

Body, relationships and rights in early childhood: an educational experience on gender and sexuality in the 0-3 age group

Corpo, relazioni e diritti nella prima infanzia: un'esperienza educativa tra genere e sessualità nella fascia 0-3

Eleonora Bonvini

Dottoranda in Scienze Pedagogiche, Università degli Studi di Bologna, eleonora.bonvini2@unibo.it

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ABSTRACT

This contribution examines the transformative role of early childhood services in promoting sexual, emotional, affective, and gender education from the earliest years of life. Drawing on an educational experience implemented in a municipal nursery in Bologna, it highlights how the body can be recognised as the primary site of experience and knowledge, as well as a vehicle of relationships and meaning-making. Inspired by the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) framework, the project valorised corporeality as an educational dimension, fostering awareness, listening, and mutual respect. The experience highlights the importance of intentional and shared educational pathways that can counter resistance and stereotypes while promoting well-being, citizenship, and relational justice.

KEYWORDS

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE); Early childhood (0-3); Inclusive educational practices;
Educator training; Consent and mutual care.
Educazione sessuale completa (CSE); Prima infanzia (0-3); Pratiche educative inclusive;
Formazione degli educatori; Consenso e cura reciproca.

Il contributo riflette sul ruolo trasformativo dei servizi per l'infanzia nella promozione di un'educazione sessuale, affettiva e di genere sin dai primi anni di vita. A partire da un'esperienza educativa realizzata in un nido del Comune di Bologna, si mostra come il corpo possa essere riconosciuto come primo luogo di esperienza e conoscenza, veicolo di relazioni e significazioni. Il progetto, ispirato all'approccio della CSE, ha valorizzato la corporeità come dimensione educativa, promuovendo la consapevolezza, l'ascolto e il rispetto reciproco. L'esperienza evidenzia l'urgenza di percorsi educativi intenzionali e condivisi capaci di contrastare resistenze e stereotipi, promuovendo benessere, cittadinanza e giustizia relazionale.

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Corresponding author: Eleonora Bonvini | eleonora.bonvini2@unibo.it

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1. Introduction

This paper is situated within the contemporary debate on gender and difference pedagogy (Ulivieri, 1995, 2022; Marone, 2002; Burgio, Lopez, 2023; Demozzi, Ghigi, 2024), as well as on the importance of affective, sexual, and gender education from the earliest years of life (WHO, BZgA, 2010; WAS, 2014; UNESCO, 2018).

Within this broad and articulated epistemological framework, the aim is to reflect on the transformative and democratic role of early childhood educational services as generative spaces of knowledge and relationships, capable of enhancing the plurality of subjectivities and countering, at an early stage, stereotypes, inequalities, and normative, sexist, and reductive models of difference. School culture, understood as the ensemble of practices, languages, mediations, and everyday relationships, constitutes fertile ground on which to act to promote a more equitable and just society (Haberland, Rogow, 2015; Bonvini, Demozzi, Ghigi, 2025).

In this perspective, teachers and, more broadly, education professionals assume a crucial role of pedagogical mediation: not merely as transmitters of content but as builders of dialogical contexts, listening and reflexive spaces, and environments that foster the emergence of subjectivities, the recognition of differences, and active participation (Contini *et alii*, 2014; Fabbri, Striano, Melacarne, 2014). Respect for children should therefore also include a reflection on the body, emotions, and gender roles, which are internalised and performed from the earliest years of life. Thus, an education that engages with the body, affective relationships, and gender structures constitutes an essential tool of prevention against potential forms of abuse, violence, or denial of the right to self-determination of children and young people.

Building on these premises, this contribution presents a concrete experience of body education in the 0-3 age group, carried out in an early childhood service in the Municipality of Bologna. The project was inspired by the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) paradigm proposed by UNESCO (2018) and reinterpreted in early childhood through a relational and embodied approach, adopting an extensive perspective respectful of children's developmental pace and implicit questions. In this sense, the body was recognised as the primary site of experience and knowledge, a vehicle of communication and affective, symbolic, and educational meaning-making.

Sexuality and gender education is thus understood as a daily, widespread, and integrated process within the educational relationship, supported, for example, through the use of picture books and storytelling, which foster children's awareness of their bodies, their ability to express emotions and needs, and their respect for others (Crivellaro, Nardone, 2020; Demozzi, 2023; Demozzi, Bonvini, 2023).

Through workshops, observations, and meetings with families, the project addressed themes such as emotional recognition, consent, mutual care, and body diversity. The experience highlighted the importance of intentional, reflective, and shared educational design, capable of acknowledging the formative value of corporeality and of promoting relationships based on listening, empathy, and reciprocity (WHO, BZgA, 2010).

