

Effective learning methods

Approaches to teaching about sex and relationships within PSHE and Citizenship



Forum Factsheet 34

There are three elements to sex and relationships education (SRE): the acquisition of information, the development of essential life skills, and the opportunity to explore values and attitudes. The methods of delivering SRE are as important as the content. This factsheet highlights these methods to ensure effective learning.

In school settings the law relating to SRE is contained in the 1996 Education Act and the 2000 Learning and Skills Act. The biological content of SRE is laid out in the statutory National Curriculum Science Order. 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 SRE Guidance (2000) builds on these legal requirements and emphasises best practice by recommending that SRE is planned and delivered as part of personal, social, health and citizenship education.

Key features of good teaching in SRE include:

1. Planning – having a clear focus for lesson planning and a broad and detailed understanding of the different aspects of SRE.
2. Climate setting – creating a climate that encourages pupils to express their views and feelings and to respect the views of others, with clear established boundaries.
3. Methods – teaching methods, including good use of resources that give good opportunities for all pupils to reflect on and assimilate their learning.
4. Assessment – assessment of pupils' knowledge and understanding the development of their values and attitudes as well as emotional and social skills.
(Ofsted 2002)

Planning

Assessing need

A needs-led approach and ethos will help you to deliver effective SRE. The process as well as the content of each activity must be addressed. SRE must also be appropriate in terms of maturity, ability, gender, sexuality and cultural background. Consulting pupils is essential to assess their needs.

Setting clear aims and outcomes

Lessons must have clear aims and proposed learning outcomes, which are to be achieved by specific learning approaches. Be realistic about what you can achieve in the time provided. Check:

- What are you trying to achieve?
- What activity will best achieve the outcome?
- How big is the group?
- How well does the group know each other?
- How well do you know the group?
- What are the different levels of ability in the group?
- What does the group already know?

Once you have determined the aims, outcomes and the time available for the lessons, appropriate activities will need to be selected. You will also need to ensure that the room is appropriately arranged. For example, the lesson may require the ability to work in circles rather than behind desks.

Climate setting

The following techniques will support the development of a safe environment in which effective learning can take place.

Develop a working agreement

Developing a working agreement ensures a 'safe environment', reduces anxiety and embarrassment and minimises unconsidered, unintended personal disclosures.

A key agreement is that no personal questions will be asked of pupils or staff. The way people feel when engaging in learning will clearly impact upon how well they engage with the learning process. A safe teaching environment will enable both yourself and pupils to discuss a whole variety of issues and topics. Trust and respect takes a while to develop and is usually based on past experience. The discussion should also include reminders to avoid personal revelations (methodologies such as use of case studies and distancing techniques should be used to protect pupils from this).

Negotiate language

As part of the working agreement the language used in the classroom should also be negotiated. Language that confuses, mystifies or offends is not helpful. Take care in your use of language because it can easily convey

Sample lesson plan

Date: _____ Age of pupils: _____

Topic: _____

Times: _____ Space available: _____

Aims:

-
-
-

Learning outcomes:

-
-
-

Information element:
(identify/describe the specific information you want to impart)

Skills element:
(identify/describe specific skills you want the pupils to develop and practise)

-
-
-
-

Values clarification:
(identify/describe both the values you want to encourage and those that the pupils will have the opportunity to clarify)

Method(s):
(identify/describe the activity, for example brainstorm, short information input and role play and time available – remember to include time for processing the learning)

Resources needed:
(identify/describe the specific resources, for example video clips and/or leaflet)

Observations:
(complete at the end of the session)

prejudice, disengage pupils or make assumptions about children and young people's abilities, desires, background or experience. Clear language is also important to ensure that misunderstandings are not developed or perpetuated. This is particularly true at the primary level where children may use family names for body parts. Respectful language has to be encouraged across the whole school and not just in the classroom.

Task setting

Set very specific tasks, not just 'discuss this picture' but 'make a list of everything that is going on in this picture'; set time limits for tasks; and ask for specific feedback – for example, 'three things you think are the most important about...'. Give clear instructions and be confident about using an activity by practising beforehand.

