Prayas (Health Group)

सहज
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SAHAJ · A PROGRAM FOR SAFE, INFORMED AND RESPECTFUL GROWING-UP

Contextualizing the SAHAJ Curriculum

A practical guide for educators and facilitators

THE CENTRAL IDEA

Contextualization does not mean changing what children need to know. It means finding the most meaningful, understandable and relevant way to help these particular children learn it.

Prayas (Initiatives in Health, Energy, Learning, and Parenthood) is a non-governmental, non-profit organization based in Pune, India. Prayas Health Group focuses on public health issues, including HIV/AIDS, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Climate Change and Health, and Preventive Oncology.

Introduction: Why this guide is needed

The SAHAJ curriculum has been developed with careful attention to the realities in which children grow up. While developing it, we have considered different aspects of children's lives, including their social and cultural contexts, family settings, gender norms, access to resources and technology, school environments, language and developmental needs. We have also drawn on the understanding that children learn not only from formal lessons, but from their families, peers, communities, media and everyday experiences.

At the same time, India is far too diverse for any single curriculum to anticipate every context in which it may be used. Children in an urban school and a rural school may have different daily experiences. But differences also exist between schools in the same city, between two villages, within the same classroom and even among children who appear to share a similar background. A curriculum cannot provide a separate version for every possible setting.

This guide therefore accompanies the SAHAJ curriculum. It is intended to help teachers and facilitators adapt the way they teach, explain and facilitate sessions so that the learning connects with the children in front of them. It offers a way to think about context, select relevant examples, while retaining the curriculum's learning objectives, scientific accuracy and rights-based principles.

The guide may also be useful to educators using other comprehensive sexuality education curricula. The examples are illustrative, not prescriptions. Educators should choose or develop examples after understanding their own learners, rather than assuming that a particular example will fit every urban, rural, tribal, linguistic or socio-economic setting.

> **REMEMBER**
>
> Contextualization is not simply translation, nor is it a matter of replacing an example in one context with another example in a different context. It is the thoughtful process of making learning meaningful to a particular group of learners.

1. What do we mean by context?

Context refers to the circumstances, relationships, experiences, opportunities and expectations that shape a child's life and influence how they understand, ask questions about and respond to what is discussed in the classroom. Context may include where children live, but it is not limited to geography. It includes their family and community relationships, language, gender, access to resources, previous learning, school environment and everyday experiences.

Context is not fixed or uniform. Children from the same neighbourhood may have different responsibilities, freedoms, access to technology or opportunities to discuss growing up. Educators should use what they know about their learners, remain curious and avoid making assumptions.

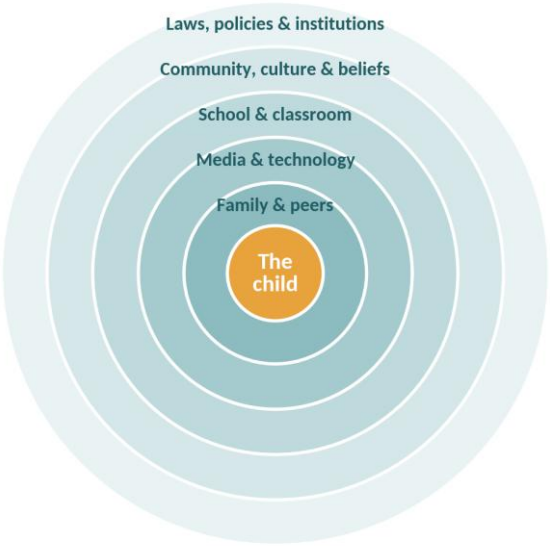

Figure 1. Every child is surrounded by layers of context that shape how they learn.

Dimension of context	What an educator might consider
Social and cultural	Family structures and relationships; community practices; language; caste and other social identities; religion; family values; ideas about privacy, respect, touch, love and growing up.
Gender	Expectations of boys, girls and children of other gender identities; differences in freedom, mobility, responsibilities, clothing, behaviour, participation and access to opportunities.
Economic and material	Access to phones, internet, transport, private space, menstrual products and health services; household responsibilities; paid or unpaid work; caring for siblings.
School and classroom	Government, private or alternative school; co-educational or single-gender setting; class size; school rules; language of instruction; classroom relationships and participation.
Geographic and everyday environment	Urban, peri-urban, rural or tribal setting; neighbourhood, housing, transport, playgrounds, markets, fields, community spaces and places children regularly visit.

Dimension of context	What an educator might consider
Learning history	What children have already learned; concepts and vocabulary they know; questions they have asked; misconceptions; learning from other subjects, family, peers or media.
Institutional and policy	School permissions and procedures; parent and school expectations; referral pathways; child-protection procedures and applicable laws.

