

Age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education for young children in Finland

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The Family Federation of Finland

<https://www.vaestoliitto.fi/en/professionals/body-emotion-education/>

What have we done in Väestöliitto?

(The Family Federation of Finland)



What have we done?

Timeline. Ten years work.

- Situation analyses and needs mapping survey, also mapping of obstacles and risks. 10y
- Info for parents: websites, information, words, models, proactively responding to opposition. 8y
- Child-centred terminology about sexuality. 23y, 8y
- Information about childhood sexuality, sexual development, and sexual education, as well as the disadvantages of its absence for children. 10y
- Media work: interviews, opinions on the importance of the issue for main newspapers, influencing public opinion, with emphasis of children's safety and healthy development. 10y
- Continuous content production: web info and children's books. 10y
- Continuous lobbying of the politicians and decision-makers to make childhood CSE mandatory (was implemented gradually in the mandatory curriculum. The word "sexuality" was included in 2022). 9y
- Persistent application of project grants for training trainers and parents. 10y
- National trainings, extensive material production, language versions in Swedish and in 3 Sami languages. 5y
- Scientific articles. 5y

Situation analyses and needs assessment studies 2013-14

DAY-CARE PROFESSIONALS (nurses, preschool teachers) for 0-6-year olds
2013, N=507

5 background questions
91 multiple choice questions
13 open questions

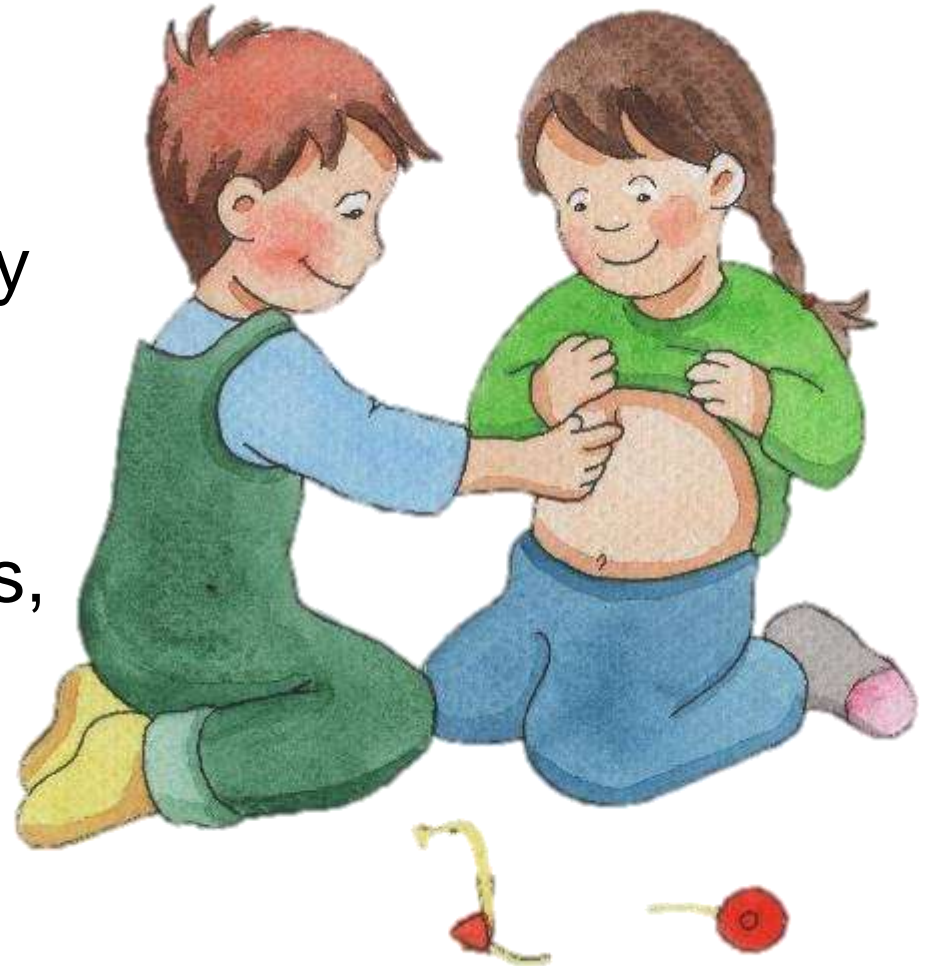
PARENTS of 0-6-year-old children
2014, N=614

14 background questions
85 multiple choice questions
25 open questions

- **If and what kind of expressions children show**
- **What children ask and how adults respond**
- **What are problems in supporting and protecting healthy (sexual) development**

