

This factsheet outlines current law and policy on the teaching of relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in Northern Ireland's schools. In official and other documents in Northern Ireland, sex education is now referred to as RSE. However, this factsheet will, at times, use the term sex education, as some of the information provided refers to literature that uses this term.

Key facts

- Young people learn most about sex from their friends.
- There is no uniform pattern to the provision of RSE in schools.
- RSE does not encourage early or increased sexual activity.

Government support for RSE

Initially, the framework for sex education was established by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) in Guidance Circular 1987/45.¹ It stated that schools should have a written policy on sex education endorsed by the Board of Governors and communicated to parents. It further states that sex education: "... should be taught in a sensitive manner which is in harmony with the ethos of the school or college and in conformity with the moral and religious principles held by parents and school management authorities."

The 1989 Education Reform Order, which formed the legislative base for education in Northern Ireland, included six cross-curricular themes, of which health education is one. Health education aims to:

- enable pupils to achieve their physical, psychological and social potential, and improve their self-knowledge and self-esteem;

- promote positive attitudes towards health;
- instil a sense of responsibility in respect of individual, family and community health;
- enable pupils to acquire skills on decision making, and in managing and handling situations of stress in relation to health;
- provide a knowledge base and the skills to interpret it.²

A Government strategy for health in Northern Ireland, published in 1996, set the following target: "By 1998, a comprehensive health promotion programme for schools in relation to sexual and reproductive health, which emphasises the importance of personal relationships, self-esteem and decision making skills, will have been developed and implemented."³

In 2001, the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) disseminated guidance on RSE to primary and post-primary schools, with the following aims:⁴

- To develop a policy statement in relation to RSE that reflects the ethos of the school and complements existing policies in relation to, for example, personal, social and health education (PSHE) and/or child protection.
- To provide a programme of RSE that is appropriate for the needs and maturity of the pupils. The Department of Education's 2001 circular 'Relationships and sexuality education (RSE)' complements CCEA's guidance documents.⁵ It advocates that teaching should: "... put primary emphasis upon what is positive and good in relationships between the sexes and should also include treatment of those matters about which people have diverse and deeply held views, for example, methods of family planning, including contraception, abortion, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, homosexuality and pornography."

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Circular 2010/01 was released in January 2010 by the Department of Education to act as an addendum to the RSE circular released in 2001.⁶ The circular draws attention to guidance issued by the Equality Commission on eliminating sexual orientation discrimination within schools in Northern Ireland, published in March 2009. The guidance, which relates to the Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, can be accessed at: [www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/SOEducationguide1\(1\).pdf](http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/SOEducationguide1(1).pdf)

In developing or reviewing their RSE policy, schools should take account of the Equality Commission's guidance, which states: "It is recommended that schools make every effort to ensure that gay, lesbian or bisexual pupils, or children of gay, lesbian or bisexual parents or same sex couples, are not treated less favourably than other pupils or singled out for different treatment. To do this, all policies and practices should be checked to ensure they do not treat pupils less favourably on grounds of sexual orientation contrary to the Regulations. Schools need to ensure that homophobic bullying is taken seriously and dealt with as firmly as any other form of bullying."⁷

In July 2006, The Education (Northern Ireland) Order was approved by both Houses of Parliament. It provides the broad legislative framework to implement a revised statutory curriculum. September 2007 marked the start of the official changeover to the revised curriculum, which includes the compulsory component 'Learning for Life and Work', based on the following three concepts:

- self-awareness;
- personal health;
- relationships.

The statutory requirements of the personal development strand of 'Learning for Life and Work' include ensuring that young people have opportunities to:

- explore the implications of sexual maturation, eg sexual health, fertility, contraception, conception, teenage pregnancy, child birth etc;
- explore the emotional, social and moral implications of early sexual activity, eg personal values, attitudes and perceptions, the law, STIs, the impact of underage parenting etc.

Provision

There is no uniform pattern to the provision of RSE in schools and very little published research in this area. Some schools provide well planned RSE coordinated across the curriculum while others would appear not to.