In the Italian social context, narratives marked by sexophobia, gender-based violence, and strong resistance to such education within schools remain prevalent (Trappolin, Gusmeroli, 2021). To avoid ideological rigidity on these issues, it is urgent to affirm the importance of educational pathways that centre children's bodily, relational, and affective well-being from the earliest years of life. Educating about sexuality thus means educating for citizenship, self-care and care for others, and the construction of a relational ethic grounded in rights, justice, and respect.

2. Violence and Abuse in Childhood

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) constitutes a primary prevention tool against violence and abuse: working from early childhood on consent, bodily autonomy, and respectful relationships strengthens socio-emotional skills and self-protective capacities. Evidence shows that exposure to maltreatment has long-term effects on mental health and relationships, while well-structured educational programs reduce aggressive attitudes and behaviours, improving the overall school climate (Goldfarb, Lieberman, 2021). In this direction, the Istanbul Convention also moves, recognising in Article 14 the role of education in preventing gender-based violence by promoting equality, non-stereotypical roles, and non-violent conflict resolution.

As emphasised in the literature (Jewkes, Flood, Lang, 2015; Shah, 2024), CSE, when age-appropriate and consistently integrated, helps break the silence often surrounding abuse: children and young people become more capable of seeking help and reporting risky situations (Walsh *et alii*, 2018). Studies have highlighted, for example, that such interventions help even very young children to recognise sexual and other forms of abuse, distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate touch, say 'no' to unwanted advances, and identify and communicate with trusted adults. Importantly, the teaching methods adopted are age-appropriate and generally active, including role-playing, theatrical performances, songs, illustrated cards, posters, and picture books (Bonvini, Demozzi, Ghigi, 2025).

Finally, the school represents both an opportunity and a risk: it can act as a protective environment, but also reproduce exclusionary norms and function as a gendered device (Burgio, 2015), reinforcing the status quo. For instance, subjectivities that do not conform to binary and cis-heteronormative models experience higher rates of discrimination and violence (Santambrogio, 2022). Integrating a bodily lexicon into everyday education that allows children to name, ask, and respect themselves, or structuring routines based on consent and conflict management – as suggested by the CSE perspective – contributes to the creation of safe environments that promote equity and rights, even in the earliest stages of development.

3. The Italian Context

In Italy, sexuality education is not compulsory and is usually introduced only around the age of 14, positioning the country among the last in Europe (European Commission, 2020; Cassar, 2022). Its implementation is left to the discretion of individual schools, thus contributing to highly uneven provision across the national territory (Battini, 2014). In recent years, debates on issues related to gender and sexuality have been the cause of sharp political and social controversies. Frequently, ideological and religious oppositions – often referred to as the so-called “gender ideology” – have also emerged, with strong public resistance even toward gender and sexuality education (Prearo, 2024), particularly when addressed to children¹. Concerns become especially exacerbated in early childhood, leading to objections such as: a) it is not age-appropriate, b) it may lead to premature sexual initiation, or c) it risks depriving children of their “innocence” (Bonvini, Demozzi, Ghigi, 2025).

However, evidence and international guidelines disprove these fears: accurate and age-appropriate CSE does not accelerate sexual activity but instead reduces risky behaviours, while fostering well-being and healthy relationships (UNESCO, 2018; Goldfarb, Lieberman, 2021). Moreover, in the absence of structured school-based curricula, children and adolescents tend to rely on informal sources (peers, media, social networks), which are often contradictory or inaccurate—for instance, pornography, sometimes used as a first form of sexual literacy. Families, of course, play an important role, but they often lack the necessary knowledge and communication tools to address such complex issues. As a result, many young people turn to alternative sources, perceiving their parents as too emotionally involved or feeling embarrassed to discuss these matters with them.

This highlights the need for structured, gradual, and culturally relevant educational pathways within early childhood services (0-6 years). For such initiatives to be effective, however, they must necessarily include thorough training for education professionals and teaching staff, as well as parents, within an ecological perspective.

4. The Project *A fior di pelle. Seminare rispetto, nutrire comprensione*

Before describing the project, it is essential to underline the centrality of the body as the primary medium through which, especially in early childhood, most learning processes occur. The body is the means through which children recognise themselves in relation to others and to their environment (Demozzi, Ghigi, 2024). Through the body, learning processes unfold that engage cognitive, emotional, and relational dimensions (Contini, Fabbri, Manuzzi, 2006), and multiple components of identity emerge. In this sense, recognising the body as an educational site is particularly relevant for addressing the challenges of affective, sexual, and gender education (WHO, 2010; UNESCO, 2018), promoting respect, equality, and consent, as well as preventing forms of domination and violence.