Clarify at the beginning of the session what is going to happen and what people are going to do (in effect the lesson plan).

Self-disclosure is not appropriate

Although it may be tempting to illustrate the lesson with experiences from your own life, it is not good practice. To safeguard against this, it is advisable to ensure 'no personal questions will be asked or answered' is part of the initial group agreement. Using characters from TV programmes allows you to demonstrate to the young people how to discuss personal issues in an impersonal way. For example 'Sharon (in EastEnders) this week had to face the dilemma of ... How do you think she should resolve the situation?'

Use distancing techniques

Use distancing techniques to encourage objectivity. They are used to help pupils to work with material

which although identifiable is not personal. Asking them to do role plays, or to consider case studies of people who they can relate to but are not them, can make them feel safe and give them ample opportunities to explore relevant issues and develop appropriate skills. This is a key technique for protecting confidentiality.

Summarise at regular intervals

This helps to keep young people to task and can help the group to feel 'contained' and 'safe'. For example, 'This discussion seems to have interested you all and you have expressed several different opinions. For instance some of you think that marriage is a good idea and others are saying that you believe in committed relationships. But you all seem to agree that you will need to work at relationships to develop trust and respect.'

Use open questioning

Use open questioning to enable discussion instead of closed questioning which usually elicits a monosyllabic response. An example of a closed question might be, 'So you think boys aren't interested in contraception?' An open question might be, 'What do boys think about contraception?' Using open questions helps you develop an enabling rather than prescribing style.

Give opportunities for reflection

Allow time for discussion. Use open-ended questions to encourage reflection. Focus on how and why things happened rather than what happened. Listen to all pupils' opinions, attitudes and feelings in a non-judgemental way. This models a respectful way of communicating with people. There will of course be times when you have to draw a line, but always remember to hold concern for

the minority view and experience. Give encouragement and be available to give support.

Challenge

Challenging pupils can be perceived badly as 'telling off' or received well as helpful learning. This is a very difficult skill. You are the adult and have to control the class but if you 'police' prejudiced remarks too heavily you may put the young person on the defensive and this may result in them resentfully confirming their prejudice. Try using an open question. For example, 'Let's think for a moment, what messages do we receive from society and the media about girls?' You could get young people to brainstorm this, and then run a short discussion on the effect of the negativity of these messages and compare it with their reality.

Further support

It is important that SRE includes information about advice services that children and young people can access, including helplines, websites and support services.

Question box

Many young people may not feel comfortable to ask questions in front of the class. A question box provides an opportunity for anonymous questions to be 'asked' at the end of the lesson which are dealt with during the following lesson. This can also help guide the planning and development of future lessons.

Differentiated learning

Pupils will have different abilities based on their emotional and physical development, life experiences, literacy levels and learning difficulties. Differentiating tasks so everyone can achieve is key to success.

Differentiated learning can be in terms of: outcome – a task for all which

Example of a working agreement with a Year 10 group

We want to enjoy our sex and relationships education and so we have agreed that:

- We will neither ask nor answer personal questions.
- We will respect each other and not laugh at each other's questions.
- We will not say things that we want to be kept confidential.
- We can 'pass' or 'opt out' if something makes us feel uncomfortable.
- We will try not to talk about each other outside the classroom.
- We will look at this list before half term and check that it is still all right.

the group can achieve at their own level; extension of activities – a group which has finished first can be given a further activity to increase their understanding; support on the task, for instance an extra member of staff to read out instructions; different resources – active learning techniques allow the teacher to manage more than one activity at a time; grouping by ability – this may be by ability or by mixed ability.

Setting up groups

A prerequisite for all SRE is to spend time building group trust and cohesion. It will be time well spent, as groups given this preparation time will work faster together and perform better. It is a good idea to use specific group-building activities at the start of a module and continue to use these over time to develop group trust.

