

# meeting the needs of girls and young women in sex and relationships education

There is a great deal of attention paid currently to a notion of 'boys and masculinity in crisis'. Those who work with girls and young women will know that, for them, the crisis never went away! In these days of supposed 'post-feminism' the pressures on young women are at least as great as ever. While there may be an assumption that their issues are all resolved, they themselves (and those working with them) know this to be far from true. The following factsheet by **Caroline Ray**, sets out some of the particular issues for girls and provides suggestions for teaching approaches to address these issues. It is a companion to our 1997 factsheet (11) on meeting the needs of boys and young men and the Sex Education Forum resource *Let's Hear it for the Boys*.

## Why the need to focus on girls and young women?

Formal sex education has long been aimed at what were assumed to be girls' rather than boys' needs. It is true that girls have access to a much wider range of sources of information about sex and relationships than boys do. Girls often cite their mothers or sisters, friends and magazines as sources of information about sex and relationships. However, more doesn't necessarily mean better. In surveys girls tell us that their formal and informal sex educa-

tion continues to be biologically focused, often comes too late, and is not relevant to their needs. Also, young lesbians, young women from ethnic minorities and young disabled women report more limited access to this kind of information.

There is a new assumption that girls are somehow 'sorted'. Understandable concern about rising suicide rates amongst young men, and their disaffection with education seems to go hand in hand with research highlighting the 'Can-do' girls of the late '90s – full of confidence, out-achieving boys academically, in short 'girl-power' has arrived.

But this so-called 'girl-power' is something of an illusion. Scratch the surface of this confident exterior and you will often find chronic levels of low self-esteem, poor body image, and young women putting up with unsatisfactory or unsafe sex or having sex which they later regret. Alongside this we are also seeing increasing levels of smoking, drug and alcohol use among young women, health issues which also denote low self-esteem.

## Changes in gender roles

There have been enormous changes in gender roles over the last 30 years or so. Although gains have been made, a recent report by the Government's Women's Unit shows that there are many areas in which equality has not been achieved, equal pay and responsibility for childcare are just two. Research also confirms that violence against women (and domestic violence in particular) are still too commonplace. For instance, every



week two women are killed by their current or former partners, and a quarter of all women experience domestic violence at some stage in their lives. Fundamentally, there haven't been great changes in how women experience sexual relationships, or how they perceive themselves as sexual beings nor in how they in turn are perceived by society.

### Sexual health and relationships

Research has long told us that girls' experience of sex education both formal and informal is often 'reproductive' in focus and generally couched in protective terms. If boys get the message, 'don't do this or you'll catch that' girls get 'don't let him do this or you'll get pregnant'. This reproductive approach serves girls badly. For instance, resources often portray women as having no sexual agency in sexual encounters, or no desires or responses (female orgasm and the clitoris are often not covered in science textbooks) On the other hand, resources focusing on the negative consequences of unprotected sex – sexually transmitted infections, and unintended pregnancy – often give the impression that girls are solely responsible for contraception and 'guilty' if it fails. So young women are caught in a double-bind – brought up to believe that they have little control over their own sexuality, whilst being taught to assume responsibility for men's.

Young women's first sexual encounter is often regretted or seen as something to get out of the way. The positive attributes such as raised status that boys associate with their first sexual experience are not often experienced by girls. Girls also report high levels of coercion to have sex. This is particularly so if their first sexual experience was at a young age. Girls are very aware of the ongoing double standards attached to sexual

experience (the 'slag' or 'drag' dilemma which young women find themselves navigating) and the risk to their reputations.

Women in our culture who carry condoms risk being perceived as sexually available and easy rather than taking responsibility for their sexual health. Research shows the problems associated with girls taking responsibility for contraception. Girls, particularly in rural areas, were very aware of the risk to their reputation of buying or carrying condoms, whereas boys could be assumed to be practising. Sex education needs to acknowledge and explore these issues as they affect young women.

