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SEXUAL EDUCATION FOR ADOLESCENTS IN POLAND – GAPS, CHALLENGES, AND EVIDENCE-BASED NEEDS*

Introduction: Sex education plays a crucial role in proper psychosexual development of adolescents, supporting their mental and physical well-being, ensuring safety, and fostering the ability to make informed and responsible decisions.

Research Aim: The first aim of the study was to analyze the current state of formal and informal sex education for adolescents in Poland. This issue was examined from multiple perspectives, including objective indicators of young people's knowledge about sexuality, expert opinions, adolescents' views, and perspectives of sex education providers. The second aim was to identify potential risks associated with insufficient or inadequate sex education and to assess the benefits of comprehensive, evidence-based sexuality education.

Evidence-based Facts: Research indicates a low level of sexual knowledge among Polish adolescents and limited effectiveness of formal and informal sex education. As a result, young people often seek information from the internet and peers, increasing the risk of engaging in risky behaviors and internalizing distorted models of sexuality. Scientific evidence confirms that comprehensive, evidence-based sex education serves an important protective function, supporting health, safety, and development of mature relationships.

Summary: Effective sex education requires collaboration among institutions, parents, and expert community. The article highlights the vital role of informal education, especially that provided in the family setting. At the same time, it advocates for introducing comprehensive, formal sex education in schools – education that is accurate, science-based, and responsive to the real needs of students. Both formal and informal sex education should be complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Keywords: sexual education, psychosexual development, adolescents, parents, school

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an intense public debate has been taking place in Poland concerning sex education. Most generally, sex education may take two forms: formal and informal, with the former provided by such professionals as physicians, teachers, or psychologists, and the latter encompassing a full range of information about human sexuality that reaches children and adolescents through parents and other close relatives, peers, social media, books, articles, and other sources (Em-Kamieniec et al., 2021). Among these forms, formal sexuality education generates the greatest controversy.

Considering the emotional tone of these discussions and the lack of consensus even on the most basic issues, one might get the impression that the subject is entirely new and unfamiliar in our country. Yet the history of initiatives aimed at education in the sensitive domain of human sexuality in Poland has a long tradition, extending over a century and reaching back to the pre-war period. Already in 1920, legal regulation was issued that permitted the inclusion of topics related to sexuality in school curricula. This date is generally considered the beginning of sexual education in Polish schools (see, e.g., Chmielewska, 2020; Jamrozowicz, 2020). Another milestone was the establishment in 1957 of the Society for Conscious Motherhood (later operating under the names Society for Family Planning and eventually Society for Family Development), which promoted the idea of sex education as an integral component of upbringing and introduced classes on the subject in selected schools (see Chmielewska, 2020; Jamrozowicz, 2020). In subsequent decades, elements of sex education were incorporated into school curricula through such subjects as Preparation for Life in a Socialist Family, Knowledge about Human Sexual Life, and Preparation for Family Life (Chmielewska, 2020). The latter subject, in a form relatively similar to its original version, continues to exist today.

Parallel to these efforts, fierce disputes about sex education have never ceased, intensifying recently with the Ministry of Education's plans to introduce noncompulsory Health Education classes in schools, including elements of sex education. These plans sparked controversy and, due to strong opposition from various groups, the idea of making the subject obligatory was abandoned, leaving parents to decide whether their children would attend. Nevertheless, the situation reignited long-standing disputes regarding the purpose, form, and scope of sex education. Despite its century-long history in Poland, society has still not reached consensus on when such education should be introduced, what its scope should be, to what extent it should be formalized, and – most importantly – who should be responsible for it: schools or families? Public opinion has become strongly polarized, and finding answers is further complicated by the fact that the entire debate has long been entangled in politics and ideology. This situation is not unique to Poland, as similar controversies can be observed in other countries as well (see, e.g., Wąż,

2017). An additional problem is that the loudest voices in the debate often belong to individuals who are not directly involved in sex education and lack sufficient knowledge about psychosexual development and the actual needs of adolescents. Meanwhile, the opinions of experts – scholars and practitioners in such fields as pedagogy, psychology, and medicine – remain insufficiently disseminated in public discourse. These expert perspectives are drowned out in heated public debate, and evidence-based arguments fail to reach a wider audience.

