
Recommendation CM/Rec(2026)14 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the protection of children from violence through age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education

*(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 14 October 2026
at the 1572nd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)*

Preamble

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.b of the Statute of the Council of Europe (ETS No. 1),

Considering that the aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and promoting the ideals and principles which are their common heritage, *inter alia*, promoting the adoption of common policies and standards;

Recalling that the essential mission of the Council of Europe is the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law;

Reaffirming that the equal rights and well-being of all children are fundamental values shared by all member States;

Recognising that violence against children is a violation of their rights, and conscious of the extent of the phenomenon and of its consequences for children's well-being and development;

Bearing in mind that safe, healthy, responsible and equal relationships based on mutual respect are the basis of individual and collective well-being and a prerequisite for democracy;

Underlining that the best interests of the child are a guiding principle shared by all member States and are a primary consideration in all actions and decisions concerning children;

Noting with grave concern that children are particularly vulnerable to all forms of violence and that this vulnerability has increased as a result of rapid technological change;

Concerned by the increasing and ever earlier exposure of children to pornographic content and child sexual abuse material, facilitated by early access to digital technologies, which may serve as a primary source of information on sexuality, thereby fostering distorted perceptions of bodies, sexuality and healthy relationships;

Recognising that sexual violence and gender-based violence disproportionately affect girls and can have long-lasting effects;

Conscious that some children are more vulnerable to violence, or can be targeted by violence, on various, sometimes intersectional, grounds, and acknowledging that certain children need special protection and support;

Recognising the responsibility, right and duty of parents and other holders of parental responsibility to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise of the child's rights and to protect them from all forms of violence; also acknowledging that violence may be perpetrated by family members or others in a position of trust, authority or emotional or other influence;

Recognising that comprehensive sexuality education is an age- and developmentally appropriate positive measure to respect, protect and fulfil children's rights;

Recognising that comprehensive sexuality education plays a crucial preventive and protective role to combat various forms of violence against children, especially child sexual abuse and sexual violence, child sexual exploitation, child trafficking, grooming, gender-based violence, particularly against girls, harmful sexual behaviours and technology-facilitated forms of violence;

Underlining that comprehensive sexuality education contributes to positively shaping healthy emotional responses and safe, responsible and equal interpersonal interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and consent from childhood through adulthood, and is central to combating sexism and violence against women and girls;

Reaffirming the obligations towards children as set out in relevant Council of Europe conventions, notably the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ETS No. 5) and its additional protocols, the European Social Charter (ETS No. 35 and its revised version, ETS No. 163), the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201, the Lanzarote Convention) and the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, the Istanbul Convention);

Recalling the relevant case law of the European Court of Human Rights and the standards and guidance of the Council of Europe regarding the protection of children from all forms of violence, and the prevention of such violence, and bearing in mind the successive Council of Europe strategies for the rights of the child, which include the strategic objective of "freedom from violence for all children";

Having regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its optional protocols, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its optional protocol, as well as the work of the corresponding treaty bodies;

Wishing to provide guidance to member States on the development, design, adoption, delivery, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of comprehensive sexuality education;

Acknowledging the views and opinions of children who have been consulted during the preparation of this recommendation and recognising that their perspectives have been central to its preparation,

Recommends that the governments of the member States:

1. protect children and prevent various forms of violence against them through the provision of comprehensive sexuality education that is age appropriate, suited to the child's stage of development, inclusive, non-discriminatory, science based, and that respects, protects and fulfils children's rights;
2. adopt the necessary legal or policy basis and allocate the necessary financial, material and human resources to the provision of this education in all relevant educational settings;
3. be guided in their legislation, policies and practice by the principles set out in the guidelines appended to this recommendation;
4. ensure that this recommendation, including the guidelines in the appendix, is translated into the official languages of member States and disseminated in accessible formats to relevant authorities and stakeholders, paying particular attention to ensuring that they are disseminated in child-friendly ways;
5. review regularly the implementation of this recommendation and the appended guidelines, with the participation of relevant stakeholders, including children, and keep the Committee of Ministers informed of progress made and remaining challenges, through the competent intergovernmental committee.

Appendix to Recommendation CM/Rec(2026)14

Guidelines on the protection of children from violence through age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education

1. Aim and scope

1.1. The aim of this recommendation and its guidelines is to promote the development, design, adoption, delivery, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of comprehensive sexuality education that is age appropriate, suited to the child's stage of development, inclusive, non-discriminatory, science based, and that respects, protects and fulfils children's rights. This comprehensive sexuality education should be an essential element of national strategies to prevent violence against children and should also support children in developing the skills, attitudes, values and critical thinking to value, respect and protect their own and others' bodily integrity and personal autonomy. Children can continue to draw on these guiding principles in adulthood to build strong democratic societies free from violence, including gender-based violence, particularly against women and girls.

