

Glossary of Terms

NOTE: Like many fields, education has its own terminology. This glossary is intended to not only serve as a dictionary of educational terms but also as a means of becoming more familiar with key educational concepts. It is important to note, however, that some terms mean slightly different things depending on the state.

Abstinence

Choosing to refrain from a behavior. Sexual abstinence refers to refraining from certain sexual behaviors for a period of time. Some people define sexual abstinence as not having vaginal intercourse, while others define it as not engaging in any sexual activity. (See also Sexual Activity.)

Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs

Programs that emphasize abstinence from all sexual behaviors outside of marriage. If contraception or disease-prevention methods are discussed, these programs typically emphasize failure rates. In addition, they often present marriage as the only morally correct context for sexual activity.

Adolescence

A transitional phase of growth and development between childhood and adulthood that generally occurs during the period from puberty to legal adulthood (age of majority). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines an adolescent as any person ages 10 to 19. This age range falls within WHO's definition of young people, which refers to individuals ages 10 to 24.

Affirmative Consent

Informed, voluntary, and mutual agreements among all participants to engage in sexual activity. Consent can be given by words or actions, as long as those words or actions create clear permission regarding willingness to engage in the sexual activity. Consent cannot be given when an individual is impaired by alcohol, drugs, or other conditions that affect one's ability to understand and agree to engaging in a behavior. (See also Consent and Sexual Consent.)

Age Appropriate

The age-level at which it is suitable to teach concepts, information, and skills based on the social, cognitive, emotional, and experience level of most students in that age range.

Age of Consent

The age a person is legally able to consent to sexual activity. It varies from state to state, but ranges from 14 to 18 years of age in the United States.

Agender

Refers to a person who does not identify with any gender.

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome)

A collection of symptoms that results from a person's immune system being severely weakened, making them susceptible to other infections and illnesses. AIDS is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and may occur if HIV is untreated. People do not die from AIDS but from an infection their body acquires as a result of their weakened immune system. (See also HIV.)

All Students

Every student regardless of race/ethnicity, ability, socioeconomic status, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, size, or religion.

Asexual

A sexual orientation that refers to a person who does not experience sexual attraction but may experience other forms of attraction (e.g., intellectual and/or emotional). Asexual people may also identify as bisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, queer, heterosexual, or many more sexual orientations. (See also Bisexual, Gay, Heterosexual, Lesbian, Pansexual and Queer.)

Biological Sex

The sex of an individual as determined by chromosomes (such as XX or XY), hormones, and internal and external anatomy, such as genitalia, gonads, hormone levels, hormone receptors, and genes. Typically, individuals are assigned the sex of male or female at birth. Biological Sex is also known as natal sex or the preferred terminology "sex assigned at birth." Those who present with ambiguous genitalia at birth and who are generally later confirmed with genetic testing to have chromosomes different from XX or XY at birth are often referred to as intersex. (See also Intersex.)

Bisexual

A sexual orientation that refers to a person who has the capacity for emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction to more than one gender. A bisexual orientation speaks to the potential for, but not requirement of, involvement with more than one gender. This is different from being attracted to only men or only women.

Bodily Autonomy

An individual's right to make decisions regarding one's own body, including deciding at any point who may or may not touch their body in any way, also referred to as bodily sovereignty.

Body Image

How people physically experience or feel in their own body, including beliefs about their appearance, which is developed through life experiences, media representations, stereotypes, assumptions, and generalizations. This may or may not match a person's actual appearance.

Bullying

Physically, mentally, and/or emotionally intimidating and/or harming an individual or members of a group. These actions are done repeatedly in person and/or through the use of technology with the intent of being hurtful or threatening.

Cisgender

Refers to an individual whose gender identity is aligned with their biological sex or sex assigned at birth. (See also Biological Sex, Gender Identity, and Sex Assigned at Birth.)

Climate Setting

The practice of creating a space that ensures students are physically and emotionally safe and ready for learning.

