

Boys and young men:

Developing effective sex and relationships education in schools



Updating Forum Factsheet 11

There is a growing realisation that the needs of boys and young men are not being met within sex and relationships education (SRE). They miss out on discussions about sex with parents and carers and they miss out at school, where SRE has focused on girls and the biological aspects of reproduction. This factsheet updates factsheet 11, following a major forum project to identify how to meet the needs of boys. It discusses the SRE needs of boys and young men and identifies practical strategies for developing SRE across different settings.

Introduction

In 1999, the Social Exclusion Unit's report on Teenage Pregnancy (SEU 1999) identified boys and young men as being '...half of the problem and half of the solution'. Since then, there has been a fundamental change in attitude towards young people's sexual health with both research and government guidance (DfEE 2000, TPU 2001, Ofsted 2002) stressing that boys need to be targeted within both education and sexual health services.

What do boys and young men need from SRE?

Messages about masculinity

Almost as soon as boys are born, the process of becoming a 'real man' begins. From an early age they learn what is considered 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' masculine behaviour. By the age of seven, boys can describe the attributes they should have, what activities are acceptable (like fighting and playing football), as well as being clear that they do not have 'boyfriends' because that makes them gay (Wild 1997).

During adolescence, boys continue to learn about 'the right way' to behave. This may include viewing girls as 'sex objects' and equating sexual knowledge and multiple sexual partners with manhood. This is a time when a young man's efforts to prove that he is a 'real man' often leads him to exaggerate his masculinity and reject traits, such as

vulnerability and being sensitive to others' feelings, that are thought feminine. It may also include taking risks and forming homophobic attitudes, which can result in young men who are perceived as gay being bullied.

As they grow up, boys often miss out on information about sex and sexuality from their parents and carers. Some young men grow up without an adult male in the home and evidence suggests that adult males who are present are uncomfortable talking to children about sexual and emotional matters. This silence provides a strong message to boys that it is not acceptable to discuss sex and concerns to do with growing up (Biddulph and Blake 2001). Mothers and female carers are more likely to discuss sexual development with their children. Yet, while first menstruation is a chance to initiate discussion with their daughters, boys are not seen as having an equivalent milestone.

On average, boys and young men are unlikely to ask for help and support and what little information a young man may glean from his friends is often distorted or wrong. Other sources of information open to boys and young men include films, television, men's 'health and lifestyle' magazines and pornography. These mostly focus on heterosexual sexual behaviour and performance, offering little guidance on emotions or relationships. As a result of the patchy, often inaccurate information that boys receive, professionals report boys and young men as often

lacking confidence, skills and knowledge in relation to sex and sexual health issues.

Why focus on the needs of boys and young men?

How and what boys and young men learn about being a man undoubtedly affects how they manage their sexual health. It also affects how they feel about themselves, and how they behave with each other and with young women. In many cultures, boys learn that being dominant, aggressive and taking risks is all part of being a man. Many young men find it hard to resist overwhelming peer pressure to be seen as sexually 'successful' and they may feel compelled to take part in risk-taking behaviour to prove their manhood. These traits can have harmful consequences for both the young men themselves and their sexual partners. As a result of these pressures many young men misuse alcohol and other drugs and are four times more likely to commit suicide than young women (Lynch and Blake 2004). At the same time, sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates, including HIV, continue to rise and teenage pregnancy rates remain unacceptably high (TPU IAG 2003, Health Select Committee 2003).

Boys as a 'problem'

Within the education system, and wider society, there has been a tendency to see boys and young men as a problem (Biddulph and Blake 2001). Traditionally, negative stereotypes (fuelled by the media) see

boys and young men as uncontrollable, incompetent, anti-social and promiscuous. This perception has reinforced the belief that SRE needs to focus on young women as the gatekeepers of responsible sexual activity. Boys and young men have been viewed as peripheral to preventing unwanted pregnancy. Their role in protecting their own sexual health, as well as their partner's, has not been a priority.