1.2. The recommendation applies to all relevant contexts where comprehensive sexuality education can be taught and learned, including formal, non-formal and informal educational settings under the responsibility of public or private entities.

1.3. While general in scope, the recommendation recognises that in the case of some individuals, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged situations, special measures, including through the provision of additional human, material and financial resources, may be required to ensure the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education.

2. Definitions

For the purpose of this recommendation:

2.1. "child" refers to any person under the age of 18 years;

2.2. "comprehensive sexuality education" is the internationally accepted expression for an age- and developmentally appropriate, culturally aware and science-based education process about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of relationships, sexuality and sex. It aims to support and protect children's development, equip children in all their diversity with knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and critical thinking that will empower them to achieve multiple objectives. These include how to respect, protect and preserve their health, well-being and dignity; how to develop safe, healthy, responsible, equal and respectful relationships; and how to consider the way in which their choices influence their own well-being and that of others. Comprehensive sexuality education also seeks to teach children how to respond if they are a victim of any form of violence, how to respond to instances, suspicions or risks of violence towards others, and to help them understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives. Its name may vary when applied to different national contexts;

2.3. the term "curricula" refers to the age- and developmentally appropriate teaching and learning content, materials, activities and endeavours used in formal, informal and non-formal educational spaces;

2.4. "gender-based violence" is violence that is directed against a person because of that person's gender, or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately. Gender-based violence is disproportionately directed against women and girls and, in these cases, should be understood with reference to Article 3 of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210, Istanbul Convention);

2.5. "harmful sexual behaviour" is developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour engaged in by a child who physically, psychologically, mentally or emotionally harms another child and/or is harmful to the child engaging in the behaviour;

2.6. "pornography" refers to any material depicting one or more persons engaged in sexually explicit conduct, whether real or simulated, which typically includes portrayals of nudity and/or various sexual acts;

2.7. “child sexual abuse material” is used in accordance with Lanzarote Committee guidance as referring to the material criminalised in Article 20 of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201, Lanzarote Convention), that is, any material that visually depicts a child engaged in real or simulated sexually explicit conduct or any depiction of a child’s sexual organs for primarily sexual purposes;

2.8. the terms “child sexual abuse” and “child sexual violence” are understood to mean the conduct criminalised under Articles 18 to 23 of the Lanzarote Convention, referring to sexual abuse, and Article 36 of the Istanbul Convention, referring to sexual violence;

2.9. “technology-facilitated violence” is understood as any act of violence that is committed, assisted, aggravated or amplified through technology and affects children;

2.10. “violence against children” refers to acts such as physical, sexual, emotional, mental or psychological violence, maltreatment and abuse, as well as omissions such as abandonment and neglect, which violate the rights of the child and result in actual or potential harm to children’s health, physical, psychological, social, economic and emotional integrity, or to their survival or development.

3. General principles

3.1. Comprehensive sexuality education should be rooted in the human rights of children, including the right to life, health, education, freedom from violence, private life, bodily integrity, personal autonomy, sexual and reproductive health, participation, non-discrimination and equality. It should equip children with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and critical thinking to empower them and enable them to exercise their rights throughout their lives, both in digital and offline environments.

3.2. Comprehensive sexuality education should help children recognise various forms of violence against them and others, whether committed by adults or engaged in by other children, and to respond to it. This would include encouraging children to report such violence, by providing them with information on available reporting mechanisms, on how to report violence and on the full range of support and integrated services within a member State for children affected by violence.

3.3. Comprehensive sexuality education should promote equality, including gender equality, by creating conditions that support children, in particular girls, in enjoying and exercising their rights. Whether comprehensive sexuality education is provided in a co-educational or single-sex setting within a member State, all children are entitled to the same curriculum to promote and ensure equality, including gender equality, in the provision of their education.

3.4. Member States should seek to promote equality and non-discrimination of all children, including through preventing and countering inequality affecting children who are in situations of vulnerability, such as children at risk of gender-based violence, particularly girls; children with disabilities; children living in poverty, experiencing social exclusion or in street situations; children in alternative care; children affected by migration, regardless of their status; children who live in rural communities; children who have been or are being exposed or subjected to any kind of violence or trauma; children who are not attending school; children at risk of discrimination on the grounds of “race”,¹ colour, language, religion, national or social origin, association with a national minority; as well as children with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, or sex characteristics; and any intersection of these factors.

3.5. Comprehensive sexuality education should be provided to children from an early age and on an incremental and iterative basis to reflect and support their growing and evolving capacities.

