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# Gender-Sensitive Sex Education for Boys*

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**Abstract:** Sex education goes far beyond merely conveying biological facts; it encompasses the psychological, social, and cultural aspects of sexuality. A gender-sensitive approach to sex education for boys* aims to address their specific needs and challenges, critically reflect on hegemonic norms of masculinity, and develop alternative, non-toxic models of masculinity. This article explores the foundations and core elements of such a gender-sensitive sex education for boys*, considering theoretical concepts such as sexual socialization, hegemonic masculinity, and sexual scripts, as well as sexual health and rights for boys*. An intersectional perspective enables a nuanced analysis of the diverse social inequalities that shape boys'* sexual development. This paper argues for four key elements of gender-sensitive sex education for boys*: (1) empowerment and self-determination to strengthen boys* in their formation of sexual identity; (2) the development of alternative masculinities to challenge stereotypical gender constraints; (3) the promotion of gender justice by raising boys'* awareness of their societal responsibility; and (4) fostering critical competencies in dealing with media and social norms. These approaches contribute to establishing a holistic and inclusive form of sex education that acknowledges boys* in their diversity and helps create a more just society.

**Keywords:** sex education; boys; masculinity; sexual health; sexual scripts; sexual socialization; empowerment; gender justice; equality; hegemonic masculinity

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## 1. Introduction and State of Research

Sex education is the pedagogical engagement with human sexuality in all its diversity, encompassing its biological–physical dimensions as well as its psychological, social, political, and cultural aspects [1,2]. Given the strong cultural, political, and legal regulation of sexuality in all societies, its pedagogical treatment, particularly in public educational settings, is always embedded in discourses and controversies regarding what is considered "normal", "permissible", or "healthy" sexuality and how to deal with corresponding "deviations" and their sanctioning. Sex education is therefore a particularly contested field, both in pedagogical research and practice. This also applies to the concept of comprehensive gender-sensitive sex education for boys*, which this text aims to substantiate theoretically and with reference to relevant empirical research and to outline in its fundamental aspects.

Several interrelated elements are addressed here. First, sex education should not be narrowly confined from the outset to biological aspects of reproduction and human sexuality but should also incorporate all social and cultural aspects, including the transformation of sexuality, sexual norms, and practices, their positive potentials, and the associated risks and dangers. Sex education can only be considered comprehensive if it does not artificially narrow its scope, for instance, out of concern for conservative criticism or traditional gender roles and norms, and if it does not limit itself to preventing (actual or perceived) sexual risks such as sexually transmitted diseases, multiple sexual partners, unprotected sex, or sexual

victimization [2,3]. A broad consensus has now emerged that such comprehensive sex education is also better able to meet the needs and interests of boys* and that incorporating a positive approach to sexuality is more effective in risk prevention than sex education that primarily warns against potential dangers, views adolescent sexuality as a "problem", adopts a moralizing stance, or promotes abstinence and sexual restraint. For example, a study by Herman P. Schaalma, Charles Abraham, Mary Rogers Gillmore, and Gerjo Kok [4] shows that sex education as health promotion should not solely focus on the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases or unwanted pregnancies but should also promote social skills and the ability to critically reflect on gender roles to be accepted by young people. The occasionally expressed concern that such comprehensive and positive sex education might increase the risk of early sexual activity and engagement in sexual risks has often been empirically refuted [5,6].

Second, sex education should be gender-sensitive in the sense that it recognizes that gender and sexuality are not merely biological facts but are socially constructed, acquired, socialized, practiced, and continuously reaffirmed or questioned in concrete actions [7,8]. Such comprehensive sex education is thus sensitive to differences, particularly in the sense that girls* and boys* today (still) grow up in a world where their gender and sexuality are perceived, regulated, evaluated, and normalized differently, and that these differences reflect power and even violent structures that mirror societal injustice between genders at the level of individuals. The elements of such gender-sensitive sex education will be discussed in more detail in the third part of this text; they are always normative, meaning they cannot simply be derived from biological or social "facts" but relate to educational goals pursuing values such as self-determination, consent, justice, or authenticity. Eva S. Goldfarb and Lisa D. Lieberman [2] show in their meta-study of thirty years of comprehensive sex education that it contributes to the development of healthy and consensual relationships, the prevention of partner violence, the promotion of sexual diversity, the strengthening of social–emotional skills, and the formation of a positive self-image in adolescents when it integrates diversity-sensitive and LGBTQ-inclusive approaches and is based on principles such as social justice and equality. Holistic approaches and programs that promote consent, authenticity, self-reflection, and communication while critically addressing traditional gender norms and power structures not only improve adolescents' sexual health but also contribute significantly to their comprehensive education and healthy psychosocial development.

