

Talk to your children about sex and relationships: support for parents



Forum Factsheet 31

Children learn about sex from a very young age even if we don't talk with them about it. Many of the things they learn are incorrect, confusing and frightening. In a world where sex is used to sell cars and ice creams, and celebrities' private lives become everybody's business, we can't afford *not* to talk to our children about sex and relationships if we're going to help them make sense of it all.

Of course it isn't always easy. Many of us feel embarrassed and worry that we don't know enough. After all, very few of us had good sex education ourselves. Some of us feel that we're not in a position to talk because our own relationships haven't been so good – and we don't want our children accusing us of 'do as I say, not as I do'.

This leaflet is designed for anybody who is a parent or who cares for children and young people. It will help you to talk to them about sex and relationships.

What is sex and relationships education (SRE)?

It is learning about sex, relationships, sexuality and sexual health. Mostly this happens at home, as well as from friends, television, films, and magazines and later at school. It doesn't just happen when we're young: all through our lives we learn new facts and continue to develop values and attitudes about sex and relationships.

What do children and young people say?

Young people say that many parents and teachers are not very good at talking about sex and relationships. They leave it too late and often don't talk about it until children have reached puberty, or young people have started feeling sexual desire – or sometimes until they're already having sex. Children and young

people don't just want the biological facts. They want to talk about feelings and relationships, and they want us to answer their questions: Why are boys different from girls? How does your body change as you grow up? Where do babies come from? When do you have sex? How do you say no? Why are some people so prejudiced? How do you catch HIV? How do you know if you want to have sex? Why are people gay? How do you know that you're in love? How do you talk to someone about contraception and safer sex?

Why should parents talk about sex and relationships?

- Children and young people want their parents to be the first person to talk to them about sex and relationships.
- If their families are confident talking about sex and relationships, young people will find it easier to resist peer pressure, express their beliefs and opinions, challenge bullying and be able to understand negative messages about sex and relationships.
- Lots of people feel very uncomfortable about sex and think that it's something to laugh about or feel shameful about. We can change this by talking about it positively and being honest even when it is difficult and embarrassing.
- Young people who have good sex education at home and at school start sex later and are less likely to have an unplanned pregnancy or to get a sexually transmitted infection.

Countries in Europe, that have supported parents, established SRE in schools and provided sexual health services for young people, have seen many benefits. Fewer teenage girls get pregnant, young people start having sex later, and their sexual health is better.

In England our teenage pregnancy rates are high: 90,000 girls and young women under 19 get pregnant every year, 7,000 of whom are under 16. Nearly half these pregnancies end in abortion. Between a quarter and a third of young people under 16 have sex – and the younger they are, the less likely they are to use contraception or have safer sex. The rates of sexually transmitted infections among young people, including HIV, continue to rise.

The Government is taking action through the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and the Sexual Health and HIV Strategy to improve sexual health and reduce teenage pregnancy. All schools have been sent Guidance by the Department of Education and Skills on how to deliver SRE in schools.

When should we begin talking about sex and relationships?

Start early. Very small children get all sorts of wrong ideas that frighten and confuse them. Talk with them about their feelings, friendships and relationships in the family. Conversations like this help build their

confidence in talking about feelings and relationships – and in the years to come will help them to make sensible decisions about sex and relationships. Use proper names for the body parts, and answer questions truthfully and briefly. Children hate lectures – if they want more information they will ask another question. ‘Where did you get me?’ Can be answered by saying, ‘you grew in a special place in mummy’s tummy’. A few years later you may be asked by an incredulous 10 year old: ‘Why do people have sex?’ And the response could be: ‘grown ups like to do it because it feels nice, it’s a way of showing love and it can make babies’.

Without frightening them make sure that they understand that they can say ‘no’ to someone who is touching them or approaching them in a way that makes them feel unhappy or uncomfortable. They must also be assured that if something like this happens it is right to tell someone and ask for help.

How do I get started?

- First prepare yourself – talk with your partner, friends and relatives to build up your confidence.
- Read a book or leaflet aimed at your child’s age group to increase your knowledge, and help you find words and a style you’re comfortable with.

