



Bloom-ED is committed to ensuring evidence-based Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is offered to all young people in their homes, schools and communities. Successful RSE has many positive outcomes that result in healthier hearts, minds, bodies and people.

We are a collective of teachers, researchers, sexologists, students, parents and activists who operate as an alliance - in conjunction with other organisations - to advocate for comprehensive RSE.

<https://www.bloom-ed.org/>

04/09/2024

**Subject Line: Special Electors' Meeting on the 26th of August for the purpose of 'the promotion of sexualizing children in the City of Albany through unrestricted books in the Town Library and events held during the month of February 2024.'**

Dear Councillors,

**We write to you on World Sexual Health Day (September 4th) to respectfully consider your decision in regards to the recent special elector's meeting, and request an audience with you if possible.**

We are Bloom-ED, a national peak body committed to ensuring evidence-based [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\)](#) is offered to all young people in their homes, schools and communities. We affirm that successful RSE has many positive outcomes that result in healthier hearts, minds, bodies and people.

We are a collective of teachers, researchers, sexologists, students, parents and activists who operate as an alliance - in conjunction with other organisations - to advocate for comprehensive RSE.

We adhere to the understanding of sexual health and sexuality education as laid out by the World Health Organization (WHO) [1], where access to comprehensive, good-quality information about sex and sexuality constitutes as human rights, (both the right to information, as well as education), and the World Association of Sexual Health (WAS) Declaration of Sexual Rights [2], whereby: the right to education and the right to

comprehensive sexuality education is valued where **everyone** has the right to education and comprehensive sexuality information, including young people.

The World Association of Sexual Health [2] stipulates that comprehensive sexuality education must be **age appropriate, scientifically accurate, culturally competent, and grounded in human rights, gender equality, and a positive approach to sexuality and pleasure**. Bloom-ED affirms the books 'Keeping Children Safe Albany' wish to restrict access to are vital comprehensive sexual education books that help keep children safe and educated. These books are evidence-based (scientifically accurate), apply to diverse populations (culturally component), promote gender equality (the book offers information to people of all genders), are grounded in human rights (applies to the offer right to information and education), and age-appropriate (these books are appropriate for young people).

Bloom-ED supports resources offering the educational benefits of evidence-based RSE for all people. We understand that comprehensive RSE, extended to resources and information, is crucial to the protection of human and sexual rights. These mechanisms serve as primary prevention strategies, targeting violence before it occurs; thereby reducing sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation. A mechanism that is vital amid a nation-wide gender-based violence crisis.

The objective of this letter is to contribute to this critical conversation and to provide an evidence-based perspective and understanding of the need for sexual educational resources for young people; and the impact of their removal. We also acknowledge that the removal of these resources, and/or the limitation to their access removes self-determination and ability to access vital material. We affirm that young people deserve their autonomy and access to information about sex and sexuality, reflecting human and sexual rights. Bloom-ED reaffirms that there is a strong evidence-base and need for access to RSE and subsequently resources, in the forms of these books. The following

will detail the evidence base that supports the inclusion of these resources and the need to allow them to be accessible to young people

### The need for RSE for young people

It is well acknowledged that sexuality is a fundamental part of the human experience [1,2,3]. The right to education is a basic human need inextricably linked with quality of life and life satisfaction. The right to information and education about sex and sexuality are recognised in the United Nations Population Fund policies on Sexual and Reproductive Health [3]. RSE teaches young people - in an age-appropriate way - about issues related to human sexuality and development [4]. These books respond in age-appropriate ways, to the needs for teens within a modern context, where books offer diverse and applicable information to young people of all genders. Unfortunately, vague curriculum guidelines in Australia [7] and a general lack of preparedness of teachers for providing and promoting CSE [8,9,10,11] currently leaves Australian students unprepared and uninformed about comprehensive RSE. Young people are often left with sex-negative, binary, and heterosexist content throughout their CSE curriculum [8]. For students of diverse sex, sexuality, or gender (DSSG), this may impact their safety at school [12], and the level of bullying, victimisation, marginalisation, or abuse they experience whilst at school [13]. These examples highlight the ongoing negative impact of inconsistent CSE on students and the detrimental effect poor pre-service teacher training has on sexual rights and autonomy. Furthermore it supports the need for access to books such as *Welcome to Sex* by Dr Melissa Kang and Yumi Stynes, and *Sex: A Book for Teens* by Nikol Hasler.

