

Brook and FPA briefing on sex and relationships education



Brook and FPA strongly believe that sex and relationships education (SRE) should be a statutory subject for children and young people of all ages at all primary and secondary schools.

This is backed up by Article 8 of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) declaration which states that all persons, without discrimination, have the right to education and information generally and to comprehensive sexuality education and information that is necessary and useful to exercise full citizenship and equality in the private, public and political domains.¹

Furthermore, Articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child state that every child has the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical, social and mental needs and that governments must help families who cannot afford to provide this. Moreover, education must also develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child's respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures, and the environment.²

What does good SRE look like?

We believe that SRE should start early in childhood so that children and young people learn to talk about feelings and relationships, and are prepared for puberty before it happens.

The Sex Education Forum defines SRE as 'learning about the emotional, social and physical aspects of growing up, relationships, sex, human sexuality, and sexual health. It should equip children and young people with the information, skills and values to have safe, fulfilling and enjoyable relationships and to take responsibility for their sexual health and well-being.'³

In addition, the Sex Education Forum believes that quality SRE should 'be positively inclusive in terms of gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, culture, age, religion or belief or other life-experience, particularly HIV status and pregnancy.' In particular, FPA and Brook know that the sexual health of young people with learning disabilities is an often neglected area, and education settings must be better enabled to deal with this issue.

Current provision of SRE

In the new National Curriculum Framework document, published 8 July⁴, what was previously described as Sex Education (the biological aspects of sex), has been upgraded to include relationships and is now described formally as Sex and Relationship Education (SRE). There can be little doubt about the weight the new National Curriculum puts on the mandatory teaching of SRE in secondary schools:

¹ [Sexual Rights: an IPPF declaration](#)

² [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

³ [Sex Education Forum](#) values and principles

⁴ [National Curriculum in England Framework Document](#)

- “All state schools are required to make provision for....sex and relationship education to pupils in secondary education.”
- “Secondary schools must provide sex and relationship education.”
- “Statutory teaching of.....sex and relationship education.”

Schools should therefore adhere to this Framework and provide young people with the SRE Brook very much knows they want and need. It is now up to schools to put this policy into action by ensuring that all children and young people are given high-quality SRE that puts young people at its heart. Getting this right will contribute to young people’s wider health and wellbeing and help them prepare for safe healthy, happy relationships.

What is set out in guidance?

Guidance issued by the Government⁵ defined SRE as ‘lifelong learning about physical, moral and emotional development. It is also about the understanding of the importance of marriage for family life, stable and loving relationships, respect, love and care. It is also about the teaching of sex, sexuality and sexual health’.

Teaching of SRE should be firmly rooted within the non-statutory PSHE education curriculum. However, not only is PSHE currently not statutory under the National Curriculum, nor in any way compulsory for Academies, but also under the Government’s current ‘*National Curriculum in England: Framework for consultation*’, there is no proposal at all to make PSHE compulsory in the National Curriculum, let alone for Academies. This is counter to the requirement for schools to offer a balanced and broadly based curriculum as set out in legislation and as described above.

The quality of SRE

In May 2013, an Ofsted report found that schools are failing children and young people by not meeting the set statutory guidance on SRE, but equally there is a lack of accountability surrounding SRE and PSHE generally, highlighted by there being no set curriculum to deliver, and poor assessment⁶. In primary schools, too much emphasis is placed on matters such as maintaining friendships and this left pupils ill-prepared for puberty and lacking in knowledge about reproduction and how babies are born. In secondary schools, the report found that in some instances, PSHE education lessons had avoided discussion of sexual and emotional feelings and controversial issues such as sexual abuse, homosexuality and pornography.

These findings extend on a 2010 Ofsted report, which found that a quarter of schools lack discrete time for PSHE education, particularly in secondary schools, meaning that SRE suffers, and in a third of schools pupils had gaps in their knowledge about sex and relationships⁷.

In fact, children and young people repeatedly describe the SRE they receive as too little, too late and too biological. In a survey of almost 22,000 children and young people by the UK Youth Parliament, 40 per cent of respondents described their SRE as either poor or very poor, 33 per cent thought it was average, and 43 per cent said they had not been taught about personal relationships at school⁸.

⁵ Department for Education and Employment, *Sex and Relationship Education Guidance* (London: DfEE, 2000).

⁶ [Not yet good enough: personal, social, health and economic education in schools, Ofsted, May 2013](#)

⁷ Ofsted, *Personal Social Health and Economic Education* (London: Ofsted, 2010).