2. What does contextualization involve?

Contextualization is the process of adapting how a session is facilitated so that children can understand and engage with the intended learning. Depending on the group, this may involve adapting:

- the examples, stories, characters and situations used;
- the language, vocabulary, pace and amount of explanation;
- the images, illustrations, role-plays and activities;
- the places, relationships and everyday situations used in scenarios;
- the way questions are invited and discussions are facilitated;
- the grouping, seating or participation arrangements;
- the support or referral information shared with children.

For example, an activity about online safety should not assume that every child owns a smartphone or has an individual social-media account. In one class, the relevant situation may involve a personal phone and social media. In another, it may involve a shared family phone, a game, a video, a message seen on someone else's device or an interaction in a group chat. The learning about privacy, pressure, respectful communication and seeking help remains the same.

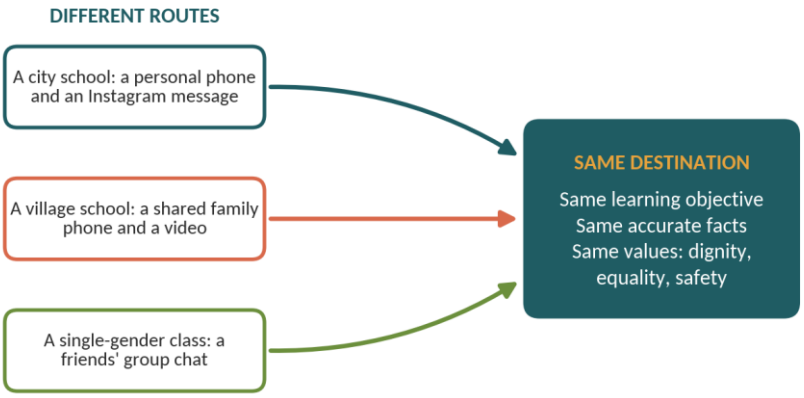

Figure 2. Adapt the route to learning, not the destination.

A USEFUL DISTINCTION

Adapt the route to learning, not the destination. The learning objective, essential information and core values remain constant; the examples and teaching approach may change.

3. Why contextualize?

Children are more likely to engage with learning when they can connect it to situations they recognise and when they feel that their experiences and questions are taken seriously. Research over the last 30 years, including programmes such as *Rights, Respect, Responsibility*, shows that sexuality education works best when it reflects these components and considers that learning happens not only inside the learner but in a social setting, shaped by family, peers, media and community. Contextualization helps educators make that connection. It also helps ensure that the curriculum does not unintentionally exclude children whose lives differ from those represented in a lesson.

Five ideas matter most for educators.

1 PERSONALIZATION

When children see the content as relevant to their own lives, they learn more and remember longer. They need to see themselves in the examples, places and situations.

2 SUSCEPTIBILITY

Children and young people often believe “this can’t happen to me.” Realistic examples (without exaggeration or fear) help them see which risks they may actually face, such as an unsafe online chat, pressure from an older peer or an unsafe touch.

3 SELF-EFFICACY

Even if children know a risk exists, they may feel unable to do anything about it. They need to *practise* saying no, setting boundaries, making decisions and asking a trusted adult for help, so they feel confident to act.

4 SOCIAL NORMS

What children believe "everyone does" or "is allowed" strongly shapes behaviour. Discussions should help them question stereotypes and see that perceived norms are often inaccurate or unfair.

5 SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Learning sticks when children apply it to real situations: communication, empathy, critical thinking, problem-solving and seeking support.

Contextualization is how we deliver all five. A well-meant example that does not match a child's life delivers none of them.

4. What is common across children, and what may differ?

Children's lives are diverse, but some fundamental needs and principles apply across settings. Whatever the school, city or village, children share these things. This is why the learning objectives and the science stay fixed.

- Bodies grow and change, and puberty happens to everyone.
- All children are curious and will find answers somewhere. If we don't give accurate ones, friends, phones and rumours will.
- All children need to feel safe, respected and listened to.
- All children can be at risk of abuse, bullying or pressure, regardless of gender, class or school type.
- Children learn best through stories, discussion, role-play and practice, not lectures.
- Children need a trusted adult they can go to.

What differs is how children encounter these issues, the language they use, the support available to them and the examples that will help them make sense of a concept. The educator's task is to identify those differences without assuming that every child in a particular group has the same experience.