Bloom-ED affirms that access to information about sex and sexuality should commence in the early years where young people can explore topics such as learning how to be a good friend, recognising emotions and naming body parts with correct names [6]. Developing these skills builds foundations of respect, bodily safety, and help-seeking behaviours, which play an important role in preventing abuse [14]. Evidence supports that the introduction of comprehensive RSE has protective factors including delaying

sexual experiences, reducing sexually transmissible infections (STIs), and decreasing dating and intimate partner violence [14].

Bloom-ED also acknowledges that need may necessitate earlier access to resources, such as child-sexual abuse, access to pornography early or an awareness of sexuality and therefore posit that information is developmentally-appropriate where access to books are dependent on both the age and stage of a child. Due to the conflicting nature of existing messages about sex and gender, it is vital that young people receive information that enables them to develop the knowledge and skills they need to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health [15], which these books do.

#### The need for unobstructed access to such material

We refer to the the World Association of Sexual Health (WAS) Declaration of Sexual Rights [2], where sexual rights are human rights and point towards no 9 in particular: The right to information: Everyone shall have access to scientifically accurate and understandable information related to sexuality, sexual health, and sexual rights through diverse sources. Such information **should not be arbitrarily censored, withheld, or intentionally misrepresented**. While families play a vital role in RSE, not every family feels confident or equipped to have these discussions, so it's important that RSE resources are available to ensure all young people have access to evidence-based, medically accurate information about relationships and sexuality [5]. It is important to note that also, sadly, some households may be unsafe, where abuse and sexual abuse may be occurring within families. Therefore, access to RSE resources and information is vital to ensure that young people are able to recognise harmful behaviours and be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to critique such behaviours and be able to seek safety [5,6]. An important element of RSE is also for people to identify what is important to them (which may or may not align with their family's values) and to hear alternative perspectives, which these books may offer young people of all genders, particularly as they may not see themselves represented elsewhere.

### Responding to the comment regarding the 'promotion of sexualising children'

There are many misunderstandings about RSE and related resources which has led to criticism and backlash, which we see here in Albany. However, we assert that **these criticisms are misguided and uninformed**. As above, decades of evidence about RSE shows it delays sexual activity, and reduces the likelihood of contracting sexually transmissible infections or experiencing sexual assault [6,14]. In contrast, abstinence-only education, or not having access to information about sex and sexuality, actually results in poorer sexual health outcomes [6]; and therefore mental and physical health outcomes.

Gay and transgender experiences are not a new phenomenon and have always existed across cultures [8] and are part of the diversity of human experience. Talking about a range of perspectives and experiences does not encourage particular identities, rather it promotes acceptance and respect, challenges homophobia and transphobia [14,16] promotes inclusion and gives people words to describe something that they may already feel or be experiencing. We believe these responses and claims to remove these resources are in-part a result of homophobia and transphobia, given the materials circulated at the Albany City Council often reflect queer sex. However, gender-marginalised young people or those not reflecting a heteronormative sexuality, often face additional mental health challenges, often attributed to stigma, discrimination and hostile environments [17]. These populations require access to information about sex and sexuality, particularly, when discussions about such matters do not exist within homes or schools, due to a lack of knowledge or understanding. Bloom-ED affirms that these books help bridge this knowledge and understanding and can help parents and caregivers help inform their young people in an age-appropriate and evidence-based manner.

**Please consider these evidence-based points in regards to the recent Albany city council meeting. We are also happy to discuss over the phone and offer**

**specialised evidence-based advice as needed** as we are concerned about the potential obstruction to human rights.

Please do not hesitate to contact us should you require any further information.

Warm Regards,

**Bloom-ED Team**

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