In the context of the intensive public debate in Poland, it is justified to undertake in-depth research on sexual education, including an analysis of available scientific evidence and a thorough assessment of existing solutions. Advancing knowledge in this area may contribute to a more comprehensive and evidence-based approach to the issue, as well as constitute an important supplement to existing perspectives. This article contributes to the ongoing discussion, representing one of the voices in the debate.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND AIM

Until recently, formal sex education in schools was offered through the optional subject “Preparation for Family Life” (WdŻ), delivered for a total of 14 hours per year, and since this September, it has been included in the subject “Health Education.” Participation in these classes is not compulsory and the decision rests with parents. Alongside formal sex education, there is also informal education, which takes place mainly within the family environment. The role of parents in sex education is invaluable, as the family is the child’s first educational environment where socialization takes place and foundations for further development are shaped. This leads to the following research question: To what extent is sex education for adolescents implemented in Poland, and how effective is it in achieving its intended objectives? The first objective of the considerations undertaken in this article was therefore to analyze the state of formal and informal sex education of young people conducted in Poland.

The second objective of the study was to address the question of what are the potential risks associated with insufficient or inadequate sex education among adolescents, and how does comprehensive, evidence-based sex education contribute to promoting healthy behaviors and developing positive interpersonal relationships? This section of the article presents evidence-based considerations regarding, on the one hand, the negative consequences of insufficient or inadequate sex education. On the other hand, the benefits of effective sex education in terms of promoting health-related behaviors, fostering healthy interpersonal relationships, delaying the age of sexual initiation, and reducing the risk of engaging in risky sexual behaviors, experiencing sexual violence, and unintended teenage pregnancies.

METHODOLOGY

The study was qualitative in nature. It was based on a review and analysis of data concerning formal and informal sexual education in Poland. An evidence-based narrative review approach was applied, supplemented by a qualitative content analysis of selected empirical publications and expert materials.

The research material was selected purposively. It included scientific publications, reports from research institutions, comparative analyses, and documents produced by national and international organizations addressing sexual education, its effectiveness, potential systemic gaps, as well as its relationships with various public health parameters and aspects of individual functioning. In conducting the literature review, the focus was primarily placed on the most recent publications published within the past ten years. The adopted methodology enabled a synthetic presentation of available scientific evidence and an assessment of the effectiveness and limitations of formal and informal sexual education in Poland from the perspective of psychophysical well-being and the quality of interpersonal relationships.

EVIDENCE-BASED FACTS

To answer the question regarding the condition of formal and informal sexual education among young people in Poland, the issue should be examined from several perspectives – objective indicators of young people's knowledge about sexuality, expert evaluations, adolescents' own opinions as the recipients of educational interventions, and the perspectives of those who deliver sex education. A few years ago, the Educational Research Institute conducted a study on the level of sexual knowledge among older adolescents. Eighteen-year-old participants were asked about such basic issues as human anatomy, sexually transmitted infections, and contraceptive methods. The published report presented a rather pessimistic picture of Polish sex education: more than a half of the respondents, on the threshold of adulthood, displayed serious gaps in fundamental knowledge of human sexuality (Bulkowski et al., 2015). Insufficient sex education during adolescence translates into the functioning of young adults. Bilarzewska et al. (2024) conducted a study on a sample of several hundred adults, aged 18 to 30, asking what information related to sexual life they had sought recently. The results showed that the most commonly sought information concerned health, contraception, and the anatomy and functioning of the human body. Importantly, these are basic issues that individuals should already have been familiar with much earlier, during their school years.

The lack of sexual knowledge among Polish adolescents and young adults aligns with the findings of a World Health Organization report (WHO Europe, 2010), which classified formal sex education in Poland as one of the least devel-

oped in Europe. The Polish model focuses primarily on promoting sexual abstinence before marriage and delaying the age of sexual initiation, while providing very limited information on other aspects of sexuality. However, human sexuality extends far beyond procreation and fulfillment of biological needs. Thus, sex education cannot concentrate solely on sexual behaviors – or rather, on their suppression or postponement – but must also include social, psychological, and emotional aspects, as well as human health and well-being (see, e.g., Jeznach, 2020).