Comprehensive Sex Education/Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Sex education programs that build a foundation of knowledge and skills relating to human development, relationships, decision-making, abstinence, contraception, and disease prevention. Ideally, comprehensive sex education should start in kindergarten and continue through 12th grade. At each developmental stage, these programs teach age-appropriate, medically accurate, and culturally responsive information that builds on the knowledge and skills that were taught in the previous stage.

Conscious Bias

The attitudes and beliefs we have about a person or group on a conscious level. This includes being aware of personal prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way that is considered to be unfair. An individual, group, or institution may hold conscious biases, which are also known as explicit biases.

Consent

An agreement between people to engage in an activity. One example is an agreement that occurs between sexual partners about the behaviors that will occur in a sexual encounter. For example, consenting to sex is when a person agrees to engage in sexual behaviors with another person. (See also Sexual Consent.)

Contraception

Any means used to prevent pregnancy, including, but not limited to, abstinence, barrier methods (e.g., external condoms and internal condoms), hormonal methods (e.g., pill, patch, injection, implant, IUD, and ring), and other nonhormonal methods (e.g., sterilization and nonhormonal IUDs). Contraceptive methods are also known as birth control methods.

Cultural Competence

Teaching that relates to, recognizes, and includes aspects of students' youth culture, ethnic culture, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, sexual experience, faith, ability, and/or physical appearance.

Culturally Responsive

Teaching that embraces and actively engages and adjusts to students and their various cultural identities.

Cycle of Violence

A model developed to explain the complexity and coexistence of abusive behaviors with loving behaviors within relationships. There are three phases in the cycle of violence: (1) tension-building phase, (2) acute or crisis phase, and (3) calm or honeymoon phase. Children who witness or experience violence often learn that violence is appropriate for conflict resolution and is acceptable in intimate interpersonal settings. These children may replicate the cycle in their own relationships.

Dating Violence

Controlling, abusive, and/or aggressive behavior within the context of a romantic or sexual relationship. It can include verbal, emotional, physical, economic, and/or sexual abuse, be perpetrated against someone of any gender, and happen in any relationship regardless of sexual orientation.

Disclosure

Actively or passively sharing information, generally of a personal nature, that may not have been known previously.

Disproportionate Risk

The phenomena of a person being at higher risk than generally predicted because of the systemic inequities and oppression they face as a result of certain characteristics, especially race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, gender identity, gender expression, ability, faith, educational status, and/or sexual orientation.

Domestic Violence

A pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain control over another partner. This may include physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and/or psychological abuse as well as control, intimidation, threats, and/or stalking. Domestic violence can happen to anyone regardless of socioeconomic background, race, age, sexual orientation, religion, gender, or gender identity. It can happen to individuals who are married, living together, dating, or sexual or intimate partners, as well as to children and other family members who live in the same domestic setting.

Emergency Contraception

A safe, legal, and effective way to reduce the risk of pregnancy up to five days after unprotected sex and/or failed contraception. Commonly referred to as "the morning-after pill," emergency contraception can be sold over the counter in pharmacies.

Experiential Learning Cycle

An approach to teaching that encourages student learning by doing, reflecting, interpreting, and exploring questions of how experiences could be different in the future.

External Condoms

A sheath of latex or polyurethane that is worn on the penis to prevent pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) when one is engaging in sexual behavior. External condoms are also called male condoms.

Fact

A provable, accurate statement based on scientific, medical, legal, sociological, or psychological research or the opinion of most experts in a field. Hypotheses and theories can count if they are identified as such. The following is an example of a fact relevant to sex education: Youth who receive comprehensive sex education are not more likely to become sexually active or experience negative sexual health outcomes.

Family Structure

The manner in which members of a family are interrelated and linked through blood, affinity, or co-residence. Family structures are diverse and can include, but are not limited to, biological parents, single parents, same-gender parents, adoptive parents, grandparent-headed households, and foster parents. Families can be created in a number of ways, which include, but are not limited to, adoption, birth (including those resulting from assisted reproductive technology), and marriage.

Gay

A sexual orientation that refers to a person who is romantically, emotionally, and/or sexually attracted to people of their same gender. Gay often refers to a self-identified man who is romantically, emotionally, and/or physically attracted to other men.