Within this framework lies the project *A fior di pelle. Seminare rispetto, nutrire comprensione*, which pursued two main objectives: on the one hand, to give visibility to dimensions often marginalized, such as those related to the body, sexuality, and gender; on the other hand, to recognize childhood as a subject of rights, too often relegated to residual spaces and excluded from decision-making processes concerning their own education. Silencing children means depriving them of the possibility to ask questions, make sense of experiences and behaviours related to the body and emotions, and implicitly reinforcing the idea that they have no voice, power, or competence (Demozzi, 2016).

The project aimed to overturn this logic, reframing marginality not as a place of exclusion but as a space of possibility, resistance, and innovation. It is precisely by acknowledging childhood and sexuality as marginalised

1 Recent legislative proposals in Italy (DDL n. 2271 Amorese, n. 2278 Sasso, n. 2423 Valditara) specifically target childhood education, aiming to restrict any school activities related to sexuality and affectivity. These bills reinforce the 2018 ministerial note on parental “informed consent” and introduce further prohibitions, such as limiting the use of the so-called “carrera alias” – an administrative procedure allowing students to use a chosen name and gender identity in school or university records without formal legal recognition – and explicitly banning discussions on gender identity, sexual orientation, or gender transition. Compared to the media campaigns of 2014, this marks a shift toward the institutionalization of such resistances, with the risk of structurally reducing educational spaces and undermining children’s right to non-discrimination.

territories that the potential emerges to challenge stereotypes and predetermined roles from the earliest years (Abbatecola, Stagi, 2017). In line with bell hooks' (1989) reflections, marginality is reinterpreted here as a creative and counter-hegemonic space, capable of producing new narratives and more equitable relationships, where "we are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world" (p. 23).

From this perspective, the project sought to translate CSE principles into concrete practices, taking the body as a privileged ground for discovery and awareness. The activities promoted bodily spontaneity, understood as the pleasure of inhabiting one's body in relation to the environment, objects, and the group. Bodily improvisation was used to stimulate relational skills, mutual respect, emotional regulation, and awareness of consent. At the same time, the project emphasised the involvement of families, recognised as active interlocutors in educational pathways, and promoted the transferability of practices, enabling the teaching staff to adopt and reproduce them autonomously.

5. Project Structure

The project *A fior di pelle. Seminare rispetto, nutrire comprensione* was piloted at the municipal nursery "Giaccaglia Betti" in Bologna, involving children aged 12 to 36 months. Initiated at the request of the educators of the two nursery sections, the workshop was conceived as a continuation of a previous program implemented at the same school, which focused on affective, gender, and sexuality education.

The sessions were designed by an interdisciplinary working group² in collaboration with the teaching staff and carried out with the support of the Bologna-based association *Micce*³. The aim was to propose age-appropriate experiences aligned with the project themes. A total of 42 children participated, divided into three mixed groups of about ten each, attending a cycle of four weekly 30-minute sessions in May 2023. In parallel, two family meetings were organised (before and after the workshop), each lasting two hours. To ensure transferability, the sections were provided with educational materials, including four picture books⁴ selected in collaboration with the educators, as well as a box of tools used during the activities, such as scarves and small coloured hoops.

The structure of the workshop followed a constant ritual articulated in three phases: (1) an opening greeting accompanied by the reading of a picture book⁵; (2) dynamic bodily exploration with games and motor activities designed to stimulate balance, coordination, and bodily awareness; and (3) a closing ritual to consolidate the experience. The final session included the participation of parents in a *ContactKids*⁶ lesson, offering children and adults the opportunity to share playful exercises focused on movement and bodily contact, to strengthen adult-child relationships.

The two-family meetings proved to be central for building a climate of trust and transparency. On the one hand, they made it possible to illustrate the aims and methods of the activities; on the other, they provided space for questions and concerns – particularly those related to the risk of premature sexual initiation or references to children's intimate parts. Such problems, frequently noted in the literature, were addressed through the sharing of scientific evidence and international guidelines showing that age-appropriate sexuality education does not anticipate sexual behaviours but instead fosters a positive body image and respectful relationships, constituting a protective factor (WHO, BZgA, 2010).

