

Findings and recommendations on improving Sexual Health among youth in the Barents Region

Created at the Barents Regional Youth Councils conference on Sexual Health in Kiruna 21th to 24th of May 2019.

Sexually transmitted infections and diseases

Findings

Shame and judgement

Youth affected by STIs often experience shame and judgement from the surrounding society. This is especially prevalent in smaller communities. Often there is little support network such as medical help and psychological counselling. These factors contribute to a “silence culture” developing that can lead to youth affected by infections not sharing this with partners or friends. Typically, this is also worsened by a labelling of the affected person as promiscuous. Youth also experiences a lack of professionalism from health care staff treating youth with STIs with questions surrounding sex life that comes off as improper or un-relevant. In the Barents Region the standards around routine check-ups and the availability of midwives and gynaecologist differ. In some regions it is free for youth to be tested for STIs, in other there is a cost. Generally, the smaller community there is the harder it is to get an appointment with health care staff trained to deal with youth affected by STIs.

Information about prevention

Youth also experience a lack of information and marketing of preventative means. Where can you find reliable information about STIs that is not moralizing? Information exists but is it reaching the target audience mostly affected by STIs – youth?

Access to prevention

A third problem is the lack of accessibility of preventative measures where the condom is the most spread and secure protection against STIs. Shops in smaller communities tend to close quite early – leaving youth lacking infrastructure to purchase preventative measures. “Typically, you tend to not get in your car to drive to a store to purchase condoms for a casual encounter”.

Solutions

Shame and judgement

Create a campaign where STIs is shown to be less dangerous or taboo stricken then it is at the moment.

Create a more open and welcoming atmosphere for youth at health clinics.

De-dramatize STIs through campaigns to show that almost everyone that is affected lives a regular life. It's important to spread the message that STIs can happen to anyone. It is important to reach youth through social media. In other regions of the world such as the USA there is different outreach groups creating websites, videos and platforms for youth to openly discuss the issues regarding STIs. It is also important to properly train health care staff in order for the health care to be perceived as open and welcoming for youth that suspect that they might have STIs. This is important for the change from judgement and shame to a more open discussion regarding STIs.

Information and access to prevention

Make sure that youth is reached with information about the preventative measures against STIs.

Create more opportunities for condom dispensers to be placed in the society.

Accessibility of preventative measures is also an important part in improving the situation for youth in risk of contracting STIs. In several parts of the world Condom dispensers is often placed in bars and clubs or outside where casual encounters often take place. If Condoms are easily accessible, that you do not have to go to a pharmacy or a store to purchase it, it would be probably be used by more people and thus lowering the risks of contracting STIs.

In the Barents Region some regions vaccinate youth against chlamydia, though at a cost. This could be implanted across the region.

Sexual Education

Findings

A diverse Sexual Education

Youth coming in to their sexual education will find that it varies due to country, region, municipality, teacher and even how young they are. There is little cohesion among teachers around what should be taught and when. Some have their sexual education during biology class, other during their homemaking class. Certain schools have appointed a special teacher that go around all classes to educate. Some bring in an external expert. Youth taking part in the sexual education in schools sometime experience a shy teacher that wants to skip sexual education as fast as possible. In general, sexual education varies widely, even in different schools in the same region. Many sexual education classes are gender based as well where boys are taught maybe different things than the girls. This undoubtedly led to a difference for the youth growing up, based upon what knowledge they received in schools.

Taboos and lack of intergender communication

In certain communities there is a strong opposition from parents for their children to be learning about sex. Sex as a proper discussion topic is in many ways still a taboo in the Barents Regions, therefore it is not surprising that it is that way in school's sexual education. Moreover, youth is often separated in classes about sex. This might lead to a lack of training in how to properly discuss hard "sensitive" questions with the opposite gender.

Media and internet as sexual education

Today's youth have access to pornography as soon as they can use an internet capable device. How does that influence the minor's way of looking at sex? Studies have shown that youth experience anxiety in connection with intercourse, how long should it last? How big or small should my genitals be? There is a lack of healthy and open discussion of sex and sexual matters in media in general.

