

WORKING WITH MEN

What is sexual health?

Sexual health means both physical and emotional health in matters relating to sex, sexuality and reproduction. Sexuality is more than just sexual acts or reproduction. It includes our desires, feelings, what we do, our values and attitudes. Reproductive health includes safe development into adults, the avoidance of sexual and reproductive illnesses, the ability to choose when to have children, to conceive safely and to avoid unwanted pregnancy. It also involves good health care to avoid the complications of childbirth, abortion, use of contraceptive methods and the long-term effects of sexually transmitted and reproductive tract infections.

People learn about their sexuality, and about sex and sexual health, from different sources: parents, friends, teachers, radio, newspapers and television, work colleagues, community elders. When people have a concern about sexual health, it may be possible to go to formal health care services, such as clinics or hospitals, or to traditional health healers. Anyone to whom people go for advice or treatment is a sexual health carer or educator.

Why work with men?

Many sexual and reproductive health services focus only on the needs of women. In recent years, great effort has been made to improve women's health, including their sexual and reproductive health. This has involved challenging the view that women are less important than men, and that inequality between men and women is the nature of things and cannot be changed. Real improvements have been made, and yet many people working with women have found that there are limits to what can be achieved unless they also work with men.

Excluding men from sexual health promotion means that women often have to take all the responsibility for both their own and their partner's sexual health. If men and women understand how each other's bodies work, they can understand each other better. Many men want to be involved in planning their families and looking after the health of their partners and their children.

SEX AND SEXUALITY FOR MEN

- Both men and women should be able to make choices about their sexual lives.
- Men and women should be as free as possible from physical harm and from feelings of shame, guilt or fear.
- Both men and women should have access to care and support services.
- Men need information about issues relating to sex and sexuality that affect themselves, and other men and women.
- Health workers, community workers and educators should involve men in sexual health education. This will benefit women and children as well as men.
- Benefits in women's and children's lives will be limited unless men are also involved in sexual and reproductive health activities.
- Working with men is not a substitute for working with women or young people.
- Working on sex and sexuality may encourage men to examine wider social issues such as the changing roles of men and women.



Involving men in sexual health programmes is good for men, women and children.

INDIA INVOLVING MEN FOR CHANGE

RUWSEC is a social development organisation in south India. After working with women for ten years, RUWSEC workers felt they would only be able to promote sexual health and better relationships between men and women if they also worked with men.

Most men accepted that women should be able to do more outside the home. Women, however, said: 'We are still tied, only the length of rope is longer'. As women became involved in RUWSEC's education work, many reported cases of domestic violence.

RUWSEC therefore decided to involve men in their work. They started with the husbands of staff members. Discussions were held on relationships between husbands and wives. The aim was to look at inequalities between men and women, examine attitudes, help women seek treatment for sexually transmitted infections and promote safer sex. These discussions raised many more topics, such as alcoholism, violence and suicide. After some time, the husbands began working with other men in the community. One wife and husband team began working with community leaders.

RUWSEC now works with groups of men, both in the community and in schools, to answer their questions and provide information about issues such as masturbation and impotence.

Groups sometimes include 'problem' sessions when common questions are read out and discussed by the group.

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RUWSEC volunteers visit men at home to talk about the programme.

Sex is enjoyable!

Many programmes that aim to promote sexual health focus on problems – on HIV or sexually transmitted infections (STIs), or difficulties between men and women. This is very important. The World Health Organization estimates that over 100 million men become infected each year with a sexually transmitted infection. By 1998 over 30 million people were living with HIV infection worldwide and numbers are growing.

However, it is important to remember that for most people, sex is pleasurable in itself and a very important part of their lives. Working on sex and sexuality with men includes:

- learning about the sexual and reproductive functions of men's own bodies and women's bodies and being able to discuss sex in a positive way, avoiding secrecy
- providing the opportunity for men to express anxieties about issues such as sexual activity and performance, infertility, masturbation, penis size, possible illnesses or infections, or problems in relationships
- ensuring access to sexual health services or advice to help with problems so that men know how to protect themselves and their partners from HIV and other infections.

BRAZIL FIRST STEPS

ECOS works with young people on communication and sexuality in São Paulo, Brazil. They have done a lot of work on sexuality, teenage pregnancy and STIs with girls and young women, but very little with boys and young men. They decided that this was important.

First they had to find out what the boys might be interested in. Most of the information they had about boys came from what girls told them. ECOS decided to find out what young teenage boys thought about sex. The workers first learned as much about the boys' world as possible, by reading their magazines, listening to their music and watching their favourite TV shows and videos.

Then they arranged meetings with groups of boys and videotaped some of their discussions. The groups started by discussing the meanings of words such as 'love' and 'hate'. Then the workers asked the boys what issues they wanted to discuss. The most popular subjects were boy-girl relationships, virginity and first sex, and homosexuality. The boys wrote down questions, which were put into a box and then picked out and discussed.

The opportunity of being videoed made the boys enthusiastic about coming to these discussions. The purpose was to deepen the boys' awareness of what they were saying and the impression that this created, and to enhance their communication skills, rather than to try to produce a high-quality video.

ECOS found that there was real pressure on boys to 'act like real men'. Boys were unsure about how 'macho' to be. The boys criticised the idea of being macho, yet acted defensively when girls talked about what they found difficult about boys' behaviour. Many boys were caught between wanting information about sexuality and being afraid to bring up a doubt or question in front of their friends. This led to much ignorance, particularly about women. The boys also talked about pressure from their fathers to become sexually active, with some suggesting that their fathers feared they were homosexual if they did not.

ECOS is now doing this work with families and teachers, especially men. Brazil's changing society is demanding a lot of men – they must be strong, brave and in control. Yet at the same time, they are expected to be sensitive and not to become violent or emotional. It is not surprising they feel confused about their proper role.

'Listening to boys' in Learning about Sexuality (see Resources, page 45).