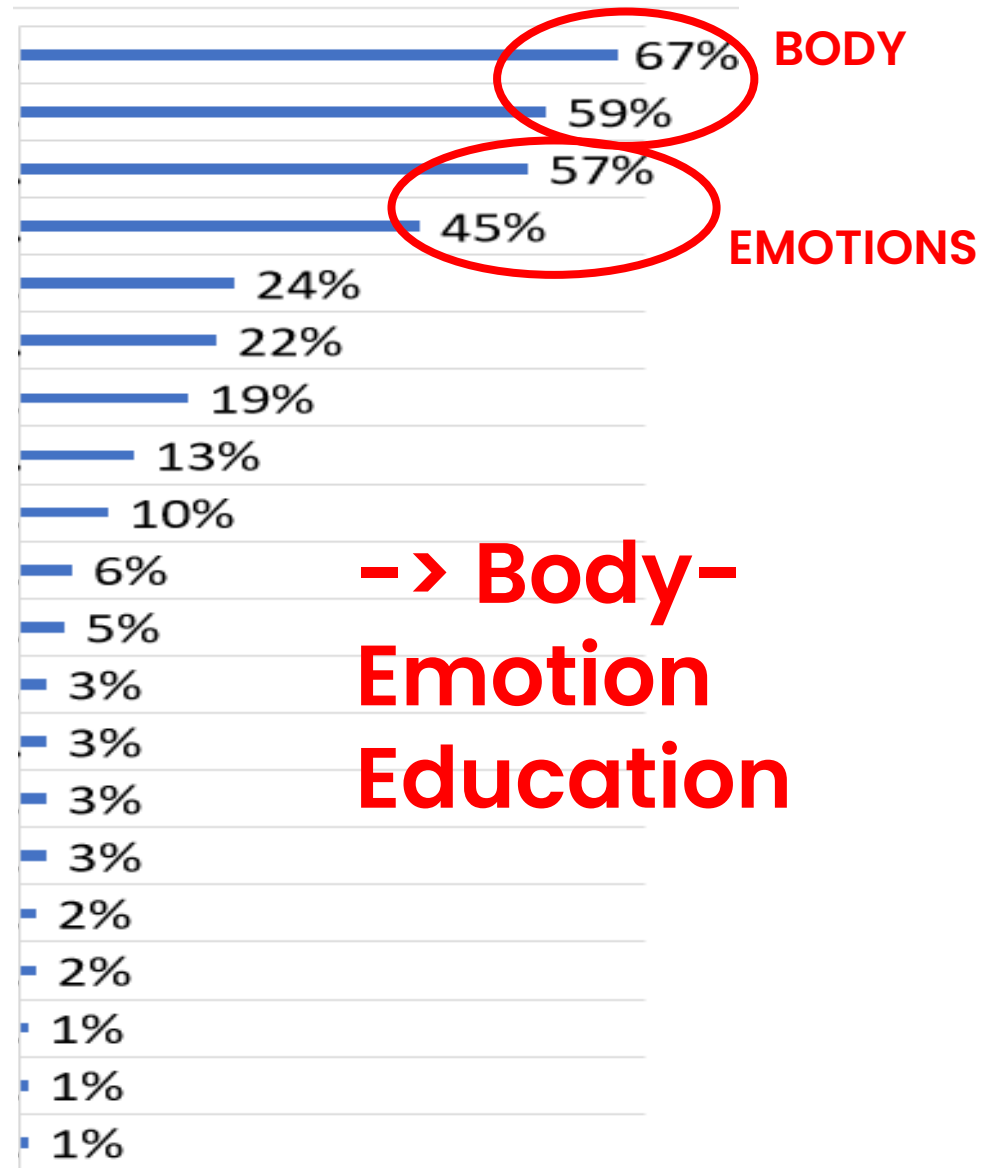
What did we learn?

- Adults constantly face children's sexuality-related expressions and questions.
- Currently, support for children's sexuality is uneven and sporadic.
- Parents and professionals lack concepts, models and knowledge.
- Parents and professionals discuss the matter narrowly, if any.



The word **Body-Emotion Education**: Topics children ask mostly

- Body hygiene (e.g. appropriate way to clean one's butt/genitals, teeth, and hands)
- Questions about different body parts and their functions (navel, ear, willy/genitals, butt)
- Liking, infatuation or love for other children
- Liking, infatuation or love for familiar adults
- Tenderness and closeness (e.g. questions like "Do you like hugging?")
- An unpleasant touch (e.g. punching, hurting, pulling hair, etc.)
- Gender roles (what a man and a woman can do or what is appropriate for them to do)
- Differences in various bodies (e.g. age, skin color, disabilities, gender)
- Sexual vocabulary that is not appropriate for the developmental level
- Liking, infatuation or love for celebrities or idols
- Who can touch the child, that is, kiss or put him/her on their lap
- Different relationships and different kinds of families (e.g. LGBT families)
- How does a child begin to grow in a tummy
- Which parts of a child are okay to touch, and which are not
- Questions regarding the differences between friendship and love
- Questions regarding sexuality as seen in the media
- What is it like for a baby to be in a mommy's tummy
- Questions regarding the sex life, breasts or genitals of professionals
- Enjoyment from touching one's own body, masturbating, or what feels good
- How does the baby come out of the tummy



Training of professionals & parents

2019-2023

- At Väestöliitto, we have trained about 6,000 early childhood education and primary education professionals on body-emotion education.
- Over 50 training days.
- 85 people have completed the 10-credit *Väestöliitto's body-emotion educator* training.
- Parent's evenings / info meetings for parents.
- Self-education courses, lectures and materials are all free online.
- Funding:
 - the National Agency of Education
 - Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA).