The model of sex education currently promoted worldwide, and regarded as optimal, adopts a holistic approach defined as:

a process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality. Its aim is to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will enable them to take care of their health, well-being, and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; reflect on how their choices affect their own and others' well-being; and understand and protect their rights throughout life. (WHO, 2018, as cited in Sękowska-Kozłowska, 2025, pp. 155–156)

Ensuring access to sex education understood in this way is considered part of the realization of human rights within the framework of sexual rights, which include, above all, the right to education and the right to information (see Em-Kamieniec et al., 2021; Sękowska-Kozłowska, 2025).

Formal school-based sex education is not perceived positively by Polish adolescents. Students often lose motivation to attend WdŻ classes because these lessons, having low status as optional, are frequently held irregularly, during substitute periods, or on Saturdays (Kościółek & Romanowska, 2023). Participants in Jeznach's (2020) study noted that the content of WdŻ lessons was often age-inappropriate, irrelevant to their needs and interests, ideologically charged, outdated, and frequently unsupported by scientific evidence. Instead of receiving accurate knowledge, students were often exposed to teachers' personal opinions. Research conducted by Smolarek et al. (2023/24) also revealed negative evaluations of formal sex education. University students surveyed in the study reported poor experiences with the WdŻ classes they had attended several years earlier.

Sex education is highly dependent on the individuals delivering it, and this is one of the main predictors of its effectiveness. Researchers emphasize that when dealing with such a sensitive matter as human sexuality, not only professional qualifications and expertise but also educators' attitudes, personal beliefs, value systems, ability to present knowledge objectively and in a worldview-neutral manner, as well as openness and honesty in interactions with students, play a crucial role (Wąż, 2017). Chmielewska (2020) conducted qualitative research among this professional group. The author asked Polish sex educators and WdŻ teachers what skills were most important in their work. They most frequently mentioned solid subject knowledge, but also highlighted a range of such soft skills as com-

mitment, communication, positive relationships with young people, and listening skills. They also described the difficulties they faced in their profession. According to nearly all participants, they encountered, as one of them put it, a witch-hunt against sex education (p. 98), difficulties in dealing with parents opposed to such education, and numerous negative reactions and attacks both online and in person. This represents a serious occupational burden, increasing the likelihood of burnout; thus, psychological resilience and stress management appear to be crucial traits in this profession.

Negative public atmosphere surrounding sex education is not the only issue raised by the participants. The voluntary nature of WdŻ results in relatively few students attending the classes. Moreover, schools often marginalize these lessons, scheduling them at inconvenient times, further discouraging attendance. Polish teachers also pointed to the lack of good textbooks, limited scope of the curriculum, and the ideological bias of its content (Chmielewska, 2020). It can therefore be concluded that the perspective of educators overlaps in many respects with the perceptions of adolescents.

In public discourse, it is often argued that formal sex education in schools is unnecessary. The claim is that it is primarily the family's responsibility and should be conducted by parents in line with their values and beliefs. Let us therefore consider these issues by taking a closer look at informal sexual education, conducted primarily within the family environment.

Open communication between parents and children about sexuality plays an important educational role – it fosters awareness that sexuality is a vital and integral part of human nature. A meta-analysis conducted by Liberacka-Dwojak and Izdebski (2021), which included studies on parent-child communication during adolescence, indicated that the quality of this communication is a significant predictor of later sexual functioning in adulthood and of openness to dialogue. An open dialogue with parents on sexual topics helps adolescents cope with challenges in the sexual sphere and enables them to develop skills necessary for building healthy intimate relationships, such as expressing their own needs, respecting boundaries, communicating expectations, maintaining mutual respect, and recognizing and meeting a partner's needs (Liberacka-Dwojak & Izdebski, 2021). Within the family, behavioral patterns are modeled, expectations are formulated, and knowledge is transmitted. Moreover, parents have the opportunity (and indeed the responsibility) to supervise the diverse socializing influences and such sources as media, the internet, and peers, from which their children obtain information. Thus, the family environment plays a key role in supporting children's and adolescents' psychosexual development. The question arises, however: how is sex education actually implemented in Polish families?