This has led to the belief among boys that sexual health, including discussions about relationships and emotions are 'women's things'. This has reinforced the message that sex and relationships education is nothing to do with them (Lenderyou and Ray 1997). Little surprise then that young men have traditionally been perceived by sex educators to lark around during SRE. However, as the following common scenarios demonstrate, there is often a gap between a practitioner's perceptions of boys' behaviour and what the boys themselves are feeling.

Example 1

A group of young men are messing about in an SRE class.

Practitioner's perspective: They are messing around and are not interested in sex and relationships education and think they know everything.

Young man's perspective: This is embarrassing. It's not relevant to us because it's about girls. Why can't we do something more interesting? If we tease the girls that will distract the teacher and she won't try and show us up by asking stupid questions.

Example 2

An SRE class is focusing on condom use and a group of young men are saying that they would never use condoms because they don't feel right.

Practitioner's perspective: They don't want to use them because they are irresponsible and don't care. They are stupid because there are so many infections around.

Young man's perspective: I want to use one but I'm worried I might lose my erection. I'd be really embarrassed to talk about using a condom, what if I can't put one on? I wish I could say that, but everyone would laugh at me.

Example 3

A group of five young men go to a contraceptive service for the first time. They are sitting in the waiting room being noisy and loud.

Practitioner's perspective: They are being disruptive and trying to make me feel intimidated. The young women here must be feeling nervous. If they have to come they could come on their own.

Young man's perspective

This is really embarrassing – thank god my mates are here. I wonder what it will be like. Will the doctor be nice? The receptionist keeps staring at us, and I feel really uncomfortable.

Boys' SRE needs

Entitlement to SRE

All boys and young men are entitled to good quality SRE, which is relevant to their needs and will prepare them for the responsibilities and experiences of adult life. The Sex Education Forum defines SRE as lifelong learning about emotions, relationships, sexuality, sex and sexual health. It involves acquiring accurate information, developing skills and forming positive beliefs, values and attitudes to promote sexual and emotional health and well-being.

The entitlement of all young people to SRE is emphasised in government guidance (DfEE 2000). SRE across

different settings is fundamental in ensuring that the Every Child Matters (HMT 2003) outcomes are achieved.

Supporting young men

With increasing understanding of the needs of boys through research and practice there has been a shifting of attention towards young men's needs and experiences, and the support they should be offered. Policy-makers and practitioners are now considering not how to change young men, but *how to help and support them* in developing positive self-esteem and emotional resourcefulness. Yet work with young men is still relatively new and professionals sometimes lack confidence in addressing sex, relationships and sexual health with young men. The rest of this briefing covers the key issues to think about in meeting young men's needs and offers practical guidance in delivering SRE.

Participation

The importance of participation is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12), which states that young people have the fundamental right to express their opinions. The government actively endorses this view, and is seeking to ensure that young people are involved in designing policies and services. Evidence shows that when children and young people have an active say in how services are provided, those services are more likely to meet their needs (Ofsted 2002).

In order to engage boys and young men in SRE they need to be involved and consulted at every stage, from initial planning to delivery and evaluation. Having an input into how SRE is developed means that young men are also taking responsibility and making informed choices about their learning, which in turn encourages them

to engage with the subject. True participation – and the realisation that their views are important – boosts young men’s confidence and enables them to develop new skills and feel valued.

The participation of boys and young men needs to be encouraged as part of policy and curriculum reviews, audits and planning activities. One way of accessing opinions is by using existing forums such as school, class or youth councils. However, discussion groups, games, visual arts, performing arts and, where appropriate, writing activities are all effective ways of encouraging participation.

Boys and young men can also be involved directly in the provision of SRE, for example, through peer education (see below), or by helping to assess plans for new initiatives. Establishing young people’s advisory panels and including young men in mainly adult-led advisory and decision-making bodies all ensure that participation does not become tokenistic.

