

Inquiry into teenage pregnancy

The Sex Education Forum

We welcome the Scottish Parliament Inquiry into Teenage Pregnancy. The SPICe Teenage Pregnancy briefing (2013) issued with the Inquiry makes clear that sex and relationships education (SRE) has an important role in contributing to a reduction in teenage pregnancy.

The remit of the Sex Education Forum is limited to England, but much of the evidence we have gathered is of international relevance. Our submission to this Inquiry is largely responding to question 'g': *'Are there specific approaches to reducing teenage pregnancy that are not currently getting sufficient attention in order to affect positive change for children and young people?'* and covers

- The evidence that SRE works
- The benefits of making SRE a statutory subject in all schools
- The importance of involving parents
- The need for educators to be adequately trained

1. What is the evidence that SRE works?

SRE involves learning about the emotional, social and physical aspects of growing up, relationships, human sexuality, sex and sexual health. It should equip children and young people with the information, skills and positive values to enable them to have safe, fulfilling relationships and to take responsibility for their sexual health and wellbeing.

SRE aims to contribute to behavior change, including reducing unprotected and unwanted sex, and reducing harmful behaviour, including sexual offences such as assault and abuse.

National and international research shows that good quality SRE has a protective function as young people who have good SRE are more likely to choose to have sex for the first time later. Kirby (2007) examined 48 SRE programmes and found that 40 per cent of these had a significant impact in three aspects of behaviour; delaying the initiation of sex; reducing the number of sexual partners; and increasing condom or contraceptive use. Young people who have taken part in a good quality SRE programme are more likely to use condoms and contraception if they do have sex (Kirby 2007). See also UNESCO (2009) and NICE (2010).

2. How legislation helps ensure all children receive good quality sex and relationships education

The Sex Education Forum is campaigning to make SRE a statutory part of the National Curriculum in England. We believe that making SRE statutory is vital,

because without this legislation the subject will continue to have poor status within schools and suffer from continued inadequate provision of teacher training.

Through our contact with schools we have established that there are examples of very good SRE provision in England but implementation is inconsistent because the subject is not statutory. Teachers have also complained about lack of resourcing for training and insufficient allocation of curriculum time to the subject.

Children and young people we have spoken to have told us that they want SRE to become statutory in their schools, recognising that the subject currently lacks status. The majority of parents are very supportive of SRE (98% of parents answering a Mumsnet survey (2011) said they were happy for their children to attend school SRE lessons.

Furthermore, the lack of education about reproduction and preparation for adult life has been identified by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2008) as a children's rights issue that needs urgent attention in the UK.

3. Why parents need to be involved and how this can be done

Evidence shows that SRE is most effective when home and school are involved (Kirby, 2007). Children and young people are clear that they want to talk to their parents and carers about sex and relationships. Many parents and carers feel they lack the skills, confidence and knowledge to talk to their children, and look to schools for support. Schools and parents need to work together to make sure children and young people get the information and support they need.

The Sex Education Forum has researched and published examples of good practice showing how some schools are working very effectively with parents. These can be viewed in the *Practice* section of our web-site:

<http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/practice/parents-sre.aspx>

We have also produced an evidence briefing summarising key research about parental involvement and views on SRE:

http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/333401/parents_sre.pdf

4. The need for educators to be adequately trained

SRE needs to be taught by willing and competent teachers. Young people have said SRE is best when teachers are confident, unembarrassed and able to teach correct biological facts and also explore relationships issues. In a Sex Education Forum survey (2008) very few teachers (3 per cent) reported that SRE was covered adequately within their initial teacher training and teachers gave training high priority as a means of improving SRE. Evidence shows that trained educators are essential to ensure SRE provision is effective (Kirby, 2007).

Trained SRE educators are able to:

Devise an age-appropriate programme. Evidence shows that SRE works best if it starts before a young person has their first experience of sex and if it responds to the needs of young people as they mature (Kirby 2007). SRE must start in primary school and be taught in an age appropriate manner, starting with topics such as personal safety and friendships. Both primary and secondary school pupils, particularly girls, have said they need SRE to start earlier (Ofsted, 2010).

Teach medically and factually correct information. SRE can have an important role in busting unhelpful myths so it must be based on medically correct information about contraception, reproduction, abortion and sexual health. A range of views on sex and relationships can be discussed, including faith perspectives, but teachers must be clear when they are presenting facts and when they are presenting opinions or beliefs.

Promote core values. Clear core values run through good quality SRE, including mutual respect, loving and happy relationships, rights to information, safety and health, equality (particularly on the basis of gender and sexual orientation) and responsibility for oneself and others. Good quality SRE can provide a safe space for children and young people to identify and reflect on their own values and those of others, including their peers. For practical examples of SRE in faith contexts, see <http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/practice/faith,-values-sre.aspx>

Develop skills. Evidence shows that SRE is more effective if it develops children and young people's skills as well as knowledge. Participatory and interactive learning tasks need to be built into SRE so that skills such as communication, negotiation and listening can be practised and developed.

It is therefore essential that teachers are adequately trained in order to deliver good quality SRE.

Lucy Emmerson
Coordinator
Sex Education Forum

7 February 2013

References

Emmerson, L (2011) *Parents and SRE: A Sex Education Forum evidence briefing*, London: Sex Education Forum:

http://www.ncb.org.uk/campaigning/media_news/2011/jan-jun/parents_want_support_with_sex.aspx

Kirby, D (2007) *Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Mumsnet survey of 1,000 parents (2011):

<http://www.mumsnet.com/campaigns/mumsnet-sex-education-survey#Results>

NICE (2010) Public Health draft guidance; School, college and community-based personal, social, health and economic education focusing on sex and relationships and alcohol education.

<http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/live/11673/49240/49240.pdf>

Ofsted (2010) Personal, social, health and economic education in schools'.

Sex Education Forum (2008) Forum briefing: Teachers survey on sex and relationships education, NCB.

UNCRC (2008) 49th session, Consideration of reports submitted by states parties under Article 44 of the Convention, Concluding observations: United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.

UNESCO (2009) International guidelines on sexuality education; an evidence informed approach to effective sex, relationships and HIV/STI education. Paris: UNESCO.

About the Sex Education Forum:

[The Sex Education Forum](#), hosted by the National Children's Bureau, is the national authority on sex and relationships education (SRE) in England. It is a unique collaboration of over 90 member organisations and 750 practitioners with representatives from health, education, faith, disability and children's organisations. The Sex Education Forum believes that all children and young people have the right to good SRE.