Research by Izdebski et al. (2022) involving 595 participants aged 18 to 26 found that 41.5% of respondents had never discussed sexuality with their parents,

while 31.1% reported that they either had no sex education at school or considered it completely useless. For 17.6% of respondents, both statements were true. When conversations with parents did occur, they most often focused on puberty and contraception, while positive aspects of sex, sexual pleasure, and masturbation were discussed least frequently. According to the researchers, variety of topics raised with parents and opportunity for discussion with mothers were the most important factors that shaped adolescents' sexual knowledge. Additionally, among girls, sexual knowledge was linked to the quality of school-based sex education, whereas among boys, it was associated with conversations with their fathers. Notably, a high proportion of Polish families avoided discussions about sexuality altogether.

Similar results were obtained by Jeznach (2020), who found that 45% of respondents reported never having discussed sexuality with their parents. These findings point to several conclusions. First, the role of parents as sex educators cannot be overstated. Engaging in conversations with their children about sexuality is invaluable for psychosexual development. Second, in many Polish families, the sexual sphere remains unspoken, shrouded in silence. Thus, when adolescents from such families do not receive sex education at school, they may be deprived of access to reliable information provided by competent individuals.

Another issue within informal sex education is that today's parents themselves may not have experienced adequate sex education or may have received it at an insufficient level. Consequently, they often avoid acting as sex educators for their children, feeling incompetent, lacking knowledge, or holding misconceptions about psychosexual development (Walendzik-Ostrowska & Dec-Pietrowska, 2023). This is supported by empirical data. Studies conducted in Poland by the Educational Research Institute showed that parents of school-aged children as well as 18-year-olds highlighted the importance of discussions on psychosexual topics. At the same time, many parents of adolescents pointed to their insufficient knowledge of sexuality and their inability to tailor discussions to their children's developmental level and needs as major obstacles. They recognized schools as a more competent educational environment (Bulkowski et al., 2015). In this context, formal sex education would be advisable not only for adolescents but also for adults. Some researchers have argued that parents should acquire sufficient knowledge to educate their children and support their psychosexual development (see, e.g., Walendzik-Ostrowska & Dec-Pietrowska, 2023). Although such a solution is unlikely to be implemented in practice at present, it should be noted that the quality of current sex education for adolescents, who will eventually become parents themselves, will have long-term effects – future parents' level of preparedness will directly shape the sex education of their own children.

Another barrier to informal sex education is the fact that sexuality remains a taboo subject in Polish society, and people often lack the skills to discuss it openly. This also applies to parents, for whom conversations about sexuality with their

children can be extremely difficult. They often experience embarrassment and discomfort in such situations (see, e.g., Ferguson et al., 2022; Grossman, et al., 2022). Adolescents' accounts confirm these observations. Participants in Jeznach's (2020) study noted that in parental sex education, there was little openness, adults often appeared embarrassed, and sometimes even responded with criticism.

Parental discomfort during conversations about sexuality is problematic because, on the one hand, it inhibits spontaneous and open communication, and on the other, it transfers the parent's negative emotions onto the child, teaching them that sexuality is shameful. Research also shows that parents' individual characteristics can limit their ability to engage in sex education. For example, lower parental self-confidence is associated with less frequent conversations about sexuality (Dilorio et al., 2001). Other barriers include insufficient general communication skills or a limited emotional vocabulary, which makes it difficult for parents to talk to children about feelings and emotional experiences (see, e.g., Liberacka-Dwojak & Izdebski, 2021; Shaffer et al., 2019).