What does body-emotion education cover?



New national, mandatory core curriculum for early education includes CSE 2022



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- Early education (2022)
 - 0-6-y-olds, 48 pages

“Children's age-appropriate curiosity towards sexuality and the body is guided respectfully.”

- Pre-primary education (2014)
 - 6-y-olds

- Basic education (2014)
 - Grades 1-2 (7-8-y-olds)
 - Grades 3-6 (9-12-y-olds)
 - Grades 7-9 (13-15-y-olds)

Elements of CSE without the word 'sexuality'

The word 'sexuality' again present ->

Finland appears to be currently the only country in the world where national Early childhood education curriculum for all ages encompasses information related to sexuality, safety skills and the body equally for all children.

Each child's individual Early childhood education plan is made together with the child's parents.

New national, mandatory core curriculum for early education includes CSE 2022

In March 2022 National Affairs of Education published the universal, mandatory National core curriculum for early education and care, which directs to ensure children's rights, safety, safety skills, media skills and sexuality education (in Finnish and Swedish). For example:

- The task of early childhood education is to strengthen skills related to children's well-being and safety.
- Matters relating to children's health and safety are reflected with children. Matters related to safety in everyday situations are practised with children. - The aim is to support the children's sense of security, providing them the ability to ask and seek help, as well as to operate safely in different situations and environments.
- Evolving criticism towards media sources and media is practised. Children are encouraged to use media responsibly, taking into account their own and others' well-being.
- Children are encouraged to ask questions, and children's questions are answered.
- One task is to develop children's understanding of and management of the body. Children will be taught to respect and protect their own and others' bodies.
- *And the sentence which Väestöliitto has proposed is included: **Children's age-appropriate curiosity about sexuality and the human body is to be directed with all due respect.***
- The learning environments are designed and developed in such a way that they strengthen equality and gender equality. This allows for the infringement of traditional gender stereotypes.
- To promote democratic values of the Finnish society, such as equality, gender equality and diversity. Children must have the opportunity to develop their skills and make choices, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, cultural background, or other reasons related to person. The staff must create a respectful atmosphere for diversity.



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In English:

<https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/National%20core%20curriculum%20for%20ECEC%202022.pdf>

Already for 8 years (since 2016)

All elements of CSE, but without the word 'sexuality'



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- Children are encouraged to ask questions, and children's questions are answered.
- The child's views and wishes should be investigated and taken into account.
- The child learns while playing, but for the child the play itself is not purposefully learning, but a way to be and to live and perceive the world.
- Children have the right to express themselves, their opinions and ideas, and to be understood by the means of expression, which they have.
- Every child has the right to a good education, care and encouraging feedback.
- The child has the right to receive information in many ways in order to deal with emotions and conflicts as well as to learn new things.
- One task is to develop children's understanding of and management with the body. Children will be taught to respect and protect their own and others' bodies.
- Children must have the opportunity to explore the world with all their senses and with their entire body.
- A display of a variety of emotions are allowed in a safe and the personnel help children to express their emotions and to self-regulate emotions and behaviours.
- Matters relating to children's health and safety are reflected with children. Matters related to safety in everyday situations are practiced with children. - The aim is to support the children's sense of security, providing them the ability to ask and seek help, as well as to operate safely in different situations and environments.
- Children get help, and they are encouraged to ask for help when they need it.
- Children's ability to take care of their health and personal hygiene are supported.
- The learning environments are designed and developed in such a way that they strengthen equality and gender equality. This allows for the infringement of traditional gender stereotypes.
- Children's family identity and family relationships are supported so that every child can experience that her/his family is valuable.
- Evolving criticism towards media sources and media is practiced. Children are encouraged to use media responsibly, taking into account their own and others' well-being.
- One objective is to develop the child's cooperation and communication skills, to promote the child's performance among his/her peers as well as to guide ethically responsible and sustainable activities, other people's rights and membership in the society;
- To promote democratic values of the Finnish society, such as equality, gender equality and diversity. Children must have the opportunity to develop their skills and make choices, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, cultural background or other reasons related to the person. The staff must create a respectful atmosphere for diversity.

The comprehensiveness of body-emotion education (CSE for children) surprises! Important to express!