Finally, this text addresses sex education for boys*. This involves two aspects. On the one hand, it reflects the conviction that it is still meaningful to think about and implement sex education along gender lines [9,10]. I use the term boys* with an asterisk in my paper to highlight the internal debates within trans and queer scholarship about categorization, challenging essentialist understandings of gender while acknowledging the complex relationship between embodiment, identity, and language. Although this linguistic choice remains contested also within queer and trans communities and scholarship, I employ it as a critical intervention that makes visible the ongoing theoretical tensions around how we name and conceptualize gendered experiences without reproducing normative frameworks that many queer scholars seek to dismantle. The asterisk may indicate that "boy*" is understood as an inclusive rather than an essentialist category, yet the term still designates a group that does not encompass all adolescents. There are also girls* as well as non-binary and intersex youth who do not identify with the category of boy*—and their respective needs, interests, and particularities require their own attention in sex education [11,12]. This addresses two aspects. First, it is important to consider and explicitly address the specific life contexts, experiences, and conditions of socialization, which still differ along gender lines. Second, this raises—though it cannot be fully explored here—the question

of whether sex education is more effective when it creates specific spaces, for example, programs designed specifically for boys, girls, or intersex adolescents. The idea is that homogeneity may be important for fostering trust, openness, and honesty, while at the same time, heterogeneous spaces are equally valuable, as they bring together different lived experiences. However, the question of educational spaces and whether sex education should be delivered jointly or separately must be clearly distinguished from the question of content—that is, what boys should learn about themselves, their masculinity and sexuality, but also about those of other genders. This article focuses on the latter. As long as the world remains practically structured along gender binarity and as long as this has not been comprehensively abolished—whether this is even possible or desirable is not up for discussion here—boys* whose upbringing, life world, gender identity, and sexuality are shaped by specific masculine norms and practices exist. Thus, it makes sense to address them as a group and consider their specific characteristics. Numerous empirical studies also demonstrate that it would be counterproductive to proceed naively in a gender-blind manner and assume that boys* have no particular needs, interests, concerns, or difficulties in a world where the masculinity that defines them as boys* imposes multiple demands on them [13,14]. Boys* themselves also demand this [15], as they find it easier to open up or feel acknowledged when their specific traits and group-specific characteristics and overlapping experience horizons are addressed. On the other hand, boys* are also perceived as a "problem"—including in sex education [9,16]. This can be understood in two ways. Boys* are seen as a problem because they cause more problems, particularly in educational settings [17]. To name some stereotypical attributions, which also have real-world relevance: they are less well-behaved and compliant than girls, more prone to violence and alcohol consumption, and socially less adjusted—also in the realm of sexuality, boys* are considered more problematic as they consume more pornography, persuade girls* to sext or have sex, or behave inappropriately [18–20]. What makes boys* problematic is directly related to what gender-sensitive sex education seeks to address: their masculinity. Boys* are a problem because they are (young) men*, and men* are, in many respects—also criminologically and in terms of crime statistics—problematic and dangerous for women* [21–23]. In principle all boys* are in need of sex education, simply because it is a fundamental part of their sexual development. Some of them may have specific needs, either because they lack access to sex education or because certain experiences or harmful influences have steered their sexual socialization in a problematic direction. In such cases, sex education can offer a corrective or positive intervention. However, it would be preferable not to understand sex education for boys* merely as a form of repair work addressing patriarchal or hegemonic masculinities, but rather as a form of prevention—as something boys* have a right to, enabling them to develop their masculinity and sexuality in a healthy way.

The next section will outline the theoretical framework for gender-sensitive sex education for boys*. Various theories and approaches will be brought into relation: the sexual socialization of boys* and the learning and practicing of masculinity and its associated norms and roles; R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity [24], which elucidates the ideals of masculinity prevailing in a patriarchal society and thus serves as a central orientation framework for sexual socialization; and the theory of sexual scripts [25], which forms the interface between these norms and roles and their internalization and implementation at the individual level. Sexual health and its safeguarding through sexual rights will provide the theoretical background for understanding positive and healthy sexuality and sexual development in boys*, and finally, an intersectional approach will be introduced, capturing the categories of boys* and masculinity in their internal tensions and differentiations according to further characteristics, experiences, and social positions. After this complex theoretical framework for gender-sensitive sex education has been presented, the next

section will focus on its core elements: empowerment and self-determination, alternative and non-toxic masculinity, gender justice, and the cultivation of critical competencies. The text will conclude with a critical summary and a discussion of the challenges facing such gender-sensitive sex education.

## 2. Theoretical Background: Sexual Socialization, (Hegemonic) Masculinity, and Sexual Health from an Intersectional Perspective

The sexuality of boys* is always the product of complex processes of sexual socialization. This means that sexuality is the result of biological, psychological, and social developmental processes that take place from the beginning of human existence. The most significant developmental surge occurs with puberty, but even before that, children are also sexual beings [26], although childhood sexuality remains a particular taboo topic [27]. Children are especially vulnerable in their sexuality, particularly to abuse by older children, adolescents, and especially adults and those in positions of authority. To adequately protect them—also in educational institutions—and not to impair their healthy sexual development, it is necessary to acknowledge their sexuality and establish age- and development-appropriate standards of sexual health and sexual rights [28–30]. These standards must not be based solely on medical and psychological findings but must also always relate to social and moral values and norms [31]. This also applies to adolescent sexuality, as young people, even more than children, actively "explore" and shape their sexuality and must (and want to) engage with it [29].

