



# Equipping ECEs to Discuss the Development of Sexuality in Childhood: In the Classroom and with Families

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# Learning Outcomes

**By the end of this presentation, you will:**

1. Have a greater understanding of ECE perceptions of the development of sexuality and gender in childhood.
2. Share your experience and opinions by participating in a brainstorming session on ECE training needs regarding the developmental domains of gender and sexuality.

# Why does this matter?

- The continuous interactions between children and ECEs impact every developmental domain of the child.
- This is an important line of research, as those working with young children are:
  - socializing agents
  - key stakeholders in identifying typical and atypical behaviours

# Larger Project Description

Grant received (2014-15) to explore the development of sexuality and gender in childhood related to ECEs':

1. attitudes;
2. knowledge and comfort addressing these domains, and;
3. relevant pre- and post-service training.

➤ **Study #1** – ECEs perceptions and experiences of the development of sexuality in childhood in early learning settings

➤ **Study #2** – ECEs perceptions of their level of preparation and training needs to address the development of sexuality in childhood in their professional practice

# Methods



Mixed methods approach via an online survey with closed- and open-ended questions



Recruitment: 1) Directors of licensed child care centres in Ontario contacted; 2) Link to survey on Ontario College of ECE website



64 participants: 95.2% women; 88.9% College educated; avg. 40.2 years old [range: 22-62]; 17.2 years exp. [range: 1-41]

# Experiences of Ontario ECEs related to the development of sexuality in early childhood

Toileting

Self-touching

Home/family  
influences

Play

Play: *“The home centre in a daycare and kindergarten classroom appears to be a natural setting for children to explore, question, try out ideas, and share stories and events. The school yard in elementary settings, children are exposed to the situations that provoke thoughts, questions, and ideas”* (p. 35).

# Purpose of sexuality education in early childhood

Knowledge  
about self

Knowledge  
about families

Answering  
children's  
questions

Answering children's questions: *"ECE's need to know what to say, when to say it, and what should be discussed with parents before any discussion with a child."* (p. 35).

# Concerns about addressing the development of sexuality in ECE professional practice

Parent involvement

Determining what is age appropriate

Need for more training

Concerned about addressing without training

Parent involvement: *“Many parents would be uncomfortable and question why their preschool child should be learning about sex. I have encountered many parents who do not use the correct terminology regarding body parts let alone explain how babies are made. I can see this type of education upsetting many parents”* (p. 36).



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What is age appropriate: *“I feel preschool children are MUCH too young to learn about sex! I do not think it has a place in the childcare field. Children should be allowed to be children and not exposed to all the problems that arise with sexuality and “pleasure,” etc. at such an early age”* (p. 36).

# Concerns about addressing the development of sexuality in ECE professional practice

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Need for more  
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without training

Challenging because: *“sexuality is an area that embarrasses many people; so when children ask questions they tend to not answer or answer incorrect/inappropriately.”*

# Concerns about addressing the development of sexuality in ECE professional practice

Parent  
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Need for more  
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Concerned about  
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without training

Participants asked for more clarity about what to teach, and when to teach it: *“I can follow a guideline but require more training and experience”* (p. 36).

# Factors affecting willingness of ECEs to address sexuality

Lack of training

Societal tensions regarding “sex ed”

Lack of workplace policy

*“Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, one must consider that an ECE could understandably fear that what they say may be taken out of context and used against them in some way. Our general societal attitude of extreme division on sex education also makes one less willing to teach sex education. In the media bodies for both females and males are highly sexualized, yet our societal attitude is to not talk about it. This creates a very difficult environment for a child to know what messages to believe and what message to disregard, and our failure to address this means we have failed children in their rights to learn” (p. 37).*

# Factors affecting willingness of ECEs to address sexuality

Lack of training

Societal tensions regarding “sex ed”

Lack of workplace policy

- 33% did not know if a workplace policy existed
- 54% indicated there was no policy
- Policies that were in place focused primarily on prevention of sexual abuse.

# Study #1: Conclusions

- Participants identified a need for more training to facilitate:
  - a) Knowledge and skills in addressing the development of sexuality and gender in childhood.
  - b) Ability to integrate an emergent approach to addressing the development of sexuality and gender in childhood.
- Workplace policies are needed to provide guidance for ECEs in these developmental domains.