The model of sexuality that young women are offered culturally is male. Young women's sexuality is often portrayed as subordinate to men's. This model is that men have sexual urges which women stimulate, respond to, and satisfy. In turn, young women are often represented as being responsible for 'taming' and containing them. This is reinforced and internalised through a range of vehicles from advertising to classical literature and sometimes reinforced by our legal system.

Certain groups of young women are often absent in sex education resources. Young disabled women rarely feature in 'mainstream' resources. Their sex education is even more likely to have a protective focus due to parental fear of vulnerability to abuse, or limited expectations of them having relationships. The parents' pack *Talking Together... About Growing up: A workbook for parents of children with learning disabilities* is very good in this respect, as is *The Lyric*, a video resource produced by SPOD.

Lesbians are invisible in the majority of resources. This has a serious effect on the development of self-esteem and the impact of this for many young lesbians is high rates of alcohol and drug abuse and attempted suicide and self-harm. Where lesbianism is mentioned this is often as a dismissive aside, 'many young people go through a stage of

questioning their sexuality'. The resource pack *Pathways to Sexual Health* is a notable exception in this area which truly caters for sexual diversity.

### Different faith perspectives

Young women from different faiths or cultures may experience mainstream sex education as an attempt to 'save them from the restrictions of their faith or cultures'. Sex and relationships education needs to use activities which explore rather than assume cultural 'norms' and show respect for diversity. Community-based projects such as the Harlesden Young Asian Women's project, have been successful in incorporating sexual health issues into broader work with young Asian women and their families.

### A whole-setting approach

Messages about sexuality, the body and gender and how they are valued are conveyed in both the formal and informal curriculum within schools. From an early age, a powerful and influential education is taking place relating to activity and passivity, to gendered power relations and role models. The school/setting needs to ensure that in its rules, physical environment, staffing, activities and opportunities for children and young people to participate, it provides consistent messages about the positive values of both genders.

A whole-setting approach to gender is crucial in providing girls and young women with a positive experience of their gender and in broadening young people's expectations and understanding of gender. The fpa *Gender in Secondary Schools* project found that bullying related to gender and sexuality is visible and commonplace. Bullying can be related to a whole range of gender stereotypes and expectations, including appearance, academic interest, sports/hobbies and friendships. Perceptions of femininity and masculinity clearly need to be broadened and opportunities and encouragement to transcend

traditional gender boundaries in terms of the activities offered need to be made available. Staff in whatever setting they work need to be aware of the role models they are providing. For instance, the male and female staff being equally involved in physical, caring, and decision-making activities.

Research has found sexism and 'low-level' harassment to be endemic in many schools and often perpetuated and reinforced by school students, staff and the whole school system. Young women experience this in other settings too. It is important for there to be a well-defined policy which enables young people to participate in making or changing policy and for there to be systems or a forum where such issues can be raised, taken seriously and challenged.

School facilities and rules can also be very influential in this arena. Dirty and ill-equipped toilets (for example no sanitary bins) or the dreaded 'gymn knickers' of the PE kit have many implications for how young women learn to value themselves and feel encouraged or otherwise to take part in physical activity. There also needs to be recognition of menstruation, PMS and period pain in terms of possible impact on academic performance.

### Policy into practice

School policies – including sex and relationships, confidentiality and anti-bullying will need to address the specific needs of both girls and boys. The National Healthy Schools Standard provides a process and structure by which schools can develop their formal and informal curriculum. The guidance criteria for sex and relationships includes:

- a policy which is owned and implemented by all members of the school including pupils and parents;

a whole-setting approach to gender is crucial

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- a planned programme to match the needs of pupils' age, ability, gender and level of maturity;
- a planned programme which is based on pupils' own assessment of their needs and a knowledge of vulnerable pupils;
- the provision of pupils' support services in partnership with local health and support services;
- a programme which is responsive to national priorities, which in the case of sex education would include the teenage pregnancy action plan, the National Sexual Health Strategy and HIV strategy.

