

Sex and relationships education for children and young people with learning difficulties



Forum Factsheet 32

Sex and relationships education (SRE) is an important part of the curriculum for all children and young people. Those with mild, moderate and severe learning difficulties are no exception. This factsheet supports staff in special schools, mainstream schools and other settings in developing and reviewing SRE policy and practice.

This factsheet outlines the following:

1. **Defining SRE** – at what age and within what context
2. **Planning for SRE** – who is responsible, how to develop a policy, who to consult, confidentiality and child protection, ensuring all needs are met and how to adapt mainstream SRE
3. **Delivering SRE** – who should teach SRE, content, methods and how to link with other services
4. **Assessing and evaluating SRE**
5. **Further information and contact organisations**

Defining SRE

SRE is lifelong learning about sex, sexuality, emotions, relationships and sexual health. Through SRE children and young people acquire accurate information, develop skills and develop positive values which will guide their decision-making, judgements, relationships and behaviour throughout their life. SRE can happen in a variety of settings and contexts, within groups or on a one to one basis.

The law relating to school-based SRE is contained in the 1996 Education Act and the 2000 Learning and Skills Act. Every local education authority, head teacher and governing body has a statutory responsibility to take account of

this guidance which requires that SRE be provided. Furthermore, a written SRE policy, which is open to Ofsted inspection, must be in place and should be available to anybody working within the school setting. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) SRE Guidance (DfEE 2000) builds on these legal requirements and emphasises best practice by recommending that SRE is planned and delivered as part of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and Citizenship.

Whatever our gender, ability, culture, faith, sexuality and family background, we are all sexual beings, with the same needs for good and appropriate SRE. Children and young people with learning difficulties have the same rights as their peers to education, information, dignity and respect. All children and young people have a legal right to education and support which will prepare them for their responsibilities and experiences now and in later life.

The SRE Guidance (DfEE 2000) states that:

Mainstream schools and special schools have a duty to ensure that children with special educational needs and learning difficulties are properly included in sex and relationships education. Sex and relationships education should help all pupils understand their physical and emotional development and enable them to make positive decisions in their lives.

Age

Formal SRE should begin as soon as children start school, because the basis of SRE is learning about relationships with families and friends, and developing life skills such as decision-making and assertiveness. Children need to learn and practice these skills from a very early age, and build on what they learn at home. Children and young people need many opportunities to reinforce this learning.

Context

SRE is delivered in schools as part of PSHE and Citizenship. PSHE and Citizenship encourages pupils to:

- develop confidence and make the most of their abilities
- play an active role as citizens
- develop a healthy, safer lifestyle
- develop good relationships and respect differences between people.

To achieve these aims, the framework suggests that pupils should be offered opportunities both in the formal and informal curriculum to:

- take responsibility
- feel positive about themselves
- participate
- make real choices and decisions
- develop relationships
- consider social and moral dilemmas
- find information and advice
- prepare for change.

Further guidance can be found in the sections on PSHE and Citizenship in the

revised National Curriculum Handbooks for teachers (QCA 1999a and 1999b). For more information also refer to *PSHE and citizenship for children and young people with special needs. An agenda for action* (Blake and Muttock 2004)

The framework also provides explicit opportunities to explore issues relating to disability. This is an area which was particularly requested by young people with learning difficulties during the development of the resource *Living your life* (Brook 2003).

Planning for SRE

SRE policy should be part of a school's overall PSHE and Citizenship policy (see model on page 4). The policy will need to relate to other areas of the curriculum and be linked to other school policies such as equal opportunities, confidentiality, anti-bullying and child protection.

To write or review your existing policy you will need the SRE Guidance (DfEE 2000) which outlines schools' duties regarding SRE provision and provides support on certain aspects of SRE delivery and content. When developing your policy it is helpful to make a link between what you are doing in school and national and local teenage pregnancy, sexual health and HIV strategies. Your local Healthy School Programme can support you in policy review and development.

Responsibility

The governors of each school are legally responsible for ensuring that an SRE policy is developed and made available to parents and carers for inspection. Providing training for governors in this area of work helps them understand their responsibilities. The training should raise awareness of the issues for schools, pupils and parents. Many schools have found it very helpful to invite governors to SRE training and events. The Sex Education Forum's video and training

pack for school governors offers an excellent example of working with children with learning difficulties (Frances and Power 2003).

