

Sex Education Forum briefing for Parliamentarians

Backbench debate on 14 February 2013 to coincide with the One Billion Rising Day of Action on

- (i) Protecting future generations from violence against women and girls,
- (ii) Preventing sexual violence conflict'.

Contact

Lucy Emmerson, Coordinator Sex Education Forum, 07808 105280

lemmerson@ncb.org.uk

[The Sex Education Forum](#) (SEF), hosted by the National Children's Bureau, is the national authority in England on sex and relationships education (SRE).

Summary

Sex and relationships education (SRE) has a key role to play in preventing violence against women and girls. Currently the provision of SRE in schools is unacceptably patchy and inconsistent. **Every child and young person has a right to comprehensive SRE and we (as adults) have a duty to ensure this.**

The best way to ensure this is by making Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education (which includes SRE) a statutory part of the National Curriculum.



1 How is violence against women and girls addressed by SRE?

A good SRE curriculum has some input in every school year from the start of primary school through to the end of secondary education and beyond. Every year pupils can revisit key themes including 'relationships', 'my body' and 'staying safe and looking after myself'.

Children aged 3-6 need to learn 'Which parts of my body are private' and 'Who should I tell if some-one wants to touch my private parts'. Children aged 9-10 can explore questions such as: 'What is love and how do we show love to one another' and 'Can some relationships be harmful'. Learning should also look explicitly at gender, for example exploring a question such as 'Are boys and girls expected to behave differently in relationships?'

The curriculum for secondary school pupils aged 14-16 should build on prior learning and focus on the skills and attitudes which foster, healthy, positive relationships. It should include information about their rights to accessing sexual and reproductive health services, the importance of consent in relationships, the laws on sexual offences and how to identify when a relationship is healthy or exploitative.

It is vital that discussions surrounding relationships, gender, sexual health, self esteem and diversity form the context for learning about domestic violence. Otherwise there is a danger that violence against women and girls is treated as an issue detached from the factors that effect it's prevalence.

When a comprehensive SRE curriculum is in place, delivered by trained educators young people can actually get to understand the meaning of 'violence against women'. They will discuss issues about power, relationships, gender and violence with their peers in a safe environment managed by a trained adult. Without comprehensive school-based SRE young people are left to make sense of a confusing array of information about sex and relationships accessible through the internet, advertising and other media.

Young people continue to tell us (and this is confirmed by Ofsted, 2010) that SRE is often started too late. In some primary schools the only SRE provision is scheduled for the summer term for the top year of the school (Year 6), and it may only consist of one lesson on periods, exclusively for the girls. This is clearly too late, as some girls have already started their periods by this point. It is also inequitable as boys have a right to information about their bodies and their health too.

Boys have complained that SRE is sometimes presented as a girls issue with too much focus on periods and contraception. While boys want to know about these topics too, a narrow female sexual and reproductive health curriculum does not meet their needs. Boys access pornography far more than girls, and one of the reasons for seeking it is to find factual information about the physical aspects of sex. However, pornography often presents an unrealistic impression of sex and has oppressive messages about gender roles. So it is essential that boys and girls are offered a broad programme of SRE that

meets their needs. Classroom SRE delivered by trained educators is the only way to ensure universal access.

2. Why sex and relationships education (SRE) should be made statutory within the National Curriculum:

The Sex Education Forum believes that making SRE statutory is vital, because without this legislation the subject will continue to have poor status within schools and suffer from continued inadequate provision of teacher training.

Through our contact with schools we have established that there are examples of very good SRE provision but implementation is inconsistent because the subject is not statutory. Teachers have also complained about lack of resourcing for training and insufficient allocation of curriculum time to the subject.

Children and young people we have spoken to have told us that they want SRE to become statutory in their schools, recognising that the subject currently lacks status.

The majority of parents are very supportive of SRE (98% of parents answering a Mumsnet survey (2011) said they were happy for their children to attend school SRE lessons. 92% think SRE should be a compulsory subject in secondary schools; 69% think SRE should be a compulsory subject in primary schools; and 90% think there should be a statutory duty on all schools, including faith schools and academies, to deliver comprehensive SRE.

Making SRE statutory is likely to increase parental involvement as the subject would rise in status in the school. Furthermore, due to the nature of the topics covered, SRE gives schools an opportunity to better engage parents in their children's learning. For example, a Sex Education Forum evidence briefing about parents views on SRE showed that parents see school and home as the two main sources of SRE, with 84% of parents believing that school and home should both be involved¹.

Furthermore, the lack of education about reproduction and preparation for adult life has been identified by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a children's rights issue that needs urgent attention in the UK (2008).

SRE is included within the non-statutory framework for PSHE education. **Both the Sex Education and NCB (our host organisation) are calling for PSHE education to be made a statutory National Curriculum subject.**

3. Benefits of SRE for the health and well-being of women

Good SRE, together with access to sexual health services will contribute to several public health priorities that are essential for the health and well-being of women:

- earlier reporting of sexual abuse and, in some cases, its prevention
- reduced number of unplanned pregnancies
- reduced maternal mortality

- reduced infant mortality
- prevention and earlier treatment of sexually transmitted infections
- reduced gap in health inequality

4. What is the evidence that SRE works?

SRE involves learning about the emotional, social and physical aspects of growing up, relationships, human sexuality, sex and sexual health. It should equip children and young people with the information, skills and positive values to enable to have safe, fulfilling relationships and to take responsibility for their sexual health and wellbeing. SRE aims to contribute to behavior change, including reducing unprotected and unwanted sex, and reducing harmful behaviour, including sexual offences such as assault and abuse.