Additional challenges identified by researchers include intergenerational barriers, poor emotional climate in the parent-child dyad, perceiving the child as insufficiently mature, and the gender of the parent discussing sexuality (Chomczyńska-Rubacha et al., 2017; Schaafsma, 2022). With respect to the latter factor, studies indicate that fathers are considerably more passive in their children's sex education than mothers, who more actively and frequently engage in such conversations (Izdebski, 2020; Schaafsma, 2022). Furthermore, when fathers do address sexuality, they are more likely to discuss it with sons than with daughters (Bulkowski et al., 2015).

Since formal sex education does not meet adolescents' expectations and family-based education is often absent, the question arises: where do young people obtain their knowledge about human sexuality? Research conducted in Poland in recent years provides some answers to this question. Bilarzewska et al. (2024) asked 18- to 30-year-olds where they sought sexual information. The majority reported turning to internet sources. Books and advice from professionals or close individuals were used much less frequently.

Similar findings were obtained by Jeznach (2020). Participants most often cited online forums and blogs (81%), peers (69%), and such non-educational publications as youth magazines and TV series (64%) as sources of sexual knowledge. Alarming, pornography was a source of information for a greater number of respondents (45%) than professionals (8%), family (28%), or school (32%).

Meanwhile, in studies conducted by the Educational Research Institute, 18-year-olds identified peers as their primary source of sexual information, followed by WdŻ teachers, and then parents – with mothers more frequently mentioned than fathers. Internet sources and pornography were also ranked highly. Interestingly, parents of school-aged children saw the situation differently: they believed that family (75%),

WdZ teachers (37%), and peers (27%) were their children's main sources of information (Bulkowski et al., 2015). This suggests that Polish parents underestimated the role of peers and the internet in informal sex education.

Fascinating insights also come from Smolarek et al. (2023/24), who surveyed university students about their school years and asked who should have been their sources of sexual knowledge and who actually was. The majority felt that parents and teachers should have been their main sources. Yet, when asked where they actually obtained information, they most often cited peers and media. Pornography ranked third among actual sources, even though respondents rated it very low when asked whether it should serve as a source of information.

These findings reveal a rather bleak picture of sex education in Poland. A large group of adolescents appears to be left alone in their psychosexual development, deprived of support and reliable information. They turn to questionable sources or to peers, who themselves lack sufficient knowledge. Both boys and girls often search online, where reliable and professional content is mixed with misleading, false, or even harmful information.

Reliance on pornography as a source of sexual knowledge, especially among boys, is a particularly dangerous phenomenon. Pornographic representations of sexuality are distorted and reduced to purely physiological aspects. Exposure to such content can distort young people's understanding of relationships, love, and intimacy – both erotic and emotional (Nowak, 2022). Research also shows that exposure to pornography can generate discomfort, negative feelings, and a sense of inadequacy (Pilarczyk, 2018).

Among girls, magazines and health-related publications are more frequent sources of information (Bulkowski et al., 2015). In the media, young women are often portrayed in ways that emphasize their sexual attractiveness and availability (Ward et al., 2016). Scholars warn that such portrayals can have negative consequences, increasing the risk of depression, self-objectification, as well as reduced self-esteem and body satisfaction among adolescent girls (Zurbriggen et al., 2011). Ironically, opponents of sex education often cite *sexualization of children and adolescents* as their key argument. Yet it is precisely the lack of reliable knowledge that drives young people to seek information in the media, where sexualized content is ubiquitous. Most advertisements, music videos, films, and online images focus on eroticism and corporeality. These patterns are quickly absorbed by young people (and even children), encouraging them to emphasize their sexuality and display their bodies (Nowak, 2022). In the media, love is presented mainly in terms of physicality and attractiveness (Dobosz, 2021). From such sources, adolescents will not learn about respect, emotions, boundaries, or privacy. This gap can and should be filled by comprehensive sex education. Research demonstrates that sex education is not only a source of reliable information but also an effective tool in countering the sexualization of children and adolescents.