Peer education

Peer education – where young people are trained to provide help or education to each other – is now widely recognised as having a positive effect on young people’s attitudes and behaviour (Cowie and others 2002). Operating within schools and other settings, peer support can help young people who are being bullied, or who have a specific concern. Peer support also acts as a gateway to further advice: in a culture where boys are reluctant to talk about their worries, knowing that support is available from a male peer is a powerful incentive to seeking help.

Partnerships

Forming partnerships with people and agencies outside school can provide a pool of support and expertise for developing SRE that is relevant and

accessible to boys and young men. This involves building links with parents and carers, the local youth service, health promotion agencies, school nurses, local family planning and sexual health services.

Involving external agencies in the delivery of SRE can provide young people with a wealth of experience and expertise. It may also offer useful opportunities for boys and young men to work with men who can provide positive role models for them.

Linking with local services

Research from the UK and abroad consistently tells us that school-based SRE is most effective when linked with local sexual health services (Dennison 2004).

Young men often believe mainstream contraceptive and sexual health services are set up exclusively for girls and women and do not feel friendly or welcoming. They are often unaware that local specialist sexual health services are available and do cater for their needs.

Even when they know that these services exist, boys and young men will often not access them for a variety of reasons. They worry about staff being judgemental and the service not being confidential; ‘stories’ from friends about painful, undignified treatments; and that treatment and condoms are expensive, and they will be turned away because they are too young. Embarrassment and fear of ridicule from friends are also reasons why young men may not use these services.

Schools and services need to work together effectively so that young men know where to get information, advice and condoms, and teachers can feel confident in directing young men towards these services. In addition, the collaboration means that services can give schools valuable information about local trends and issues that can

then be addressed within personal, social and health education (PSHE) and Citizenship (HMT 2003). (See also *Arranging Visits* page 7.)

Youth workers’ role

Youth workers and Connexions Personal Advisers are in a good position to link up with schools and can provide teachers with extra confidence and support in delivering SRE to young men. They may also be able to run sessions at school lunchtimes or after school that are targeted at boys. They can refer young men on to services offering support relating to sexual health, contraception and teenage parenthood, and in some cases can provide advice and information themselves.

Parents and carers

The vast majority of parents support SRE and are keen for schools to provide it to their children (HEA/NFER 1994). Many parents particularly welcome school-based SRE for their sons because they recognise that they communicate with them less effectively about sex and relationships than with their daughters. Schools can play an important role by giving advice and information to parents, especially fathers, to help them talk more confidently with their sons (SEU 1999).

Linking with the community

For most boys and young men, school is the main information point for SRE. But, because many at-risk boys are not at school, access to information and condoms needs to be available in other places where they are likely to be, for example, youth clubs and pool halls. Other boys and young men may also feel more comfortable accessing information in less formal settings.

If schools build links with relevant community and voluntary sector services in relation to SRE, all boys will have

Planning participation work with boys and young men

- Be clear about your aims – why is the exercise being carried out and what will they get out of it? Identify what knowledge and skills are needed.
- Unless working with a specific group, work with as diverse a mix of boys and young men as possible, including those from different cultures, social backgrounds, sexualities, physical and learning abilities.
- Plan the format of the participation – any questions put to the group or activities used need to reflect the range of age, experiences and abilities of the group.
- Plan practical considerations, including time, costs, venue and equipment.
- What are the roles and responsibilities of the adults involved? If an outside visitor is carrying out the exercise it is the legal responsibility of teachers to stay in the classroom.
- If working with younger boys out of the school setting do you need parents' permission?
- Ensure that the work can be carried out within the school's confidentiality policy.
- How will any special needs be planned for to ensure that all boys and young men can participate fully, for example, do you need wheelchair access, signers, transport or to pay carer expenses?

Delivery

- Make clear to the boys and young men the purpose of the activity, what you would like them to do, how their views will be presented (for example, in a report or video) and how the information gathered will be used and incorporated into the SRE curriculum.
- Once the activity is over, ask for their feedback. What did they learn or find useful? What did or didn't they enjoy? How could it be improved?