In 2002, FPA published the *Towards better sexual health* survey on the sexual attitudes and lifestyles of young people in Northern Ireland aged 14 to 25 years.⁸ Young people's main criticism about sex education was that sexual feelings and emotions, or potentially contentious issues such as sexual orientation, abortion or how to make sex more satisfying, could not be discussed with teachers in an open and unbiased way. Key findings included the following:

- Young people learn most about sex from their friends.
- Young men reported receiving less sex education than young women.
- Over half of those surveyed were able to name HIV/AIDS as an STI but less than one quarter were able to name any other STI.
- Pupils at Catholic maintained schools were least likely to be taught about contraception and safer sex.

Research published by ACCORD in 2002 involved Catholic maintained secondary schools with pupils aged 15 to 17 years and found that:

- 68% of pupils find it difficult to talk to their parents about sex and sexuality;
- 61% could not name more than three teachers from the whole school who are good at talking about sex and sexuality.⁹

The research also included some parents and teachers: 95% of parents felt that their child's school should teach RSE and 78% indicated that they would like to talk more to their child about relationships and sex and would like more information; 23% of teachers said they were not confident about teaching RSE and felt most discomfort when teaching about bisexual (50%) and homosexual relationships (41%).

What is RSE?

FPA's policy statement on sex education states that it should: "... be a lifelong learning process based on the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and the development of positive values and attitudes... it should equip young people to enjoy sex and relationships that are based on qualities such as mutual respect, trust, negotiation and enjoyment." ¹⁰

The Sex Education Forum, an umbrella body bringing together national organisations involved in supporting and providing sex education, states that sex education should:

- be an integral part of the learning process, beginning in childhood and continuing into adult life;
- be for all children, young people and adults, including those with physical, learning or emotional difficulties;

- encourage
 - exploration of values and moral issues,
 - consideration of sexuality and personal relationships,
 - development of communication and decision-making skills;
- foster self-esteem, self-awareness, a sense of moral responsibility and the skills to avoid and resist sexual experience.¹¹

Why RSE?

The World Health Organization (WHO) believes that education on health is a fundamental right of every child. Education can help to increase self-esteem and develop effective communication skills. It also encourages each person to respect his or her own body and understand their responsibilities to others.

Surveys among adults as well as young people regularly show considerable ignorance about issues related to sex and sexuality, resulting in confusion, unhappiness and the breakdown of relationships. The media bombards society with overt and often misleading information, which influences a young person's knowledge and attitude to their own sexuality, as well as that of others. Families, parents and teachers often exclude young people from discussions about relationships and sexuality.

This mixture of secrecy, lack of knowledge and negative media messages confuses young people and encourages poor self-esteem, resulting in uninformed choices being made. These may lead to unplanned pregnancies, STIs including HIV/AIDS, or deeply unhappy and damaging relationships.

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In Northern Ireland, the Department of Education circular recognises the need to provide young people with guidance and the opportunity to examine sexual issues in a supportive environment.⁵ The *Towards better sexual health* survey produced the first ever comprehensive Northern Ireland-wide data on the sexual lifestyles of young people in Northern Ireland.⁸ It is therefore not possible to comment on whether young people are having sex at an earlier age. The survey does, however, show that of those young people who had experienced sexual intercourse, 36.7% had sex before the age of 17 (the legal age of sexual consent at the time of the survey) and 27.4% had sex before the age of 16. Young men reported earlier sex than young women, and Catholics were less likely than other respondents to have sex before the age of 16.

There were no significant differences between these results and the data produced by the *Northern Ireland health and social wellbeing survey*, also in 2002, which included sexually active young people aged 16 to 24 years.¹² The data from the *Towards better sexual health* survey also compares well with *The health behaviour of school children in Northern Ireland* study 1997/1998, which revealed that in a sample of 3,450 young people from years 9-12 (approximate ages 13 to 16 years), 655 (14.9% of this age group) reported that they had experienced sexual intercourse.¹³ The average age for first sexual intercourse was 13 years for boys and 14 years for girls. The majority of those who had experienced sexual intercourse (79.2%) reported using some form of contraception.