Without engaging in disputes and controversies, two points must be clearly stated: first, sexual education is highly necessary for Polish youth; second, the current sexual education – both formal and informal – exhibits significant deficiencies. Leaving young people without reliable knowledge about sexuality may result in difficulties in understanding the changes that occur during puberty in their bodies and minds, understanding the principles of building erotic relationships and the norms associated with them, as well as in caring for their psychological well-being and health. As Kościółek and Romanowska (2023) note, the psychological costs are enormous – young people often experience confusion, shame, and fear, while unconsciously reinforcing negative stereotypes and beliefs regarding their own and the opposite sex, as well as gender roles. Among contemporary youth, phenomena such as instrumentalization and objectification of sexual partners, convergence of male and female roles, and “sexualization of girlhood” (e.g., girls taking the initiative in establishing intimate relationships) are observed, accompanied by a weakening of social control, including parental influence (Izdebski et al., 2020).

In light of scientific evidence, comprehensive sexual education serves as a protective factor against many contemporary problems. These include the aforementioned sexualization, early sexual initiation, risky sexual behaviors, unintended teenage pregnancies, as well as sexual violence and exploitation. Goldfarb and Lieberman (2021) conducted an extensive review of the benefits associated with implementing sexual education programs in American schools. According to these researchers, sexual education significantly increases knowledge about sexuality, reduces levels of homophobia, and serves as a protective factor against intimate partner violence. Moreover, it contributes to enhanced interpersonal competencies and development of attitudes and skills regarding personal safety.

Without reliable knowledge, and uncertain about what is happening to them or what is normative, young people become particularly susceptible to the influences of media and peers. They often overestimate sexual activity of their peers and, under this pressure, engage in sexual behaviors for which they are not yet psychologically prepared (Jąderek, 2022). In Poland, there is a trend of a steadily decreasing age of sexual initiation, particularly pronounced among girls. Consequences of early sexual activity include emotional stress, an increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, and unintended teenage pregnancies (Dacka, 2021; Maciejewska & Płaczekiewicz, 2021). Research indicates that early sexual initiation increases the likelihood of other risky behaviors, such as intercourse with multiple or unfamiliar partners, as well as involvement in prostitution (see, e.g., Dacka, 2021). Early sexual initiation (at age 15 or younger) is also often associated with the use of psychoactive substances (drugs, alcohol), smoking, truancy, and negative attitudes toward school. This is primarily linked to shared risk factors for various risky behaviors (Kempińska & Malinowski, 2023). It should be em-

phasized that in countries implementing the WHO-recommended holistic sexual education, such as Sweden, Switzerland, or the Netherlands, positive trends are observed, including lower rates of pregnancies among minors and a higher age of sexual initiation (e.g., Switzerland and the Netherlands have the lowest proportion of 15-year-olds in Europe who have already initiated sexual activity; Maciejewska & Płaczkwicz, 2021).

A serious problem is the engagement of youth in risky sexual behaviors, both in real life and online. Research shows that, alongside early sexual initiation, the most common behaviors include unprotected intercourse, sexting (sending erotic content, such as nude photos, via phone or online), and grooming (sexual predation over the Internet; Jąderek, 2022). Risky sexual behaviors often co-occur with other high-risk behaviors, such as the use of psychoactive substances. Analyses of data collected in various countries indicate that one of the main protective factors against risky sexual behaviors and irresponsible youth decisions is high-quality, comprehensive sexual education delivered both within families and through educational institutions, health centers, foundations, etc. (Kempińska & Malinowski, 2023; see also Liberacka-Dwojak & Izdebski, 2021).

Among Polish children and adolescents, there is currently a growing prevalence of violence, some forms of which may be linked to the sexual sphere. For example, research indicates that one in three respondents experiences violations of their intimate space through various forms of unwanted touching, and one in three is frequently exposed to unwanted sexual or pornographic content (Chmura-Rutkowska, 2019). A new form of violence is the so-called slut-shaming, involving various forms of humiliation, stigmatization, and shaming of girls for their sexual activity (real or perceived; Chmura-Rutkowska, 2019). It is alarming that gender-based violence and harassment are so widespread that, although they strongly affect adolescents, they learn to accept it and perceive it as part of school life (Chmura-Rutkowska, 2019). At the same time, such violence is often overlooked by adults, who regard it as natural conflicts between girls and boys and as a way of negotiating their relationships (Jurkiewicz, 2023).