It is established good practice to develop SRE policies in consultation with pupils, parents and the school community. Consultation will raise awareness of the aims and values of SRE provision, and also enhance both staff and parental confidence in addressing these issues as it ensures that the programme is relevant to the needs of the pupils.

Involving children and young people

The SEN Code of Conduct (DfES 2001) emphasises the importance of consulting children and young people with special educational needs and learning difficulties. There are many ways they can be involved in the development of the school's SRE policy and practice. For example the school council could be involved in the policy review process and older students could work with younger students to think about the content of SRE. For more ideas on participation refer to *Working together: Giving children and young people a say* (DfES 2003) and *Promoting participation* (NHSS 2004).

The Shepherd School encourages the participation of its pupils. A working party was set up to revise the resource *Living your life* (Brook 2003) and included people with learning difficulties who were now in adult services or further education and students of the same age without learning difficulties. Over two years the group met regularly. Their confidence was built up with the support of a facilitator. They discussed issues concerning the SRE they had or had not received at school. They also discussed related issues such as bullying and lack of opportunities to develop friendship networks outside of school. Story boards and maps were used so

that students could have a visual reminder of what had been discussed. The user group greatly influenced the revision of the resource and was present for the launch of the new edition in 2003. This resource is now frequently used in the school.

Working with parents and carers

Despite a willingness to talk to their children about sex and relationships, many parents and carers are unsure about how to get started.

For some parents and carers of disabled children, fears of exploitation and pregnancy or a reluctance to see their children as sexual beings may complicate matters further. Parents and carers' anxieties often peak when a child reaches puberty. Their concerns can be reduced if the child's sexual development is addressed as a natural part of home-school links, rather than just at crisis points. Many schools include SRE in the home-school partnership agreements and place SRE on the agenda at the annual parents' and carers' meeting. Other schools make clear their commitment to providing SRE within the school prospectus.

For other parents and carers, their concerns may mean they are highly motivated to address these issues. They appreciate the openness and support given by schools and health professionals. Schools can help support parents and carers by lending SRE books and resources such as the parents' resources *Talking Together about Sex and Relationships* (Kerr-Edwards and Scott 2003) and *Talking Together about Growing Up* (Scott 1999). These excellent books provide support with education on the life cycle, body parts, keeping safe, feelings, growing up and looking ahead for parents and carers of children with learning disabilities. A factsheet for parents is also available from the Sex Education Forum (SEF 2003).

There are many examples of ways to engage parents and carers. Meetings and workshops with other parents and carers can be used to share experiences, ideas and increase confidence. Participative events hosted by professionals working with people who have learning difficulties are also useful. To support their work with parents and carers the Shepherd School developed *Body Works*, which includes 'agony aunt' letters addressing common concerns. The responses provide support and reassure parents that their concerns are not unique to them.

Confidentiality

The lives of disabled children and young people are so often open to public scrutiny that they may feel that everything they do or say will be reported on. Nevertheless, it is important to give them opportunities to discuss sexual matters with someone other than their families or friends.

Although SRE may trigger thoughts of a personal nature, class-based SRE is not an appropriate place to discuss personal issues and working agreements need to be established to ensure there are boundaries to what is discussed. Schools should provide information on where pupils can talk about personal issues in confidence.

The DfES guidance recommends that schools develop a policy on confidentiality and that this is made available to parents and carers, pupils and outside visitors. Clear policies on confidentiality will help to develop the trust and the support that young people need.

Child protection

Children and young people with learning difficulties may be vulnerable to exploitation and abuse for a number of reasons. SRE should increase their ability to recognise and respond to abusive behaviour.

Schools also have a duty to safeguard all of their pupils. All staff and others working within schools must be made aware of the child protection procedures. *Safeguarding Children: Guidance about child protection arrangements for the Education Service* (DfES 2004) sets out schools' responsibilities and *What to do if you're worried a child is being abused* (DoH 2003) sets out the individual's responsibilities to safeguard the welfare of children and young people.