What may vary	How it may shape understanding	What the educator can do
Language and vocabulary	Children may use local words, slang or no familiar word for a body part, body change or feeling.	Acknowledge the words children use without ridicule, and introduce accurate terms calmly and without shame.
Family and trusted adults	Children may live with parents, grandparents, other relatives, one parent, guardians or in other care arrangements. They may have different levels of trust and support at home.	Use inclusive language such as 'a trusted adult'. Help children identify a safe adult they can actually approach.
Gender expectations	Ideas about how boys and girls should behave may affect freedom, responsibilities, confidence, safety and participation.	Notice whose voices are heard and who takes on particular tasks. Invite reflection without shaming children or families.
Technology	Some children use personal devices; others share devices or have limited access. Digital experiences may still reach children indirectly.	Choose examples that match actual access and discuss privacy, pressure and help-seeking across different forms of digital exposure.
Daily routines and responsibilities	Children may travel in different ways, care for siblings, help at home, work with family or spend time in different community spaces.	Use settings children recognise, after checking that the scenario is relevant to the group.
Beliefs and social identities	Ideas about purity, menstruation, touch, food, festivals, caste, religion and social status may affect comfort and participation.	Be respectful, provide accurate information and ensure that no belief or practice is used to justify discrimination or harm.
School environment	Single-gender and mixed-gender classes, class size, school rules and classroom relationships may shape participation.	Adapt facilitation and group arrangements while retaining the same learning objective and inclusive principles.
Prior learning and experience	Children may already know, misunderstand or have experienced aspects of a topic before it appears in the planned sequence.	Find out what they know, address misconceptions sensitively and build on prior learning.

5. Gender is an important part of context

Gender is not simply a characteristic to record when describing a class. Gender expectations can shape children's everyday experiences: what they are encouraged to do, what they are discouraged from doing, how much freedom they have, what responsibilities they carry, how they express emotions and how they participate in school. These expectations may differ between families and communities, and they may operate even within the same classroom.

Contextualizing sexuality education therefore requires educators to notice how gender norms influence children's lives, while avoiding the assumption that all boys, all girls or all children of another gender have the same experiences.

An important part of contextualization is ensuring that the examples we create do not unintentionally reproduce stereotypes. An example should not present a gender stereotype simply because it is common or familiar in the community. For instance, if girls in a particular setting are commonly expected to do household work, this does not mean that an example should automatically show girls doing the cooking and boys doing work outside the home. Doing so may make the example familiar, but it can also reinforce the very expectation that the curriculum is intended to help children examine.

At times, however, a gender stereotype may need to be reflected in an example because it is a real part of children's lives. In such cases, this should be a deliberate pedagogical choice, not an unexamined assumption. The situation should create space for children to notice, discuss and question the expectation.

The table below illustrates situations that an educator may encounter or recognise in different contexts. The educator's task is to decide whether a situation is genuinely relevant to the learners, whether using it would unintentionally reinforce a stereotype, and, if the stereotype is part of the children's lived reality, how it can be used to help them examine and question it.

Area of everyday life	Typical/illustrative situation	Questions for discussion
Household work and care	At home, girls are usually expected to wash dishes and look after a younger sibling, while boys are asked to help with tasks outside the house.	Who does which tasks? How are these decisions made? Can everyone learn to do different kinds of work? Is the division fair?

Area of everyday life	Typical/illustrative situation	Questions for discussion
Freedom and mobility	A boy is allowed to cycle to a friend's house after school, but his sister is expected to come straight home.	Are the rules different? Why? Are concerns about safety being addressed by restricting girls, or by making the environment safer for everyone?
Emotions	A boy who cries after falling is told, 'Don't cry like a girl.'	Can boys feel hurt, afraid or sad? What is wrong with using 'girl' as an insult? How can friends respond with care?
Classroom participation	During group work, boys take charge of equipment and presenting, while girls are asked to write or decorate.	Who decided who would do each task? Do all children get opportunities to lead, handle materials and present?
Play and interests	A girl is discouraged from playing kabaddi, or a boy is teased for choosing dance or cooking.	Are games and interests meant only for particular genders? How do these expectations limit children?
Puberty and menstruation	Girls are expected to keep menstruation private, while boys are not encouraged to understand it.	Why is menstruation treated as something to hide? How can all children learn to respond with understanding and respect?
Clothing and appearance	Children are told that certain clothes, hairstyles or ways of sitting are appropriate only for boys or only for girls.	Who decides these rules? Are they about safety, comfort, tradition or gender expectations? Do they treat children fairly?

6. What contextualization is — and is not

Contextualization is...	Contextualization is not...
Using language children understand while introducing accurate terms.	Using inaccurate or euphemistic language that leaves children misinformed.
Connecting concepts to situations children recognise.	Assuming that all children in a place or community have the same experiences.
Responding thoughtfully to children's questions and concerns.	Avoiding questions because the topic feels uncomfortable.