Gender

A set of cultural identities, expressions and roles—typically attached to a person’s assigned sex and codified as feminine or masculine—that are assigned to people, based upon the interpretation of their bodies, and more specifically, their sexual and reproductive anatomy. Gender is socially constructed, and it is, therefore, possible to reject or modify the assignment made and develop something that feels truer and just to oneself. (See also Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Gender Role.) Examples of gender include, but are not limited to, male, female, transgender woman, transgender man, agender, gender expansive, genderqueer, and nonbinary. (See also Transgender, Agender, Gender Expansive, Genderqueer and Nonbinary.)

Gender Binary

A socially constructed system of viewing gender as consisting solely of two categories—male and female—in which no other possibilities for gender are believed to exist. The gender binary does not take into account the diversity of gender identities and gender expressions among all people.

Gender Expansive

Refers to a person who broadens their own culture’s commonly held definitions of gender, including expectations for its expression, identities, roles, and/or other perceived gender norms. Gender-expansive individuals include those

with transgender and nonbinary identities, as well as those whose gender expression is in some way seen to be stretching society’s notions of gender. (See also Gender, Gender Nonbinary, and Transgender.)

Gender Expression

The manner in which people outwardly express their gender through, for example, clothing, appearance, or mannerisms.

Gender Identity

How an individual identifies based on their internal understanding of their gender. Gender identities may include male, female, agender, androgynous, transgender, genderqueer, and many others, or a combination thereof. (See also Transgender and Genderqueer.)

Genderqueer

Commonly used to describe a person whose gender identity is neither male nor female, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders.

Gender Nonbinary

A continuum or spectrum of gender identities and expressions, often based on the rejection of the gender binary’s assumption that gender is strictly an either/or option based on sex assigned at birth. (See also Gender Binary.)

Gender Nonconforming

A person whose gender identity and/or gender expression does not conform to the sex they were assigned at birth nor to prevailing cultural and social expectations about what is appropriate to their gender. People who identify as gender nonconforming may or may not also identify as transgender. (See also Transgender.)

Gender Pronouns

The pronoun or set of pronouns a person uses to refer to themselves when they are not being addressed by name (e.g., she/her/hers; he/him/his; and, they/them/theirs).

Gender Roles

The cultural or social expectations of how people should act, think, and/or feel based on the gender they are perceived to be.

Harassment

Unwelcome or offensive behavior by one person to another that can be sexual or nonsexual in nature. Examples include making unwanted sexual comments or jokes to another person, sending unwanted sexual texts, bullying, or intimidation.

Healthy Relationships

A relationship between individuals that consists of mutual respect, trust, honesty, support, fairness/equity, separate identities, physical and emotional safety, and good communication.

Heterosexual

A sexual orientation that refers to a person who is romantically, emotionally, and/or sexually attracted to people of a gender different from their own.

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)

A virus that weakens a person's immune system so that the person cannot fight off many everyday infections. HIV is transmitted through exposure to an infected person's blood, semen, vaginal fluids, or breast milk. HIV, if left untreated, may lead to AIDS. (See also AIDS.)

Homophobia

Prejudice against individuals who are or are perceived to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or queer.

Incest

Sexual contact between persons who are so closely related that marriage between those two people would be considered illegal (e.g., a parent/stepparent and a child or siblings).

Inclusive

Activities, curricula, language, and other practices in the educational environment that ensure every student's entitlement to access to and participation in learning is anticipated, acknowledged and taken into account, including those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer.

Induced Abortion

A surgical or medicinal procedure that ends a pregnancy. Medicinal abortion, also called medical abortion, most often involves the use of a prescription medication called Mifepristone, which is also known as RU-486, and is used in combination with misoprostol. These medication are often called "the abortion pill." Abortion medication should not be confused with Emergency Contraception, a medication that reduces the risk of pregnancy when taken shortly after unprotected sex. Surgical and medicinal abortion are legal, but subject to various federal and state laws in the United States. (See also Emergency Contraception.)