⁸ UK Youth Parliament, *SRE: Are You Getting It?* (London: UKYP, 2007).

The UK Youth Parliament's Campaign for 2013⁹, formally titled '*Curriculum for Life*' extends on these findings. The Curriculum for Life campaign is aimed at reforming the National Curriculum through a youth-led review that helps develop young people's political knowledge, better sex and relationships education, cultural awareness, community cohesion, finance skills and sustainable living.

The support for the Curriculum for Life campaign is overwhelming, receiving 154 of the 295 votes cast in a UKYP vote of five different campaign topics. These topics had previously been voted for by over 250,000 young people across the UK¹⁰.

Brook research on what young people think of SRE at their schools

In November 2011, Brook published its response to the Government's review of PSHE education, which surveyed over 2,000 14-18 year olds throughout the UK¹¹. The findings showed that:

- Nearly half (47%) of secondary school pupils say that SRE doesn't cover what they really need to know about sex.
- Around one in four (26%) say they don't get any SRE in school at all. Of those that do, around a quarter (26%) say their SRE teacher isn't able to teach it well.
- On average, one out of five young people (22%) rate their SRE as poor or very poor.

What young people want from SRE:

- Teaching without embarrassment
- In everyday language
- Input into SRE lessons
- Training for teachers
- Delivered in smaller groups

What young people want 21st century SRE classes to cover:

- 72% said body confidence
- 71% said how to avoid peer pressure to have sex
- 69% said how to treat a boyfriend or girlfriend
- 65% said love
- 61% said virginity
- 60% said whether I am feeling the same as others my own age
- 58% said sexual attraction
- 56% said how to behave in a relationship
- 54% said whether my experiences are similar to others my own age
- 52% said homosexuality

⁹ [Further information](#) on Curriculum for Life.

¹⁰ [Further information](#) on UK Youth Parliament vote.

¹¹ [Sex and Relationships Education fit for the 21st Century](#) (Brook, November 2011)

Report recommendations:

1. **Make SRE compulsory in ALL schools and protected by law.** This will make sure that young people receive SRE as a right, teachers are trained in SRE, and action can be taken if provision is inadequate.
2. **Put young people at the centre of SRE content development,** and consult them about both creating national guidance and making local policy within schools.
3. **Create formal SRE teaching qualifications** that will help develop high-quality leadership, management and teaching of SRE.
4. **Make SRE right for the age, maturity and understanding of both children and young people,** and make sure the learning is as rigorous and as challenging as all other subjects in the curriculum.

Why should SRE be a compulsory and quality part of the curriculum?

Many children and young people do not currently receive the SRE they need. We believe this puts their health and wellbeing at risk. Children and young people learn about sex and relationships from a relatively young age from a variety of sources, including family, friends, television and magazines; SRE plays an important role in correcting the inaccurate and skewed messages they may receive elsewhere, not least in terms of behaviours which may lead to sexual violence against women. SRE must be statutory in both academy and maintained settings in order to ensure all children and young people receive this vital information.

High quality SRE does not encourage young people to become sexually active. In fact, international research has shown that school-based SRE, especially when linked to confidential advice services, can have a positive impact on children and young people's knowledge and lead to them delaying sexual activity as well as making them more likely to use contraception, if and when they do decide to have sex¹². **SRE can also play a role in keeping children and young people safe. SRE aims to equip children and young people with language and skills to understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, be able to resist pressure and to know who to talk to and how to access help and support when they need it.**

PSHE and prevention of Sexual Abuse, Sexual Exploitation and Domestic and Sexual Violence

- Sexual bullying and harassment are routine in UK schools. Almost one in three 16 -18 year- old girls has experienced 'groping' or other unwanted sexual touching at school (YouGov)¹³.
- One in six children aged 11-17 (16.5%) have experienced sexual abuse¹⁴.
- Nearly a quarter of young adults experienced sexual abuse during childhood¹⁵.
- 38% of rape recorded by the police involves a victim under the age of 16¹⁶.
- 17,186 sexual crimes against children under 16 were recorded in England and Wales in 2011/12.

In the reoccurring and alarming reports of sexual abuse, domestic and sexual violence and sexual exploitation, not least with regards to the ugly circumstances of the recent Rochdale and Oxford child sexual exploitation

¹² Kirby D, Emerging Answers 2007: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (Washington DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2007). See also NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (CRD). Effective Healthcare Bulletin 3 (1) Preventing and reducing the adverse effects of unintended teenage pregnancies, University of York, 1997.