How to talk with children and young people about values and morality

The family has a major role in developing a child’s values and attitudes to sex and relationships. Close loving relationships are the best way of showing a child or young person how your family ‘does things’, based on your values, culture, faith and beliefs. Research across the world confirms that telling young people to ‘say no’ doesn’t work. Young people

Some Dos and Don’ts

Do

- Read books, leaflets or watch a video with your child.
- Talk while you’re doing something else – washing up, driving in the car or fishing.
- Enjoy it. Laugh with each other, not at each other – it can reduce embarrassment and stress.
- Listen rather than judge. Try asking them what they think?
- Answer questions and don’t be afraid to say: ‘I really don’t know – let’s work it out or look it up together’. Have a phrase for awkward moments, such as: ‘That’s a good question, but let’s talk about it once we get home’ (then make sure you do!).
- Always respond, if you don’t, she or he may think it is wrong to talk to you about sex and relationships and as a result you may find your child clams up when you raise the subject.
- If it all feels too personal, try talking about people in books, films and favourite television programmes such as soaps.

Don’t

- Bombard your child with questions or talk too much. Many children say it is awful to get the formal lecture on sex or questions fired at them. ‘I asked a question and she immediately came back with “Are you having sex then?” Try and hold on to your anxieties, answer the question, and respect privacy. Young people go through phases of wanting to be private. It’s better to keep their trust than antagonise or alienate them.
- Be afraid to tell children what you think, and why. But do try and avoid making harsh judgements of others and give your child some leeway to come to their own opinions.

don’t always want to be told what to do but they are interested in talking about what is right and wrong. Conversations need to be relaxed, realistic and relevant to young people’s life experiences.

What do schools do about sex and relationships education?

In the early years up to the age of 7, teachers will be helping children to develop the skills of listening and caring as well as talking about feelings and their relationships with families and friends. Children will learn the names of the body parts, the differences between male and female and the ways in which they will

develop and grow. Importantly, they will also learn to recognise unsafe and risky situations, and to ask for help.

‘We address the bodily changes children are going through as they reach the age of 9 and 10 because children are maturing earlier now’
primary school head teacher

From 7 to 18 years they will continue to develop their knowledge and skills. In agreement with parents, children will be prepared for the physical and emotional changes of puberty and learn about reproduction and sexual behaviour. They will also learn about relationships, sexuality, contraception and safer sex, including the importance of family, marriage and stable long-term relationships for the care and support of

children. They will also learn social skills, which will help them to be assertive, ask questions, access support, negotiate within relationships, problem solve and make and carry out decisions.

There are laws which ensure that SRE is delivered within a moral framework that values the diversity of family life. The Government has given guidance to each school on how they should teach SRE to ensure that it works by improving sexual health and well-being, reducing teenage pregnancy and delaying first sex.

All schools are expected to join their local accredited Healthy Schools scheme. This offers a process that ensures SRE is planned in partnership with parents, pupils and school nurses.

How can parents help schools?

Schools review their SRE policy on a regular basis. They are encouraged to work in partnership with parents. Ask the teachers if you can help. Read the policy and look at some of the resources. Parent Teacher Associations or Boards of Governors have meetings on SRE. Try to attend them, and help the school to plan good sex and relationships education. In some areas, parents have been trained as peer sex educators so they can help other parents to talk with children and young people about sex and relationships. Parents can test out leaflets and videos at home, conduct a survey to work out what everybody – both parents and pupils – expect of SRE in school and give classroom talks about being a parent.

What happens if I am not happy with SRE provided in our school?

It is very rare that parents are unhappy with SRE in school. Most concerns are founded on misunderstanding rather

than complete disagreement. Where there are concerns, difficulties can often be resolved by making an appointment to talk with the Personal Social Health Education (PSHE) and Citizenship Coordinator in school. Be prepared to express your view and hear the views of teachers and governors. And most importantly, listen to what your child thinks. Parents of some cultures and faiths have expressed concerns that boys and girls are taught together. Where this has happened the school has resolved it, by making arrangements to deliver the more private aspects of SRE in single sex groups.