The *Towards better sexual health* survey also showed that approximately one quarter of respondents failed to use contraception when they first had intercourse and that over 40% of young

men and 33% of young women were drunk when they first had sex.⁷

One of the most common arguments against RSE is that it encourages early sexual activity. Yet a 1993 WHO review of 35 sex education studies in the USA, Europe, Australia, Mexico and Thailand found no evidence that sex education leads to earlier or increased sexual activity.¹⁴ The survey showed that sex education programmes can actually encourage young people to postpone penetrative sexual intercourse or, if they are already sexually active, to reduce their number of partners or have safer sex.

- In all 35 studies, sex education did not result in earlier or increased sexual activity.
- In six studies, young people delayed their first sexual intercourse, or reduced their overall sexual activity.
- In 10 studies, individuals who were already sexually active had less unprotected sex.
- Studies of two programmes providing counselling and contraceptive services reported neither earlier nor increased sexual activity.
- The programmes that promoted a range of options were more effective in encouraging safer behaviour than those promoting abstinence alone.
- Programmes that introduced sex education before young people became sexually active achieved better results.

A review of reviews conducted by the Health Development Agency in 2003 concluded that there is no strong evidence for the effectiveness of abstinence education approaches.¹⁵

Where should RSE be taught?

Ideally, RSE should be tackled both at home and in school, and possibly through

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religious and community groups. However, while research indicated that both parents and children would like to discuss sexual issues, many parents lack the confidence to do so. A 1992 study undertaken by the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland (HPA) found that although parents in Northern Ireland believe they have a responsibility to contribute to their children's sex education, many feel unable to talk about it comfortably.¹⁶

Research carried out by the HPA in 1996 revealed that 98% of parents in Northern Ireland want schools to play a role in teaching sex education to children and young people.¹⁷ Seventy-two per cent of parents and teachers said that they should share equal responsibility for sex education. Despite this view, however, many parents had not discussed any sexual issues with their children.

Teaching methods

RSE is taught in a variety of ways in schools but, as with provision, a full picture is not available.

The classroom setting and traditional mode of teaching may not provide opportunities for discussion, for examining attitudes and values, or for exploring facts and feelings in relation to the young person's everyday life. Informal approaches, such as group discussion, role play and quizzes encourage participation and make the information more relevant to the young person's experience. It is important that the group feels safe, comfortable and relaxed so that participants enjoy themselves as well as learn.

Conclusion

Young people have the right to RSE, appropriate to their age and comprehension, which offers exploration

of emotions, feelings and personal values, as well as information about reproductive biology and sexually transmitted infections.

RSE should promote positive sexual health and with the introduction of the revised school curriculum in 2007, it is a compulsory part of every child's education.

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Resource list

The following titles are available from FPA direct, Fax: 0845 123 2349, Email: fpadirect@fpa.org.uk or Telephone: 0845 122 8600. You may also visit www.fpa.org.uk

A comprehensive catalogue of books and resources about sexuality and relationships is also available. Please send an A5 SAE to FPA, 3rd Floor Ascot House, 24-31 Shaftesbury Square, Belfast BT2 7DB.

Abortion: just so you know This FPA booklet provides young people with accurate information about abortion. It

covers current UK abortion law, attitudes towards abortion, abortion procedures and sources of further information and advice. Full colour and highly illustrated. Young people aged 12 years and above. Meets curriculum guidance for key stage 4.

Beyond Barbie: community based sex and relationships education with girls and young women: a workers' compendium

Aimed at those working with girls and young women, this book shares skills, knowledge and best practice in community based sex and relationships education. *Beyond Barbie* looks at the rationale for working with young women in our highly sexualised society and the current climate in relation to society, the media and policy – all from the perspective of experienced workers. Using illustrations, case studies, examples and tips, the book provides a snapshot of issues important to young women and what they want to know about sex and relationships, a potted history of girls' work, and lists of resources that workers have found most useful.

