

# Sex Education Should Start at age 10, Researchers Say

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(Re-published in *Toronto Star*, August 11, 2014, page E5)

CHILDREN AS YOUNG AS 10 ARE BEGINNING TO PROCESS MESSAGES ABOUT HOW TO GAIN SOCIAL STATUS AND WHAT THEY GAIN – OR LOSE – BY DELAYING POTENTIALLY RISKY BEHAVIOURS.



To significantly decrease unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, maternal deaths and sexually transmitted diseases globally, we should start talking to boys and girls about their sexual and reproductive health as young as age 10, says a [new study](#)<sup>1</sup> out of Georgetown University.

"At a time when sexuality and gender identities are emerging, younger adolescents may experiment with adult sexual behaviours," write authors Susan M. Igras,

Marjorie Macieira, Elaine Murphy and Rebecka Lundgren. "But because of their cognitive developmental stage, (they) are unlikely to correctly assess risks and consequences."

The researchers define younger adolescence as ranging from age 10 to 14.

The study focuses on adolescent behaviours and risk around the globe, noting that 90 percent of the world's 1.2 billion adolescents live in lower- and middle-income countries. Efforts at curbing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases — particularly HIV — have increased in many parts of the world since 1990, according to the study, but they're mostly directed at older youth.

Victoria Jennings, director of the Institute for Reproductive Health at Georgetown and professor of obstetrics and gynaecology, says the findings are important to consider in North America as well – in all socioeconomic spheres.

"The implications are so clear," Jennings says. "Adolescents in all cultures and every social status are learning at 10, 11, 12 how to match up to gender roles and expectations for them."

Children as young as 10 are beginning to process messages about how to be popular with the opposite sex, how to gain social status and what they gain – or lose – by delaying potentially risky behaviours.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://irh.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Investing\\_in\\_VYAs\\_SRH\\_2014.pdf](http://irh.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Investing_in_VYAs_SRH_2014.pdf)

Yet parents, educators and other decision-makers are often wary of introducing the topics of sexual and reproductive health to young adolescents, Jennings says, because they fear it will encourage them to engage in sexual behaviour.

“If it’s done properly it has the opposite effect,” she says. “It has to be done in the context of helping them develop healthy self-esteem and the ability to negotiate their way in the world and develop expectations for themselves and their lives that will case them to make decisions that will lead to positive outcomes.

“The message can’t be narrowly focused on family planning and contraceptives and HIV,” she says. “It has to be about developing a healthy life and healthy perceptions of themselves and others.”

The study calls on policy-makers, educators and parents to shift their sex-education conversations to younger adolescents.

“If programs...are implemented at a time when adolescents are still malleable and relatively free of sexual and reproductive health problems and gender role biases, very young adolescents can be guided safely through this life stage, supported by their parents, families and communities,” the authors write in the conclusion. “It will be critical to encourage dialogue with younger adolescents, the significant adults in their lives and local communities...in order to influence positive investments on behalf of this future generation.”