



**Keys to youth-friendly services:  
Adopting a sex positive approach**

# Keys to youth-friendly services: adopting a sex-positive

Sexuality is a fundamental aspect of human life that refers to gender roles and identities, sexual orientation, intimacy and pleasure. It is experienced and expressed through thoughts, desires, emotions, beliefs, values, behaviours, roles and relationships. Being able to express sexuality freely and openly is central to being human and important to every individual's well-being, happiness and health. These are realities, and accepting them is the starting point for adopting a sex-positive approach to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services.

Sex positivity is an attitude that celebrates sexuality as an enhancing part of life that brings happiness, energy and celebration. Sex-positive approaches strive to achieve ideal experiences, rather than solely working to prevent negative experiences. At the same time, sex-positive approaches acknowledge and tackle the various concerns and risks associated with sexuality without reinforcing fear, shame or taboo of young people's sexuality and gender inequality.

## Sexual rights



**Sexual rights are an evolving set of entitlements related to sexuality that emanate from internationally-recognised human rights to freedom, equality, privacy, autonomy, integrity and dignity. The recognition of sexuality as a central aspect of being human is one of the seven guiding principles of 'Sexual Rights: An IPPF Declaration'. Adopting a positive approach to sex is the internalization of this principle and the application of it to the work you do.**

Article 6 of the Declaration is the right to freedom of thought, opinion and expression. This article recognizes that all young people have the right to express their thoughts, opinions, needs and desires related to sexuality without limitations based on dominant cultural beliefs or political ideologies. All young people have the right to explore their sexualities and should be able to have dreams and fantasies, and voluntarily express their sexuality without fear, shame or guilt, while respecting other people's rights.

## Sex as a source of pleasure

Physical pleasure is often a central motive or goal of a sexual relationship. Understanding sexual desires and those of a sexual partner helps to build intimacy which, in turn, can increase sexual satisfaction.

Young people can experience types of pleasure other than physical through the expression of their sexuality. For example, sex can be one way to express love or to experience intimacy with a partner. Sex can also be a way for young people to gain an understanding and feel in control of their bodies; it can also be a form of expression that enhances young people's lives and contributes to their empowerment.

Young people's experiences of sexual pleasure are very important since these early experiences can shape the way they experience and express their sexuality in the future. Ensuring that all young people understand that they are entitled to sexual pleasure and understand how to experience different forms of sexual pleasure is important for their health and well-being.

## Sex as a source of pain

Sexuality and sex are not always sources of pleasure for young people and can be the outcome of abusive or exploitative relationships. Many young people are coerced or forced into sex, often by an older person. Coerced sex is more likely than consensual sex to result in unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections or HIV; it can also lead to lifelong emotional and social problems.

Negative experiences of sexuality also result from particular sexual practices, such as young women being expected to have a dry vagina during sex or female genital mutilation, which can make sex painful. Limited knowledge about the body and how to experience or give pleasure can also mean that young people engage in unfulfilling, painful or disempowering sexual practices.<sup>1</sup>

## A sex positive approach to sexual and reproductive health services

Sexual and reproductive health information and services for young people tend to focus on what not to do and how to avoid infections and abuse rather than the positive aspects of sexuality. What is often missing in young clients' interactions with health professionals is information about sex as a source of pleasure.

Health professionals may be nervous about discussing sexuality as they feel they lack the skills, feel uncomfortable, worry about being offensive or are simply constrained by time.<sup>ii</sup> Fortunately, health professionals already possess many of the skills needed to effectively communicate with and help young clients. In addition to listening skills, you should be aware of the most common physical and emotional problems faced by young clients in relation to sexuality and sex, and be there to support and empower them.

Open communication is integral to the sex-positive approach to service provision. Having a considered attitude and talking much more openly about sexuality, including sex, allows you to provide the most appropriate services and information for each individual young client.<sup>iii</sup>

By listening to young clients' concerns, desires, needs and realities, you can provide information that answers the client's direct questions as well as information that addresses related issues, whether or not they are raised by the young client.

The enjoyment of sexuality is based upon the recognition of autonomy and individuality. Young clients may not always make the choices that you would make if you were in their position, but you should respect their choices. The bottom line is that young clients should walk away feeling confident and positive about their choices.



## Obstacles and solutions

In the table below, we outline some common obstacles that you may face in adopting a sex-positive approach to service provision for young clients and provide suggestions on how to address them.