Traditional sexual education

Consent, emotional and bodily wellness is key areas of one's own sexuality, but it is rarely discussed and taught in schools on the level it needs. Not only in sexual education classes but in general, how do we treat each other, what kind of respect do we have to each other?

Solutions

A diverse Sexual Education

Specially trained teachers that can diversify sexual education.

Information campaign online where youth can access sexual information.

In order to help break down the stigmas regarding sex it is of importance that the sexual education in schools is perceived by the youth as someone they can relate to. And that can convey the education in an open and direct way. One solution could be to bring in a specific teacher that has special training in the field or is in other ways knowledgeable. It is also important that sexual education is not just one or two classes, but that it is continuing to be taught throughout the school years. Many websites currently exist in the Barents Region countries which is often created by youth themselves not happy with their own sexual education. These initiatives should be taken into the school system and be analysed.

Taboos and lack of intergender communication

Oversee that all students are being reached with sexual education.

All students should be taught the same things, there should be minimal gender separation.

In order for all youth to get the sexual education they deserve the school system must be firm in their conviction to deliver a good sexual education for their attending youth. Taboos is broken down slowly and by addressing it in an open way. In this case the taboos might have been formed in the difference of education girls and boys have received in their own sexual education. For order reasons it might be necessary to separate the class, but the teaching should nevertheless be the same. If boys are taught how a condom works, the girls should be taught the same.

Media and internet as sexual education

Websites as a safe place for discussion and questions should be gathered and promoted.

Special nationalised websites that address sexual education should exist and be promoted. Here a safe haven would be created for youth to discuss sexual issues, get education on contraceptives and other things. In all Barents Countries there exists a number of different websites belonging to different organizations, these are however often limited in their capacity to reach the large mass of youth. These websites should also use the same teaching tools as the sexual education in schools.

Traditional sexual education

Make sure that sexual education covers consent, body identification and emotional questions.

Elevate sexual education in the school curriculum.

As sexual education differs wildly in schools, so too does the “updated” sexual education where consent, sexual identity and emotional is discussed. In certain schools this already exists. It does not in other schools, this leads to some youth has a good knowledge about these matters and other lacking. Sexual education should be elevated to a higher level of importance in schools and be given its own curriculum and space.

Sexual conduct

Findings

Sexual harassment

Young people, especially females is often mistreated. If not with actual sexual abuse, like improper touching, but with comments and talk behind backs. Even courts sometime improperly questions women affected by sexual assault on matters of clothing and behaviour. Toxic masculinity based on misogynous ideas exist that further helps deteriorate the situation. The past years #metoo movement has led to a backlash among young men feeling left out and thinking that they deserve sex they conduct crimes against females.

Communication

As raised in other findings in this report, intergender communication is severely lacking not only about sex but also these other questions. There is a lack of safe places for youth to share their thoughts and emotions without them being labelled and moralized. There is also a lack of role models. For a toxic class to meet a person of the approximate same age that has been through what the class is currently experiencing can be more rewarding then an older person.

Distant communities

The region is vast and densely populated. There is often a lack of educated specialists that can deal with both sexual conduct questions but as well other ones. In local communities' sexual discussions is even rarer due to the close relationship amongst the residents.

Solutions

Sexual harassment

Update and harmonize the legislation regarding sexual harassment.

Address the issues about what is okay and not in the schools.

Legislation needs to be updated and knowledge to be shared in the society. Youth and the populace in general need to be encouraged to take steps when sexual harassment and or mistreatment occur. This should be emphasized in schools and throughout campaigns in society. Legislation needs to be clear and transparent in order for it to be clear what is okay and what is not.

Communication

Implement training programs for youth in order to get techniques to fight sexual harassment.

A vital place to ensure that youth has skill in intergender communication is the schools. A training program could be implemented on a voluntary basis where youth are taught how to deal with sexual harassment, and toxic behaviour.

Distant communities

Make sure that all youth across the country has the same access to sexual counselling.

Often the distant, densely populated north is deprived of resources, and often it is the softer questions such as sexual counselling that is affected. In some communities there might only be a person one can discuss sexual problems once a month. There should an equal opportunity in the whole country to discuss important issues.