Sexuality & rights

Rights



Body & human development

The body and development



Values & normes

Norms and behavior



Emotions

Emotions



Materials:

Simple language

Swedish

3 Same languages

Fertility & reproduction

Reproduction



Closeness, self-esteem and feeling good

Sexuality



Sexuality, health & well-being

Well-being and health



Relationships & lifestyles

The environment and other people



ONE YEAR'S SCHEDULE 5-6 Y



One year curricula for different ages (8 topics = 8 months of a year)
0-2y, 3-4y, 5-6y, 7-8y

| Contents | To talk about | Materials | Plays | Cooperation with guardians |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four safety skills: names for each body part, & the swimsuit rule, three-step rule and rules of touching • How to act in a difficult situation? • Child tries to manage on his own. • Everyone must feel safe in the group. • Consent: asking permission to touch and respecting the response • Digital safety skills • What are harassment, bullying and hurting? How can these be reduced? Who to tell? • A good and a bad secret • Child can tell what touch feels good or bad. • Child searches for positive feelings and seems happy and healthy. | <p>"You don't have to be involved in play if you do not want to. Even in the middle of play, you can tell a friend that I no longer want to be involved. And you can leave."</p> <p>"Touch must always be voluntary and comfortable for everyone."</p> <p>"Touch, closeness, friendship, likes and play promote health."</p> <p>"What kind of programs/games/videos do you like to watch or play on media devices?"</p> <p>"Which people in your life are safe and reliable?"</p> <p>"If a situation seems scary, say NO, leave the situation immediately and tell an adult you trust about the incident. "</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pikku Kakkonen's safety skills videos and paper dolls - Safety skills and your body - poster - Other safety skill materials. - Droplet intervention <p>Books:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cacciatore & Ingman-Friberg: Pipunan ikioma napa (+coloring pictures) - Vento: Peikonhäntä - Friester & Goossens: Parku pöllö ei päästä ketään sisään <p>Songs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Myyryläinen: Safety song - Lampi: Know your body - Mimi & Kuku: Tarjatohtorin terveystunti/ Kylpylaulu | <p>Safety skill situations: the child picks a written situation out of a jar. Figure out together, either by talking or acting, how you would best solve the situation.</p> <p>How does your body feel? Each draws own body on a paper. Give children different colored stickers or colored pencils. For example, three blue stickers are placed on the parts of the body where one feels that touch is comfortable, and three yellow stickers are placed on the parts of the body in the drawing that the child would not like to be touched or tickled, etc.</p> <p>Practice taking pictures with your cell phone. What can you take a picture of? Why not? Private versus public.</p> | <p>Share safety skills and digital safety skills instructions at home. For many parents these are new topics, so they need more information and tips.</p> <p>Some of the children can get their own smart phone or a smart watch at this age. It is timely for all children and parents to learn digital safety skills.</p> <p>Tell the guardians that they must also practice safety skills and saying NO at home with children. Child's denial must be respected.</p> |

Empowering children

Previous beliefs:



Silence only makes sexuality taboo -> children can't tell or ask when they have problems!

What research says:



Involving parents

- Parents also want their children to be safe, happy and healthy. You are on the same side.
- Parents need information, time, tools (book lists, info leaflets) and discussions.
- Professionals have a toolkit to provide parents a short (15min) or a long (60min) presentation
 - Slides with explanations
 - Materials to print
 - Invitation letter for parents
- Discussion cards and posters might be needed to open discussion with parents.