Institutional Value

A value that is agreed upon and often represented in the policies of a school or organization. The following is an example of an institutional value that is relevant to sex education: All students deserve to learn in a safe and inclusive environment.

Internal Condoms

A polyurethane pouch that is inserted into the vagina when one is engaging in sexual behaviors to prevent pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Some people also use internal condoms in the anus to protect against STDs during anal intercourse. Internal condoms are also called female condoms.

Intersex

Refers to a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive and/or sexual anatomy, chromosomes, and/or hormones that do not fit with the medical definitions of female or male.

Lesbian

A sexual orientation that refers to a self-identified woman who is romantically, emotionally, and/or sexually attracted to other women.

Lived Experiences

A collection of events that have been experienced firsthand by an individual.

Long Acting Reversible Contraception (LARC)

Birth control methods that can remain in place for several years. They are the most effective forms of reversible birth control and include, but are not limited to, IUDs and implants.

Masturbation

Touching one's own body for sexual pleasure. This may include stimulation of one's own genitals and commonly results in orgasm.

Medically Accurate

Information relevant to informed decision-making based on the weight of scientific evidence; consistent with generally recognized scientific theory; conducted under accepted scientific methods; published in mainstream peer-reviewed journals; or recognized as accurate, objective, and complete by mainstream professional organizations and scientific advisory groups.

Miscarriage

The spontaneous or natural loss of a fetus before the 20th week of pregnancy. (Spontaneous or natural occurring pregnancy loss after the 20th week is often called a stillbirth.) Miscarriage, which may also be called a spontaneous abortion, is a naturally occurring event, unlike induced abortion, which is also known as medical or surgical abortions. (See also Induced Abortion and Spontaneous Abortion.)

Pansexual

A sexual orientation that refers to a person who is romantically, emotionally, and/or sexually attracted to people, regardless of their gender identity.

Professional Boundaries

The limits placed between teaching professionals and students, given that educators are entrusted to care for students, responsible for ensuring student safety, and in a position to exert a measure of authority and control over students.

PEP (Post-Exposure Prophylaxis)

Medication prescribed that may prevent a person who has been potentially exposed to HIV from becoming infected. Treatment must be taken within 72 hours.

PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis)

Daily medication that people who are HIV negative and at high risk for HIV infection may take to prevent infection.

Puberty

A time when the pituitary gland triggers production of testosterone, estrogen, and/or progesterone resulting in physical and emotional changes. Physical changes may include hair growth around the genitals, menstruation, sperm production, breast growth, and much more.

Queer

An umbrella term used to describe sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression for individuals who do not conform to dominant societal norms. While often used as a neutral or even a positive term among many LGBT people today, “queer” was historically used as a derogatory slur.

Racial Justice

The systematic fair treatment of people of all races and the proactive reinforcement of policies, practices, attitudes, and actions that produce equitable power, access, opportunities, treatment, impacts, and outcomes for all.

Rape

A type of sexual assault that involves vaginal, anal, or oral sex using a body part or an object without consent. Rape is a form of sexual assault, but not all sexual assault is rape. (See also Sexual Assault.)

Safe and Affirming Learning Environments

Refers to a place where all students feel welcomed and cared for. These environments are intentionally created through group norms, role modeling, and other approaches.

Safety Plan

A personalized and practical plan that can help a person in an unsafe relationship know the best way to respond when they are in danger including, but not limited to, how to get out of the relationship.

Self-Concept

An individual’s attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and cognitions about who they are as a person.

Self-Esteem

A person’s overall opinion of themselves and how they feel about their abilities and limitations. For example, high self-esteem may result in someone feeling good about themselves whereas someone with low self-esteem may place little value on their own opinions and ideas.

Sex Assigned at Birth

The sex that the medical community labels a person when they are born typically based on their external genitalia. Sex Assigned at Birth is also known as natal sex. (See also Biological Sex.)

Sex Positive

Teaching that recognizes that sexuality and sexual development is a natural, normal, and healthy part of our lives and refrains from using shame and fear to motivate students to be abstinent.