Stages groups go through

All groups go through particular stages and teachers can develop skills to enable

pupils to move through the stages easily to maximise learning. The following are based on Tuckman's work (1965).

Forming – The starting process when pupils may feel excited, unsure or shy, particularly if it's a new activity, even though they know each other. At this point, teachers need to offer and negotiate clear ground rules to help the group move onto the second stage.

Storming – Pupils begin to feel so unsure that they argue about who is working with whom and have difficulties in understanding instructions.

Norming – Pupils start to settle down and work out who is going to do what.

Performing – Pupils can now get on with the task having resolved issues of relationships, increased the feeling of safety in their group and understood what is expected of them.

If you have divided the class into small groups they may well go through these stages differently. The process will depend on the level of trust and quality of relationships in the small group, as well as the clarity of the task and the support available to them.

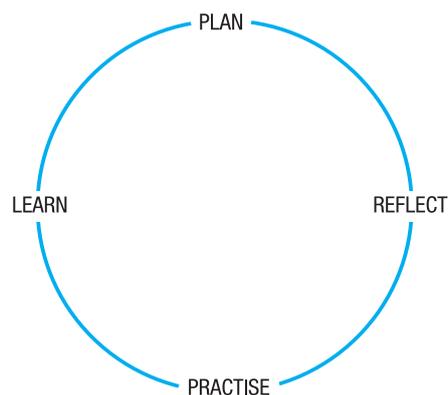
Working in mixed and single gender groups

In some circumstances it may be more appropriate for elements of SRE to be dealt with in single gender groups. For example, for some children it would not be culturally appropriate for them to address particular issues in a mixed group. The organisation of SRE will be clearly outlined in the policy. Let the pupils tell you what is appropriate and acceptable for them. Try out different ways of working, observe how different groups/genders take to the task, and follow up by asking pupils which methods they preferred or were most comfortable with.

Methods

Learning ... that reflective activity which enables the learner to draw upon previous experience to understand and evaluate the present, so as to shape future action and formulate new knowledge.
(Kirby, 1995)

For information to become knowledge, which informs and influences behaviour, a particular type of learning has to take place. Learning which is based on active methods are key to successful outcomes. We all learn in different ways. Children learn best when they are motivated and when the method of learning offered to them engages them and seems appropriate. Given some teachers' anxieties about SRE it can be tempting to use didactic methods, which can be seen as offering more control over the session. Methods such as giving factual presentations can be useful when information is imparted to a large group. However this is a passive way of learning and does not engage the individual. Research from the UK and the US provides evidence that SRE that leads to the clarification of attitudes and values and skills development is most effective when pupils are actively involved (HDA 2003). As a young woman said: 'We want to think about real life dilemmas.' Crucially, research with



children and young people shows that where SRE is concerned traditional teaching methods are unpopular. (Thomson and others 1991, Sex Education Forum 2000)

'It was a teacher teaching, it wasn't a discussion, if you know what I mean. It was an overhead projector at the front, teacher behind the desk; it wasn't an open discussion at all.'
(Young man, year 9)

Active learning uses creative processes to develop skills. Pupils work through a sequence of principles in order to learn. This involves 'doing' or engaging in a structured activity, for example a problem-solving exercise and sharing the experience by reflecting on the activity and describing it in process terms. What has been learnt is practised and is followed by planning future behaviour, by working out what has been learnt and how they might change their beliefs and behaviour in the future.

Assessment for learning forms an important part of this process by helping children and young people to think about and concretise what they have learnt.

Active learning methods can be fun and effective, but equally if not well-planned and practised beforehand can feel threatening and awkward to both you and pupils. It can seem as if you are relinquishing control of the class but in fact you are sharing it with the group and you are still responsible for the learning, discipline and safe environment.

Benefits of using active learning methods

Active learning methods have a number of benefits:

- They can be used successfully with groups of all ages and abilities

(including work with parents, governors, and in staff training).