During the feedback meeting, parents reflected on their experience with the children during the *ContactKids* session⁷. Although some initially expressed discomfort in engaging in body-based activities in a shared space with other adults, the majority acknowledged the value of the project and expressed a desire to continue similar initiatives within the educational routine. Some particularly appreciated the opportunity to address issues related to gender and sexuality, considering them a valuable stimulus for personal and family reflection; others maintained reserva-

2 The project was conceived and implemented by the working group composed of Prof. Silvia Demozzi and Dr. Eleonora Bonvini (didactic and pedagogical supervision) from the University of Bologna, and Francesca Penzo (artistic direction and supervision) from the association *Micce*.

3 *Micce* is a social promotion association engaged in training through workshop-based activities in schools, in collaboration with local associations. Its mission is to promote cultural activities with an accessible and plural transfeminist approach, raising awareness across different age groups on gender equity and active citizenship.

4 The picture books donated to the school were: *A fior di pelle* by Chiara Carminati and Massimiliano Tappari; *Così come sono* di Helen Druvet; *Julian è una sirena* by Jessica Love and *La nudità che male fa* by Rosie Haine.

5 The selected picture book was *A fior di pelle* by Chiara Carminati and Massimiliano Tappari.

6 The *ContactKids* method, developed by dancer Ilay Yatuv in 2014, is a movement-based approach that uses playful physical contact between parents and children (ages 2-5) to enhance trust, motor skills, and non-verbal communication, while strengthening the parent-child bond. It is now practiced internationally through certified instructors in educational and community settings.

7 The proposed activities consisted of exercises connected to the discovery of children's bodily dynamics and movement qualities through play, the development of body schema, coordination, balance, and spatial structuring.

tions about the appropriateness of the proposal for the 12-36 month age range, but nonetheless recognised the coherence of the language used and the attention given to children's developmental levels.

Overall, the pilot project functioned not only as a workshop for developing children's bodily awareness and relational skills but also as a transformative space for dialogue among educators, families, and the educational community. The framework contributed to building a welcoming and inclusive environment grounded in respect, consent, and the appreciation of diversity – core pedagogical principles of the project.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its positive outcomes, the project has several limitations. It was carried out in a single municipal nursery in Bologna, with a small and relatively homogeneous sample, and over a short time frame (four sessions) without follow-up, which limits generalizability and prevents assessment of long-term effects. Evaluation relied on qualitative observations and feedback from educators and families, without standardised instruments, thereby exposing results to potential biases. Family engagement also proved uneven: while some parents participated actively, others expressed resistance or doubts about addressing issues related to the body, gender, and sexuality in the 0-3 age range. These reactions reflect the persistence of cultural taboos and social fears (e.g., the risk of "premature sexuation"), obstacles often reported in the literature. Another critical issue concerns staff training: without structured professional development, the replicability of the approach remains fragile. Furthermore, the absence of a national policy framework and ongoing political and cultural resistance make implementation fragmented, directly affecting the possibility of adopting such initiatives systematically.

In light of these limitations, several development trajectories can be outlined. First, future studies should be designed with pre and post assessments and validated instruments, integrating systematic observations and collecting feedback from educators, children, and their families. Including follow-up assessments (after three or six months) would allow monitoring of the durability of learning and attitudes over time. Strengthening the training of educators and staff through specific modules is also crucial.

Another area of work concerns family involvement. Beyond informational meetings, participatory workshops, Q&A sessions with experts, and accessible educational materials could be developed to address concerns and resistance in a transparent and constructive manner, thereby reducing the social alarm that often surrounds these issues. Expanding the project to other nurseries, kindergartens, and eventually primary schools would help ensure educational continuity throughout children's development, consolidating learning and practices. Finally, although more complex, institutional support is crucial to guarantee resources and structured, shared policy frameworks starting from early childhood.

7. Conclusions

The *A fior di pelle. Seminare rispetto, nutrire comprensione* project demonstrated that even in the 0-3 age range, it is possible to implement practices of affective, sexual, and gender education centred on the body as a tool for learning and relationships. Despite the highlighted limitations, the project fostered positive experiences of bodily awareness and mutual respect among children, while also creating opportunities for dialogue with educators and families.

The experience confirms that gradual, age-appropriate CSE does not hasten sexual activity but instead acts as a protective factor against abuse, stereotypes, and violence. It further underscores the need to strengthen staff training and family involvement to ensure sustainability and broader dissemination. At the policy level, the urgency emerges for a national framework capable of overcoming the current fragmentation. The challenge, therefore, lies in transforming local pilot initiatives into structured and widespread programs that can shape educational and social culture, and promote more equitable and inclusive contexts for childhood.

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