# Teachers' need for more sexual health education training

- Previous research supports the need for more training (e.g., Larsson & Svedin, 2002; Kakavoulis, 1998; Menmuir & Kakavoulis, 1999)
- Ontario Min. of Education → Healthy Living (human development & sexual health) segment of the Health and Physical Education curriculum
- Need for more training for public school teachers' to address sexuality education (e.g., Cohen, Byers, Sears, & Weaver, 2004; Cohen, Byers, & Sears, 2010; Martinez, Carcedo, Fuertes, Vicario-Fuertes, & Orgaz, 2012; Ninomiya, 2010)
- Pre-service sexual health education training in Bachelor of Education programs (McKay & Barrett, 1999):
  - ✓ Mandatory for only 15.5% of the programs
  - ✓ Combination of mandatory and/or electives for 39.3%

# The Ontario context: Pre-service ECE training

- 30 institutions that currently offer approved<sup>1</sup> ECE programs
- Our informal review<sup>2</sup> of these ECE programs demonstrated:
  - ✓ **No** required courses on gender or sexuality in childhood
  - ✓ Gender and sexuality, if addressed at all, usually only covered in **one lecture within one course**, and typically within the realm of diverse families
  - ✓ Overall lack of instruction addressing this area of development

<sup>1</sup> On the College of ECE approved program list

<sup>2</sup> Review of programs of study posted on institutional websites and email correspondence with program coordinators/directors.



# ECEs' perceived level of preparation to provide appropriate instruction

## Lack of training

- Lack of training identified by 64.1% of the respondents
- Belief that ECEs are *“not equipped AT ALL to teach sexual education”*
- Some training/workshops on child abuse

## Inadequate climate

- *“Very difficult for ECEs to have a unified approach to sexuality education”* due to the perceived link between sexuality and religion
- *“The ages that we work with do not need to be exposed to sexuality education. It is enough to be taught that girl parts and boy parts are private and should stay that way.”*

# Experience, training, and resources currently available

No formal training: draw on personal experience

Workshops focused on child abuse prevention

- ECEs had to draw on their personal experiences (and beliefs) to guide practice
- *“I have had no specific training. I follow my teaching partners’ lead and use common sense. I don’t feel that sexuality should be taboo, but that it should be respected. I am honest with the children while explaining self-respect, gender differences, and appropriateness.”*

# Required characteristics to address the development of sexuality in childhood

## Interpersonal skills

- *“Ability to work as a team and communicate (cooperative); follow guidelines and policies to help protect all involved (responsible and reliable)”*

