

# Youth Sexuality from a Sociocultural Perspective

A Sexualidade Juvenil Numa Perspectiva Sociocultural  
La Sexualidad Juvenil Desde una Perspectiva Sociocultural

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Analisar a sexualidade juvenil sob uma perspectiva sociocultural, fundamentando-se na teoria de Vygotsky. **Método:** Pesquisa analítico-descritiva, sobre oficinas de sexualidade. **Resultados:** Atividades lúdicas e colaborativas, alinhadas ao contexto sociocultural dos jovens, promovem autonomia, protagonismo e reflexão crítica, contribuindo para a internalização de valores sociais e compreensão da sexualidade. A educação sexual deve ir além de informações biológicas, abrangendo aspectos emocionais, afetivos e sociais. A criação de espaços inclusivos e reflexivos, como sugerido por Vygotsky, permite que adolescentes explorem e discutam a sexualidade sem os tabus culturais e familiares. **Conclusão:** Essa abordagem potencializa a formação integral dos jovens, capacitando-os para a tomada de decisões conscientes e a construção de relacionamentos saudáveis. Por fim, o estudo destaca a relevância de práticas pedagógicas inclusivas que conectam experiências individuais e coletivas, promovendo uma educação sexual transformadora e alinhada aos desafios contemporâneos.

**DESCRIPTORIOS:** Vygotsky. Teoria sociocultural. Adolescência. Sexualidade.

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To analyze youth sexuality from a sociocultural perspective, based on Vygotsky's theory. **Method:** Analytical-descriptive research on sexuality workshops. **Results:** Playful and collaborative activities, aligned with the socio-cultural context of young people, promote autonomy, protagonism and critical reflection, contributing to the internalization of social values and understanding of sexuality. Sex education must go beyond biological information, covering emotional, affective and social aspects. Creating inclusive and reflective spaces, as suggested by Vygotsky, allows adolescents to explore and discuss sexuality without cultural and family taboos. **Conclusion:** This approach enhances the integral formation of young people, enabling them to make informed decisions and build healthy relationships. Finally, the study highlights the importance of inclusive pedagogical practices that connect individual and collective experiences, promoting transformative sex education that is aligned with contemporary challenges.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Vygotsky. Sociocultural theory. Adolescence. Sexuality.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Analizar la sexualidad juvenil desde una perspectiva sociocultural, a partir de la teoría de Vygotsky. **Método:** Investigación analítico-descriptiva sobre talleres de sexualidad. **Resultados:** Las actividades lúdicas y colaborativas, alineadas con el contexto sociocultural de los jóvenes, promueven la autonomía, el protagonismo y la reflexión crítica, contribuyendo a la interiorización de valores sociales y a la comprensión de la sexualidad. La educación sexual debe ir más allá de la información biológica, abarcando aspectos emocionales, afectivos y sociales. La creación de espacios inclusivos y reflexivos, como sugiere Vygotsky, permite a los adolescentes explorar y discutir la sexualidad sin tabúes culturales y familiares. **Conclusión:** Este enfoque mejora la formación integral de los jóvenes, permitiéndoles tomar decisiones informadas y construir relaciones saludables. Finalmente, el estudio resalta la importancia de prácticas pedagógicas inclusivas que conecten experiencias individuales y colectivas, promoviendo una educación sexual transformadora y acorde a los desafíos contemporáneos.

**DESCRIPTORIOS:** Vygotsky. Teoría sociocultural. Adolescencia. Sexualidad.

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## INTRODUCTION

The social, emotional and cognitive development of adolescents is a complex process, highly influenced by historical, social and cultural factors. At this stage, the transition between childhood and adulthood marks a period of discovery and conflict, including the awakening of sexuality, which requires young people to balance their new impulses with the social and cultural expectations imposed by society.<sup>1</sup> The psychological development of adolescents must be understood in light of the sociocultural context, in which school and family play fundamental roles, especially by offering structures for adolescents to explore and understand their own identities in relation to current norms of behavior.<sup>2</sup>

In the school setting, playful imagination emerges as an essential element for the cognitive and emotional development of young people, providing a basis for the formation of abstract thoughts and the exploration of realities that go beyond immediate development. Vygotsky<sup>2</sup> argues that playful and interactive activities stimulate the development of higher psychological functions, enabling adolescents to express their thoughts and emotions in a creative and reflective way. In the context of sexuality, this playful process allows experimentation and negotiation of cultural norms, enabling young people to internalize social values and experience their sexuality in a safe and imaginative way.<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>

Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective on development highlights the role of education in enhancing adolescents' conceptual and critical

thinking. He suggests that by mediating access to scientific concepts and critical discussions, educators can help adolescents move from concrete to conceptual thinking.<sup>1,2</sup> This process not only supports cognitive development, but also promotes an environment of reflection, which is essential for young people to understand and deal with complex issues, such as sexuality and relationships. Thus, the role of the school goes beyond academic teaching, becoming an environment for mediating social expectations and values that directly impact the integral development of adolescents.<sup>7</sup>

However, despite the importance of sexual education in the development of adolescents, there is still significant resistance in schools and families to addressing sexuality as a legitimate and necessary topic. Sexual education, based on diversity and respect for individual experiences, is crucial for the empowerment of young people and for promoting their health and well-being. By addressing sexuality in a playful and educational way, it is possible to create a safe environment in which adolescents can explore and discuss issues related to their bodies and desires, without the taboos and prejudices that often inhibit open dialogue on the topic.<sup>7,8,9,10</sup>

With Vygotsky's theory and an understanding of the sociocultural context, we seek to identify pedagogical practices that promote the healthy development of sexuality in adolescents, respecting their experiences and offering an educational basis that contributes to their integral development. In this sense, this article aims to analyze youth sexuality from a sociocultural perspective, based on

Vygotsky's theory.

## METHOD

This study is a partial result of an analytical-descriptive research<sup>11</sup> excerpts from a workshop on sexuality aimed at adolescents, held in 2004 in Palmas, Tocantins, were analyzed: a) Informational folder on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs); b) Informational material 'ARE YOU ALREADY INFORMED? (in the original language, *JÁ TÁ LIGADO?*)'.

The theoretical-conceptual analysis of the present study was based on the premise that Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the importance of social interactions and the sociocultural context in cognitive development, highlighting that learning occurs through mediation between the individual and his/her social environment.<sup>12</sup>

## RESULT

In the process of creating an informational brochure on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (Figure 1), adolescents had a significant experience of peer education. This experience allowed adolescents to assimilate relevant information on the topic and to take the lead in the construction and dissemination of health knowledge, aligning themselves with an active learning approach.

Figure 1. Folder on sexually transmitted diseases



Source: researcher's archive

Learning mediated by interactions corroborates the creation of spaces such as the informative 'ARE YOU AL-

READY INFORMED?', where adolescents exercise self-expression and reflect on their own sexuality in a collective and contextualized way (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Informational content produced by adolescents



Source: researcher's archive

DISCUSSION

A sociocultural perspective on adolescence

The sociocultural perspective on adolescence highlights the influence of the historical, cultural and social context on the development of young people, positioning them at the intersection between the individual and their environment. Unlike the view that seeks a universal 'truth' about this phase of life, this approach recognizes adolescence as a social construction that emerges from specific contexts. The idea of adolescence, therefore, varies according to time and space, being shaped by different norms, values and social expectations.<sup>9,13,14</sup>

Vygotsky offers a detailed analysis of the changes that occur during adolescence, highlighting the simultaneous transformations in the physical, emotional, and social spheres. For him, adolescence is an 'age of transition' in which changes are shaped by both biological factors and the cultural and historical environment in which the young person is inserted, directly affecting their understanding and expression of sexuality. This perspective recognizes that sexual development, like other aspects of growth, is profoundly influenced by cultural norms and the social environment.<sup>2,15</sup>

Contrary to the traditional view that associates adolescence with a period of 'storm and stress', which would require social control and educational interventions, the sociocultural perspective emphasizes the capacity of young people to actively participate in their development. This approach values the potential of adolescents when inserted in school environments that offer supportive relationships and rich and challenging teaching-learning experiences, favoring their cognitive and emotional development.<sup>14,16,17</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century, Vygotsky already highlighted the role of schooling in the cognitive