Influencing the general attitude

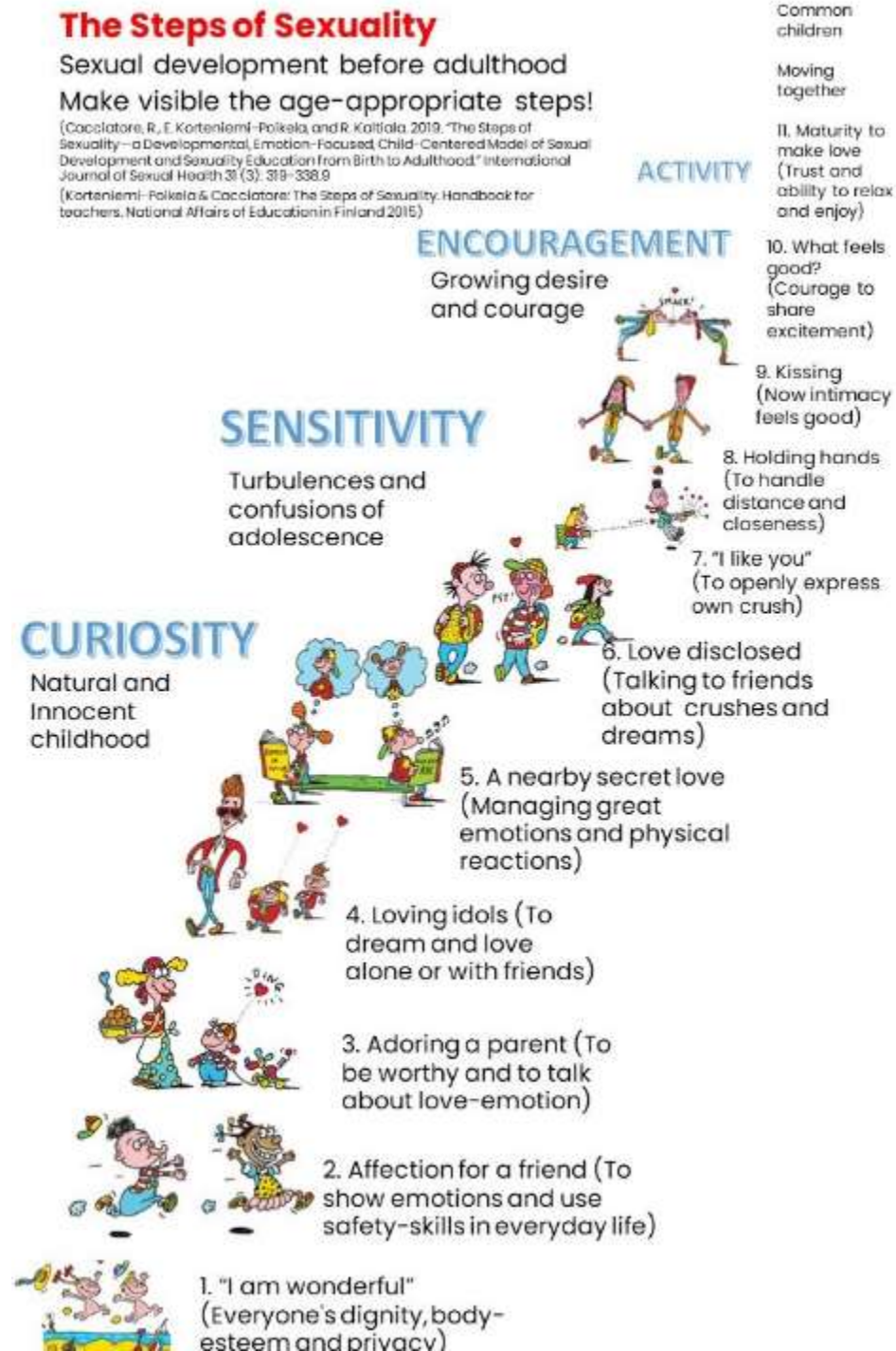
Emotions first! Not only technical rules. Positivity and rights! Not dangers.



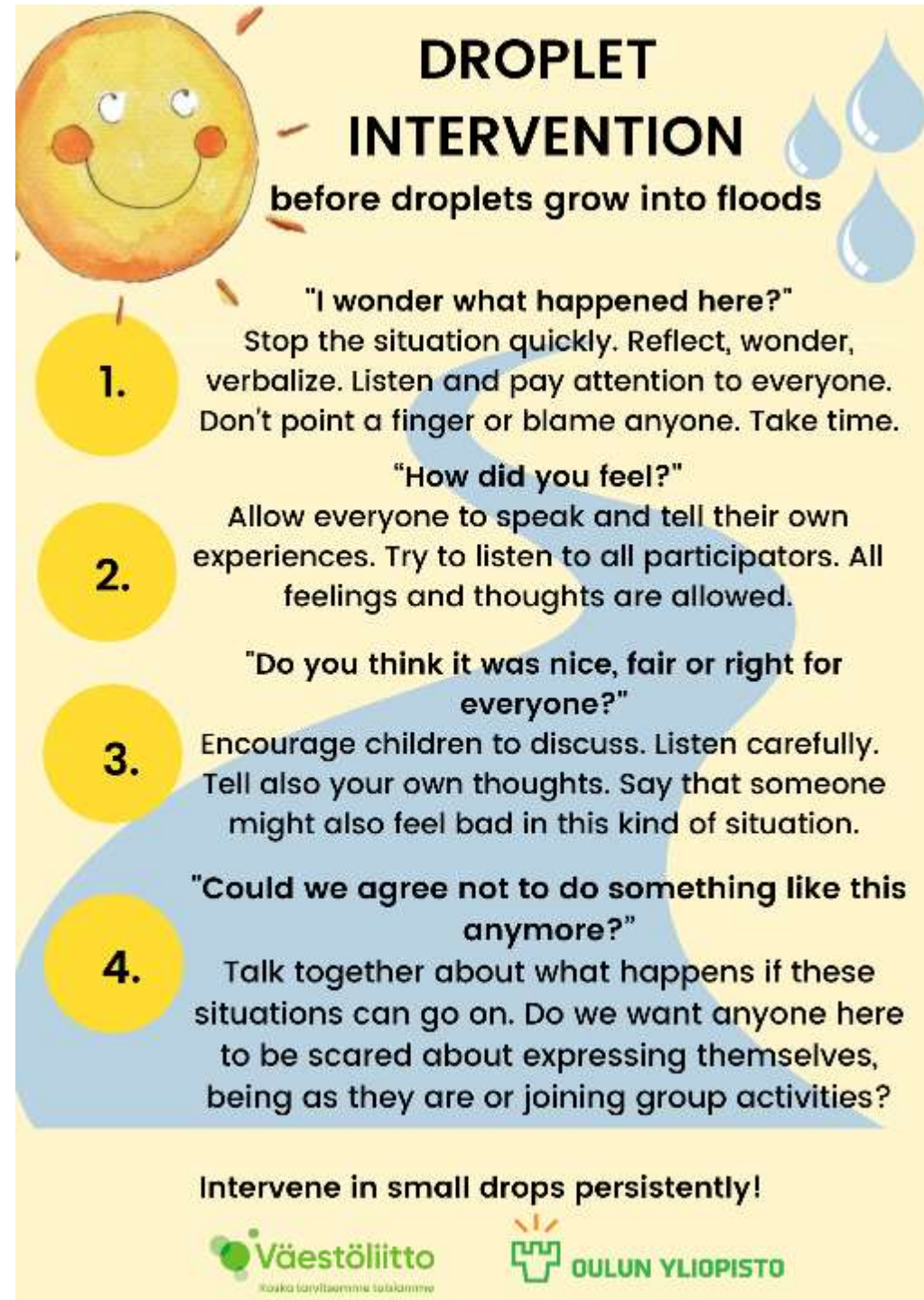
- Rights based
- Health & well-being promoting
- Body-esteem, body pride, bodily rights
- Empowering & skill learning
- Special, private, valuable places in bodies
- Respect is love in action