Sex Trafficking

The use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain a commercial sex act with an adult or minor. Sex trafficking is considered a form of modern-day slavery.

Sexual Abuse

Any sort of unwanted sexual contact, including but not limited to, force, threats, or taking advantage of an individual, often over a period of time. A single act of sexual abuse is usually referred to as a “sexual assault.” (See also Sexual Assault).

Sexual Activity

Sexual behaviors that include, but are not limited to, vaginal sex, oral sex, anal sex, mutual masturbation, genital rubbing, or masturbation.

Sexual Assault

Any unwanted sex act committed by a person or people against another person. Examples include, but are not limited to, nonconsensual kissing, groping or fondling; attempted rape; forcing someone to perform a sexual act; and rape.

Sexual Consent

The act of expressly saying yes to engaging in a specific sexual behavior with another person. Sexual consent cannot be given when an individual is impaired by alcohol, drugs, or other conditions that affect one’s ability to understand and agree to engaging in a behavior.

Sexual Harassment

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.

Sexual Identity

A person’s feelings and ideas about themselves in relation to their sexual orientation and/or sexual behaviors. No one else can determine what a person’s sexual identity is; only the individual can decide what identity is right for them.

Sexual Intercourse

Sexual intercourse may mean different things to different people, but could include vaginal sex, oral sex, or anal sex.

Sexual Orientation

A person’s romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction to other people. Sexual orientations include, but are not limited to, gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, queer, pansexual and asexual. (See also Asexual, Bisexual, Gay, Heterosexual, Lesbian, and Pansexual.)

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

Common infections caused by bacteria, viruses, or parasites that are transmitted from one person who has the infection to another during sexual contact that involves exchange of fluids or skin-to-skin contact. STDs are often referred to as sexually transmitted infections or STIs in an effort to clarify that not all sexually transmitted infections turn into a disease.

Social Justice

The view that everyone deserves to enjoy the same economic, political, and social rights and opportunities, regardless of race, sex, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, ability, or other characteristics.

Spontaneous Abortion

A naturally occurring termination of pregnancy before the 20th week of pregnancy. (Naturally occurring pregnancy loss after the 20th week is often called a stillbirth.) Spontaneous abortion, which may also be called a miscarriage, is a naturally occurring event, unlike induced abortion, which is also known as medical or surgical abortions. (See also Induced Abortion and Miscarriage.)

Student Centered

An approach to teaching that prioritizes the needs and learning styles of students first.

Teaching Strategies

The intentional use of different modalities that enable students to learn desired content and skills.

Teasing

Teasing is a social exchange that can be friendly, neutral, or negative. It is not intended to harm, and the perpetrator does not intend for their actions to be hurtful to the victim. Teasing does not include making fun of someone's ability, ethnicity, faith, or other characteristics that are out of the person's control. Teasing can be meant in good fun, but if repeated over and over again, continuing after a person asks that it stop, or with harmful intent, teasing can become bullying or harassment. (See also Bullying and Harassment.)

Transgender

Refers to a person whose gender identity and/or expression is not aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender is often used as an umbrella term encompassing a large number of identities related to gender nonconformity. (See also Gender Nonconforming.)

Transphobia

Prejudice against individuals who are or are perceived to be transgender.

Trauma-Informed

An approach to teaching that recognizes the influence of individual and systemic trauma on students and assesses the implications on instruction and cognition to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment.

Trusted Adult

A person to whom a student can turn to in a time of need who can offer support and guidance.

Unconscious Bias

Social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness. Everyone holds unconscious beliefs about various social and identity groups, and these biases stem from one's tendency to organize social worlds by categorizing, often as the result of historical context. Unconscious bias is also known as implicit bias.

Universal Values

Values that are agreed to by the consensus of people in a society. The following are examples of universal values relevant to sex education: honesty, trustworthiness, responsibility, respect for self and others, and freedom from coercion/exploitation.

Value

A belief or opinion about the morals or ethics of an issue—right and wrong, good and bad, and/or the relative importance or what one should or should not do. The following is an example of a value relevant to sex education that a person might hold: Masturbation is wrong.

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