In recent years, there has also been an increasing number of cases of sexual exploitation of children and adolescents by adults, which has become an international problem (see Dacka, 2022). Based on conducted research, the Fundacja Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę [Empowering Children Foundation] (2021) reports that approximately half a million children in Poland have experienced sexual exploitation during their lives. Researchers link the growing problem of sexual abuse of children and youth to multiple factors, including technological advancements that facilitate access to content inappropriate for developmental stages, lack of parental control, insufficient social support, and inadequate sexual education (Handayani et al., 2020).

Appropriate sexual education and the engagement of various societal sectors can contribute to preventing sexual abuse of minors. Dissemination of sexual

knowledge and school-based prevention programs have scientifically proven effectiveness in preventing sexual exploitation of children in various countries (Walsh et al., 2018). For instance, Walsh et al. (2018) demonstrated that children participating in school-based sexual education programs are more likely to report sexual exploitation than students who did not participate in such classes. Parents can also protect their children from abuse by providing reliable knowledge about risks, teaching boundary-setting, monitoring real-world and online activities, and indirectly shaping self-esteem and strengthening social competencies (Dacka, 2022).

Effective sexual education is also necessary for youth as a protective factor for psychological well-being. Adolescence is associated with high emotional sensitivity and lability, unstable self-esteem, and an increased need for peer acceptance and approval. A significant issue is the observed dissatisfaction with one's appearance among both girls and boys. Body dissatisfaction has become a norm affecting not only adults and adolescents but even children (see Em-Kamieniec et al., 2021). According to a 2018 report by Mazur and Małkowska-Szkućnik (2018), conducted in Poland, 36% of adolescents aged 11–15 assessed their body weight as too high, even though it was within normal range. The situation was even worse among 13- and 15-year-old girls, where more respondents assessed their weight as too high than as normal. This in itself is alarming.

Moreover, a negative body image is a risk factor for various body-related disorders, potentially predicting eating disorders, dysmorphophobia, low self-esteem, interpersonal relationship difficulties, and often co-occurring risky sexual behaviors. Conversely, positive body perception reduces the likelihood of engaging in risky sexual contacts (Em-Kamieniec et al., 2021). These data indicate that a positive body image is an important factor in overall well-being. However, mass culture, which promotes idealized and flawless beauty, does not facilitate acceptance of one's appearance among youth. Researchers suggest that one way to resist this pressure is through quality sexual education. For example, Goldfarb and Lieberman (2021) found a correlation between sexual education and positive self-perception, including more favorable body image. Similar conclusions are drawn from Polish studies. Em-Kamieniec et al. (2021) found a relationship between the level of knowledge about sexuality and various indicators of body image among young women. Those who rated their sexual education more positively felt more attractive and assessed their bodies more favorably. Based on these findings, the researchers argue that introduction of reliable sexual education is a means of fostering a better relationship with one's body and, consequently, improving psychological, relational, and social well-being.

SUMMARY

Both empirical data and the long-term experiences of countries implementing high-quality sexual education clearly indicate that reliable, systematic, evidence-based sexual education tailored to the real needs of young people is essential. As they enter adulthood, young people should be equipped with accurate knowledge that enables them to fulfill their sexual needs in a safe, satisfying manner that aligns with social norms. Awareness and understanding of one's own sexuality constitute a crucial element of healthy relationships with others, as well as maintaining physical health and psychological well-being. Sexuality is inherent to human nature from the earliest stages of life and, in the author's view, it cannot be altered by its suppression in public consciousness, school curricula, or family discussions.

Tabooing of the sexual sphere will not eliminate natural curiosity, needs, or problems experienced by young people. In the absence of good sexual education, Polish adolescents will be left alone with their doubts and concerns, without support from well-intentioned, responsible, and competent adults. Life does not tolerate a vacuum, and if it is not filled with reliable, evidence-based knowledge, young people will inevitably seek to satisfy their natural curiosity through peers or by consulting blogs, social media, or discussion forums, as is currently the case. Alongside valuable content, they may encounter misleading or even harmful information.