- Children are acknowledged as the starting point for their own learning; this can have a positive effect on the ethos of the school by sending a clear message that feedback from the pupils is valued.
- A variety of learning experiences increases energy levels and interest.
- Different life experiences are acknowledged.
- Pupils are actively engaged in their own learning process by enabling them to draw on their own experience.
- Pupils are encouraged to use the communication skills because they are working collaboratively.
- Pupils learn how to articulate an idea and share the idea with others. This requires the skills of presentation, and listening.
- Pupils have to respond to the actual content as well as the diverse beliefs, values, opinions and feelings of others.
- Pupils have to critically analyse their material, make decisions and find consensus or agree to differ.
- Pupils can develop core life skills, an integral part of good work on sex and relationships, for example communication and decision-making skills.

'I am glad that people took the lessons seriously and didn't make a laugh or joke about it and that we could sit in a circle and discuss our different views.'
Young woman, Year 9

Activities

The following are examples of activities that can be used to achieve active learning. You will need to match the method to the purpose and to the stage of group development, ability and maturity of the group.

With new groups or if you are new to the group it is better to start by

choosing simple activities which are information focused such as brainstorming and build up to more sophisticated ones like role-play and values clarification. It is important to keep the process in mind – the experience of working in a group is as important as learning facts. Prepare to be flexible – this way of working does encourage the group to set its own agenda; see this as positive!

This is just a small selection of activities. There are now many teaching packs available with different activities (see the Sex Education Forum website for details). Choose activities that will meet the needs of the pupils, suit your own personal style and the ethos of the school.

Brainstorming

This is a useful way of recording ideas quickly. It can help you to gauge the pupils' prior knowledge and identify the range of prevailing attitudes and current concerns and issues. It should only take a few minutes. Ask pupils to call out all the words they associate with a particular word such as 'relationships'. All responses are written up, the writer filters none. The brainstorm could be discussed or built on with another exercise.

Discussion techniques

Asking pupils to work in small groups makes talking easier for them. For many people talking in a large group is very frightening and they can develop confidence working first with pairs and then threes, etc. In order to involve all members of a group rather than just the confident or vocal members, it will be necessary for the facilitator to divide the class into various sub-groups. The following are some ideas for improving discussion sessions.

2s to 4s – Pupils can be asked to talk in pairs and then move into fours to share what they have learned.

Reporting back – After a discussion or task, each group should share what they have done/talked about. This enables each group to contribute to the wider discussion, and shows that everyone's contribution is valued.

Socratic discussion – This form of discussion is teacher-led with pupils working in threes. Pupils are given questions to discuss in small groups for a short period. They are then invited to share their ideas with the whole group. Questions arising from the whole-group discussion are then explored in smaller groups.

Fishbowl discussion – This is a way of controlling discussion. Put not more than six or seven chairs in an inner circle, with the rest in an outer circle. Discussion takes place only in the inner circle. A spare chair ensures that someone can come into the centre. At the same time people in the centre can move out and allow others to contribute.

Debate – For this to be effective it must be well prepared. More reticent pupils are more likely to take part if small group discussion has taken place prior to the formal debate.

Standpoint-taking – This technique enables pupils to explore both sides of an issue. Make two concentric circles with chairs, each inside chair facing an outside chair. Give a statement and ask the inside group to argue for it, and the outside group to argue against with the person they are sitting opposite. It is important to stress that they may not believe that particular stance but they have to find as many arguments as possible. Allow two minutes' discussion and move the outer circle on two places. Repeat the process. Move again but this time change stances thus arguing the opposite viewpoint.

Ask the group: How did it feel to argue for something with which you disagreed? How easy was it to change viewpoints? What have you learned?

Listening exercises

These can be conducted in pairs. For example, person A talks to person B for five minutes describing the qualities of a friend. Person B records to A what they have heard. They swap roles. This pair joins another pair and they are asked to draw up a friend specification. This work is presented to other groups or the whole class.

Questionnaires and quizzes

These are not tests of knowledge but triggers for discussion, where pupils will be able to acquire more information as well as explore issues that arise. They should not last too long otherwise some pupils may feel excluded or bored. They can be used for discussion by asking the group to discuss the things they agree with or disagree with, alone and then discuss with a partner those on which you disagreed.

