



Parenting

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FPA defines sexual health as *the capacity and freedom to enjoy and express sexuality without exploitation, oppression, or physical or emotional harm*. FPA recognises that parenting plays a vital role in promoting positive sexual health, development, behaviour and attitudes among children and young people and believes that appropriate support should be offered to all people in this role.

Many different people may fulfil the parenting role for children and young people: parents, step-parents, grandparents, other family members, carers, foster carers and others. It is therefore important that all work, information and materials to support parenting are made available to all people who may have this role, and in this policy statement we use the term 'parents' to refer to this broad group. It is also important to recognise that there are different family structures within which parenting takes place, including lone parent families, same sex relationships, extended families, step-families, and foster families, and these different structures should be valued equally.

1. FPA recognises that many different people may fulfil the parenting role for children and young people, and believes that it is important to recognise and value equally the different family structures within which parenting takes place.
2. FPA acknowledges that parents can play a crucial role in giving information and advice to children and young people about sex and relationships.
3. FPA believes that it is important to recognise that parents have unique knowledge about their own children, and that those who provide parenting support should base this on a partnership approach with parents.
4. FPA believes that information on parenting support in relation to sex and relationships education (SRE) should be accessible to all parents.
5. FPA believes that parenting support should acknowledge and meet the needs of different groups of parents.
6. FPA recognises that parenting can be difficult and that societal attitudes can create barriers for some parents in accessing information and support. It is also important to acknowledge that some parents may not have had good sex and relationships education themselves, and that this may have an effect on their perception of this subject.
7. FPA believes that schools should encourage parental involvement in the development of sex and relationships education policies within the school setting.

The importance of parenting has been increasingly recognised at national policy level: in England, a Parenting Fund was established in 2004 to provide financial support for parenting and parenting organisations. In Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government launched a Parenting Action Plan in 2005 which set out a comprehensive approach to improving services and support for parents.

Specifically in relation to sexual health, parents can play a crucial role in giving information and advice to children about sex and relationships. Parents have been called ‘the first and most enduring sex educators in our children’s lives’¹, and research shows that children and young people from families in which sex and relationships are openly discussed are more likely to delay the age at which they first have sex, to have fewer partners, and to use contraception when they do have sex².

Evidence shows that children and young people want to talk to their parents about sex and relationships, and vice versa, but both can feel very awkward about doing so. This was recognised by the Ofsted report into sex and relationships education in 2002, which commented: *“When pupils were asked who should be their main source of information on sex, many of them (about 40-50 per cent overall) said it should be their parents. A frequent response by pupils was that, in an ideal world, parents should be their main source, but they accepted that this was unlikely because of embarrassment on both sides”*³. Research involving over 37,000 10–15 year olds found that although one in five boys and one in three girls aged 10–12 said that their parents were their main source of information, this had dropped to 15 per cent and 21 per cent respectively by the age of 15⁴.

Parenting is a developing process, and many parents will benefit from advice and support in order to be able to communicate with their children about sex and relationships. However, it is important to recognise that parents have unique knowledge about their own children, and those who work with parents should establish a non-judgemental partnership approach. Support for parents can work in a number of different ways: identifying parents’ needs, fears, concerns and hopes; providing a safe learning environment in which to deal with sensitive issues; helping parents access relevant information and support to aid them in providing sex education in the home; and developing parents’ confidence, sensitivity and skills in relation to sex and relationships education.

It is important to ensure that information is disseminated to parents through existing communication channels, and reaches parents in places where they already go. Information of this kind is most effectively conveyed when parents are familiar with and trust the information source. Information must also be accessible to all parents, and materials should be developed which are suitable for parents, children and young people with a range of learning needs including low levels of literacy, those whose first language is not English and those with learning disabilities.

There must also be recognition of and support for the needs of different groups of parents. For example, fathers can play a very positive role in communicating with their children about sex and relationships, but different approaches may be needed to engage them effectively. Parents from different religious or ethnic minority groups may also need targeted approaches which recognise and work within their cultural norms.

It is advisable that all groups of parents are made aware of the content of SRE in schools and how they can access information about this from their local schools. As well as communicating about sex and relationships with their children at home, parents should be encouraged to get involved, where possible, with SRE in schools. Schools should involve parents in the development of a school's SRE policy and parents should work together with teachers in the best interests of children and young people, seeing SRE as a joint home-school programme.

It must also be recognised that, for whatever reason, some parents will not be able or may choose not to communicate with their children about sex and relationships, and some children and young people may prefer not to talk to their parents about this subject. It is therefore important that parents, children and young people are supported and given information about where else to access information and advice about this subject.

Parenting support programmes such as the FPA Speakeasy programme can make a significant difference to the way that parents communicate with their children about sex and relationships. Speakeasy is a community-based education programme that provides parents with the skills and confidence needed to talk to their children about sex. The content is needs-led, parents actively influence and shape the sessions, and coursework is eligible for accreditation through the Open College Network. Programmes such as Speakeasy not only help parents in their communication with their children, but can also have a positive impact on parents' own learning and confidence levels, therefore, it is important that they are made available to all parents.

Further information

FPA policies on *Sex and Relationships Education and Young People* (2011)

¹ Alexander T, *Empowering parents: Families as the foundation of a learning society* (London: NCB, 1997)

² Ingham R, *The development of an integrated model of sexual conduct amongst young people* (Southampton: University of Southampton, 1997)

³ Ofsted, *Sex and Relationships Education in Schools*, (London: Ofsted, 2002)

⁴ Balding J, *Young people in 2002* (Exeter: SHEU, 2003)