OBSTACLES	SOLUTIONS
Feeling uncomfortable discussing sex and sexuality with young clients	Talking about sex can be uncomfortable and embarrassing. This often because we feel we don't have the 'right' answers. A good way to improve your communication skills with young clients is to understand your own values, experience and expertise about sex and sexuality.
Normalizing personal values and beliefs	It is important to distinguish your own beliefs from the needs and rights of your clients. Everyone has different sexual practices and preferences, and it's important not to make assumptions about clients' sexual orientation.
Believing sexuality is a personal matter that young people do not want to talk about in a clinical setting	<p>Young people have many questions, and they should be able to ask them without fear of judgement. Building rapport and gaining trust is paramount. Here are some simple questions to initiate a conversation about sex:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you currently in a relationship? If yes, it is sexual?</li> <li>• Are you happy with your current sexual relationships?</li> <li>• Do you have sex with men, women, or both?</li> <li>• Do you have any sexual concerns you would like to discuss?</li> </ul>
Focusing only on the negative aspects of sexuality or on prevention	<p>Health professionals sometimes forget the life-enhancing reasons that young people have sex, such as love, intimacy or to satisfy curiosity. Instead, there is a focus on the risks, disease and abuse. Discuss the positive aspects of sexuality and sex with your young clients by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• explaining how people experience pleasure in different ways</li> <li>• discussing factors that can improve sexual pleasure</li> <li>• discussing how safer sex can be pleasurable</li> <li>• recognizing that safer sex includes much more than protected sex; it is feeling safe and at ease with your partner, and building trust, communication, and happiness</li> </ul> <p>explaining that no one has the right to have sex with a partner if it degrades him or her to an impersonal object and everyone has the right to say no to sex any time</p>
Thinking young people are not sexual or should not be sexually active	Young people are diverse, and they develop at different rates. For this reason, we need to question our assumptions about young people's sexual behaviour, such as 'young people have sex all the time'; 'young people love to take risks'; 'young people are egoistic pleasure seekers' and 'young people don't want to discuss their sexuality with adults'.
Thinking sex is always voluntary and between equal partners	Young people can be in abusive relationships and may be scared to discuss it with you. Talking about sex in a non-judgemental way will help them to open up. Be clear that everyone has the right to say no to sex any time. Believe them, commend the fact that they are looking for help, and stress that you sometimes have to address problems in small steps.

## OBSTACLES

Thinking young clients don't want to use condoms

## SOLUTIONS

Ensure that condoms are placed in convenient, discreet locations for young clients. Or, hand them out to every young client and give them the option to return them by placing a box in a discreet location near the clinic exit. Don't assume that all young people know how to use a condom. Some suggestions for improving condom use:

- Explain how to put on and take off a condom and when to use it during intercourse.
- Encourage young men to practice alone before trying with a partner.
- Talk about why the young client thinks his/her partner does or does not want to use condoms. If it is helpful, role-play the situation with you as the client and the client playing his or her partner.
- Some young men find it hard to stay erect and some women find it difficult to have an orgasm while using a condom. Suggest that putting on a condom can become an integral part of foreplay.
- Suggest the use of lubricants inside and outside condoms to increase pleasure for both partners
- Explain the need to have more than one condom available, what to do when you change positions, and what to do when a condom breaks

## A youth-friendly health professional...



- Accepts young people as sexual beings.
- Listens and respects young clients' sexual values, experiences, concerns and desires.
- Gives open and honest information about sexual health, including information about sexual pleasure and intimacy.
- Helps young clients, especially female clients, understand about how inequity within sexual relationships can undermine sexual pleasure as well as intimacy between partners.
- Distinguishes between his/her moral beliefs and the needs, concerns and desires of young clients.
- Accepts that some young people are sexually active.
- Avoids normalizing any one kind of sexual practice, preference or orientation.
- Answers young clients' questions about sexuality in an open and honest manner.

## Resources



Association of Reproductive Health Professions (2005) What you need to know: talking to patients about sexuality and sexual health. Available at: <http://www.arhp.org/publications-and-resources/clinical-fact-sheets/sexuality-and-sexual-health> Accessed 2 March 2011

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<sup>i</sup> Population Council (2004) The Adverse Health and Social Outcomes of Coerced Sex: Young Women's Experiences of young women in developing countries. Available at: <http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/popsyn/PopulationSynthesis3.pdf> Accessed 2 March 2011

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<sup>iii</sup> K. Moore and J. Helzner (1996) What's sex got to do with it? Challenges for incorporating sexuality into family planning programs. New York, New York: Population Council.

<sup>iv</sup> K. Moore and J. Helzner, *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> Association of Reproductive Health Professionals, *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> K. Moore and J. Helzner, *Ibid.*

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