Beyond Barbie: community based sex and relationships education with African-Caribbean girls and young women: a workers' compendium

This supplement should be read with *Beyond Barbie*. It promotes a model for positively contributing to the sexual health of African-Caribbean girls and young women. Also encourages the contribution of the black and minority ethnic (BME) voluntary sector to the current agenda of reducing inequalities in health. For use by workers and organisations carrying out, or interested in sexual health education work with African-Caribbean girls and young women. Organisations interested in working in partnership with the BME sector.

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4 Boys: a below-the-belt guide to the male body FPA's most popular leaflet. This full colour, highly illustrated booklet uses simple text and humorous illustrations to provide information on testicular self-examination, contraception, STIs and safer sex. Young people aged 12 years and above. Meets curriculum guidance for key stages 3 and 4.

4 Girls: a below-the-bra guide to the female body This full colour, 16 page companion booklet to *4 Boys* gives girls the facts they want to know about physical changes and sexual development. An invaluable resource for youth workers, teachers and everyone working with young women. Young people aged 12 years and above. Meets curriculum guidance for key stages 3 and 4.

4 Boys, 4 Girls: talking with young people about sex and relationships Updated in 2006, this activity manual for teachers and youth workers has been produced to accompany FPA's bestselling series of booklets for young people. It uses a variety of learning methods to explore and develop the themes of the booklets, including drama, art, activities and knowledge and attitude tests. The manual contains samples of the following booklets: *Periods*, *4Boys*, *4Girls*, *Abortion*, *Is Everybody Doing It?*, *Pregnancy*, *Love STIngs*, and *Love Sex Relationships*. Young people aged 12 years and above.

4 You: growing up. . . what's it all about? This colour cartoon booklet includes straightforward information on puberty and growing up, male and female body changes, periods, wet dreams, feelings, keeping safe, and also gives sources of further information and advice. Suitable for work with young people aged nine years and upwards. The booklet will help to prepare young people for the physical

and emotional changes that happen to everyone.

Challenging homophobia: equality, diversity, inclusion Based on a three day course developed by FPA Scotland, this training manual is designed for professionals concerned about the effects of homophobia and heterosexism. It is for anyone who trains health and social care staff, nurses, teachers and youth leaders. The training manual includes a number of exercises designed to develop an understanding of homophobia and heterosexism, and what can be done to make a difference. The supporting documentary video includes interviews with lesbians and gay men who talk about their own personal experiences and the barriers they face.

Contraceptive display kit This kit is an ideal way to stimulate interest and discussion about contraception. It comprises a sturdy briefcase style holder containing samples of contraceptives in a lift-out tray; condom demonstrator; user manual containing a variety of exercises, including photocopy friendly activity sheets; FPA leaflets on contraception; selected FPA factsheets. Ideal for use by teachers, youth workers and school nurses, the contraceptive display kit will: increase young people's understanding of contraceptives and how they work so they can make informed decisions; promote awareness of condoms and how to use them properly; provide an understanding of how to access sexual health advice and services; trigger discussion on feelings and attitudes about sexual health through guided quizzes and group exercises. Suitable for use with young people aged 13-16 years.

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Girls out loud (VHS video, 20 minutes, and accompanying pack). This is a new resource from FPA, designed to help those working in sex and relationships education provide young women with the information, education and communications skills they need to negotiate their way through this difficult and, at times, confusing part of their lives. The pack comprises a video and accompanying book, along with a copy of FPA's *4 Girls* booklet. The topics covered include physical development, gender issues, relationships, sexuality, and sexual activity. The *Girls out loud* book is divided into two parts. Part A focuses on specific issues raised in the video, using direct quotes from young women from Northern Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland, to prompt questions on areas like love, growing up and friendship. Part B encourages group discussion on more general themes, such as the concepts of society and acceptance.