Evaluation

- Record the outcomes of the evaluation and, where appropriate, include the boys and young men in the development of these.
- Inform them of any outcomes and let them know what happened to the information they provided.
- Ensure that other young people (including girls and young women), teachers, support workers and other relevant professionals in the setting know what the boys and young men had to say.

better access to multi-faceted services that address all their needs from reproductive health to substance use, violence prevention and economic opportunities.

Policy development

Government guidance states that all schools must have an up-to-date SRE policy that is reviewed regularly. This policy is most useful when developed

in consultation with pupils, teachers, governors and the wider community. The SRE guidance from the DfEE (2000), recommends an overall PSHE policy with a special section on SRE. If you are not ready to do this at the moment bring together all of the different policies into one folder.

A clear policy framework is essential for providing clarity about professional boundaries and responsibilities as well

as outlining the approaches and resources to be used. Policies must include clear aims for SRE. This should focus on boys as much as girls at primary level as well as secondary level. Specifics must be included on how exactly the needs of boys and young men are to be assessed and on the steps that will be taken to address their needs. This may include strategies such as single-gender lessons for some modules (see page 6).

Confidentiality

The classroom is not a confidential setting. All boys and young men need to understand this and know where they can access confidential help.

Policy into practice

A positive approach

Start with a positive approach towards young men. It is important to encourage them to set their own agenda for learning, to acknowledge their opinions and to respect the reasons why they hold them. Educators need to take into account the diversity of their experiences and backgrounds and should look past the behaviours and attitudes exhibited by boys and young men, to see what fears and anxieties might really lie behind them. Understanding how gender stereotypes and expectations affect young men, and working to raise their self-esteem provides a firm foundation for learning.

It is important to remember that the stereotype of promiscuous young men is less than accurate – practitioners should assume that large numbers of young men are actually disposed towards responsibility but are 'deflected' for a variety of reasons.

When young men seek help, respond positively. Young men should be consulted about what makes seeking

A good SRE policy:

- states the aims and objectives for SRE as part of PSHE and explains how the aims will be fulfilled
- is based on consultation with pupils, parents and the community
- establishes a values framework
- identifies the different needs of boys and girls, those who are gay and lesbian, and those who may be more vulnerable and meets those needs
- defines the content of the programme and how the needs of the individual will be met and links to child protection procedures
- gives guidance on teaching
- spells out the arrangements for pupils who are withdrawn from aspects of SRE
- identifies assessment strategies
- specifies the means of review and evaluation and the timetable for these processes.

(Adapted from Ofsted 2000)

help possible, what the barriers are, and what they do when they cannot ask for help. This information should then be fed into the curriculum development.

It is crucial to consider the impact of homophobia and peer pressure on young men's thinking. Homophobia should always be challenged and can be used as an opportunity to explore why people hold these attitudes. Address the issue creatively through programmes that promote respect for those who do not fall within the perceived norms (see pages 5–6).

Initiatives need to be adaptable and to promote the involvement of young men from a range of cultural identities and different backgrounds and abilities. As has been discussed, using adults and young men as mentors and

role models can also be a highly effective means of showing positive images of what it is to be male.

Effective teaching

The primary years

SRE needs to start when boys are young, so that they can think and learn about the different stereotypes and messages they receive about being a male before the onset of puberty and sexual experience. Primary schools need to use formal and informal opportunities to look at attitudes, emotions, relationships and stereotypes with children as soon as they enter school. All aspects of school life need to promote positive ways of being male, including talking about feelings, showing the gentle, caring side of their natures, and fathering.

SRE in primary school needs to ensure that all pupils develop confidence in thinking about relationships and in talking and listening to others. Boys need to be prepared for puberty, and to know how to ask for help or support.