## Intrapersonal skills

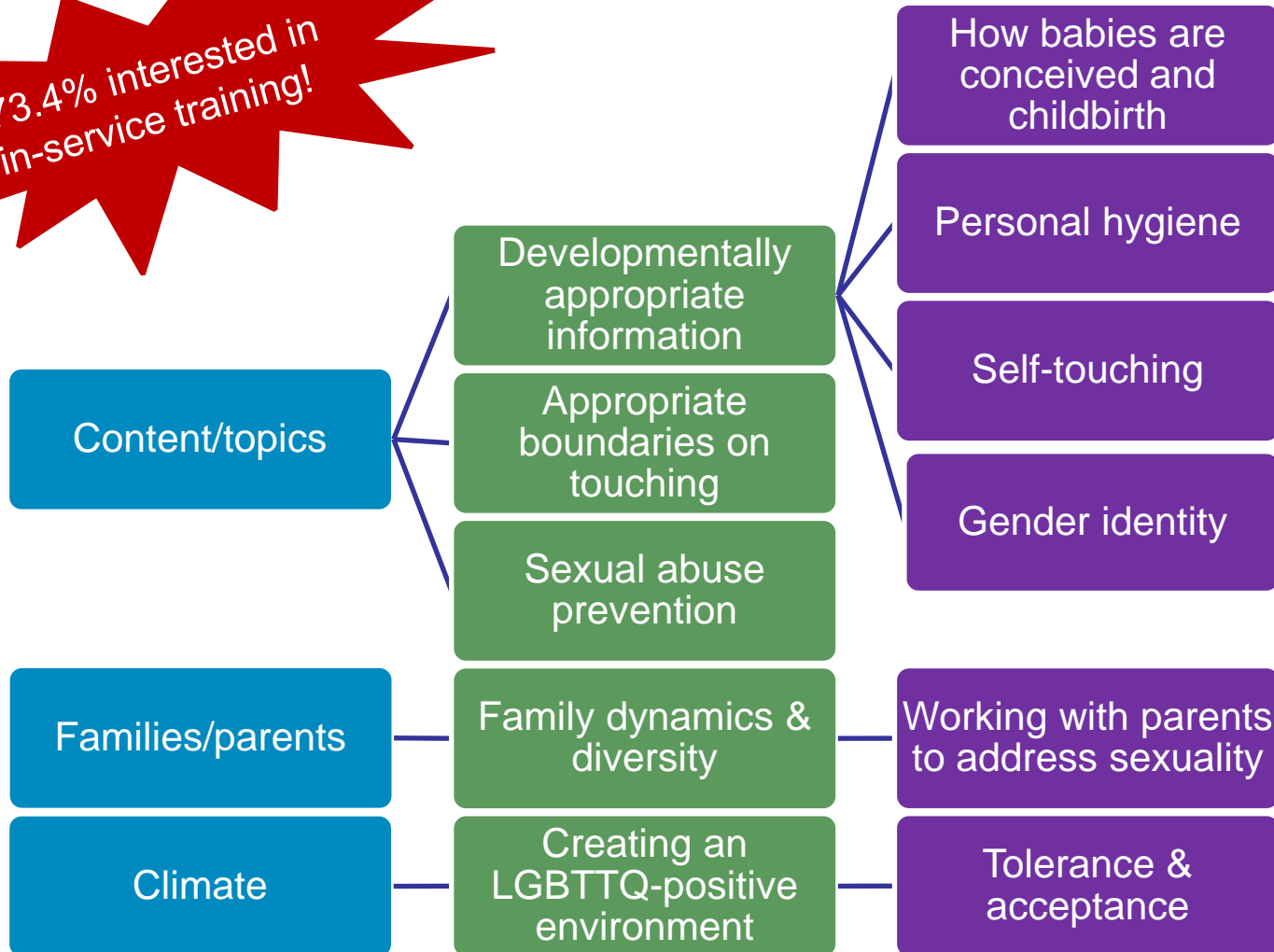
- *“Confidence”, “Being open minded”, “Comfortable with their own sexuality”, “Patience”, “Sensitivity”, “Maturity”, and “Self reflective of personal biases”*

## Strong relationships with parents/families

- *“It is essential for an ECE to be able to speak comfortably and confidently to parents about their child if/when they start to masturbate so that the messaging can be clear to the child, consistent between home and the child care setting, and does not shame a child or encourage a sense of having done something wrong.”*

# Training Preferences

73.4% interested in in-service training!



# Discussion

- Everyone has varied experiences, and what are the dangers of just going on personal experiences?
- Concerns were raised as to how to get families “on board”, and “how to teach sexuality while respecting family boundaries”
- Fine line between providing facts and imposing beliefs
- Recommendations on good resources – what is developmentally appropriate, what questions should I be answering?

A group of diverse young children, including boys and girls of various ethnicities, are shown from the chest up. They are all looking towards the camera with various expressions of interest and engagement. Several children have their hands raised in the air, suggesting an interactive or educational setting. The background is plain white.

## Your Turn!

1. What topics, specifically within the domains of sexuality and gender, do you think ECEs need more training on?
2. What resources (e.g., books, manuals, websites, et cetera) addressing the development of sexuality and gender in childhood do you consult?
3. What do you think is “developmentally appropriate” education when thinking about the development of sexuality and gender in early childhood?
4. How can we begin this conversation with parents/families in our early learning settings?

# Questions? Feedback?

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## Study #1 details:

Balter, A., van Rhijn, T.M., & Davies, A.W.J. (2016). The development of sexuality in childhood in early learning settings: An exploration of early childhood educators' perceptions. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 25(1), 30-40. doi: 10.3138/cjhs.251-A3

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