development of adolescents, arguing that access to and engagement with mediated learning enables the development of conceptual thinking. He argued that the integration of imagination and conceptual thinking helps young people prepare to act and think creatively and critically, not restricted to the concrete.<sup>1,2</sup> This process is essential for adolescents to develop the ability to imagine more equitable social futures and challenge stereotypes often associated with adolescence.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Vygotsky also criticized inequality in schooling, pointing out that schools often offer different experiences based on factors such as social class, gender and individual abilities.<sup>2</sup> For him, although the potential of young people can be enriched by mediated learning experiences, the school context often fails to offer equitable opportunities. This analysis highlights the need to rethink educational practices that overcome stereotypes and promote inclusion, enabling young people to become protagonists in the construction of knowledge and in society.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, access to imaginative play opportunities is a vital tool in youth development, as it allows adolescents to practice thinking beyond their immediate context. By exploring scenarios and possibilities beyond their realities, young people develop important skills for critiquing and questioning cultural models and media representations of adolescence. This practice fosters a broader understanding of themselves and the world, which is essential for the formation of conscious and reflective individuals.<sup>7,18,19</sup>

Although recent approaches in psychological research propose the study of historical and cultural influences on the development of young people, this was a central perspective for Vygotsky almost a century ago. Contemporary studies corroborate the importance of a multidisciplinary and contextual-

ized view of adolescent development, promoting an understanding that goes beyond the decontextualized individual and that considers young people in their relationship with the historical, social and cultural environments that surround them.<sup>18,19</sup>

The creation of an informative folder reflects Vygotsky's theory, which values learning mediated by social interaction and considers the cultural environment as central to cognitive development.<sup>20</sup>

According to Vygotsky, cognitive development occurs in the context of social interactions, where knowledge is constructed collectively and mediated by others, including peers.<sup>15</sup> In the case of the creation of the brochure, the adolescents took on the role of protagonists, communicating with and teaching their own peers. This peer education format reinforces the importance of collaborative practices and knowledge exchange in a sociocultural environment. By placing themselves in the position of educators, the young people practice skills such as responsibility and autonomy, developing a critical and conscious stance on the topic of sexual health.

In addition, this methodology promotes more accessible and direct communication among adolescents, as the materials were created using language adapted to the target audience. By using familiar language and adapting the content to the reality and interests of their peers, the young people can make the message more relevant and understandable.<sup>14</sup> This process highlights the value of giving adolescents an active role in health education, allowing them to reflect on their own experiences and share knowledge in a way that fosters deeper understanding among them.<sup>17</sup>

Another important aspect of this activity is the strengthening of autonomy and responsibility over one's own health, while promoting a more equitable vision of the role of adolescents

in society. This approach allows young people to see themselves as agents of change and health promoters in their community, which reinforces the construction of more inclusive and responsible social roles.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, by exploring social and cultural influences on youth development and engaging adolescents in peer-to-peer teaching practices, this educational experience corroborates a sociocultural perspective of adolescence.<sup>1,2</sup> This approach highlights the importance of methodologies that promote youth protagonism, valuing the voice and experience of young people themselves in the construction of knowledge and the promotion of health practices. In this way, it is possible to foster a more inclusive and transformative understanding of adolescence, preparing young people to actively participate in society with a solid foundation of knowledge and responsibility.

## Sex education as a sustainable pillar for adolescent health

Sexuality education as a sustainable pillar for adolescent health highlights the need for a comprehensive and effective approach to sexuality education for adolescents. Such an approach contributes to sustainable health practices, promotion of well-being and empowerment of young people, enabling them to make informed decisions about health and relationships. Understanding the family structure as the first social group influences personal formation, as the family acts as an interactive system and as a social force, shaping behaviors and influencing personality development.<sup>21,22</sup>

Sexuality is an essential component of the human being and emerges in adolescence as a biological, psychological and social expression, influenced by personal beliefs and cultural values. This topic, however, is often neglected in the school and family environment, where the taboo on discussing

sexuality openly still persists.<sup>23</sup>

In turn, sexual education should cover more than just information about anatomy and disease prevention, pregnancy and other topics, but should also include emotional, affective and social aspects, thus promoting a comprehensive understanding of sexuality. By being encouraged to share experiences and openly discuss their thoughts, adolescents not only acquire knowledge, but also develop essential skills, such as informed decision-making and assertive communication. This process helps build critical and empowered autonomy, which is important for dealing with sexual issues in a responsible and safe manner.<sup>24</sup>

Vygotsky states that by ignoring sexuality in education, schools often repress natural expressions, which can result in trauma and neurosis among young people. Furthermore, he highlights that sexuality is not exclusive to adolescence; it emerges in childhood and evolves until maturity, being shaped by cultural factors. In this context, inclusive sexual education is essential to offer acceptance and understanding of cultural diversity and the individual experiences of young people.<sup>25</sup>

Vygotsky's theory underpins this approach by emphasizing that learning occurs most effectively when built on social interactions and individuals' personal experiences.<sup>1,2,25</sup> According to Vygotsky, the daily experiences of adolescents constitute 'knowledge that does not involve personal experience', which makes it fundamental to human development.