Sexual socialization describes the psycho–physio-social process of the formation of sexuality, encompassing both physical development and the psychological and social dimensions, including engagement with one's own body, sexuality, sexual orientation and identity, desires, sexuality-related values and norms, actions toward oneself and others, as well as the diverse actions and communicative processes of others. According to Klaus Hurrelmann [32], socialization in adolescence is a process of actively processing reality and mastering developmental tasks—including those related to sexuality. It is therefore important to emphasize that socialization does not simply "happen" but that adolescents are active agents and subjects in this process. They always also socialize themselves—in the realm of sexuality, just as in all other processes of identity formation and biography construction. Through interactions with their environment [32,33]—including influences from parents, peers, teachers, media, and role models—they shape themselves.

Boys* thus always also shape themselves as boys*, just as they are shaped into boys* by their environment [8]. A defining element of their identity is their masculinity, which distinguishes them as boys* from girls* and non-binary youth. Masculinity is not a natural trait but a socially constructed ensemble. This means that masculinity as a gender category cannot and should not be reduced to biological sex characteristics (sex), nor does it necessarily have to correspond to them—it is not inherently tied to the presence of a penis, testes, or XY chromosomes. Masculinity is the result of social developmental processes—of socialization—and is performatively produced in the sense of "doing gender" [7,34]. What is considered masculinity or "masculine" is therefore historically and culturally variable. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms [35], it is a *doxa*—a belief that is perceived as natural while concealing its social construction, including that of the male *habitus* [36]. Numerous studies, such as those by Loredana Cerbara, Giulia Ciancimino, and Antonio Tintori [37], show that masculinity—understood as a set of roles, values, norms, and behaviors—is practiced and internalized from early childhood, leading boys* to develop an understanding of what their gender expects of them and which behaviors are deemed appropriate. Early childhood conditioning is further reinforced throughout socialization by various social institutions, role models, and media [38], which demonstrate and model masculinity while sanctioning

deviations. Even today, as shown by Avni Amin, Anna Kågesten, Emmanuel Adebayo, and Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli [39], certain "traditional" notions of masculinity—centered on dominance, risk-taking, and control, particularly over girls*—continue to be reproduced. One important source of socialization, which remains highly influential in many regions, is religion. I can only briefly mention this here—especially with regard to notions of masculinity and norms surrounding sexuality, certain religions warrant critical reflection. At the same time, they can also offer points of connection for a gender-sensitive approach to sex education.

R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity has become established in masculinity research—despite some criticism [24,40,41]—as a way to conceptualize the positionality of men* in society, both in relation to women* and other men*. The term "hegemonic" signifies a form of masculinity that is both widespread and claims power for itself. While the specific form of hegemonic masculinity varies historically and culturally, in modern societies of the Global North—often broadly characterized as patriarchal—it is commonly associated with dominance, strength, risk-taking, activity, and claims to power. It is also heterosexual, white, and socioeconomically successful. Hegemonic masculinity entails a dual power position: it asserts male dominance over women* and also the dominance of certain men* over others, whose masculinities are devalued or suppressed. These are referred to as marginalized masculinities—such as those of migrants* and men* with lower socioeconomic status—and subordinate masculinities, such as those of homosexual or non-cisgender men* [42–45]. While all men* benefit from the "dividend of masculinity" in relation to women* and are thus privileged over them, they are nevertheless ranked hierarchically in relation to dominant men*, who embody all the traits of "successful" masculinity. Thus, despite different theoretical foundations, the concept of hegemonic masculinity shares significant similarities with Bourdieu's idea of male domination [35], which is based on symbolic violence and constructs femininity as the *other*, appearing as a natural order [46].

Hegemonic masculinity serves as a key orientation framework in the sexual socialization of boys*, providing the norms and ideals they are expected to strive for and embody in order to be considered masculine—especially to be recognized as "successful" and "real" men. Deviations from these ideals are considered "weak" and "unmanly" and are sanctioned accordingly by hegemonic men* to maintain their own dominance. However, it is not only men*—particularly fathers* [47]—who socialize and "educate" boys* into this framework, but also women* who act as accomplices to hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing and encouraging its performance in their sons, friends, or partners [24]. Similarly, mothers* often socialize their daughters* into gender roles and serve as role models in expressing their femininity in alignment with hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity [48,49]. Clearly, the socialization of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity are deeply interwoven in our society—even though it is conceivable that hegemonic masculinity could exist without heteronormativity. That is, the notion that heterosexuality is the "norm" and that "real" men* are heterosexual [50,51]. Heteronormativity as a social norm includes further expectations regarding the "normal" or "desirable" form of heterosexual identity and interaction, which are closely linked to the requirements of hegemonic masculinity—for example, that men* should be active, dominant, strong, or assertive in (sexual) interactions with women*, while women*, by contrast, should be passive, submissive, weak, and reserved. These norms must be learned and practiced by both boys* and girls* throughout their sexual socialization and demonstrated in their interactions. However, socialization is always precarious [39,52]. On the one hand, it is fraught with epistemic uncertainties—there is no truly reliable knowledge or completely trustworthy sources of information for pubescent adolescents, and alternative models, role models,

and media are always present. On the other hand, practice is never a mere replica of the overarching norms that are to be internalized and rehearsed but is itself fraught with challenges. Adolescents thus always experience a degree of uncertainty—after all, it is their real lives and interactions that are at stake.