This creates a supportive environment in which to implement the new framework for PSHE and citizenship education within the revised National Curriculum. The four-strands of the unified PSHE framework are:

- Self;
- Relationships;
- Health and Safety and;
- Active citizenship.

These provide a clear rationale and structure for addressing personal relationships within all the Key Stages.

### Beginning early – the primary years

Stereotyping begins at an early age and limits both genders. When boys were asked by the Sex Education Forum to draw pictures and write about what was the difference between girls and boys, the results showed that they were very aware of gender 'boundaries'. Their pictures also displayed the attitudes which later affect self-esteem and limit aspirations. The messages that 'boys are better than girls', 'girls don't like getting dirty', 'girls like make-up and don't play football' were commonplace. Looking at gender can begin from an early age. Fiction such as Anthony Browne's *Piggy Book* can provide a useful way of looking at gender roles and stereotypes in a fun way.

Other children's fiction can be used as discussion material for looking at the emotional aspects of growing up, and for exploring relationships; different types of families; making friends; and valuing diversity in

### timely provision for puberty is vital

the early years. *Hand in Hand: Emotional development through literature* provides lots of suggestions for materials which offers positive role models for girls.

As far as formal sex education is concerned the biological focus starts early. Videos are often the main culprit focusing on reproduction with women's roles being limited to pregnancy, birth and breast feeding. Research has found that little consideration is given to the effect of these video scenes on girls.

### Accurate information

Accurate naming of girls' sexual as well as reproductive body parts is vital from an early age. Girls' genitals are not assumed to form part of 'the main external parts of the body' and so are often not mentioned. It is particularly important that they are, if children are not to see the differences between genders in terms of what boys have and girls don't have. Girl's genitals often don't get the family names that boys' may get. These may be inaccurate but at least they are acknowledged. This absence conveys influential gendered messages about girls' sexuality and deprives girls of a comfortable language about themselves. If you don't know the words for parts of your body and have picked up the message that adults don't talk about them either, how can you describe them if you need to? This has serious implications for child protection as well as for girls developing a positive sense of their bodies as a source of pride and pleasure.

In addition, many resources incorrectly label the vulva as the vagina, and the clitoris doesn't often make an appearance. When it does, it is often described in terms of appearance rather than stating that its purpose is to give sexual pleasure. This all adds to the 'mystery' and taboo about girl's bodies and to the denial for young women of their right to sexual pleasure. *How Did I Begin?* by Mick Manning, for

Key Stage 1, *Where Babies Come From* by Rosemary Stones and *Let's Talk About Sex* by Robie H Harris for Key Stages 2 and 3 are resources which are good in this respect.

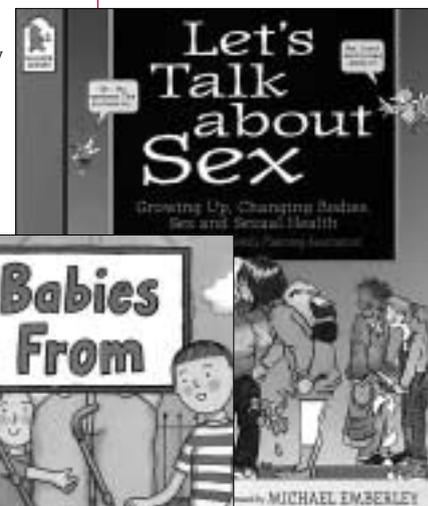
Accurate information about the physical changes that take place at puberty is important, however teaching should also cover the broader context of relationships. Primary schools provide ideal opportunities for this, where close trusting relationships between children, staff and parents have been developed, and openings within the curriculum are offered by circle time/work and the literacy hour.

### Preparation for puberty

This is clearly part of primary school sex education, yet 80 per cent of girls in one survey said they had inadequate preparation for periods in primary school. Parents often assume schools will cover it, schools may assume parents will. One in ten girls surveyed knew nothing about their periods before they started menstruating. No wonder then, that for many girls their first period will be remembered as an experience tinged with shame, fear and ignorance. Timely provision for puberty is vital. The National Curriculum which suggests that changes at puberty should be covered at Key Stage 3 is not helpful as for many girls this will be too late.