Ensuring all children and young people's needs are met

The SRE programme will need to be flexible to meet the different needs of children and young people. For example, for students who use alternative methods of communication such as signing, symbols and/or communication switches and aids, you will need to ensure that staff are familiar with words in Makaton, Braille and British Sign Language.

Students with profound and multiple learning difficulties need not be excluded from the program. Using appropriate methods, they will be able to experience most of the basic content such as self-awareness, gender awareness, body recognition and privacy.

For example, the Shepherd School uses a range of sensory games to raise awareness of parts of the body using silk scarves and items that make sound. When they move, each body part can make a different sound for example, feet on gravel, side on 'whoopie cushion', head on foil, arms in shells, bottom on bubble plastic.

Developing SRE provision in a mainstream school

Under the provisions of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) schools are required to ensure that the curriculum (including PSHE and SRE) is meeting the needs of pupils with

special educational needs and to monitor this. SRE guidance (DfEE 2000) advises that teachers may find they have to be more explicit and plan work in different ways in order to meet the individual needs of children and young people with learning difficulties. Consultation with children and young people will help you do this. Students should not be withdrawn from SRE so that they can catch up on National Curriculum subjects. Increasingly, pupils with learning difficulties will receive extra support in PSHE with one to one sessions to reinforce learning in SRE sessions.

It is important to ensure that activities are differentiated, including a task for all, which everyone in the group can achieve at their own level; extension activities to increase understanding; and additional support on the task, for instance help with reading out instructions or follow up work. You might also want to use different resources or grouping by ability or mixed ability.

Children and young people with learning difficulties in mainstream education often need additional learning opportunities and reinforcement to ensure that they understand fully. Tutorial time can give an opportunity to discuss student's concerns on a personal level. This is also a good time to raise awareness of issues to do with peer group interaction, such as body language, eye contact and the need for personal space.

Finally, ensure that the resources you use are inclusive of and provide positive images of disabled children and young people.

Delivering SRE

Staff

Good quality SRE is dependent on confident staff who are adequately trained and supported. Some schools involve all staff members, in others it is delivered by a specialist PSHE team, as

Model PSHE & Citizenship Policy Framework which integrates SRE

Introduction

Name of School

Date policy was completed

People responsible

Healthy School Status

Information about

The school and community

The consultation process with children and young people, parents/carers, the wider community, etc.

The aims of PSHE and Citizenship (including SRE element)

Why should it be taught – objectives of PSHE and Citizenship, for example:

- to raise pupils' self-esteem and confidence, especially in their relationships with others
- to develop skills in language, decision-making and assertiveness
- to help young people gain access to information and services
- to enable children and young people to participate in society and to value themselves and others.

The topics and themes including SRE, emotional health and well-being, healthy eating, exercise, drug education, safety and citizenship

How PSHE and Citizenship supports the ethos of the school and what are the values underpinning the programme

How the whole school ethos supports the provision of PSHE and Citizenship

How PSHE and Citizenship contributes to Healthy School development

Organisation and planning

Name of PSHE and Citizenship Coordinator

Who teaches PSHE and Citizenship

How PSHE and Citizenship will meet the needs of all children and young people including those with special educational needs

What are the specific arrangements for special educational needs and disabled children and young people (timetabling, resources, staffing and revision)

Where PSHE and Citizenship is taught (how it forms part of the curriculum)

Teaching methods and approaches (differentiation, assessment & evaluation)

Criteria for resources selection

Staff professional development and support

How children and young people's learning will be assessed, recorded and reported

How to link to, and make pupils aware of, pastoral systems and health advisory services in school and the wider community

Specific issues

Legal aspects relating to SRE, special educational needs, including learning difficulties, the Disability Discrimination Act, drug education, bullying, promoting racial equality, safeguarding children

Creating a safe environment for learning and teaching, confidentiality, boundaries

Ensuring pupil participation and active citizenship, including peer education

Ensuring partnerships across school with parents and wider community including agreements for using visitors in the classroom

How this policy will be cross referenced to other policies and guidance

Who will receive a copy of the policy and how it will be made available

Monitoring and evaluation

Who will monitor the implementation of the policy

How will the work be evaluated

When will it be next reviewed, once every two to three years is advisable

recommended by Ofsted (2002). It is helpful to have a named member of staff with overall responsibility of SRE for parents to contact. It is also helpful if this person is a senior member of staff who can influence budgets, timetabling and staff training. PSHE staff and those delivering the curriculum will need extra training on curriculum content, teaching methods and other relevant issues.