Is everybody doing it? A full colour, highly illustrated booklet that deals with peer pressure, the issues involved in starting a sexual relationship, going to a contraception or sexual health clinic, different contraceptive methods and sexually transmitted infections. Young people aged 12 years and above. Meets curriculum guidance for key stages 3 and 4.

Is this love? A pocket sized fold-out leaflet with illustrations and clear text designed to help young people identify, and protect against, abusive behaviour. The leaflet looks at caring behaviour and controlling behaviour, and provides contact details of organizations that can help victims and perpetrators of abuse. Young people aged 14 and above. Meets curriculum guidance for key stages 3 and 4.

Lets grow with Nisha and Joe A comic introducing 6–7 year olds to the concepts of growth and physical change, using

reassuring stories and pictures. The comic also helps children explore their relationships with friends and family. Packed with activities to encourage children to find out more about themselves and to help them personalize their copy. Comes with teacher's guidance notes. Children aged 6 to 7. Meets curriculum guidance for key stage 1.

Love Sex Life Supports young people who want to explore all aspects of sex and relationships. Topics covered include getting to know your body, negotiating relationships, good communication, contraception, abortion, sexually transmitted infections, staying safe and enjoying sex. Young people aged 16 years and above.

Love, sex, relationships Clear text and humorous comic drawings help young people explore how they feel about their own sexuality, body image and relationships. This booklet puts a strong emphasis on developing self-belief and doing what's right for you, as well as information on safer sex and contraception. Young people aged 12 years and above. Meets curriculum guidance for key stages 3 and 4.

Love STIngs: a beginner's guide to sexually transmitted infections In brilliant comic strip style, this booklet raises and answers young people's questions about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) – their symptoms and long-term effects, how they are treated, and how they can be avoided. Above all, it presents a reassuring picture of the sexual health clinic and the importance of a check-up if there is any reason to think you could have an STI. Young people aged 12 years and above. Meets curriculum guidance for key stages 3 and 4.

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Periods: what you need to know

This colourful booklet for girls aged 9–12 years prepares young girls for menstruation by explaining why girls and women have periods, what happens and how to deal with them. Meets curriculum guidance for key stage 2.

Pregnancy: a young person's guide

This comic style booklet covers reproduction, preparing for pregnancy, the development of the fetus and birth. It also describes the physical and emotional changes of pregnancy and the role men play in pregnancy and birth. It aims to give young people a realistic view of what pregnancy entails. Young people aged 12 years and above. Meets national curriculum guidance for key stages 3 and 4.

Sex FM An interactive video pack for relationships and sexuality education (RSE) teachers designed to examine young people's ideas on sex and relationships, teenage pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections. It can be used either in schools as part of an RSE programme within the personal, social and health education framework, or for sexual health sessions within other youth settings. Sex FM can also form part of a drama course. Young people aged 14 years and above.

Speakeasy: talking with your children about growing up An invaluable book for parents and carers. The questions that children most frequently ask about puberty, contraception, reproduction, sexually transmitted infections and relationships are all answered in a clear straightforward and informative way. There are also tips on how to talk with children of all ages. This will help parents and carers understand why it is important to talk with their children about sex and relationships and the reassuring style will also give them the knowledge and skills to do so in an open and honest way.

Talking to your child about sex and relationships

This booklet is packed with support and advice for parents and carers who want to talk comfortably to their children of all ages about sex and relationships. It covers issues such as how to start talking about sex and relationships, and what schools teach. It also includes details of helpful books, leaflets, websites and how FPA can help you.

The boys are aw'right: young men and sexual health

Reflects the Aw'right project team's experience during the three years they spent involving young men in experimental learning about sexual health and relationships. It examines how to provide the right environment for all those involved in such work, workers as well as participants, and how to ensure the young men involved get the most out of the learning.

Life happens This is a resource manual containing a compilation of tried and tested exercises that focus on sex and relationships. They can be used in health and wellbeing work to build up the resilience of groups of young people or an individual young person. Although these exercises could arguably be used with any young people, they work well with more vulnerable groups – those in care, those excluded from formal education and disaffected young people. They are also most effective when working with a well established group who are familiar with, and trust, the facilitator.