National and international research shows that good quality SRE has a protective function as young people who have good SRE are more likely to choose to have sex for the first time later.

Kirby (2007) examined 48 SRE programmes and found that 40 per cent of these had a significant impact in three aspects of behaviour; delaying the initiation of sex; reducing the number of sexual partners; and increasing condom or contraceptive use. Young people who have taken part in a good quality SRE programme are more likely to use condoms and contraception if they do have sex (Kirby 2007). See also NICE (2010) and UNESCO (2009).

5. What is needed

Through our extensive experience, contact with professionals and informed by the international evidence base, the Sex Education Forum recommends the approach described below is used to deliver good quality SRE. The key features listed provide a summary only; see also the Sex Education Forum values and principles for SRE at www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/values

1. SRE for all children and young people. All children and young people must receive SRE, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, culture, age, religion or belief or other life experiences, particularly HIV status and pregnancy. Ensuring that SRE has a timetabled slot in school helps guarantee that no child or young person will miss out on vital information.

2. Trained educators. SRE needs to be taught by willing and competent teachers. Young people have said SRE is best when teachers are confident, unembarrassed and able to teach correct biological facts and also explore relationships issues. In a Sex Education Forum survey (2008b) very few teachers (3 per cent) reported that SRE was covered adequately within their initial teacher training and teachers gave training high priority as a means of improving SRE.

3. An age-appropriate programme. Evidence shows that SRE works best if it starts before a young person has their first experience of sex and if it responds to the needs of young people as they mature. SRE must start in primary school and be taught in an age appropriate manner, starting with topics such as personal safety and friendships. Both primary and secondary school pupils, particularly girls, have said they need SRE to start earlier (Sex Education Forum, 2008b, Ofsted 2010).

4. Medically and factually correct information. SRE can have an important role in busting unhelpful myths so it must be based on medically correct information about contraception, reproduction, abortion and sexual health. A range of views on sex and relationships can be discussed, including faith perspectives, but teachers must be clear when they are presenting facts and when they are presenting opinions or beliefs.

5. Promoting core values. Clear core values run through good quality SRE, including mutual respect, loving and happy relationships, rights to information, safety and health, equality (particularly on the basis of gender and sexual orientation) and responsibility for oneself and others. Good quality SRE can provide a safe space for children and young people to identify and reflect on their own values and those of others, including their peers. For practical examples of SRE in faith contexts, see www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/practice

6. Developing skills. Evidence shows that SRE is more effective if it develops children and young people's skills as well as knowledge. Participatory and interactive learning tasks need to be built into SRE so that skills such as communication, negotiation and listening can be practised and developed.

7. Partnership with parents and carers. Children and young people are clear that they want to talk to their parents and carers about sex and relationships. Many parents and carers feel they lack the skills, confidence and knowledge to talk to their children, and look to schools for support. Schools and parents need to work together to make sure children and young people get the information and support they need.

8. A whole school approach to equalities. A whole-school approach means working across the school community (parents, pupils and staff) to address equalities including violence against women. This includes curriculum, behavior and policies such as safeguarding.

About SEF:

[The Sex Education Forum](http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk) (SEF), hosted by the National Children's Bureau, is the national authority on sex and relationships education (SRE). It is a unique collaboration of over 90 members and 750 practitioners with representatives from health, education, faith, disability and children's organisations. SEF believes that all children and young people have the right to good SRE and this website aims to provide all professionals involved in SRE with the information they need to ensure this right.

References

Emmerson, L (2011) *Parents and SRE: A Sex Education Forum evidence briefing*, London: Sex Education Forum http://www.ncb.org.uk/campaigning/media_news/2011/jan-jun/parents_want_support_with_sex.aspx

Kirby, D (2007) *Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Mumsnet survey of 1,000 parents (2011) <http://www.mumsnet.com/campaigns/mumsnet-sex-education-survey#Results>

NICE (2010) Public Health draft guidance; School, college and community-based personal, social, health and economic education focusing on sex and relationships and alcohol education. <http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/live/11673/49240/49240.pdf>

Ofsted (2010) Personal, social, health and economic education in schools'.

Sex Education Forum (2008a) Forum briefing: Teachers survey on sex and relationships education, NCB.

Sex Education Forum (2008b) Forum briefing: Young people's survey on sex and relationships education, NCB. http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/333301/young_peoples_survey_on_sex_relationships_education.pdf

UNCRC (2008) 49th session, Consideration of reports submitted by states parties under Article 44 of the Convention, Concluding observations: United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.

UNESCO (2009) International guidelines on sexuality education; an evidence informed approach to effective sex, relationships and HIV/STI education. Paris: UNESCO.

Emmerson, L (2011) *Parents and SRE: A Sex Education Forum evidence briefing*, London: Sex Education Forum http://www.ncb.org.uk/campaigning/media_news/2011/jan-jun/parents_want_support_with_sex.aspx

About the Sex Education Forum:

[The Sex Education Forum](http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk), hosted by the National Children's Bureau, is the national authority on sex and relationships education (SRE) in England. It is a unique collaboration of over 90 member organisations and 750 practitioners with representatives from health, education, faith, disability and children's organisations. The Sex Education Forum believes that all children and young people have the right to good SRE.