Another theoretical building block is provided by what William Simon and John H. Gagnon refer to as sexual scripts [25], in which the ideals and norms that constitute masculinity are made available as concretized action templates for sexual interaction. This means that sexual behavior does not occur (merely or primarily) instinctively but is socially acquired and learned. They distinguish three levels of sexual scripts that interlock: cultural scripts as socially established conceptions of sexuality (e.g., heteronormative expectations, gender roles); interpersonal scripts at the level of individual interactions, in which people negotiate sexual expectations (e.g., flirting, dating, consent); and intrapsychic scripts, meaning personal fantasies, desires, and interpretations of sexuality, which in turn are based on cultural and interpersonal experiences. It is evident that sexual scripts serve as the link for transferring the (heteronormative) ideals, values, and norms inherent in hegemonic masculinity onto the level of sexuality and translating them into concrete actions. The internalization, formation, and practice of sexual scripts are essential results of sexual socialization; they are always individually shaped, yet as shared scripts—especially through their anchoring in a common sexual culture and gender order—they enable joint action and meaning–making of actions [53]. Like all social norms, they facilitate and restrict action by providing guidelines that boys* can follow. The social construction of sexual scripts is not always conscious; rather, they often appear "natural". They function, to borrow a term from Bourdieu, as doxa, that is, unquestioned beliefs operating in the background. For example, it is "natural" for many boys to be "active" in initiating sexual encounters and "seducing", while girls* are "passive" and "reserved", just as the male orgasm appears to them as a "natural" climax of heterosexual sex [54–56].

Sexual health and sexual rights of boys* are closely intertwined. Sexual rights are intended to protect and ensure sexual health, while sexual health is the normative determination of what should be made possible as healthy sexuality for all people. The WHO defines sexual health not merely as the absence of sexually related disease, infirmity, and suffering but adopts a positive concept of health that refers to physical, psychological (emotional and cognitive), and social well-being [57]. Sexual health thus also encompasses the ability to live the sexuality one freely and authentically chooses, whereas all forms of coercion, exploitation, and oppression are considered detrimental to sexual health. Consequently, sexual rights are no longer understood merely in terms of a risk discourse as protection against assaults and dangers but as positive rights that also address how social frameworks, institutions, and infrastructures should be designed to enable such sexual health [58]. This undoubtedly includes sexual education as the provision of information, knowledge, and skills to live sexually healthy lives [1]. In this way, the WHO follows, on the one hand, an expanded understanding of sexuality, which also underlies this text, and on the other hand, positions sexual health and sexual rights within the social, cultural, and political framework that is crucial for the previous discussion of sexual socialization and hegemonic masculinity. This can be understood from two perspectives: since sexuality is socially constructed and not a "natural" fact, what constitutes sexual health cannot be limited to physical functions but must also consider how people—in this case, boys*—can develop a healthy sexuality. Again, it becomes clear that these standards cannot be derived or justified purely descriptively: what is considered healthy or good sexuality for boys*—and girls*—only emerges in conjunction with answering normative questions, such as what makes sexuality valuable, why, and to what extent it is part of a good life and connected to other valued attributes or capabilities like self-determination, satisfaction, au-

thenticity, or self-realization [59,60]. This also means questioning whether the predominant influences of sexual socialization today—through hegemonic masculinity, rigid gender roles, or heteronormative sexual scripts that shape boys'* sexuality—promote or hinder their sexual health, and indeed, what possible standards could be used to answer this question. If an essential part of sexual health is to live an authentic and self-determined sexuality, meaning also finding fulfillment of one's own desires and needs [58,61], then this can never occur without reference to social norms and the practices shaped by them, but it also shifts the critique of such norms and practices into focus. At the same time, it becomes apparent that a sexuality shaped by hegemonic masculinity is a significant risk factor, particularly for girls*, making gender justice, sexual health, and sexual rights inseparably connected. A positive concept of sexual health and sexual rights is particularly contested for adolescents [28]—as adolescent sexuality is considered, in many cultures and societies, both especially vulnerable and, at the same time, taboo, requiring regulation through strict norms. A clear gender gap is evident here, with girls* in particular being subject to sexual norms and judged by different standards than boys* [62,63]. Girls* are often perceived primarily as potential victims—and, unfortunately, they are also victimized far more frequently [31,63,64].