A wide range of staff can be involved in the care, support and education of a child or young person with learning difficulties for instance, one to one care workers, house parents and teachers, learning mentors — all with different roles. To ensure adequate support and consistency of approach, all staff should be involved in policy development. Care and support staff play an informal but key role as they are often involved in intimate care. The school's approach to delivering SRE should form part of the induction programme for all new members of staff. All staff in the schools will need an awareness of the issues involved in SRE, such as the language to be used, and some familiarity with the messages and methods of the SRE programme.

Content

The content of SRE is similar for all children and young people but the approach and methodology are often different. All SRE in mainstream and special schools needs to address attitudes to disability, diversity and difference.

Image in Action divides the content of the SRE programme into six main themes (Blake 2003):

- body parts
- gender
- feelings
- public and private
- relationships
- life cycle

Each of these themes can be developed at different levels over the years and will be based on pupils' ability and maturity. At the core are the basic life skills of permission, decision-making and assertion. There are a variety of resources which can help you to develop schemes of work on these subjects such as *Sex and Relationships Education: A step by step guide for teachers* (Blake 2002). The following sections describes approaches to some of the key areas.

Feelings

The foundation of all SRE work is the development of self-esteem and emotional resilience. Children and young people with learning difficulties need to explore the impacts on their relationships resulting from society's attitudes towards disability and sexuality, and the feelings associated with experiencing prejudice and unfair treatment. SRE needs to acknowledge the diversity and difference of relationships. SRE can also help pupils understand the impact of feelings on behaviour and how our behaviour effects the feeling of others.

Opportunities to make choices, have a say in decisions that affect their lives and assertiveness training will increase children and young people's self-esteem and can help reduce their vulnerability. Introducing the element of choice into children and young people's lives at an early stage is vital. Knowing that they can make a choice, and can say yes or no are important skills for life. For example, ensuring that children are given opportunities to decide what they want to eat or wear from an early age will ensure that decision-making skills are learned and developed. These skills can then be used in other areas of their lives. For children and young people with learning difficulties, teaching choice needs to be well structured. Learning will need to be reinforced in a wide variety of contexts.

Public and private

Public and private are complex concepts for many children and young people with learning difficulties.

Misunderstanding can lead to inappropriate behaviour and render them vulnerable and unsafe. Special effort needs to be made to teach these complex concepts as there are various situations which might be described as private or public. For instance, a room with 'private' on the door does not indicate that sex may take place there. Using drama where students say whether certain situations are public or private can help reinforce appropriate behaviours. Image in Action uses a screen for this. They describe a situation and ask a student to step in front of the screen if they think that the situation is public, and to step behind it if they think it is private.

Of course, many children and young people with learning difficulties do have a clear sense and understanding of privacy but may not be afforded much by the adults around them. Children and young people cite adults discussing their condition, or asking whether they need the toilet in front of anyone. SRE training and provision should raise awareness of the importance of providing children and young people with privacy so that they genuinely experience it.

Good rapport needs to be established with parents and carers so there is consistency of approach. If the child's school is saying a particular activity is a private one, suitable for their own room, there needs to be discussion with parents or carers so they can reinforce messages about appropriate behaviour.

Masturbation

An element of sexual fulfilment for many people is masturbation. To reassure children and young people and their families, supportive education should help children and young people to cope with masturbation, teach about appropriateness, privacy and

encourage good hygiene. The teaching should also explain what happens and give reassurance. Storytelling with pictures has been found very effective for doing this. *Talking Together About Growing Up* (Kerr-Edwards and Scott 1999) contains a picture story which addresses this subject positively with young people.