Secondary school age

When boys and young men reach secondary school age, the SRE that they receive should build on work that has already taken place. A key element of SRE is to support self-esteem and a positive self-identity and to encourage self-efficacy so that young men value themselves and others as well as feeling they are in control of their lives. Another key element is to develop and improve communication skills within relationships. Doing this also gives them the opportunity to develop negotiation skills, which might enable them to delay sexual activity until they are able to enjoy and take responsibility for it, as well as promoting young men's self-interest in

pregnancy prevention, sexually transmitted infections, and sexual and emotional satisfaction.

Improvements in young people's knowledge about sexuality, contraception and STIs do not always result in changes in sexual risk-taking behaviours. Programmes in secondary schools should therefore include components that may lead to healthy behaviours such as skills building, negotiating condom use, and risk-reduction and values discussions. It should also provide the opportunity to learn about conflict resolution, anger management and violence prevention.

Learning and teaching

Be open and honest and make sure the lesson's aims are clear. Boys and young men respond best when they feel safe and comfortable. Encourage the group to make formal working agreements or codes of conduct, for example, listening when someone speaks and respecting other people's views within the group. Other strategies to help them feel safe include single-sex sessions (see page 6) and avoiding personal disclosure by using distancing techniques such as role-play. It is also important not to impose your own agenda, for instance by making pupils feed back the results of group discussions to the whole class if they do not want to.

The use of active learning methods helps to ensure that everyone is motivated and engaged and reinforces the learning (see box overleaf). Active learning methods are informal, creative and fun, as well as being effective for exploring feelings, practising skills and discussing values.

Use boys' and young men's energy creatively by choosing activities that get them moving about physically. This helps to get them into the mood for later active discussion and reflection.

Active learning methods

- **Art** – for example, making posters, painting and collage, is useful for displaying information and looking at issues such as sexual stereotyping and body image. It is particularly useful for young men with low literacy levels. Displaying the work can help build self-esteem.
- **Music** – writing a song or creating a tune or rap uses a range of skills (for example, researching information, discussing attitudes and reaching consensus).
- **Drama** – for example, role-play and use of puppets and masks. Drama acts as a distancing technique, which boys and young men can use to explore situations with imagination and intuition, without revealing personal information. Drama also releases them from stereotypical gender roles.
- **Quizzes and questionnaires** – these are useful for assessing knowledge and opinions about specific issues. They can also provide an assessment of future learning needs, as well as triggering discussion on selected topics.
- **Situation cards/case studies** – a specific situation is presented and then opened up to group discussion about values, attitudes and feelings.
- **Brainstorming** – getting the group to say out loud their response to a particular word, thought or issue, and writing down what they say. This technique is helpful in triggering discussions.
- **Circle time** – a useful technique for addressing emotions, feelings and relationships. Initially used in primary settings but now also used successfully in secondary settings.
- **ICT** – many boys and young men enjoy using ICT opportunities.

Highlight and celebrate achievements by using 'team tests' and awards. This will encourage the young men's engagement, promote involvement in the learning process and 'normalise' SRE. Further information about active learning can be found in *Forum Factsheet 34* available at: www.ncb.org.uk/sef

Single-sex lessons

In consultations, both young people and practitioners generally agree that boys and girls should have some opportunities to work in single-sex groups for school-based SRE. One study (Buston and Wight 2002)

concluded that while splitting boys and girls up for SRE might reduce some of the anxieties and embarrassment felt by the pupils, it might also prevent them from gaining insights into the experiences and views of the other sex. They suggest that SRE programmes might include some single-sex lessons at the beginning.

This view is echoed in the Ofsted Sex and Relationships report (Ofsted 2002), which found that both boys and girls recognised the need for some single-sex lessons, but also wanted to understand the emotional and physical changes that the other sex go through during puberty.

Single-sex groups may be particularly important for pupils who come from cultures where it is only acceptable to speak about sex, relationships and the body in single-sex groups.