Finally, it is essential to adopt an intersectional perspective that complements the theoretical insights gathered so far by recognizing that boys* are by no means a homogeneous group but exhibit different characteristics and experiences that significantly influence their position in social space, their lived experiences, how they see themselves, and how they are seen and treated by others. Kimberly Crenshaw [65,66] coined the term "*intersectionality*"—originally from a legal theoretical perspective but with a significant impact on the social sciences—to describe how multiple forms of discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism, and classism) intersect and reinforce each other. For example, Black women are not discriminated against only as women or as Black individuals, but their specific experiences at the intersection of both systems of oppression are often overlooked. Intersectionality thus helps to understand that social inequalities are not isolated but interwoven and affect people differently depending on their social position. Intersectionality can help to further differentiate the concepts mentioned so far. Men* who do not (or cannot) conform to hegemonic masculinity standards are often subject to multiple forms of marginalization and inequality—for instance, as (ethnicized or racialized) migrants*, as men* with low socioeconomic status, as homosexual, asexual, or bisexual men*, or as transgender men*. As Ann-Dorte Christensen and Sune Qvotrup Jensen [67] argue, it is therefore useful, in the analysis of power relations between men* and women* and within the group of men* itself, to consider these additional intersectional dimensions, which in turn is also relevant for a sexually pedagogical approach that is both sensitive to and critical of hegemony. Injustices such as poverty, oppression, and discrimination can be factors that lead men* to reaffirm their social position through masculinity, often in conjunction with demeaning attitudes toward and assaults against women [68]. The fact that sexual socialization is also shaped by intersectional experiences—meaning, for example, that class- and milieu-specific inequalities play a role in how masculinity is passed on, learned, and lived, so that *doing gender* is always also *doing class* [69]—has been widely theorized and empirically examined [70,71]. To give just one example: prevailing ideals of masculinity make it difficult for boys* to recognize and acknowledge certain forms of sexual violation against themselves, as these do not fit into the stereotype that "men always want sex" [72,73]. It is also important to consider a class-specific element, as the role of "victim" is harder to accept for boys* (and girls*) from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who, throughout their socialization, have often been made aware of their vul-

nerability to powerful structures and individuals in different ways and have experienced this firsthand [74].

Intersectionality is therefore significant for the sex education of boys* in two ways. On the one hand, it brings differences and inequalities within the group of boys* into focus, acknowledging that while they are all (to varying degrees) shaped by masculinity and thus share similar experiences, needs, and interests, there are still important differences among them that overlay or push this common horizon into the background [71]. These differences must be taken into account both theoretically and practically [3,13]. On the other hand, intersectionality also shapes how boys* see themselves and how they interact with others. Hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, and sexual scripts are co-shaped by their respective positions, environments, and experiences, which also influences how they engage with others. For the sexual health and sexual rights of boys*, social inequalities represent both a risk—such as the significantly higher risk of sexually transmitted infections in contexts of poverty and homelessness [75,76]—and a contributing factor to why boys* themselves become perpetrators*, violating others' sexual rights and sexual self-determination. Addressing this issue and developing alternative ways to process experienced injustices is also a task of sex education.

## 3. Elements of a Gender-Sensitive Sex Education for Boys*

Now, we turn to the core elements of a gender-sensitive sex education for boys*, which incorporates and pedagogically implements the theoretical foundations previously explained. This refers to a sex education that is aware of the social construction of masculinity and the power of hegemonic masculinity while also being committed to the goal of sexual health and sexual rights for boys* and taking into account the intersectional entanglement of discrimination and inequality, recognizing that boys* are not all the same but differ in essential characteristics that influence their position and status in society or social groups, leading to specific needs and interests. The four core elements to be briefly outlined below are empowerment and self-determination, alternative and non-toxic masculinity, gender justice, and finally, the development of critical competencies.

Empowerment and self-determination constitute the first element of a gender-sensitive sex education for boys*, meaning that they should be encouraged and enabled to make their own decisions reflectively, become aware of their strengths, and shape their sexuality authentically and according to their own ideas [77]. Empowerment refers to making boys* active agents in their own lives, while the ability of self-determination is its expression in their biography as well as in concrete actions and situations. Accordingly, Anna Kågesten and Miranda van Reeuwijk [30] understand empowerment as a central element of competency-based sex education—they identify key competencies such as sexual education, gender-equitable attitudes, respect for human rights and consent, critical reflection skills, coping strategies, and interpersonal communication skills. This approach aims to enable young people to shape their own sexuality in a self-determined, informed manner, in harmony with their individual values and ideas as well as fundamental ethical values and norms, by not only providing them with the necessary knowledge but also strengthening their ability to make decisions, critically question social norms, recognize gendered power structures, and actively contribute to changing them in order to live a self-determined, healthy, and fulfilling sexuality that respects both their personal needs and interests and the rights and boundaries of others. To achieve this, it is necessary to strengthen adolescents' self-confidence and cultivate appropriate social skills so that boys* possess the knowledge, resources, and psychological resilience to make informed decisions about their sexuality, actively assert their rights, and protect themselves—and others—from potential risks or forms of oppression. It must always be considered that empowerment