Appropriate behaviour

An important part of SRE is learning about what is acceptable behaviour in different situations. For example appropriate behaviour will be different for staff providing intimate care, for friends or meeting a new adult. It is advised that visitors are more formal and less intimate with the pupils than staff; and that 'strangers' are even less physically demonstrative (for example not hugging a child or young person when they first meet). In this way, children and young people are more likely to learn different ways of relating to people and not to feel rejected if an intimate approach to a stranger is not reciprocated. This type of strategy helps to reduce children and young people's vulnerability to abuse and to ensure that they themselves don't act in an abusive way. Policies should be clear about acceptable boundaries for pupils and staff.

Relationships

We all have a need for a range of relationships including those with family, friends and lovers. Intimate relationships can be fulfilling and enhance self-esteem and confidence. In turn, this can encourage cognitive and other development. For children and young people with learning difficulties, opportunities for meeting and forming relationships are often lacking and they may have fewer opportunities to learn and develop skills as part of their natural sexual development. This is why it is particularly important that children and young people with learning difficulties are able to practice these skills in the classroom and in other

settings such as trips and social events.

Many groups have used storytelling and drama as a way of exploring relationships. The pupils can take part in developing the characters and choosing what happens to them. It is important for them to recognise the different types of relationships – those with family, fellow pupils, particular friends and sexual relationships. It is helpful to include discussion about the development of relationships, how they change and how they end.

Gay and lesbian relationships

Information about sexual relationships, including gay and lesbian relationships is an essential part of SRE to help children and young people understand the situations and feelings they may experience. Young lesbians and young gay men need support and accurate information that is relevant to their experiences. Teaching about the diversity of relationships will take place within the guidelines in each school's policy.

Life cycle

Education about reproduction and pregnancy is included in the National Curriculum (QCA/DFEE 1999a). However this teaching will need to take its place in a programme which also covers access to contraception, knowledge about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and skills to practise safer sex. There may be particular issues around contraception for girls with learning difficulties, for instance, informed consent, ensuring that they are aware of the need for regular health checks and that most forms of contraception (such as the pill and the injection) do not protect against STIs. Teaching about protection and safer sex practices is important, particularly in the current context where STIs continue to increase. A useful guideline is to teach that condoms should always be used during sexual intercourse.

Methods

Children and young people report that they would like some of their formal SRE to be provided in single sex groups. However, work in mixed gender groups is also important.

Using active methods in a group is the most effective approach. These methods use a variety of ways of communicating and are not only verbal. They enable skills to be practised; they keep up the energy and enthusiasm of the group and are fun! They include circle work, matching and sequencing pictures, experiential work, storytelling, mime and drama.

Some key elements of working in this way are:

- setting up working agreements from the start, such as no-one will be expected to ask or answer a personal question; it also provides clarity about what will need to be passed on if there is a genuine concern
- use of distancing techniques – realistic case studies for instance – will help to protect confidentiality
- using group building activities to form a cooperative and safe group
- giving a variety of opportunities for developing and practising skills like decision making and assertion
- using distancing methods like stories, case studies, drama and 3D models to allow discussion about matters without referring to people in the group
- using ritual and repetition to promote learning, for example using the same song or activity to start the session
- building on what has gone before by returning to similar content at each stage
- drawing on a wide range of materials including visual, aural and tactile.

Children and young people with learning difficulties will need constant repetition and reinforcement of learning. Checking that they have really

understood or assimilated information or concepts is much more important than simply 'covering everything'.

For those with slower cognitive response, classroom work needs to be more explicit than with other students. Visual material will need to be clear and unmistakable and learning can be reinforced using anatomically correct, three-dimensional models.

Drama

Drama can be particularly useful for students to practise skills such as those required to get out of difficult situations. The skill may be to shout out 'No!', but standing up to an adult or more powerful peer may be very daunting. Using drama techniques, students can practice this. You might model the first scenario to encourage students. Situations could then vary, perhaps saying 'No' to a stranger and then to a neighbour or family friend. Filming the role-plays is a good way of allowing the pupils to discuss what was happening and how their peers might improve their skills.

It is very important that pupils feel comfortable with the use of role-play and have used it in other situations. They should know when people are in or out of role. Staff, too, must feel confident in its use. Some excellent ideas on the use of drama can be found in Image in Action's resources *On the Agenda* (Scott 1994) and *Let's Do It* (Johns and others 1997). Drama has also been used to improve confidence in accessing advice services.

