

Italian parents and teachers' attitudes and perceptions of a comprehensive sexuality education activity in secondary schools: EduForIST national project

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Introduction/Summary

- Open communication between adults and adolescents about sexual health related topics improves young people's safer behaviours in sexual relationships.
- This study aims to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of parents and teachers involved in a comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) activity targeting secondary schools' in Italy, named **EduForIST project**.

Study Design

- EduForIST is funded by the **Ministry of Health**, coordinated by the University of Pisa in collaboration with the National Institute of Health, Universities of Verona and Foggia, civil society organisations (CSOs), and local health departments.
- CSE activity consisted of **5 modules** covering topics such as: changes in adolescence, relationships and consent, sexual identity, STIs, unwanted pregnancy prevention and sexual health services.

Methods

- A **cross-sectional study** was performed between December 2023 to May 2024 targeting **teachers** from secondary schools where EduForIST was implemented and **parents** of students attending the same schools.
- Based on a literature review, the research team developed **two tailored questionnaires** to be administered to teachers and parents attending dedicated meetings with CSOs educators at the end of CSE activities with students.
- Each questionnaire included 30 items, exploring:
 - knowledge gaps** and **needs** of teachers and parents regarding CSE
 - attitudes** towards **discussing** these topics with students/adolescents
 - opinions on **who bears the responsibility** of educating children on sexuality
 - perceived impact of the EduForIST activity** on adolescents' behaviours.

Results

- The project involved **26 schools** across 6 Italian regions, for a total of 60 classes.
- Up to May 2024, **239 parents and 130 teachers** answered the questionnaires.
- 80%** of those who answered the questionnaires identified as **female** (Table1).

	Parents	Teachers
N	239	130
M	33 (16,7%)	24 (21,4%)
F	165 (83,3%)	88 (78,6%)
Mean age	47,3	50
Main job/ Subject	Salaried - executive role (74%)	Math&Science (25,4%)

Results of 2

Who should educate about sexuality?

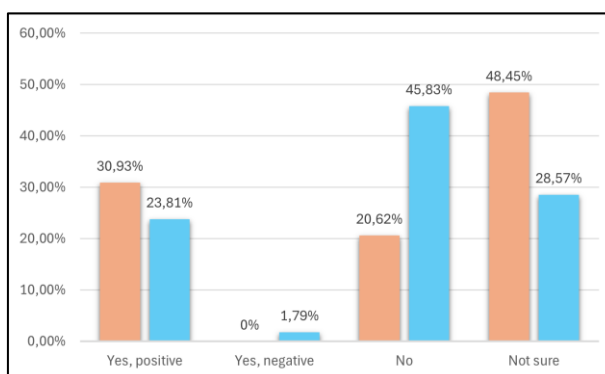
The vast majority (around 90%) of both parents and teachers replied that **school and families together** should bear the responsibility for SE.

On which topics you do not feel prepared enough to answer your students/children questions?

Parents and teachers identified these topics as the most challenging for them:

- Sexual identity**
- Sexual health services** and counselling
- STIs**
- Stigma** and discrimination towards people living with HIV/STI
- Emotions, feelings and **relationships**

Figure 1. I have noticed a change in the behaviour of my students/children from the beginning of the EduForIST experience to today



Do you feel confident when talking about sexuality-related topics with students/children?

Around 60% of people replied that **they did feel confident** in addressing sexuality-related topics with adolescents, however..

Do you talk about sexual issues with students/children?

Only 44% of teachers and 74% of parents reported **effectively talking** about these topics.

Most common fears of both parents and teachers regard, in particular, the **language** they should use when talking about sexuality and which **social media platforms** or other sources of information the adolescents use to stay informed.

Perceived changes in adolescents' behaviours

Most parents/teachers did not notice or were not sure about changes in the students/children behaviours following EduForIST experience.

Although **30% of teachers and 24% of parents** reported that there was a **positive changes**, such as perceiving the adolescents to be more open, relaxed, at ease when talking about sexuality, as well as using less discriminatory talk and stereotyping.

Conclusions

- According to parents and school teachers involved in EduForIST, **sexuality education should be taught in schools**, in all grade of schools or starting from lower secondary
- Additional feedbacks from parents and teachers participating in pre-post meetings addressed the **need for increased training and support in how to communicate** about sexuality with young people
- The results will contribute to the limited literature in Italy and to highlights the importance of **engaging** teachers and parents in CSE interventions in Italian schools

Figure 2. My students/children shared with me the topics discussed during the EduForIST experience at school