and self-determination are not only characteristics and abilities that boys* can learn but are also normatively charged. This is not self-evident and requires justification, which cannot be provided in detail here. Such a justification must engage with the question of why autonomy and agency are considered valuable abilities—that is, morally valuable. This points to a long-standing liberal tradition, which, however, also has its pitfalls and has been criticized for placing too much emphasis on the individual. In contrast, relational conceptions of autonomy highlight that all people—not only adolescents—are always dependent on others in order to be autonomous in the first place. In this sense, empowerment and agency—or self-determination—should be understood as abilities necessary for leading a good life, one characterized by authenticity and autonomy, particularly in the realm of sexuality. This aligns with the values of liberal modernity that it is preferable to be capable of action rather than powerless and better to be autonomous and self-determined than unfree and externally controlled. Adolescents are still in the process of developing these characteristics and abilities—this distinguishes them in their cognitive, psychological, and social competencies from children, who are significantly less free, and from adults, whose development in this regard is largely complete and who also legally possess far greater control over their lives and more freedoms [78,79]. Therefore, if boys* are to be pedagogically enabled to become capable of action and self-determined in relation to their sexuality, this is fraught with all the difficulties associated with the liberal paradigm, namely, the recognition that these goals can never be fully realized, that human beings are always socially determined—through socialization, for example—and can never fully detach from this, and that agency and self-determination also have natural, social, and moral boundaries that must also be part of this sex education. In this sense, empowerment and self-determination are also part of sexual health, understood as sexual well-being and the realization of one's own sexual desires and interests, always with consideration for the rights of all involved sexual partners and their sexual health [1,57]. For boys*, in particular, this is also a task that may initially seem paradoxical: they must critically reflect on and relinquish their own privileges and the power position attributed to them as (emerging) men* before they can truly be powerful and self-determined. Masculinity—as the concept of hegemonic masculinity illustrates—is associated with power and attributes of freedom and self-determination, in contrast to femininity, which is characterized as subordinate and externally controlled. However, this is precisely where boys* also experience powerlessness, lack of freedom, and external control, as they must conform to these ideals, norms, and practices if they wish to be recognized as "real" men. Therefore, empowerment is both self-critical and system-critical. A central issue for sexually active adolescents is the question of consent and how it is negotiated. The ethics of consent is notoriously contested, but several important points seem clear: consent cannot be reduced to the mere absence of a 'no'; it means more than simply asking—it requires active dialog. Consent also involves awareness of the social pressures or norms that may lead individuals to engage in unwanted sex, meaning they agree to something they do not truly want. Moreover, consent should not only be discussed in the context of male sexual violence; it also concerns situations in which boys give consent without genuinely wanting to—for instance, because they feel compelled to conform to sexual norms. Consent is a central element of good sex [28,80]; that is, sexual experiences that enable positive encounters and learning processes. However, it must also be acknowledged that consent cannot prevent all potentially distressing experiences. This is particularly relevant in relation to practices such as rough sex, which are increasingly common among adolescents. Such experiences can be disturbing, even—or especially—when they were consented to. They call for reflection that goes beyond a simple yes-or-no framework.

Finally, from an intersectional perspective, it must be considered that empowerment and self-determination are particularly difficult for those boys* who experience various

forms of discrimination and marginalization and have fewer educational opportunities, resources, and a sense of self-efficacy than boys* from privileged families or those whose sexual identity or orientation does not align with the ideals of heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity. The ability to find oneself and confidently and authentically live out one's sexuality, even in the face of resistance and a hostile environment, is often highly challenging for these boys*, requiring special support and guidance [13,81].

Ultimately, self-determination and empowerment must also be applied to the theory and practice of sex education itself: following the long-established principle in childhood and youth research that children and adolescents should have a say and are experts in their own lives [82,83], their perspectives, desires, and opinions are also a central resource for gender-sensitive sex education [84], as long as it does not intend to impose content and knowledge in a top–down manner.

This also touches upon the second element of a gender-sensitive sex education for boys*, namely the development of alternative and non-toxic masculinity [85], which is characterized by attributes such as openness, empathy, care, justice, and respect, and stands in contrast to the traits of hegemonic masculinity, which emphasize competition, emotional detachment, supposed rationality, power, and, in particular, the devaluation of non-hegemonic masculinity and femininity. As Fritjof Bönold argues [86], there is a need for a sex education that shows boys* what it means to be a man without conforming to traditional masculine stereotypes—that is, in a sense, not being a "real man"—but instead consciously choosing a different form of masculinity. Alternative role models and reference points are crucial for this [87]. Such alternatives can be found particularly in research on queer sex education for boys [13,81], where the aim is to deconstruct masculinity and raise awareness of diverse and equally valued alternatives. While empowerment and self-determination primarily open up the space for boys* to discover themselves, alternative and non-toxic masculinities provide concrete possibilities they can orient themselves toward, as they are always in the process of searching for and finding their identity. As Carl Eberhard Kraatz [88] demonstrates, it is not enough to merely present alternatives; boys* also need the opportunity to discover and appropriate them for themselves. Otherwise, the goals of gender-sensitive sex education fall short of their commitment to fostering agency and self-determination—meaning authentic sexuality. It is also important not to view masculinity solely as an individual project, as this obscures the structural, institutional, and organizational causes underlying hegemonic masculinity. Sex education for boys* that aims to develop alternative forms of masculinity—such as caring masculinity [89–91], which emphasizes emotional competence, empathy, and (selfless and sincere) concern and action for others—must not overlook the fact that overcoming unequal gender relations and hegemonic masculinity requires more than just individual change [92]. Thomas Viola Rieske [81] argues that queer pedagogy, in particular, can provide a transformative framework for exploring alternative forms of masculinity by challenging rigid binary gender categories and creating spaces where boys* can experience and experiment with diverse gender identities and expressions without fear of judgment. Queer approaches do not necessarily have to focus exclusively on LGBTQ+ issues but can benefit all boys* by expanding their understanding of masculinity beyond restrictive, hegemonic, and heteronormative notions and norms [13,93]. By focusing on alternative and non-toxic forms of masculinity, gender-sensitive sex education for boys* not only expresses an inclusive and diversity-conscious understanding of sexual health but also addresses the needs of boys* who experience discrimination and disadvantage based on their sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, or ethnic identity. Their masculinity should no longer be suppressed and devalued but recognized and respected as that of equally valuable individuals.