Language

It is helpful to clarify with all staff the language that will be used in formal and informal SRE. This will help avoid confusion and offence. All staff need to be precise about the language they use. Avoid unhelpful euphemisms such as 'down below'. The development of an appropriate language with which children and young people can describe

their bodies is essential if they are to develop a sense of pride in their bodies. Appropriate language is also a key element in child protection.

Developing appropriate language should begin from an early age and can be reinforced by using accurate language when providing personal care. Parents' and carers' involvement and commitment will ensure consistency at home.

Links with other services

The SRE guidance highlights the importance of making links to sexual health and advice services. It is important to find out what local services exist for young people and whether they cater for pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities. For example, are the premises accessible?

Links should be forged to increase staff confidence. For example, students from one special school visited a family planning clinic, got to meet the staff and designed signs and posters which would make it more friendly towards those with disabilities. The same could be done with GP surgeries and other sexual health services (Thistle 2003).

Staff from the GUM clinic may also support SRE by visiting the school or arranging visits to their service. The school nurse or doctor can provide both practical input for pupils and advice to school staff. For example they could support a women's and a men's group looking at sexual health issues.

Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment in SRE is crucial to the process of learning. It helps children, young people and the adults that work with them to understand what has been learned and to identify future learning needs. Assessment also helps staff to identify pupils' progress for reporting processes. Evaluation is concerned with

the appropriateness of content and the effectiveness of the methodologies used in achieving the learning objectives. Both assessment and evaluation are collaborative processes between children, young people and staff. For further information see *SRE: An assessment and evaluation tool kit* (Blake and Muttock forthcoming).

It is equally important to mark your successes in this area. Recognising pupils' progress is a key part of motivating them. Celebratory work such as displays and folders of achievement are useful ways of sharing achievements with pupils, staff, parents and carers.

Further Information

The Sex Education Forum produces a number of resources to support SRE. For an up to date list of resources for working with children and young people with learning difficulties please visit the Sex Education Forum's website (www.ncb.org.uk/sef).

The following organisations will be able to support you in developing your SRE provision.

Image In Action

Chinner Road, Bledlow Ridge, High Wycombe HP14 4AJ
tel: 01494 481 632

Image In Action has produced a series of extremely useful resources for schools and parents and also provides training and consultancy regarding SRE for children with learning difficulties.

Consent

tel: 01923 670796
e-mail: consent@hnhsrc.demon.co.uk
website: www.hertsparts.nhs.uk/consent
Consent offer a range of services to respond to a broad range of sexuality issues, including enabling informed choices, sexual health, issues of HIV risks and working with people with learning difficulties who have been sexually abused or perpetrated sexual abuse.

Ann Craft Trust

Tel: 0115 9515400
 website: www.anncrafttrust.org
 Ann Craft Trust supports professionals working with people with learning difficulties to understand issues of abuse and to be able to identify and take action when necessary in order to protect the people they work with.

Shepherd School

tel: 0115 915 3265
 e-mail: shepherd_school@hotmail.com
 website: www.shepherdschool.org.uk
 The award winning Shepherd School had produced a number of resources for children and young people with learning difficulties and for professionals and parents.

National Healthy Schools Coordinators

Contact details for coordinators are available from your LEA or the Health Development Agency (tel: 020 7661 3072, website: www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk).

Teenage Pregnancy Coordinators

Contact details for coordinators are available from your local authority, PCT, or the Teenage Pregnancy Unit (tel: 020 7273 4839, website: www.teenagepregnancyunit.gov.uk).

Brook Advisory Centres

tel: 020 7284 6052
 website: www.brook.org.uk
 Brook provides confidential sexual health and advice services for young people. They also produce a number of useful resources.

fpa

tel: 01865 719 418
 website: www.fpa.org.uk
 fpa produce a number of useful SRE resources.

Centre for HIV and Sexual Health

tel: 0114 226 1900
 website: www.sexualhealthsheffied.chiv.nhs.uk
 The Centre produces a wide variety of resources and training programmes in sexual health promotion.

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 DISABLED
 CHILDREN



THE SHEPHERD SCHOOL

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