



Puberty Education

Heads or Tails - supplementary evidence briefing

Results from our Survey with young people

The Sex Education Forum ran an online survey with young people aged 11-25 in November to December 2015. The aim was to find out if young people have learnt about their bodies, sexual development and consent at school and whether or not their school SRE met their needs in this area. This briefing addresses the questions about puberty education covered by the survey. Questions about other aspects of SRE were published in [‘Heads or Tails? what young people tell us about SRE’](#) (2016).

A total of 2,648 young people took part in the survey, but those who had not been to school in England have been removed from the survey data for the analysis contained in this report. This leaves 2,326 responses. Because not all respondents completed every question the total number of respondents to each question is recorded in the data tables.

Young people identifying as female accounted for 66% of responses, with 29% identifying as male and 4.5% as trans, non-binary or other. Over 90% of respondents had attended a state school and 7% had attended an independent school.

Findings about puberty education

The survey revealed gaps in young people’s education about puberty. Changes affecting boys, such as wet dreams, are particularly neglected and almost a quarter of female respondents had not learnt about periods before they started having periods themselves. Young people identifying as trans, non-binary or other gender were least likely to have learnt all that they needed to about body changes at puberty.

- Nearly four in five (79%) of young people had learnt about periods at school, 15% did not.
- Amongst the youngest respondents (11, 12 and 13 year olds) more had learnt about periods at school (83%), but that left 13% who had not learnt about periods at school.
- Almost a quarter (24%) of respondents identifying as female did not learn about periods before they started having periods.
- Female respondents were more likely than male respondents to have learnt about periods at school (83% for females compared with 70% amongst males).
- Half of young people (50%) did not learn about wet dreams at school, and 38% of respondents identifying as male had experienced wet dreams before they had learnt about them.
- 30% of young people **did not** learn all that they needed to about body changes at puberty. This dropped to 22% for male respondents, rose to 33% for female respondents and rose to 46% for respondents identifying as trans, non-binary or other.

Table: Data from Sex Education Forum young people’s SRE survey 2015

	Yes	No	Not sure	# Responses to question
Did you learn about periods at school?	79%	15%	6%	2180
If you are someone who has periods, did you learn about periods before you started having periods? (female respondents only)	70%	24%	6%	1440
Did you learn about wet dreams at school?	38%	51%	11%	2172
If you are someone who has had wet dreams, did you learn about them before you first had them? (male respondents only)	54%	38%	8%	616
Did you learn all that you needed to about body changes at puberty?	58%	30%	12%	2178

Benefits of good education and the gaps in reality

Young people were invited to leave a comment in an open text box in response to the question ‘Did you learn all that you needed to about body changes at puberty? Some comments reflected on the benefits of good education:

“I am now confident about what is happening inside my body thanks to the education in school. I felt very prepared for what was going to be changing” (Female, 14 years old)

“School was one of the reasons why I wasn't as worried or scared when my body was changing as I knew what was happening from the lessons” (Female, 14 years old)

Other comments revealed the lack of education about puberty

“They told us our bodies would change. They did not, however, tell us what would happen or how we should deal with it” (Female, 14 years old)

“I haven't learned anything at school but parents have explained at home” (Male, 14 years old)

Several comments highlighted specific gaps in the content and quality of provision

Key gaps include: information about normal vaginal discharge and lubrication, detail about pubic hair growth and shaving, the diversity of bodies including breasts and genitalia, the age range for the start of puberty, sexual arousal, masturbation and orgasm.

"I didn't learn about all the places that adults grow hair, e.g. the extent of pubic hair (it was just drawn as a little triangle on the mons pubis and did not extend to the upper thigh and anus, for example), stomach, feet, around the nipples etc." (Non-binary, 24 years old)

"There was nothing about what normal breasts look like i.e. that inverted nipples are normal, hair will grow and not all breasts look the same between people. Also that one boob can look different compared to the other on one person" (Female, 18 years old)

"For me, it was too late. We learnt about puberty aged 11. I started puberty aged 9, and couldn't have felt more like a freak about it, compared to my friends, and the little they knew about what was happening to me" (Female, 21 years old)

"I think maybe for Muslims an Islamic view should be given? I felt very upset by having these sort of changes and didn't really understand what was going on. And I felt as though I was a bad Muslim" (Male, 21 years old)

"I was told nothing about vaginal lubrication! I spent the better part of about two years thinking there was something wrong with me, that I must have some kind of weird disease, but being scared to ask anyone about it... and then eventually my mother casually told me in passing that it was a thing that was normal and I felt extremely relieved..." (Non-binary, 22 years old)

"We were never shown what things might actually look like when puberty was finished which lead to a lot of body issues for me" (Trans, 21 years old)

"I think that there should have been a bigger emphasis on how different people mature at different ages - this may prevent bullying for premature development" (Female, 21 years old)

"We were very briefly explained periods with no opportunity to ask questions. when I first started it was so much worse and I honestly wanted to die, for my first year I didn't go to school when I was on as I didn't know how to control it. I was nowhere near prepared enough" (Female, 16 years old)

"Sex-positive talk isn't really encouraged at school so we didn't learn that most -but not ALL people would have sexual urges" (Non-binary, 14 years old)

"Bodily changes include hormones and therefore mental health issues. Needs to be openly discussed" (Female, 23 years old)

"No comment on stretch marks, breast growth (what's normal what's not), what's normal vagina-wise" (Female, 20 years old)

"Things like BV (bacterial vaginosis) and Cystitis never explained (lots of friends noticed this too)" (Female, 24 years old)