

COVID-19 IPPF Innovation and best practice: Digitalising for young people

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) provides young people with accurate information and skills to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and take control of their sexual well-being. Reports have suggested that high adolescent birth rates occur in all countries where sexuality education (SE) is curtailed.

“The burden of loneliness is much harder than the burden of academic slow-down. A friendly face and question like “How are you REALLY doing, kids?” can make a huge difference because we tend to forget the burden that our youth is carrying in these difficult times. Parents need help too! Let’s think, how to provide more support in CSE for them in this era as well.”

Kristina Birk-Vellemaa
Training Manager, ESHA

CSE programmes addressing gender, rights and power are up to five times more effective in reducing negative outcomes, including unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). CSE has a transformative impact with teaching methods that support students to question social and cultural norms around gender and develop gender-equitable attitudes, and leads to more consistent condom use, lower pregnancy rates, and reduced risk of HIV infection and partner violence.

COVID-19 saw the closure of schools and face-to-face gatherings worldwide, meaning a halt to CSE for many young people. In response, International Planned Parenthood Federation Member Associations got innovative in using digital tools to engage with young people and continue delivering Sexuality Education.*

The initial findings of IPPF’s COVID-19 impact survey in March 2020 indicated that the Estonian Sexual Health Association (ESHA) had shifted their delivery of sexuality education online to reach young people in their homes during education facility closures enforced as part of the lockdown.

This Learning Brief highlights innovations through the Estonian Sexual Health Association’s COVID-19 enhanced sexuality education implementation plan during the pandemic.

* Sexuality education through online tools is referred to as digital SE.

COVID-19 impact

The Estonian Sexual Health Association (ESHA) is the national provider of sexuality education in schools. When government restrictions led to the immediate closure of schools, the country's education system had a robust digital strategy to keep students learning during the pandemic. ESHA moved all sexuality education school training online to deliver through the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department of Education of Tallinn¹. The shift to online training was immediate thanks to Zoom sessions, with many schools in Tallinn working with ESHA from March 2020.

Enhancing services in the pandemic

Sexuality education is part of the Estonia school curriculum and offered at both primary and secondary levels. In response, to the pandemic ESHA moved their training online working with schools in the country. ESHA's online training sessions are tailored for students aged 10–19 years and provided as 90-minute sessions. Younger students aged 10–12 cover essential topics about puberty, reproductive rights, relationships, and contraception. Older students receive a tailored set of subjects and work in larger groups. Students are excited about the sessions and benefit from the digital approach using interactive functions to discuss topics. The Zoom format offers introverted students the option of confidentiality to ask questions anonymously. During March - December 2020, ESHA delivered over 72 digital SE classes, reaching over 1,400 students aged 10–19.

Digitalising for young people

Trainers had to learn how to use Zoom technology and find ways of using the interactive functions to replace activities usually done in physical group settings. ESHA has six trainers running sessions using [Amaze](#) animations, interactive whiteboards (Google Jamboards), small groups and confidential chat boxes that allow students to participate freely in activities. Trainers also feedback on sessions and work with teachers to tailor the sessions appropriately.

ESHA also provided training on consent and protection from sexual violence workshops for parents and youth practitioners before the pandemic. As part of the new strategy, the Member Association transferred these sessions online. ESHA saw demands rise for this service as it gave people more flexibility to attend than face-to-face settings. Online sessions increased from 120 attendees in April 2019 to over 480 in December 2020.

“Without sexual and reproductive rights, we would be doomed.”

(After playing a dystopian game about sexual and reproductive rights in a SE session.)

Karl, 16 student

Key challenges

- Connectivity issues had to be tackled quickly to ensure the sessions ran effectively and without interruptions.
- Most students had access to the Internet, laptops, and mobile phones to participate, but lack of equipment access could be a barrier.
- Typically, parents and siblings are at home with students, often sharing the same and busy network, limiting connection to sessions. Students may not have complete privacy to turn on microphones to interact in sessions.