Trigger drawings, storyboards, situation cards, photographs, magazine articles

These can be used for discussion, problem solving or as material for role-play.

Case studies

These can be used to help pupils to understand another's experience and to consider the effects of the situation. For instance, the group is asked to work out all the options that are available to the characters described, who would help them and how could they get this help.

Interviewing outside visitors

This is a powerful group-building activity and provides young people with the opportunity to find out what they want to know. This is an alternative to having 'speakers' and

gives responsibility to the group for the process and for their own learning. Pupils control the session, and visitors should be briefed that they will not be giving a presentation but will be asked to respond to questions about their area of expertise or experience. In preparing for the visit the group considers questions such as who do we invite and for what purpose? What do we want to know? What questions shall we ask and in what order? How is everybody going to be involved? How do we make the visitor comfortable? Who will draw the session to a close? The visit should be followed by a debriefing session to draw out the learning of the subject matter and the performance of the group. Guidance on using visitors is offered in Sex Education Forum Factsheet 8 (1996).

Story telling

Make use of fiction or develop stories within the group to explore feelings and attitudes. Relating the discussion to the fictional characters provides a safer way of examining experiences the young people may go through such as making and losing friends, bullying, needing help, bereavement and many others. Refer to current situations in 'soaps'. How would the group resolve the issues raised?

Videos, films, CD ROMS

These can be thought provoking and interesting, but equally can be boring, inaccurate and outdated. It may be tempting for the facilitator and the audience to react passively to them. Issues raised need to be followed-up by the use of methods that focus energy and attention. It is important to prepare the group well by exploring the issues. Ask the group to look for four or five key points. These can form the basis for a group discussion. Pausing or stopping at key points is another way of

picking up issues for discussion.

Continuums

These are 'lines' of variance between two points, such as agree or disagree, or high risk, low risk. Pupils (volunteers) are asked to physically place themselves somewhere along the line that best describes their opinion or the value of a statement called out by the teacher. Care should always be taken to ensure that statements used are sensitive to the circumstances and backgrounds of the pupils. Opinions are shared with one or two others and finally opened up to the group where appropriate. After a few minutes pupils find someone of the opposite opinion and exchange views. The aim of the exercise is not to change other people's views, but to hear and understand them. Pupils can enjoy this activity which makes them move about, demonstrates the breadth of opinion so visually and offers them a real opportunity to both express their own values and hear the values of others. Although this exercise can be fun and a really useful experience it must be carefully facilitated so that pupils do not feel alienated and frightened. Some people find this type of activity challenging and may prefer to observe. Always support a young person who finds themselves alone at a point on the continuum as they may be teased about this afterwards.

Role-play

Enables people to use their fantasy and intuition. Pupils are asked to identify with a character and act out his/her role in a particular situation. It gives them an opportunity to experience an issue or situation from a different perspective. For instance a girl can experience how a boy feels in a particular situation. If pupils are to identify with their characters, careful preparation is needed to build the background and feelings of the

characters before the role-play takes place. Unfortunately role-play is sometimes used so badly that people are afraid of it. Always use role-play in small groups and never ask young people to perform in front of the class without very strong trust first. Sometimes pupils identify so strongly with their 'character' and can't disengage so make sure you 'derole' pupils. Re-engage them with the present, for example in a particular situation 'what did you have for lunch today?'

Using resources

There are many resources currently available. It is essential that you familiarise yourself with the resources before you use them. This will ensure that you are confident with the materials and that they are appropriate for the needs of the group. Most resources will need adapting:

- Is it consistent with the school ethos, mission statement, equal opportunities statement and the values framework for SRE?
- Is it appropriate to the needs of your pupils in terms of language, images, attitude, maturity and understanding and the knowledge required?
- Does it avoid racism, sexism, gender and homophobic stereotyping? Does it exclude anyone on the basis of home circumstance, gender, race, literacy, culture, disability, faith or religion?
- Does it include positive images of a range of children and young people?
- Can it be used as a trigger material for discussions of difference or exclusiveness?
- Can the resource be adapted for use with particular groups of children and young people?
- Is it factually correct and up to date?
- Video resources – are these current

enough in terms of fashion, are there images of different children and young people? Will the pupils be able to relate to the visual images, for example decor, surroundings and fashion?

