

Why work together?

First and foremost, people are educated at home. If they are not getting the correct answers at home, then they aren't getting them. Period.

Comment from a young person responding to a Sex Education Forum survey, 2008

Who is responsible for SRE?

The Sex Education Forum (SEF) believes that SRE is the joint responsibility of school and home. The majority of parents also see it as a dual responsibility (Durex and others 2010). There are three important reasons for schools to involve parents in SRE:

- to bring about improvements in the SRE children and young people get in school
- to help parents provide better SRE at home
- to support children's and young people's development and well-being by linking learning at school and home.

When schools work together with parents on SRE they often find other benefits too, for example, parents get more involved in children's learning in other subjects.

For information about what schools are legally required to teach in relation to SRE, check the info box at the end of this section.

What is the evidence that SRE works?

National and international research shows that good quality SRE has a protective function as young people who have had good SRE are more likely to be older when they first have sexual intercourse, to have fewer sexual partners and to use contraception (Kirby 2007). All those involved in sex and relationships education want young people to wait until they are ready before they start having sex. For some young people, this may not be until they get married – but it is vital that all young people are helped to develop the emotional skills needed to make responsible choices. There is no evidence that teaching children about sex and relationships encourages them to have sex.

The unique role of parents in SRE

Children and young people are clear that parents are an important source of learning about sex and relationships (Turnbull and others 2012). More than three-quarters of parents feel they should have a role as sex and relationships educators – 77 per cent in one study and 90 per cent in another (NHS Bristol 2009 and Ingham and Carrera 1998) but fewer actually talk to their children.

SRE at home can be more informal and spontaneous than timetabled teaching at school. And because of the unique relationship between a parent and child this makes learning about sex and relationships at home very different to school.

The Sex Education Forum spoke to members of a faith and values working group about what makes the role of parents in SRE unique. Their thoughts about the opportunities and challenges involved are shown in the box.

The unique role of parents in SRE

Ideas from members of the Sex Education Forum faith and values working group

Opportunities

- parents have an emotional relationship with their child
- potentially have time to talk
- spontaneous 'here and now' context (e.g. while watching a TV programme)
- parents transmit their personal and community values and views
- developmental approach that can be appropriate to child's age and level of understanding
- unique knowledge of child – although don't know everything
- siblings and other relatives can contribute
- parents can set the tone about sex and relationships before children go to school
- parents can be advocates for good SRE for their children

Challenges

- generational patterns get repeated
- how to respect a child's privacy
- authority and boundary-setting role may mean children keep things from parents – that's the nature of adolescence and parenting
- home is not always a safe place
- depends how confident and comfortable parents are about talking about sex and relationships

Most parents give the 'birds and bees' talk when they feel ready, not when the child is ready which seems really weird and parents get embarrassed and tend to give up!

Young person responding to Sex Education Forum survey, 2008

If we had SRE when we were younger then a lot of us would have been better equipped to deal with a lot of things in life.

Parent speaking at a discussion group about SRE at a primary school in Birmingham

What role do parents really take?

Many parents and carers find it difficult to talk to their children about sex and relationships. As a result many children grow up without ever having had a conversation with their parents about sex and relationships. Boys are less likely than girls to have talked to their parents, and fathers are less likely than mothers to start a discussion.

So there is a big gap between the ideal role that parents aspire to as educators and what happens in reality. Children and young people are well aware of parents' failings with SRE.