¹³ YouGov [Opinion poll commissioned by the End Violence Against Women and Girls Coalition](#), May 2013

¹⁴ [Statistics on Child Sexual Abuse](#), NSPCC, March 2013.

¹⁵ [Statistics on Child Sexual Abuse](#), NSPCC, March 2013.

¹⁶ [Statistics on Child Sexual Abuse](#), NSPCC, March 2013.

cases, there is something to be learned, particularly with regards to ensuring that SRE becomes part of statutory education.

Certainly, in its May 2013 report into PSHE, Ofsted states that lack of age-appropriate sex and relationships education may leave young people vulnerable to inappropriate sexual behaviours and sexual exploitation, particularly if they are not taught the appropriate language, or have not developed the confidence to describe unwanted behaviours, or do not know who to go to for help¹⁷.

SRE can play a role in keeping children and young people safe. SRE aims to equip children and young people with language and skills to understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, be able to resist pressure and to know who to talk to and how to access help and support when they need it.

In terms of Rochdale and Tim Loughton (ex Young People & Families Minister) MP's criticism in January 2013 of the Department for Education's "*deeply worrying...complete silence*" on this issue, FPA and Brook call upon the Department for Education to implement compulsory and quality SRE so that violence against girls and women alike can be addressed.

Specifically FPA and Brook believe SRE could be used to teach young people as follows:

- To address sexual consent and sexual coercion.
- To manage situations where they are feeling pressured into sex.
- What is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of sexual advances.
- What is not only acceptable and unacceptable, but also legal and illegal in terms of 'sexting' (the act of sending sexually explicit messages and/or photographs, primarily between mobile phones).
- To be respectful, particularly in the context of widespread availability of pornography, which raises unrealistic expectations.
- How unacceptable it is to engage in violence against women who refuse sex.
- To address the prevalence of groping.

These notions are supported by Ofsted in their May 2013 report into PSHE¹⁸.

The backing for this is clear. In May 2013, a YouGov opinion poll found that 86% of UK adults believe that sex and relationships education "which addresses sexual consent and respectful relationships" should be compulsory in secondary schools¹⁹.

Porn and SRE

According to the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC), a significant number of children access pornography; it influences their attitudes towards relationships and sex; it is linked to risky behaviour such as having sex at a younger age; and there is a correlation between holding violent attitudes and accessing more violent media²⁰.

¹⁷ [Not yet good enough: personal, social, health and economic education in schools, Ofsted, May 2013](#)

¹⁸ [Not yet good enough: personal, social, health and economic education in schools, Ofsted, May 2013](#)

¹⁹ YouGov [Opinion poll commissioned by the End Violence Against Women and Girls Coalition](#), May 2013

²⁰ Basically Porn is Everywhere. Office of the Children's Commissioner, May 2013

FPA and Brook fully agree with the OCC that in order to counteract the impact of pornography the Department for Education should ensure that all schools understand the importance of, and deliver, effective relationship and sex education which must include safe use of the internet.

Certainly, this notion is also backed up by parents. According to the National Association of Head Teachers, in May 2013, 83% had sufficient confidence in schools' ability to help their children understand the dangers specifically associated with pornography that they believed teachers were as important as parents in handling the issue. Just 13% thought it should be left to parents alone to educate children about pornography²¹.

Parents' involvement in SRE

Brook and FPA recognise the crucial role that parents play in their children's development. We believe the provision of SRE should be a partnership between parents and schools with lessons in schools supporting the information and messages children and young people receive from their parents, though often parents will need training in order to overcome gaps in knowledge, embarrassment or awkwardness when they talk about sex and relationships with their children. But this partnership between schools and parents should not be at the expense of outright allowing parents to withdraw children and young people from sex education lessons, because we believe this undermines the right of every child to receive education about relationships and sex and is incompatible with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In any case, the overwhelming majority of parents support statutory, school-based SRE. A survey of parents conducted by the National Association of Head Teachers in May 2013 found that 88% said sex education and lessons on adult and peer relationships should be mandatory in schools²². This figure is corroborated by a survey conducted by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in 2009, which showed that 81% of parent respondents supported the principle that all children should receive school based SRE²³.

²¹ NAHT survey, May 2013

²² NAHT survey, May 2013

²³ Rt Hon Ed Balls MP, *Written Ministerial Statement, Personal, Social and Health Education* (Column 49WS), House of Commons Hansard, 5 November 2009