3.6. The name given to comprehensive sexuality education by member States, when it is delivered to different cohorts of children, can vary to reflect local and cultural contexts and its age- and developmentally appropriate content.

¹ Since all human beings belong to the same species, the Committee of Ministers rejects, as does the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), theories based on the existence of different “races”. However, in this document, the term “race” is used in order to ensure that persons who are generally and erroneously perceived as “belonging to another race” are not excluded from the protection provided for by legislation and the implementation of policies aimed at promoting equality.

4. Prevention of and protection from violence

4.1. Member States have a legal obligation to protect children and to prevent all forms of violence against them. This responsibility rests with States, not with children. Children must not be held responsible for violence committed against them.

4.2. Comprehensive sexuality education should be directed towards the goal of ending violence against children and contribute to building strong democratic societies free from violence by:

- a. being rooted in children's rights and informed by the values of non-discrimination, equality, including gender equality, non-violence, consent and mutual respect in all interpersonal interactions and relationships;
- b. helping children understand and express their own emotions constructively so as to guarantee their right to be heard and listened to, respect the feelings of others, recognise and respect their own and others' bodily integrity and personal autonomy and understand power dynamics within interpersonal relationships, and enable them, from childhood through adulthood, to develop healthy, responsible, safe and respectful interpersonal interactions and relationships with others;
- c. supporting children in developing a critical understanding of:
 - the social, cultural, emotional, psychological, biological, sexual and gendered aspects of interpersonal interactions and relationships;
 - how values, sociocultural norms, beliefs, attitudes, decision making and personal behaviour can be influenced positively and negatively by a range of factors such as families, peers, culture, religion, media, digital technologies and other aspects of society; and
 - the content and influence of any media, traditional or online, such as books, television, music, art, movies, videos, games, podcasts, social media and other audiovisual material, including pornography and child sexual abuse material, which has the potential to harm and shape the perceptions, behaviours, relationships and identities of children;
- d. providing children with information about what consent means, particularly in relation to bodily integrity and personal autonomy for themselves and others; age-appropriate information on consent to sexual activities and on the legal age for sexual activities; information that any lawful sexual activity should be consensual but that some sexual activities will always be considered unlawful irrespective of the age of the victim or whether or not they acquiesced or allegedly "consented", for example where a person in a recognised position of trust, authority or influence engages in sexual activities with a child; and
- e. equipping children with the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and critical thinking to recognise different forms of violence against them, whether committed by adults or other children; developing their capacity to recognise the risks of violence; empowering them to respond to, communicate on and report all forms of violence when they are subjected to it or where there are instances, suspicions or risks that other children have been subjected to violence; and information on how to access relevant support services. As part of comprehensive sexuality education, children should be informed that adults, because of their role or position, can be under a duty to report instances, suspicions or risks of all forms of violence.

4.3. The curricula should be gender responsive, situating all forms of violence in their broader social and cultural contexts. They should take into account sociocultural norms and gender stereotypes conducive to violence and help children develop their critical thinking skills and become life-long learners and responsible members of a democratic society.

4.4. The curricula should be responsive to the fast-changing digital environments in which technology-facilitated violence proliferates. Children need to be informed in an age- and developmentally appropriate way about how to engage safely with others in the digital environment. Children should also be informed about the channels for reporting technology-facilitated violence, especially sexual violence against children.

4.5. Member States should create an enabling environment for professionals who work with children to identify, respond appropriately to and report all instances, suspicions or risks of violence, including when children or adults disclose such violence, in line with Committee of Ministers' Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)8 on strengthening reporting systems on violence against children.

5. Training for educators

5.1. Adequately resourced mandatory training and continuous professional development programmes should be put in place for all those who deliver comprehensive sexuality education to ensure consistency in the content and delivery of this education. Training should ensure that educators are informed about new ways that violence against children can be perpetrated, including about the risks of technology-facilitated violence and how to support children in addressing these risks.

5.2. Educators should be trained about the special nature of comprehensive sexuality education to ensure that they deliver it in ways that are age and developmentally appropriate, inclusive, safe, non-judgmental, non-violent, culturally aware and trauma informed. Educators should also know how to create a learning environment that reduces the risk of re-traumatisation and secondary victimisation for children who are experiencing or have experienced violence.

5.3. Educators should also receive training on safeguarding children to ensure that they are equipped to identify signs of violence against children and to respond appropriately to, and report, instances, suspicions and risks of violence and disclosures of violence from children or adults, whether in a formal, non-formal or informal educational setting.