CONCLUSIONS

Sexual education should be conducted holistically, addressing not only the physiological aspects of human development but also the emotional, social, and psychological dimensions of sexuality – adapted to the age and developmental level of adolescents. Research consistently indicates that comprehensive sexuality education, as recommended by such international organizations as the WHO Europe (2010) and UNESCO (2018), represents the most effective model of educational intervention. It demonstrates greater educational and health-related benefits compared to programs that focus primarily or exclusively on promoting sexual abstinence before marriage, commonly referred to as “abstinence-only programs” (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Goldfarb et al., 2026; Kohler et al., 2008).

At the same time, in line with expert recommendations and international guidelines, an effective model of sexuality education should be integrated in nature, combining formal education with informal educational influences (WHO Europe, 2010). In this process of sexuality education for adolescents, collaboration between schools and families is of critical importance (Izdebski et al., 2022). Parents should be active educators of their children. Sexual education delivered by

qualified professionals should not replace this parental role but rather complement it, providing support where professional knowledge is necessary or where open conversations with close family members may be difficult. A significant portion of society recognizes the need to supplement informal sexual education within families with formal education integrated into the school curriculum. According to data collected by CBOS [Centre for Public Opinion Research] in 2019, as many as 84% of respondents affirmed the need for teaching human sexuality in schools. Similar results were obtained in studies conducted by the Institute for Educational Research in 2015, in which 87% of eighteen-year-olds and 88% of parents of school-aged children believed that classes on psychosexual development and human sexuality should take place in schools (Bulkowski et al., 2015). Few issues achieve such a high level of consensus within our society.

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EDUKACJA SEKSUALNA MŁODZIEŻY W POLSCE - LUKI, WYZWANIA I POTRZEBY OPARTE NA DOWODACH NAUKOWYCH

Wprowadzenie: Edukacja seksualna odgrywa kluczową rolę w prawidłowym rozwoju psychoseksualnym, wspierając dobrostan psychiczny i fizyczny młodzieży, zapewniając jej bezpieczeństwo, a także kształtując zdolność do podejmowania świadomych i odpowiedzialnych decyzji.

Cel badań: Pierwszym celem badania była analiza aktualnego stanu formalnej i nieformalnej edukacji seksualnej młodzieży w Polsce. Problem ten został zbadany z wielu perspektyw, uwzględniających obiektywne wskaźniki wiedzy młodych ludzi na temat seksualności, opinie ekspertów, stanowiska samych adolescentów oraz osób prowadzących edukację seksualną. Drugim celem było określenie potencjalnych zagrożeń wynikających z niewystarczającej lub nieadekwatnej edukacji seksualnej oraz ocena korzyści płynących z kompleksowej, opartej na dowodach naukowych edukacji seksualnej.

Stan wiedzy: Badania wskazują na niski poziom wiedzy seksualnej młodzieży w Polsce oraz

ograniczoną skuteczność zarówno edukacji szkolnej, jak i rodzinnej. W efekcie młodzi ludzie często czerpią informacje z Internetu i rówieśników, co zwiększa ryzyko zachowań ryzykownych i utrwalania zniekształconych wzorców seksualności. Jednocześnie dowody naukowe potwierdzają, że kompleksowa, oparta na faktach edukacja seksualna pełni istotną funkcję ochronną, wspierając zdrowie, bezpieczeństwo i rozwój dojrzałych relacji.

Podsumowanie: Skuteczna edukacja seksualna wymaga współpracy między instytucjami, rodzicami i środowiskiem eksperckim. W artykule podkreślono kluczową rolę edukacji nieformalnej, szczególnie tej prowadzonej w środowisku rodzinnym. Jednocześnie postulowana jest konieczność wprowadzenia kompleksowej, formalnej edukacji seksualnej w szkołach, skierowanej do szerokiego grona uczniów – rzetelnej, opartej na wiedzy naukowej i odpowiadającej na rzeczywiste potrzeby młodzieży. Oba rodzaje edukacji seksualnej powinny być komplementarne i wzajemnie się uzupełniać.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja seksualna, rozwój psychoseksualny, młodzież, rodzice, szkoła