In sexual education, there is an implicit need to open spaces for adolescents to critically reflect on their own experiences and desires, avoiding a moralizing pedagogical stance and promoting an education that allows self-knowledge and understanding of the different expressions of sexuality.<sup>26</sup> This stance is echoed in the ideas

of Vygotsky, who affirms the importance of respecting and including the individual and collective experience of students in educational practices, reinforcing the idea that knowledge is validated and rooted when associated with the reality of students.<sup>25</sup>

Contemporary studies highlight the importance of a sexual education approach that goes beyond the transmission of biological knowledge, including emotional, affective and social aspects.<sup>23,27,28</sup> Several methodologies suggest that sexuality education should be a participatory and reflective process, allowing adolescents to reflect on norms, values and gender roles. The lack of preparation of parents and teachers to address sexuality leads young people to seek information from unreliable sources, which increases the risk of misinformation.<sup>24,29</sup>

Proper sex education provides adolescents with the skills they need to deal with physical and emotional changes, as well as developing assertive communication and responsible attitudes.<sup>29,30</sup>

It strengthens the sense of autonomy, enabling young people to make informed choices and contributing to the prevention of gender-based violence and the promotion of equality.<sup>23,27</sup> Thus, sexual education promotes a comprehensive understanding of health and well-being, enabling adolescents to interact safely and responsibly with their own sexuality and that of others, in addition to preventing risky behavior and cultivating solid self-esteem.

Thus, a strategy that integrates adolescents as information multipliers strengthens their role in social development, encouraging protagonism in their own growth and action in their communities.<sup>31</sup> In this way, sexual education is configured not only as an individual learning process, but as a transformative practice that contributes to a more conscious, inclusive

and equitable society.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, developing educational projects that incorporate adolescents as multipliers and protagonists reinforces the essential role of sexual education in the formation of critical and conscious young people, enabling them to exercise full and responsible citizenship. These young people, once empowered and aware of their own sexuality and body, can act in a meaningful way in their communities, promoting sustainable health and well-being practices.

## CONCLUSION

The sociocultural approach to youth sexuality reveals the importance of integrated and contextualized sexual education in the school environment, which is an essential space for the social, emotional and cognitive development of adolescents. The production of educational materials and brochures by adolescents themselves, as highlighted in the results, demonstrates the effectiveness of pedagogical practices that value youth protagonism, allowing them to express and share information in a creative and collaborative way. These materials not only offer a means of disseminating knowledge, but also reflect the cultural diversity and individual experiences of students, fostering an inclusive and plural approach to sexual education.

From Vygotsky's perspective, adolescence is a phase in which imaginative thinking and the zone of proximal development are highlighted, allowing young people to transcend their immediate experiences and conceptually explore issues related to sexuality and identity. Based on this view, sexual education should be planned in such a way as to expand adolescents' critical and creative thinking, incorporating their experiences and promoting an environment of dialogue and reflection. Thus, the production of educational materials, guided by

adolescents themselves, not only empowers them, but also establishes a bridge between scientific knowledge and experiential knowledge, connecting the school context with the social reality of young people.

In this sense, sexual education emerges as a fundamental pillar for promoting the health and well-being of adolescents, contributing to sustainable health practices and strengthening their autonomy and ability to make informed decisions about their sexual lives. By integrating students'

cultural and identity diversity, sexual education in the school environment respects and values multiple identities, creating a space where all young people feel welcomed and respected.

Finally, sexual education should be geared towards the empowerment and autonomy of adolescents, promoting their active participation both in their own development and in the construction of a more just and respectful society. By recognizing and valuing young people's creative potential to think and act in a transformative way, the

educational process is consolidated as a comprehensive and emancipatory experience. This integration of imagination and creativity into the learning process prepares adolescents to face challenges and transform social reality, consolidating an educational practice that goes beyond the classroom and that aligns with the principles of comprehensive and critical education.

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