6. The role of parents and other holders of parental responsibility

6.1. Parents and other holders of parental responsibility have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of their child and for the protection of children from violence. Prior to and on an iterative basis following the introduction of comprehensive sexuality education in the curricula, parents and other holders of parental responsibility should be provided with:

- a. information about the content, objectives, benefits and potential providers of comprehensive sexuality education so that they can increase their own knowledge and support the children within their care as they progress through the curriculum and develop their knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and critical thinking to recognise situations of violence, seek help and assert their rights;
- b. information about all forms of violence against children, their seriousness, their short-, medium- and long-term consequences, including how to recognise signs that a child in their care may be experiencing violence and how violence can undermine the rights of children;
- c. information about how to seek help and the full range of support services available should they need to access them for the children within their care; and
- d. accessible science-based educational resources, awareness-raising and training opportunities to enable them to support the health and development of the children within their care and respond in an age-appropriate way to their questions about relationships, sexuality-related matters and sex, and to support them in their role of fostering the values of non-discrimination, equality, particularly gender equality, and mutual respect in all interpersonal interactions and relationships.

7. Awareness raising

7.1. Member States should allocate the necessary human, material and financial resources to raise awareness among children, parents and other holders of parental responsibility, educators, all relevant stakeholders and the general public about:

- a. the prohibition of abuse and violence against children, including gender-based violence and the disproportionate and particular impact on girls, and the related laws and rights;
- b. differences in how children process and respond to experiences of violence, and the consequences these responses may have on their vulnerability to subsequent experiences of violence;
- c. the role of comprehensive sexuality education in preventing and protecting children from various forms of violence;
- d. how the content of comprehensive sexuality education is tailored to the age, development, maturity and evolving capacities of children with the aim of protecting the rights of children and supporting them in recognising and respecting their own and others' bodily integrity and personal autonomy;
- e. the risks and prevalence of violence against children, including harmful sexual behaviour engaged in by children, and their consequences;
- f. the link between sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour engaged in by children and their exposure to digital media harms, including pornography and child sexual abuse material, and the link between these behaviours and the risk that the child has been, or is, a victim of violence;
- g. the importance of reporting instances, suspicions or risks of violence against children and the availability of support services, care and treatment; and
- h. the easily accessible and child-friendly means, including child-friendly complaint mechanisms, to report any instances, suspicions or risks of digital or offline violence against children.

8. Legal or policy basis

8.1. All children within the territory of member States should have equal access to comprehensive sexuality education to protect their rights. The necessary financial, material and human resources should be allocated, regardless of whether the education is provided by a public or private entity, in formal, non-formal or informal settings.

8.2. Member States should adopt the necessary legal or policy basis for the inclusive and accessible provision of this education to all children. *De jure* or *de facto* exemptions to comprehensive sexuality education undermine the protection of children from various forms of violence.

8.3. The legal or policy basis for the provision of this education in member States could include legislation or regulations which set out the general framework within which this education is provided and standards to ensure accessibility, quality and availability for children, according to their age and developmental needs.

9. Comprehensive sexuality education in practice

9.1. Member States should choose the means of delivering comprehensive sexuality education best suited to their own context while upholding children's rights. Consideration should be given to formal, non-formal and informal delivery of this education and whether and how delivery through multiple routes can complement one another, ensure inclusiveness and accessibility and provide children with the resources to prevent, and protect them from, violence.

9.2. The content and implementation of comprehensive sexuality education should be science based and be regularly monitored, evaluated and revised at the national, regional or federal level, depending on the national context, to ensure its efficacy as a means of preventing and protecting children from violence. Comprehensive sexuality education should also be revised to respond to new forms of violence as they emerge. Member States should establish monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure that comprehensive sexuality education upholds children's rights. Member States should regularly consult experts about best practices at domestic and international levels to ensure the content of comprehensive sexuality education is appropriate, relevant and effective.

9.3. Children should be equipped with the necessary competences to participate according to their age, maturity and evolving capacities in the development, design, delivery, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of comprehensive sexuality education curricula. Necessary human, material and financial resources should be made available to ensure that children's participation is safe, meaningful, inclusive and based on children's right to equality, and that they receive feedback on their contributions.

9.4. Member States should recognise, encourage and support the work of relevant civil society organisations working to provide comprehensive sexuality education and prevent various forms of violence against children.

9.5. Member States should adopt an integrated system for collecting, analysing and managing data to monitor all forms of violence against children. The data collected should be disaggregated by sex, age, type of violence, victim-perpetrator relationship, location or other relevant characteristics, circumstances and factors, depending on the national context. These data should support the design, monitoring and evaluation of policies, programmes and projects relating to the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education curricula and other strategies to prevent and combat violence against children.