Why abortion? Understanding why women choose to have an abortion

This DVD explores the realities faced by women with an unplanned pregnancy and considering abortion. Using short drama pieces, the viewer is asked to make choices based on the information presented to them.

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A users manual helps professionals who work with young people or adults examine how unplanned pregnancy impacts on the lives of those involved, the options available when facing an unplanned pregnancy, and the factors that influence the decision making process. Suitable for young people aged 14 years and above. For use by education, social services and health professionals, and youth and community workers. Meets curriculum guidance for key stage 3.

Useful addresses

Department of Education Rathgael House, Balloo Road, Bangor, BT19 7PR. Tel: 028 9127 9279.

ACET: AIDS Care Education and Training Glendinning House, 6 Murray Street, Belfast BT1 6DN. Tel: 028 9032 0844. Health education and training agency. Provides community education and an accredited training programme on sexual health, drugs, alcohol and parent-child communication. Provides speakers for school, community and church groups.

Brook Belfast 3rd Floor, 9-13 Waring Street, Belfast, BT1 2DX. Tel: 028 9032 8866. Offers young people free, confidential contraceptive advice and supplies, and help with emotional and sexual problems.

Childline Tel: 0800 1111. A free national helpline for children with any problems.

FPA 3rd floor, Ascot House, 24-31 Shaftesbury Square, Belfast BT2 7DB. Tel: 0845 122 8687, or, 3rd Floor, 67 Carlisle Road, Londonderry BT48 6JL. Tel: 028 7126 0016. Telephone helpline and drop-in service providing advice and information on sexual issues. Also provides a non-directive unplanned pregnancy counselling service. This voluntary agency

also offers training for professionals.

Genito Urinary Medicine clinics Belfast (Outpatient department, RVH), Tel: 028 9063 4050/54; Londonderry, Tel: 028 7161 1257; Coleraine, Tel: 028 7034 6028; Newry, Tel: 028 3083 5050. The clinics provide information, counselling and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Appointments may be necessary.

Life Pregnancy Care Service Bryson House, Bedford Street, Belfast. Tel: 028 9024 9414. Offers free pregnancy testing, counselling, practical help and accommodation.

National AIDS Helpline Tel: 0800 567 123 freephone. The lines are open 24 hours a day.

RELATE - Marriage guidance 3rd and 4th Floors, Glengall Exchange, 3 Glengall Street, Belfast BT12 5AB. Tel: 028 9032 3454. Relate offers relationship counselling, family counselling and psycho-sexual counselling and advice on sexual abuse.

The HIV Support Centre Warehouse 7 James Street South, Belfast BT2 8DN. Tel: 0800 137 437 Mon-Fri 9am-5pm, 7-10pm; Sat 2-5pm. The helpline is one of a range of preventative and care services operating from the centre. Services offered include complementary therapies, support groups, and domiciliary support.

The NEXUS Institute (formerly the Rape and Incest Line). 119 University Street, Belfast BT7 1HP. Tel: 028 9032 6803, or, PO Box 32, Londonderry. Tel: 028 7126 0566. Counselling, training and education agency. Support training, information and resource materials may also be obtained from your local Health and Social Care Trust.

Factsheet last updated August 2010.

Other Northern Ireland factsheets

Abortion

Sex and the law

Sexual health and people with learning disabilities

Sexual behaviour and young people

Sexual orientation

Sexually transmitted infections

Teenage pregnancy

The legal position regarding contraceptive advice and provision to young people

For further information contact FPA at:

3rd Floor Ascot House
24–31 Shaftesbury Square,
Belfast BT2 7DB

Tel: 0845 122 8687

Email: belfast@fpa.org.uk

or

3rd Floor,
67 Carlisle Road,
Londonderry BT48 6JL

Tel: (028) 7126 0016

Email: derry@fpa.org.uk

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