Contextualization is...	Contextualization is not...
Helping children reflect on stereotypes and unequal expectations.	Reinforcing stereotypes because they are socially familiar.
Adapting activities, examples, pace and facilitation.	Omitting essential topics or changing the learning objective.
Respecting cultural and family differences while upholding dignity and rights.	Allowing personal beliefs or social norms to replace accurate information or justify discrimination.
Building on what children already know.	Repeating information without checking prior learning or understanding.

A SIMPLE TEST

After adapting a session, ask: Can I still state the same learning objective for this lesson? Are the facts accurate? Are the core values of choice, dignity, equality, inclusion and safety intact? If yes, the session has been contextualized without changing what children are meant to learn.

7. Age-appropriateness: not age cut-offs

Age of the child is an important part of context. Age-appropriateness is significant in sexuality education, but it should not be understood as a rigid rule that a child can receive particular information only at a specified age or grade. Children develop at different rates, have different prior knowledge and encounter information and experiences at different times. A child may ask a question, notice a body change, hear something from a friend or encounter content online before the curriculum reaches that topic.

AGE-APPROPRIATE DOES NOT MEAN AGE-LIMITED

The important question is not only 'How old is the child?' It is also 'What does this child need to understand now, and how can I explain it in a way the child can understand?'

When a child asks a genuine question, there is no need to withhold an accurate answer simply because the topic is scheduled for a later grade. What matters is how the information is shared. Begin with the question the child has asked. Use simple, clear and factual language. Give enough information to answer the question, without unnecessary detail. Check whether the child has understood and allow them to ask more.

Answer the question the child asked, not the question you are afraid they might ask next. Avoid dismissive responses such as 'You are too young', 'You will understand when you are older' or explanations that are inaccurate or misleading. If you do not know the answer, say so and find a reliable answer rather than guessing.

Building on learning is also age-appropriate

A concept introduced in simple terms at an earlier age can be revisited and deepened as children's understanding develops. This is central to a spiral curriculum. Age-appropriate learning is not only about when a concept is first introduced; it is also about how it is revisited, connected to new ideas and explored with greater complexity over time. Look at the example below about teaching concept and how it may evolve over a period of time where because of the prior discussion it becomes possible to talk to children about the concept in more depth as they group.

Stage of learning	How understanding can develop: example of consent and boundaries
Early learning	My body belongs to me. I can say no to unwanted touch and tell a trusted adult.
Building understanding	People may have different boundaries. We should listen when someone says they do not want to be touched or included in an activity.
Deepening the concept	Consent means freely agreeing. It should not be obtained through pressure, threats or manipulation.
Applying the concept	Consent can be changed or withdrawn. Power differences and pressure can affect whether agreement is freely given.
Further application	Explore consent in relationships, including its ethical, social and legal dimensions, in language and depth appropriate to the learning objectives.

8. What must remain unchanged

Contextualization allows flexibility in how the curriculum is taught. It does not make every aspect of the curriculum optional. The following elements should remain intact:

- ✓ **Learning objectives.** The intended learning for each session should remain the same.
- ✓ **Scientific accuracy.** Information about bodies, puberty, reproduction, health and relationships must be accurate.
- ✓ **Right based affirmative approach.** Every child should be treated with respect. No child should be excluded, shamed or discriminated against.

- ✓ **Inclusion and equality.** Adaptations should not reinforce discrimination based on gender, caste, religion, disability, family background or other identities.
- ✓ **Skills practice.** Children should have opportunities to practise communication, boundary-setting, decision-making, empathy, critical thinking and help-seeking.
- ✓ **Child safety.** Any concern or disclosure of abuse must be handled sensitively and in line with the school's child-protection procedures and applicable law.

9. A practical process for contextualizing a session

Contextualization is not a one-time exercise completed while preparing a lesson. It is an ongoing process of understanding the learners, making thoughtful adaptations, observing how they respond, and adjusting facilitation when needed.



Figure 3. Contextualizing is a cycle, not a checklist you finish once.

Before adapting a session, work through the following questions:

1. **Who are my learners?** What do I know about their language, everyday lives, family situations, gender expectations, access to resources and school environment?
2. **What might they already know?** Have they encountered this topic before? What questions or misconceptions may they have?
3. **Which parts of the planned example may be unfamiliar or based on assumptions?** Do I need to share the examples with teachers and get their inputs on making it more relevant for the group?
4. **What situations, people, places or activities** would make the concept easier for this group to understand?
5. **Does the adaptation retain** the learning objective, accurate information and skills to be practised?

6. **Could the new example** reinforce a stereotype, expose a child or make someone feel singled out?
7. **Is the language clear and understandable?** Have I introduced accurate terms where needed?
8. **Do I know how to respond** if a child asks a question or shares a concern? Do I know the school's support and child-protection procedures?