In the rare event that you are still not satisfied, you have the right to withdraw your child from certain lessons or the whole programme provided within PSHE and Citizenship. The reproductive elements of SRE are often delivered in Science and children cannot be withdrawn from a National Curriculum subject. You will need to notify the Chair of Governors and the school will make separate arrangements for your child. Think carefully about how your child will get the right information and education before you withdraw your child completely. It is usually better to hear something from a teacher than hear it in the playground.

What laws about sex affect young people?

Young people cannot legally consent to sex until they are 16. The Department of Health and medical professional guidelines require doctors to offer all patients, including young people under 16, a confidential service. They always encourage young people to talk with their parents, but they are able to give confidential contraceptive advice and treatment if they believe the young person will have sex anyway and endanger their sexual health. Doctors are required to use their professional judgement to assure themselves that the young

person is mature enough to understand contraceptive treatment. They are only able to break confidence in very specific circumstances, such as suspected sexual abuse.

Who should be talking about sex and relationships?

Fathers as well as mothers need to talk about sex. Mothers talk more to girls, and often boys feel left out. If we want young men to take responsibility for their sexual behaviour we need to offer them support. One young man commented: 'The moment it looked as if the conversation was going that way Dad was up and out saying he had to mow the lawn,' while another said: 'It was great. They didn't always know the answers but Mum and Dad were always willing to talk with us about it.' Grandparents can play an important role by recalling how it was for them when they were younger. Aunties are often good at talking about these matters with their nephews and nieces. Stepparents and foster parents should also be willing to answer questions and involve themselves in family discussions about sex and relationships, and of course teachers and school nurses will talk to children and young people in school.

My child has a disability. How should I talk about sex and relationships?

Children with learning and/or physical disabilities need exactly the same sex and relationships education as all children, but it may need to be explained more simply and more often. It is also important because they may be more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. There are some extremely useful resources to get you started (see sources of support, below).

What if my son or daughter is gay?

Even though it may be hard for you it is important that you don't express strong negative feelings because your child will need your acceptance and love and positive messages from you that being gay is fine. Gay children and young people are often bullied verbally and physically, in and out of school. We need to challenge prejudice because it damages the self-esteem and emotional development of the child who is bullied – as well as the bullies themselves. There is information and support available both for you and your child (see sources of support).

I'm a foster parent, and some of the children I look after have been sexually abused. What should I do?

Everything in this leaflet is relevant to you, but the children you're looking after may find that talking about sex brings up traumatic memories. This means you have to build their trust first. They may not know as much about sex as you think – and past abuse may mean they'll be more open to abusive relationships in the future. Reassure them that the abuse was not their fault, be very boundaried and let them know you recognise how painful it is for them. Make sure you get specialist support from the social worker, who may be able to offer training or leaflets for you and the children.

I'm on my own with a son and a daughter; do I need to do anything different?

No, you may feel it's harder because you can't share the responsibility. Try and make sure that your children can talk with trusted family members and friends of both sexes.

I feel I've left it too late to start talking about sex and relationships

It's never too late. Why not start now by talking about this leaflet?

Sources of support

There are many books, leaflets and some videos on sex and relationships, aimed at all ages. They can be borrowed from schools or public libraries, or bought from your local high street book shop. Attend school meetings and events, which will talk about SRE. You'll find that most parents are 'like you' trying to do the best for their child. The following organisations offer information, helplines, leaflets, and books and in some cases a mail order service.

Brook

Telephone: 0800 0185023 (for local information)

FFLAG (Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

Helpline: 01454 852 418

E-mail: info@fflag.org.uk

Website: www.fflag.org.uk

fpa (formally Family Planning Association)

Helpline: 0845 310 1334

Monday to Friday 9am to 7pm

www.fpa.org.uk

Parenting Education and Support Forum

Information Service: 020 7284 8388

E-mail: pesf@dial.pipex.com

Website: www.parenting-forum.org.uk

Parentline Plus

Helpline: 0808 800 2222

Monday to Friday 9am to 9pm

Saturday 9.30am to 5pm

Sunday 10am to 3pm

Website: www.parentlineplus.org.uk



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Sex Education Forum

Tel: 020 7843 1901 Fax: 020 7843 6053 E-mail: sexedforum@ncb.org.uk

Website: www.ncb.org.uk/sef

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