Explain sexual development from an age-appropriate view.



A concrete participatory model to prevent (sexual) harassment, bullying and violence among young children in early education & primary schools





DROPLET INTERVENTION

before droplets grow into floods

- 1.** "I wonder what happened here?"
Stop the situation quickly. Reflect, wonder, verbalize. Listen and pay attention to everyone. Don't point a finger or blame anyone. Take time.
- 2.** "How did you feel?"
Allow everyone to speak and tell their own experiences. Try to listen to all participants. All feelings and thoughts are allowed.
- 3.** "Do you think it was nice, fair or right for everyone?"
Encourage children to discuss. Listen carefully. Tell also your own thoughts. Say that someone might also feel bad in this kind of situation.
- 4.** "Could we agree not to do something like this anymore?"
Talk together about what happens if these situations can go on. Do we want anyone here to be scared about expressing themselves, being as they are or joining group activities?

Intervene in small drops persistently!

 Väestöliitto
kasvokäsiä laulavammille solakammille

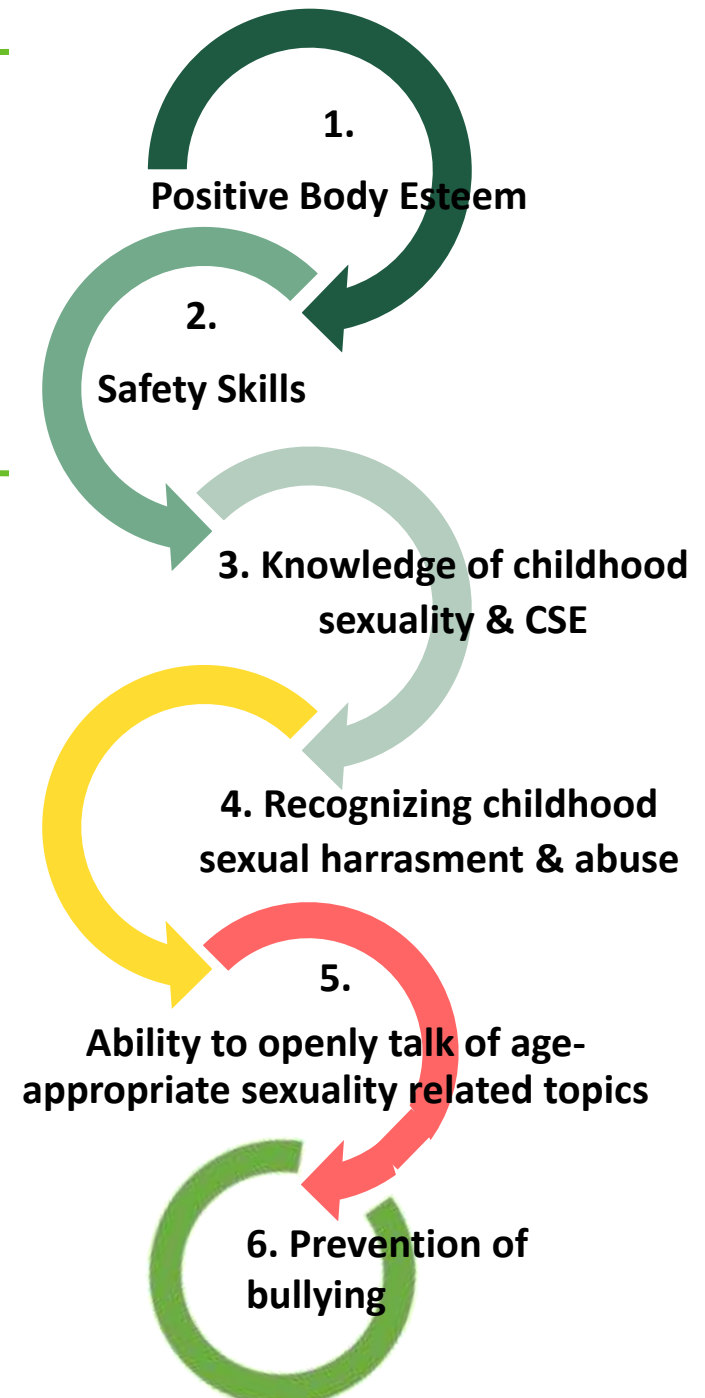
 OULUN YLIOPISTO

Six steps of promoting the sexual safety and well-being of children (future youth)!



