced in Sweden? Condoms, contraceptive pills, IUDs and other forms of contraception have been around for many years, but how long have they been available in Sweden? Knowledge about the abortion legislation and the morning-after pill can be interwoven here.

Core content, school years 7–9

Human sexuality and reproduction, and also questions concerning identity, gender equality, relationships, love and responsibility. Methods for preventing sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy at individual and global levels, and from a historical perspective.

OTHER EXAMPLES

The body and ideals

Thoughts about the body are central to many young people. Do they measure up, or what should their bodies look like? Everyday, pupils can encounter suggestions in the media about how to eat right, exercise right and reduce stress. You are supposed to lose weight, build muscles and try to bring your body close to the ideal. But what about the relationship between body and ideal? When is the body at its healthiest, and how are pupils affected by the ideals of beauty that constantly surround them? These are a few questions on which an interdisciplinary approach can be based.

Biology, Physical Education and Health, Home and Consumer Studies, Civics

Identity

How is the development of identity affected by environment, and is it possible to decide who you want to be? This is something that can be discussed from many different perspectives. Outlook on life may have an impact, as well as family conditions and society's view of the individual. Music and fashion have an impact. People's sexuality and relationships also contribute to shaping their identities.

Swedish and Swedish as a Second Language, Biology, Music, Religion, Civics, Mother Tongue Tuition

Relationships and family

What significance has the family had at different periods and in different cultures, and what is the situation today? This theme takes a closer look at the concept of relationships and family, and pupils can gain a broader perspective of what a family is and can be. It is important not to get stuck in heteronormative assumptions of what the family looks like – families can take many different forms.

Swedish and Swedish as a Second Language, Science Studies, Biology, Civics, Home and Consumer Studies



Advertisement's hidden messages

What gender patterns and norms are reproduced in advertisement and the mass media? In this theme, pupils get the chance to study the messages advertising sends about appearance, body, assumed characteristics, interests, sexuality and prosperity.

Art, Civics, Home and Consumer Studies

“We will have a larger advertisement theme together with Home and Consumer Studies and Art. In Home and Consumer Studies, the pupils will work with advertising and the way the media influence what we buy, and they will also look at consumer rights and obligations. In Art, the pupils will analyse images from the mass media and imagery in general based on representations of gender and sexuality, for example. Simply put, we will work with the whole chain – from the function and structure of the media, to image analysis and consumer impact. The pupils normally like working with images from advertising, they easily see through exaggerated ideals of beauty and stereotypical gender-based portrayals of interests. They often become very critical of the advertising imagery after themes such as this. We scrape the surface with a norm-critical view, and it’s effective.”

Teacher, Civics

HIV and AIDS around the world

HIV and AIDS affect the lives of millions of people around the world. What is HIV and how is it transmitted? Protection, treatment and social stigmas. What kind of rights and opportunities to get help are there in different parts of the world? This cross-disciplinary theme can provide more detailed knowledge about the disease and improve understanding of the problems created by the HIV epidemic in the world.

Biology, Science Studies, Geography, Mathematics, Civics, History

“I often encounter pupils who ‘know’ that only homosexuals get HIV. They are rarely aware of how HIV is transmitted or what it is like living with HIV. Some think that it can be cured, and others think that you die after a short period of time. When it comes to sexually transmitted infections in general, but HIV in particular, I carefully go through how the virus is transmitted, which sexual behaviours are risky, why condoms are good and important, which groups are the most vulnerable and what treatment is available today. I try to underline that anyone can get it, regardless of sexual identity or ethnicity, and that safer sex is the best way to avoid it. When their knowledge of the facts is a little bit better, I usually talk about the situation of people with HIV, for whom stigmatisation, fear and prejudice can be part of their everyday lives. It is important to emphasise that these are people with a chronic illness, nothing more. To get the historical perspective, I show a documentary from when AIDS was discovered and the first patients were hospitalized in Sweden. It captures the fear that spread throughout the world in the 80s. It’s best to work with the stigmatisation and the historical perspective in year nine; the discussions will generally be a bit deeper and more interesting at that point.”

Teacher, Biology

Everyday gender patterns

Ideas about what is masculine and feminine influence the pupils' daily lives in many different ways; how they dress, what interests they are expected to have, what qualities, what educational programmes and profession they are expected to choose and how they are supposed to behave in general. These gender patterns affect life on many different levels, and in this theme, the pupils are given an opportunity to gain more detailed knowledge about the origin and influence of these patterns, and how they can create changes within these norms.

Physical Education and Health, Music, Art, Technology, Civics

Gender equality

Gender equality can be highlighted as a special theme in teaching, even if teaching in general should always have a gender equality perspective, both in terms of structure and content. A gender equality theme may expose gender patterns that exist in society, gender policies and consequences of a lacking of gender equality.

Civics, Biology, History, Religion, Swedish and English

“I selected five different texts that dealt with gender equality in different ways. There was an extract from the government’s website, a column from an evening newspaper, an opinion piece from a daily paper, a blog post and a letter to the editor. Since all of them were about gender equality in one way or the other, it was easier to compare form, language, structure and message. We discussed which text felt the most serious, which was the closest to reality, which was the most entertaining, which was the hardest to understand, and which would be the hardest to write yourself. The message was sometimes a bit hard to find, as was the purpose, while the pupils had plenty of opinions on the credibility of the messenger and their actual chances of making a difference. For example, they had a much greater faith in the influence of bloggers than I did, which in itself was an interesting aspect of the discussion.”

Teacher, Swedish

7. Multiple actors involved in the work with sex education

THROUGH THEIR HEADTEACHERS, schools have the overall responsibility of ensuring that all pupils get a subject-integrated sex education. The Swedish National Agency for Education governs this work through the wording of the curricula, however, schools themselves decide how teaching is structured and organised. The Swedish National Agency for Education provides support in the form of continued professional development, materials and by highlighting good examples. The Swedish National Agency for Education does not produce practical guides or learning materials in this subject.

Many other actors in Swedish society have also long contributed by supporting school staff with knowledge, teaching materials and to develop their working methods. Non-governmental organizations such as the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU), the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights (RFSL) and the Swedish Youth Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Queer Rights (RFSL Ungdom) are, and have been, key to increasing staff expertise, and thereby developing the sex education provided in schools. They produce teaching materials and practical guides, organise professional development training and share their experience. Authorities such as the Public Health Agency of Sweden and the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society have played an important role in producing a knowledge base, and also allocate funds to other actors. Several county councils work actively with prevention in terms of sexual health, and have initiatives targeted at the schools.

The Swedish National Agency for Education recognises that the collaboration between authorities and organisations is important in order to develop the sex education provided in Swedish schools.

There is a long history of sex education in Sweden. Compulsory sex education was introduced in Swedish schools in 1955.

Terms such as sexuality, relationships, gender, gender equality and norms have since 2011 been included in several of the course and subject syllabuses for compulsory and upper secondary school and adult education. This means that the responsibility for including sex education falls on several teachers and that it will be brought up within the scope of multiple courses and subjects.