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Sex Education Forum response to Welsh government consultation on legislation to end violence against women and domestic abuse.

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[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.

We warmly welcome the Welsh government's proposal to make education on 'healthy relationships' compulsory in all schools. The Welsh government has an incredible opportunity to show international leadership in this regard.

We recommend that relationships education forms part of a comprehensive sex and relationships education (SRE) curriculum that starts early in primary school with learning being built on year by year. Specific investment will be needed to ensure educators are trained to deliver this.

Every child and young person has a right to comprehensive SRE and we (as adults) have a duty to ensure this.

Our response to this consultation focuses on the proposals relating to improving education and awareness.



Consultation Question 5

Do you agree that ensuring education on healthy relationships in schools will achieve the outcomes sought?

Yes. A comprehensive programme of sex and relationships education (SRE) will contribute to preventing violence against women and girls. Teaching on healthy relationships should not be delivered as a one-off module for a particular age-group. Rather, 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'.

What is included in age-appropriate comprehensive SRE

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 its prevalence.

It is essential that all teaching is based on medically and factually correct information.

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 may also be the case in some Welsh schools.

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.

We also support the proposal to implement a whole-school approach to preventing violence against women and domestic abuse. In practice we recommend that this involves 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.

Consultation Question 6

What other measures could we use to ensure that schools do provide evidence based education on healthy relationships?

We warmly welcome the proposal to make it compulsory for all schools to teach about healthy relationships. The Sex Education Forum has been lobbying for years to make SRE a statutory part of the National Curriculum in England. **The Welsh government has an incredible opportunity to show leadership in this regard by making legislative change to Curriculum requirements.**

Why make SRE statutory within the Welsh Curriculum?

In our experience in England the lack of statutory status for SRE results in continued poor status for SRE within schools and inadequate provision of teacher training. The problem with lack of consistency in educational provision is mentioned as a recurrent theme arising from consultation events that informed the consultation documents on Welsh government legislation to end violence against women and domestic abuse. Through our contact with schools we have established that there are examples of very good SRE provision in England 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. Too much depends on the leadership of individual Head teachers and as a result many children and young people miss out on vital learning.

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.

Inspection

In England the Ofsted Inspection framework is a useful tool to help ensure that schools to deliver good quality, evidence-based teaching on relationships and other topics falling under the subject 'Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE education). There is subject specific guidance for PSHE which stipulates the quality of provision required for PSHE to be judged outstanding, good, adequate or inadequate. Also there are periodic subject inspections which involve visits to 60 schools (primary and secondary) and result in a national report on the status of PSHE education in schools. The 2010 report picked up the fact that even in schools with good PSHE education, SRE is often a weakness. We therefore recommend that the Inspections framework in Wales is used a tool to ensure good quality evidence-base education.

Having trained educators is also fundamental to the quality of education about growing up, sex and relationships. This is covered in the next question.

Consultation Questions 7 and 8

Do you agree that a National Training Framework will support a consistent approach to training of professionals across Wales? Which key professionals would you like to see captured in the National Training Framework?

It is essential that SRE is 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 (2008) 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.

While a National Training Framework for professionals across Wales may meet the needs of some professionals on issues relating to violence against women and domestic abuse it may not be either broad enough or specific enough for teachers. The skills of a teacher facilitating discussion about attitudes to gender, for example, with a group of 30 pupils is very different to the skills of a school nurse having a one-to-one consultation with a pupil.

We recommend that the issue of teacher training on SRE as a whole is looked at specifically and given specific resource. This would ensure that teachers are able to address a range of inter-related subjects including more biological aspects such as puberty, sexual health and our bodies, as well as being fluent in teaching methods for exploring attitudes and values to do with relationships, gender and sex. One of the benefits of making SRE a statutory Curriculum requirement is that it prompts investment in teacher training for dedicated SRE or PSHE teachers.

Consultation Question 9

What if any additional resource implications do you think there are for this proposal?

The Sex Education Forum recommends that additional resource is dedicated to training teachers on SRE. This could have three elements:

- 1) A professional certificate available for teachers who are already qualified and are working in schools. Elements could be adapted from the PSHE CPD programme, which was rolled out in England (many teachers taking this broader certificate chose to focus on SRE)
- 2) Create an initial teacher training route with the option to specialize in SRE or PSHE. This will nurture a new generation of fully competent SRE teachers.
- 3) Support the creation of a national Forum or professional association that enables teachers of SRE to network, access up-to-date evidence and facts, get practical support such as finding good SRE teaching resources and hear about ongoing training opportunities. This could be based on the model of the Sex Education Forum in England. There is also scope for sharing practice on specific aspects of SRE with our 90 member organizations, which include professional membership organizations, faith, disability, youth, health and education organizations.

Additional information about SRE

Support from parents

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.

Children's Rights

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).

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

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).

What is needed for good quality SRE

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.

About SEF:

[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). It is a unique collaboration of over 90 members and 750 practitioners with representatives from health, education, faith, disability and children's organisations. We believe 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. A full list of our members is available here: <http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/about-us/list-of-members.aspx>

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