Educating Children

Training Professionals



SEXUAL RIGHTS FOR CHILDREN

are the responsibility of adults!

Support children's safe and healthy growth and development into their own personalities.

Give children correct age and developmental-appropriate information continuously. Use research-based recommendations.

Promote children's sexual safety on all possible levels of activity.

Protect children's age-appropriate sexual development and natural innocence.

Guide respectfully children's age-appropriate curiosity towards sexuality and their own body.

Teach children to respect their own and other people's bodies and the word no.

Protect and strengthen children's intact body image and body-esteem.

Teach children to appreciate equality, individuality and diversity.

The most important right is to be able to develop

- To your own kind sexuality
- Supported and protected
- At your own pace and
- Without being hurt

Everyone has the right to feel that they are safe and that they are good and valuable as such.

IMPACTS?

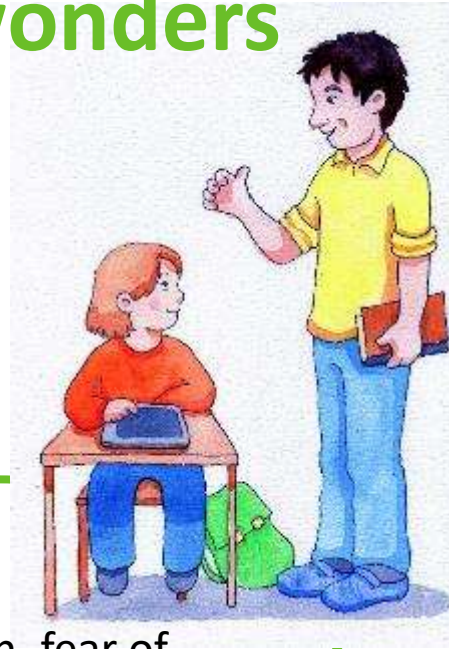


Talking about CSE raises many doubts and wonders

"Do parents accept that I talk to their child about these things?"

"What if parents disagree?
What if they get upset?"

"Does the situation make the parent feel embarrassed?"



Teacher

- Hesitation, fear of judgement
- Own CSE history
- Prejudices, misinformation, know-how
- Feelings as shame
- Experiences of sexuality etc.

"Do parents have information?
Do I need to tell them something first?
Is it my job to 'raise' parents?"

"Do parents understand what I'm talking about to their children?"

Professionals after four months of body-emotion education 1/3

- **The whole atmosphere has changed.** It is acceptable to talk about one's body, its parts and everything related to the body. It is the greatest insight for both children and professionals.
- **The well-being of the whole group has improved.** The children have learned more about each other and themselves. **It's easier to be.**
- **A clear change in children's rights.** More often than before, it is noticed that the child knows what to do if someone disturbs them. They know how to say: "No, I don't like it, I don't want it!"
- With our five-year-olds, **the violations of privacy in the toilet have completely ended.** Although some go to the toilet with the door open, they are allowed to be alone and in peace.
- The project has resulted in **adults taking up these initiatives, becoming relaxed and confident** in speaking and intervening.

Professionals 2/3

Outi Takala, the manager of kindergartens in Riihimäki

Requested statement of body-emotion education's impacts for the Education and Science Division of the Finance Committee of the Parliament Väestöliitto, 2021

- We now have a common plan about topics that we bring up weekly or daily. It increases the children's well-being with each other and trust in the adult. When the child feels good and safe, it also balances being in a group.*
- Change is good for children: you can talk about any issues, and you can rely on an adult and trust that you can do so.*
- The taboo has been broken. Things are talked about more, but not in a disturbing or excessive manner. Children know how to keep their boundaries.*
- Our attitude has also changed, our culture has changed. The children mention these topics and we respond to them in a different way than before.*

Professionals 3/3

Feedback after trainings

- *This gave certainty to own work and thoughts. We received a lot of practical tips, action instructions and confidence to discuss difficult issues. Certainty and self-confidence increased.*
- *You explained things well in a positive spirit. Thank you for making me think and reflect on my own actions in a group of children.*



"These topics have never been spoken of before. I have no words or ways to speak."

"Why does the teacher talk about these things? Is there something wrong with my child?"

"I would like to talk to the teacher about this topic, but how can I start?"