The third element is gender justice, meaning the goal of designing sex education for boys* in such a way that they critically reflect on injustices based on gender—as well as sexual orientation or identity—both in their private lives and social environments and do not reproduce them themselves. What is understood as gender justice is contested, even within feminism [94]; on one side are different feminist approaches that emphasize the differences but also the equality of genders, while on the other side are queer–feminist approaches that fundamentally challenge the gender dichotomy and emphasize its social construction. While difference feminism holds that masculinity and femininity are not reducible to or interchangeable with each other, queer feminism seeks to deconstruct these two categories [85,95]. What both share is the view that the patriarchal order, the inequality between and the dominance of men* over women*, and the privileging of masculinity are unjust and manifest both in private life and in the public sphere.

For sex education, crucial fields of gender injustice include all forms of inequality between men* and women* or boys* and girls* that relate to sexuality, sexual health, and sexual rights—for example, the reproduction of male dominance and the higher valuation of male sexuality in romantic or sexual relationships, or the sexual victimization of girls* by boys*. Gender justice therefore goes hand in hand with the dismantling of hegemonic masculinity and its corresponding sexual scripts. Ben Almassi [85,96] understands gender justice primarily as a demand placed on men*, who, often unconsciously, contribute to power asymmetries and the unequal distribution of positions and resources between men* and women* through their privileges. He argues, drawing on bell hooks and Michael Kimmel [97,98], that men* should see themselves as allies* within feminist movements working to dismantle unjust structures, which they achieve by cultivating a non-toxic masculinity that is caring, empathetic, honest, and self-critical. The status of an ally* is also a valuable concept for gender-sensitive sex education for boys*, even though it must be acknowledged that adolescents are still developing their abilities, knowledge, and competencies. For boys*, this means engaging in sex education that encourages them to confront gender injustices in their immediate environment, where they may be complicit in reproducing and reinforcing them, as well as examining the broader social structures, norms, and practices through which men* are placed above women*. Thus, it is just as important for boys* to critically examine their own privileges as men* as it is to analyze macro-level structures of society, culture, economy, and politics. In the context of discussing gender justice, an intersectional perspective also demands consideration of additional injustices that affect both men* and women* and influence their opportunities for sexual health and the exercise of sexual rights in various ways. For example, why racialized girls* experience disadvantages not only as girls but also due to their race, or why some boys* have more privileges than others, making it harder for them to see themselves as allies and act accordingly, leading them instead to strive for hegemonic masculinity ideals. This aligns with approaches such as those proposed by Amanda Keddie, Michael Flood, and Shelley Hewson-Munro [99], who argue that while many programs critically address hegemonic masculinity, they often fail to adequately consider the complex interactions between gender roles and other social categories such as ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, and disability. As a result, they may unintentionally reproduce stereotypical notions of masculinity and overlook the multifaceted experiences of marginalized groups. Referring to Nancy Fraser and the interdependence of social inequalities [100], they emphasize the relevance of participatory and context-specific pedagogical approaches that encourage boys* to critically reflect on their own position within societal power structures and to recognize the deeper interconnections of social inequalities.

The fourth element to be emphasized here is the teaching and acquisition of critical competencies, particularly self-reflection and the ability to navigate role models, expecta-

