

COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION AND ABORTION CARE FOR YOUTH

HISTORY

Up until 1969, contraception, like abortion, was illegal in Canada. It was a crime to advertise, sell, or even hand out [the birth control pill for the purposes of contraception](#), and sexual health in the way we think of it today was rarely discussed in public, nor taught in schools. Emboldened by women's liberation and "[the sexual revolution](#)" of the era, student activists across the country began organizing to challenge traditional sex and gender norms in Canadian society. They demanded the ability to control their own bodies and reproductive decision-making, and organized to improve all Canadians' access to and information about contraception and abortion.

Around the same time the Vancouver-based Caravaners descended upon Ottawa demanding abortion reform, students in other Canadian provinces started [birth control centres](#) on university campuses to provide information to their peers about abortion and contraception. Students in Montreal self-published the [McGill Birth Control Handbook](#) in 1968 and over the next six years distributed three million illegal copies across Canada – evidencing Canadians' hunger for information about sexual and reproductive health. Student-run birth control centres [continuing opening on campuses](#) throughout the '70s, and their free services became even more expansive from the '80s onwards as queer students got involved and insisted such resources include information about sexual diversity.

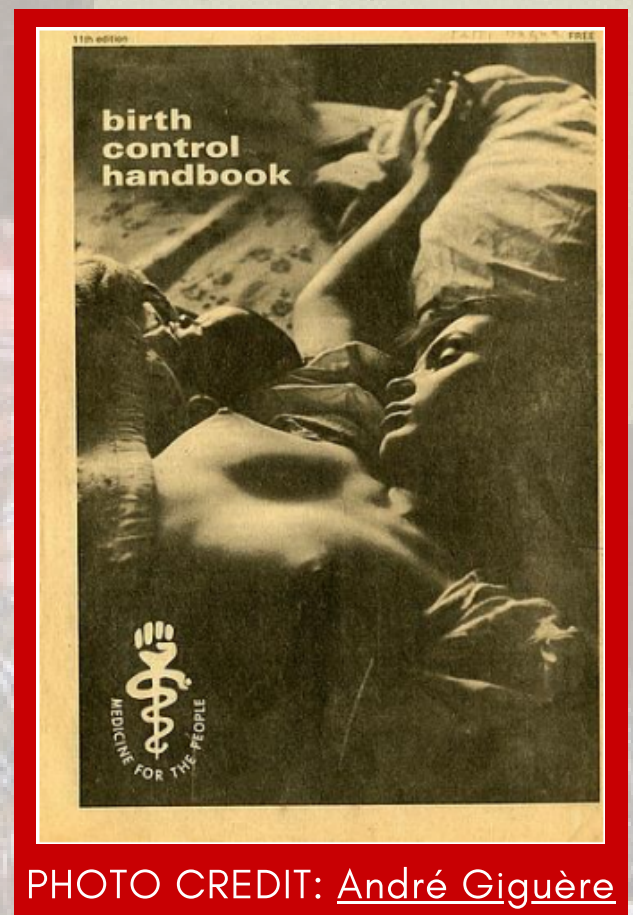


PHOTO CREDIT: [André Giguère](#)

CURRENT ISSUES

Despite leading sexual health education campaigns themselves, young people have long insisted that comprehensive sex education be taught in schools – by compassionate educators with both interest and training in the field. Comprehensive sex ed includes information on contraception and abortion, which helps young people navigate their reproductive healthcare and [fosters positive attitudes toward their developing bodies, sexuality, and relationships](#). Comprehensive sex ed has been [recognized as a human right under various international treaties and by the United Nations](#).

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Although every public school system in Canada teaches sex ed, there is a lack of consistency in how it is taught because education, like healthcare, is provincially regulated. Sex ed has been particularly heated in Ontario in recent years, beginning with the implementation of a new curriculum under former Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne in 2015. The province's curriculum had not been updated for 18 years, and though the update did not address abortion, it did include topics such as consent, gender diversity, and masturbation. While Premier Doug Ford repealed the new curriculum in 2018—responding to intense lobbying from conservative groups but in spite of an overwhelming majority of comments from the general public favouring modernized sex ed in Ontario schools—he backtracked in 2019 and thus the curriculum stays much the same. That is, it still does not contain information on abortion.

When sex ed is not comprehensive, there are inevitable consequences – namely, youth experience unplanned pregnancy. For young women who do not wish to carry a pregnancy to term, inadequate sex ed compounds the problems they face when trying to access abortion. Many do not have the money to travel when they discover abortion services are far from where they live. Many young



PHOTO CREDIT: SHORE Centre

Many are dependent on parents and or guardians whose attitudes and values can add to the stigma and shame of an unplanned pregnancy. Like young women decades before them, many may not be able to talk about what they need at home or to openly phone abortion clinics to book appointments. While Canada does not have parental consent laws for abortion, some young people experience pressure from healthcare providers to consult parents or guardians before making decisions about their sexual health or an unwanted pregnancy. Combined, these pressures can result in reproductive coercion, which occurs when people make healthcare decisions that are not in their best interest.

When I got pregnant at fifteen, I didn't know anything. The thing that drives me crazy is that we couldn't get birth control. He couldn't get condoms, we could do nothing....nothing... we were teenagers.

**SANDRA CONWAY,
ORIGINAL CARAVANER**

OUR DEMANDS

- Provincial and territorial sexual education curricula must include evidence-based information on abortion. Curricula must be designed and taught according to the most recent [Canadian Guide for Sexual Health Education](#). All youth deserve to learn about positive aspects of sexuality and relationships, such as gender identity, masturbation and pleasure.
- Religiously-affiliated and anti-abortion organizations, such as "[crisis pregnancy centres](#)" must be barred from [delivering sex education](#) in public schools.
- Primary healthcare providers must be conscious of language, and refrain from using inappropriate terms to describe youth – such as calling young women "girls" or young people "kids." Learning how to frame discussions is an important step in promoting inclusive and empowering dialogue about youth health care and bodily autonomy.

SUPPORT OUR WORK

- Contact your provincial Minister of Education to demand comprehensive sex education in every grade.
- Parents of public-school students can contact teachers to reiterate the importance of inclusive and comprehensive sex education delivered in schools. Parents can also ensure the attendance of their child in class when these lessons are taught.
- Purchase a copy of [Beyond the Basics](#) for your child's teacher.

LEARN MORE

- Read Action Canada's 2020 national report on "[The State of Sex-Ed in Canada](#)."
- Watch a collection of videos produced by and for young people about their abortion experiences [here](#).
- Read the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada's [guide to the legal nuances of abortion and minors](#).

Young women were coming to you in tears because they were pregnant. What could we offer them? What could we say? You had this pack of slightly older students trying to find medical help for these young women or watch their lives go down the tubes.

**PAT DAVITT,
VANCOUVER WOMEN'S CAUCUS**