Lessons

- Test and improve connection issues for the smooth running of Zoom sessions.
- Invest in good audio-visual equipment for trainers to ensure participation and session quality.
- Teachers need specific resources to inform students about some potentially triggering sessions in advance. Topics like sexual violence or other sensitive areas can be difficult for young people to discuss at home, where their privacy may be limited. Students may also require support after being triggered in a session.

Next steps

- ESHA will be looking at ways to survey students to understand how much they gain from SE online and if improvements can be made. This could potentially be done in cooperation with National Institute of Health Development or universities.
- The rapid shift and broader reach of digital services has prompted ESHA to identify ways to offer consultations through Zoom as they are doing via Facebook, Skype or emails.
- Teacher guidance will be developed to work with students before training on subjects around sexual violence to avoid triggers and find a comfortable space to listen and interact in their sessions.
- More programmes and trainings for parents are needed, as SE is a challenge for them. When schools and youth centres are closed, it is especially key to keep parents included.
- ESHA will share their learnings and contribute to the development of Guidelines on delivering SE online. This will be done within the Erasmus + project “Sharing innovations from the Covid-19 crisis to improve sexuality education access online” which is led by YSAFE (IPPF European Network’s youth network) with six European Member Associations (Latvia, Cyprus, Serbia, North Macedonia, Portugal, Spain) and an external partner, End Female Genital Mutilation.

Recommendations for SRH services, governments, and civil society organizations (CSOs)

- Based on the local experiences and needs identified during the COVID-19 response, guidelines for delivering online sexuality education (SE) and to provide technical assistance and capacity building should be developed. Digital SE interventions are likely to be more beneficial when mainstreamed and conducted along with online classes during routine school hours and should complement rather than replace face-to-face delivery.
- Governments should ensure that country-level emergency preparedness plans include continuous access to SE for all young people as part of contingency schooling systems, through online and other digital interventions aimed at reaching underserved young people.
- Governments and CSOs should invest in closing the digital gap and ensure that essential SRH services are available and linked with digital SE during emergencies.
- As the most active digital technologies users, Youth networks, youth volunteers and CSOs working on youth should develop digital platforms to promote SE and increase young people’s broader engagement, including those most vulnerable. Online SE must be delivered in safe digital spaces, free of risks related to cyberbullying and sexual and gender-based violence, where young people’s privacy or anonymity is protected.

Endnotes

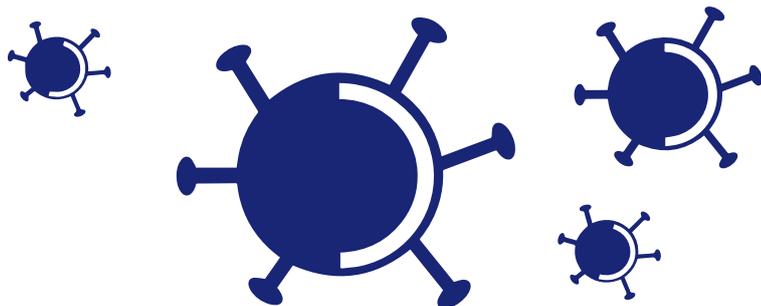
[1] World Economic Forum accessed 20 March 2021 [How Estonia's digital society became a lifeline during COVID-19 | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](#)

IPPF COVID-19 Impact Surveys

IPPF COVID-19 Impact survey 1 March 2020: COVID-19 Survey Results | IPPF ([ippf-covid19.org](#))

IPPF COVID-19 Impact survey 2 June 2020: COVID-19 Round 2 Survey Results | IPPF ([ippf-covid19.org](#))

IPPF COVID-19 Impact survey 3 November 2020: COVID-19 Round 3 Survey Results | IPPF ([ippf-covid19.org](#))



About ESHA

The Estonian Sexual Health Association is Estonia's leading advocate of family planning and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and has a focus on sexuality education for young people. ESHA played a central role in designing the school curriculum on the subject and runs training workshops for teachers and peer educators around the country.

Who we are

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) delivers sexual and reproductive health services that let people make their own choices. We fight for everyone to exercise their right to make those choices. We are local, through our members and volunteers, and global, through our network. We meet need, wherever it is, whoever requires it, for as long as they want it.

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