- Will the resource contribute to a broad and balanced PSHE and Citizenship curriculum?
- Does it encourage active and participatory learning methods?
- If you have used this resource before, what formal or informal feedback did you receive from children and young people about it?
- Are you confident about using the resource?

Assessment and Evaluation

Assessing the learning

One of the key components of active learning methods is the processing of the learning: enabling pupils to reflect on what they achieved and experienced by taking part in the activity. It is really important to allow enough time at the end of the session for this, otherwise the group can go away having enjoyed the activity but not knowing what the point of the exercise was. This information can also be used to assess what has been learnt and understood. Some typical questions are:

- What was it like doing this activity today?
- What did you learn by listening to people's opinions when they are different from your own?
- What skills did you learn and practise today?
- Do you think your learning today will change or influence your behaviour?

Assessment can be undertaken using a range of techniques including:

- What new information have you learnt today?

- What new skills have you practised or learnt?
- What do you now think or believe?
- What did it feel like to do that exercise?
- What was it like to hear different people's views?
- Did anything surprise you?
- What else do you need to know?

How the lesson went

Evaluating enables you to plan future work more constructively. Some helpful questions are:

- Were the pupils engaged?
- Did you achieve the learning outcome?
- Did girls and boys engage equally with the activity?
- What do they need to learn next?
- What did I do well?
- What would I do differently next time?

Resources

For lists of resources that offer activities using active learning methods visit the Sex Education website: www.ncb.org.uk/sef

Useful websites

Sex Education Forum

www.ncb.org.uk/sef

Publications and resources lists for policy and planning of SRE.

References

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Sex Education Forum (2000) *Our Charter for Effective SRE*.

Thomson, R and Scott, S (1991) *Learning About Sex: Young women and the social construction of sexual identity*. Women Risk and AIDS Project.

Tuckman, B W (1965) 'Sequences in small groups', *Psychological Bulletin* 1963(6), 384-99.

Teachernet

www.teachernet.gov.uk/pshe

DfES resource for teachers and school managers. Includes resources, lesson plans and case studies.

Wired for health

www.wiredforehealth.gov.uk

Series of websites to support the National Healthy Schools Standard. Sections for teachers, health professionals and children and young people.

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

www.qca.org.uk

Includes end of key stage statements and assessment guidance for PSHE.

Brook Advisory Centres

www.brook.org.uk

Brook produces a number of teaching resources and materials which can be used in schools.

fpa

www.fpa.org.uk

fpa runs a number of training programmes and produces resources which can be used in schools.

Centre for HIV and Sexual Health

www.sexualhealthsheffield.co.uk

The Centre produces a variety of resources and training programmes on sexual health promotion.

Assessment, Evaluation and Sex & Relationships Education A practical toolkit for education, health and community settings

Simon Blake and Stella Muttock

This toolkit puts the spotlight on why assessment and evaluation are important, and offers practitioners clear advice on how assessment and evaluation can be used in SRE. It provides practitioners with practical activities for assessing learning and evaluating teaching.

Assessment, Evaluation and Sex & Relationships Education includes:

- an overview of best practice in sex and relationships education
- a summary of the theory and practice of assessment and evaluation
- forty activities that can be used with individuals or groups, and can be tailored for a wide range of abilities and ages.

This toolkit is the result of a collaborative effort between the Camden and Islington Healthy School Scheme, Camden and Islington Teenage Pregnancy Team, Camden Local Education Authority, CEA@Islington, the National Children's Bureau and the Sex Education Forum. It was developed in response to teachers' and community workers' requests for support and information, and Ofsted's recommendation that assessment is strengthened in SRE.

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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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