Supporting individuals

Many schools provide support and advice for individual pupils, for example, via school nurses, counselling services and youth workers. However, boys feel that this support and advice is often aimed only at girls (Ofsted 2002). This perception discourages them from seeking help. It has also been found that school-age fathers do not receive enough guidance (Ofsted 2002).

Where support is provided, boys and young men will often not access it because privacy is difficult, for example, the location of the nurse, or referral systems used by schools, which make it obvious when a pupil has been for advice.

Choosing resources

Teaching materials and leaflets should be reviewed to ensure that they are appropriate and relevant and represent a wide range of positive images of masculinity.

Does the resource:

- promote a positive view of boys and men and a broad definition of what it is to be a man?
- address emotional and physical aspects of male sexuality?
- depict men as sexually responsible and sexually moral?
- prescribe gender roles for men that are positive and empowering?
- promote positive images of diverse sexualities?
- present the context for sex as being disease, reproduction or pleasure?

(Adapted from Jewitt 1997)

Who should teach SRE?

Trained and confident workers are best suited to deliver SRE. Boys say that they want someone who 'knows their stuff' and does not get embarrassed. They need to have a sense of humour, and to respect boys' feelings, beliefs and opinions. They also want someone who can give them information relevant to them, for example, what it is like emotionally for boys and young men growing up, and details of specific male physiological developments (for example, wet dreams, shaving and uncontrollable erections). They also note that they would like some male input for certain aspects of SRE. Most importantly, they want someone who will discuss and explore issues with them in a positive way.

Training and support

Anyone teaching or training young people in SRE needs appropriate training and adequate support. They need to have explored their own attitudes towards boys and young men and how their attitudes affect their response to them. It is also important that they have confidence and skills in communication, group-work methods and facilitation techniques with boys. In addition, they need to regularly update their own knowledge about sex, sexuality and sexual and reproductive health. Educators may feel under pressure to challenge boys and young men's views rather than to listen to them and explore them.

Arranging visits

Inviting visitors from sexual health services and community support services into the school gives young men the opportunity to meet health professionals in an informal setting. It helps to demystify the services and

reduces apprehension about accessing those services for the future. Schools may also want to organise visits to local sexual and reproductive health services.

Boys are likely to ask questions about sexual health services such as: Where is it? How do I get there? How long will it take? Will I have to give my name and address? What will happen once I'm there? Will it hurt? Addressing these questions will increase the likelihood of boys and young men accessing the services. Before referring a boy or young man to the service, make sure it has a positive attitude towards young men.

Advertising services

Because young men do not usually consider accessing health services, they would benefit considerably from schools advertising sources of sexual health advice and treatment. This might include contact details for helplines, websites, local Brook centres and sexual health clinics available in private and public places. A mandate for schools to advertise sexual health services for young people is given in *Sex and Relationship Education Guidance* (DfEE 2000). Details of helplines and services for young gay men should also be advertised in schools.

Endnote

The challenge for all of us is to provide curriculum and pastoral opportunities to explore gender stereotypes and expectations and the impact of these on behaviour, as well as specific support and information about sex, sexuality and sexual health.

Skills and qualities needed by the facilitator

The qualities and skills of facilitation are more important to boys than the professional role or gender of the facilitator.

- Facilitate a balance between personal and impersonal information – that is, to enable young men to be open without being 'put under the spotlight'.
- Safety is vital for learning. Balance protecting young men from ridicule and banter, while engendering a sense of fun.
- Young men often want immediate answers. Facilitators do not need to know all the answers but they can build trust and credibility by obtaining the information asked for.
- Skills in participative and active learning techniques will encourage participation.
- Take a positive approach, rather than promoting risk-associated aspects of sexual health and limiting aspects of masculinity.
- Understand the impact of different masculinities (for example, through peer pressure, racism, homophobia).

(Adapted from Davidson 2003)

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Registered Charity 258825. 8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE.

Sex Education Forum

Tel: 020 7843 6000

Fax: 020 7843 6053

Email: sexedforum@ncb.org.uk Website: www.ncb.org.uk/sef

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