tions, values, moral concepts, and social norms. Since youth today is significantly shaped by media—meaning that adolescents are constantly surrounded by media and their content, making them a central socialization force—a key competency is the ability to engage with these media critically. In the realm of sexuality, and especially for boys*, this has been discussed in recent years with a particular focus on (online) pornography, which is consumed almost ubiquitously by boys*—as well as by many girls*, primarily for masturbation [101]. As Polly Haste [9] demonstrates, a sex education that avoids addressing pornography contributes to boys* relying on it as a source of education and information, which can reinforce distorted perceptions of sexuality. Media shape ideas about gender, masculinity, sexuality, sexual scripts, needs, and attractions [102,103]. Self-determination and the search for alternative forms of masculinity are thus only possible in engagement with media. At the same time, media provide a space and an opportunity to do exactly that—to learn about other forms of masculinity and sexuality, explore positive sexual health and sexual rights, engage in conversations with other adolescents, form relationships, or find role models and inspiration. A gender-sensitive sex education for boys* must therefore also be media-based, making media both a subject of discussion and a tool for engagement. This includes what Nicola Döring and others term *porn competence* [104], while Kate Dawson, Saoirse Nic Gabhainn, and Pádraig MacNeela [105] use the term *porn literacy* to describe the ability to critically analyze pornographic content and media within the context of their production, intentions, messages, and effects—including their influence on one's body image, self-concept, sexuality, and sexual scripts—rather than passively absorbing them. Media literacy is thus also a central aspect of empowerment, enabling adolescents to utilize media and its benefits—for example, for queer boys* to better understand themselves, find allies and other queer youth, and exchange experiences. Empowerment and self-determination in this context also mean taking seriously the fact that adolescents consume pornography, understanding how and why they do so, and understanding how they engage with it—neither overestimating nor underestimating their abilities to reflect and critique and avoiding falling into moral panic [106,107]. Media literacy in sex education should not be limited to viewing boys* as consumers—whether of pornography, streaming series, films, or short clips on platforms like TikTok and YouTube—but also as producers. Today's digital technologies, especially smartphones, allow adolescents to create, share, and interact with media content, including sexually explicit material, almost anytime and anywhere. This is by no means to suggest that the responsibility for dealing with technologies should be placed solely on young people—or their parents. Rather, the web of responsibility is more complex. A significant share of responsibility lies with the companies that develop, promote, and profit from these technologies, as well as with the state and its institutions as regulatory bodies. Gunter Graf and Gottfried Schweiger [31], for example, have powerfully argued—particularly in relation to risks faced by children and adolescents—that it is the tech companies that must ensure the safety of their products. At the same time, young people also bear a degree of responsibility of their own—this is part of their growing up and developing autonomy. However, they need pedagogical programs and support to be able to take on this responsibility in a meaningful and empowered way. A gender-sensitive sex education must therefore address the responsible use of both their own and others' media content, whether within peer groups or in romantic and sexual relationships. This requires an approach that is neither blind to the gender dynamics that boys* themselves reproduce nor overly reliant on a risk-based discourse that primarily operates through prohibitions [108,109]. From the perspective of sexual rights, boys* also have the right to shape their own sexuality and use media technologies for this purpose [110,111]. Engaging with media also enables boys* to recognize power and privilege structures that are deeply embedded in the media's portrayal and construction of masculinity. Boys* grow

up in a media environment that often presents hegemonic masculinity norms as desirable, emphasizing dominance, emotional restraint, and heteronormativity. Through critical reflection on these norms in and through media, boys* learn that masculinity is not a fixed, biologically determined trait but a social construct reproduced through cultural practices and institutional structures. Media also play a role in essentializing masculinity and gender roles, reinforcing rigid norms that a gender-sensitive sex education must actively challenge.

## 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, gender-sensitive sex education for boys* emerges as a complex and demanding educational task that, on the one hand, offers great potential for promoting empowerment, self-determination, and alternative masculinity ideals, but on the other hand, faces significant challenges and difficulties in implementation. The present concept is based on the premise that sexual socialization, hegemonic masculinity norms, and intersectional discrimination processes are interconnected. Only a holistic approach that addresses both the individual and structural dimensions of sexual development can adequately respond to the diverse needs, interests, problems, and experiences of boys*.

A central issue lies in effectively addressing and deconstructing deeply ingrained hegemonic masculinity norms, which are still widely taken for granted in many societal and institutional structures. Although alternative and non-toxic masculinity models have become more widespread and are embraced by many boys* and men* [89,97,112,113], the question remains to what extent educational interventions can genuinely transform norms that have been internalized and socially reproduced over many years, or whether a combination of multiple factors and socialization agents is necessary. In this regard, it seems both reasonable and necessary to begin comprehensive sexual education as early as possible [2,37]. However, this highlights the inherent tension between the goal of raising boys* to be self-determined and emancipated individuals and the real power structures in which these boys* operate. Moreover, gender-sensitive sex education encounters structural, institutional, organizational, and personal obstacles and resistance. Schools and other educational institutions are often under pressure—from parents, religious groups, or political actors—to convey conservative educational content [114]. Institutional inertia, lack of resources, and insufficiently trained or overwhelmed staff pose major challenges to the consistent implementation of comprehensive sex education, particularly in schools that are already struggling with resource shortages, understaffing, or other social issues affecting students. This discrepancy between theory and practice leads to a situation where, although significant progress has been made at the conceptual level of sex education and in individual pilot programs, practical implementation often remains inadequate, slow, and fragmented [1,115].

Another critical issue concerns the risk of reproducing marginalization and exclusion. Although the concept of gender-sensitive sex education for boys* explicitly acknowledges the diversity—and inequalities—within the group of boys*, there is a risk that specific educational programs unintentionally fail to reach or adequately address and involve certain subgroups, such as boys* from socioeconomically disadvantaged or discriminated communities. Additionally, there is the challenge of balancing empowerment with the critical reflection of one's own masculine privileges. Boys* should be encouraged to explore and adopt alternative, caring, and empathetic forms of masculinity, which for some means questioning or even relinquishing previously held, personally meaningful, and identity-forming beliefs. To prevent experiences of stigmatization—whether from other, "progressive" boys* or educators—overwhelm, or resistance, not only is a high level of pedagogical sensitivity required, but also institutional frameworks that allow space for discourse and self-critical reflection. To meet the demands of a contemporary and

inclusive sex education, greater interdisciplinary collaboration is needed—to reflect on the various dimensions of masculinity and boys'* lives from pedagogical, psychological, medical, sociological, and ethical perspectives—along with investments in time, (trained) personnel, and resources, as well as continuous reflection on existing pedagogical practices.

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