"Can professionals talk about sexuality to children and raise them without shame or fear?"

Parent/Caregiver

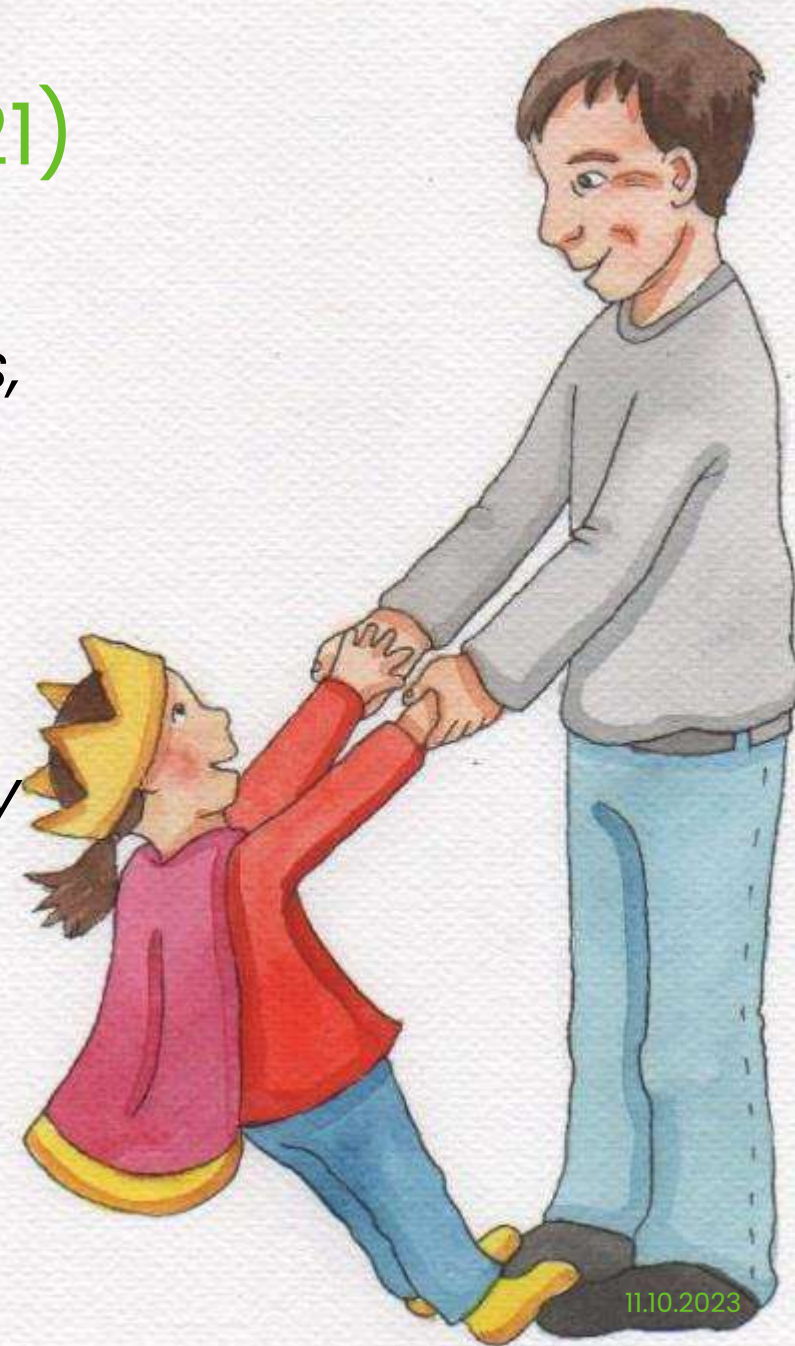
- Hesitation, fear of judgement
- Own CSE history
- Prejudices, misinformation, know-how
- Feelings as shame
- Experiences of sexuality etc.

"It's great that these issues are talked about openly these days!"

Parents

(post surveys 2020–21)

- *The child names more body parts than before. When I have talked about safety skills, he has said that he knows and has talked about it in kindergarten.*
- *The child is more aware of what is private area that others are not allowed to touch.*
- *He has talked more about his body and body parts and also seems to know safety skills.*
- *The child is more aware of what is an area within himself that others are not allowed to touch.*



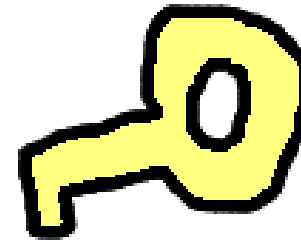
Difficult issues for adults have become easier:

1. **Reproduction / fertilization**
2. **Dangerous adults / safety skills**
3. **Masturbation / self touching**
4. **Heteronormativity / studying the gender**



Safety in childhood

Speaking openly will create a safe environment for the child



Adults give the permission by starting conversations with suitable terms.



What you can talk about, you can protect!



THANK YOU !

Laura Cacciatore, 4

"A woman in love"

Raisa Cacciatore /Finland