Girls prefer single sex lessons to explore the practicalities of dealing with periods in school, however, both genders should have a basic knowledge of what happens to each with good support for early developers and reassurance to later developers. Timing is important, but so are adequate facilities for girls to cope with the practicalities of periods without embarrassment. Teaching in this area needs to be respectful of cultural differences, for example, by covering use of both tampons and towels. This subject is popular with commercial companies but not all their materials are of good quality. They may be free, but they need to be 'quality tested' in the same way as resources which are purchased.

Periods or preparation for puberty is one area where schools often use outside visitors (such as representatives from tampon companies). Schools should make sure that all visitors are aware of the school's sex education policy. Some schools have arranged for mums to come into school with their daughters to share experiences, and to learn together in a supportive and fun way. The resource pack *The Inside Story* makes very good use of extracts from fiction and autobiography to look at different experiences both celebratory and negative of menstruation.



### Teaching approaches Boys and girls learning together

One of the 'aims' of sex education must be to open up communication between genders and improve understanding. Communication skills are of course vital if young women are to feel able to negotiate safer sex, satisfactory sex, or indeed say no to sex. Comparative research with young people in the Netherlands has found that young people feel much better able to discuss sexual matters with their partners than their UK counterparts. To overcome this reticence, activities often suggest using mixed groups for sex education activities. Research projects in the UK have found difficulties when bringing single gender groups back to report to a mixed gender group. Boys in particular tend to self-censor and discussion dries up. A more successful approach seems to be to organise small mixed gender groups (no more than four people). This according to the young people concerned enables a more honest and open exchange of opinions and views.

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### Opportunities for work with girls

Girls often describe the difficulties of 'sensible discussion' in school sex education because of boys messing or joking about. As earlier research with boys has shown, there can be many (very understandable) reasons for this reluctance to 'take sex education seriously'. However, the result can be that attention is directed away from girls towards controlling the boys. One solution is to provide some time for girls to discuss issues relevant to them, in single sex groups. For example, a school in Reading has approached the 'problem' of single gender time, by providing voluntary lunchtime discussion groups. These 'talking shop' sessions have proved very popular with the students. This approach may also help alleviate some of the difficulties of tailoring sex education to very differing needs and stages of development when dealing with a full class.

In practice, the school setting offers limited opportunities for single gender work with girls. Community-based youth projects and services can often provide more time and space and a more informal atmosphere for open and frank discussion between girls. For example, a youth worker in Sheffield worked with a group of girls from an



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estate with one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the city. *Girls on a Mission* worked together to produce four resources – one on feeling confident to say no, one on the positive effect of girls' friendships, one on smoking and one on drug use.

### Public care settings

Research with young women with experience of public care has highlighted the lack of effective support and sex education this group receive. It is not just a case of missed school sex education lessons as a result of different placements, but also that their particular sex and relationship needs are often not addressed. Staff in public care settings may be reluctant to take on this

much needed area of work due to lack of clear policies and management support. They may also believe (incorrectly) that because of previous experience of sexual abuse, it is not possible to undertake sex education work with this group of young people. It is crucial however, that it is. Young women in public care may face particular pressures to be sexually active, may have been abused, may be involved in 'informal or formal' prostitution and exploitation and may be sexually active at an earlier age. In studies this group have been found to be statistically more likely to be pregnant before or shortly after leaving care than their peers. The Sex Education Forum has developed a policy and practice manual *Let's Talk About Sex and Relationships*



which addresses the specific needs and pressures felt by this group of young women. The Terrence Higgins Trust worked with a group of girls in residential care to produce a series of sexual health information cards addressing their particular needs. One of the key issues for this group was to avoid the stigmatisation of the label 'public care'.

### Self-esteem and assertiveness

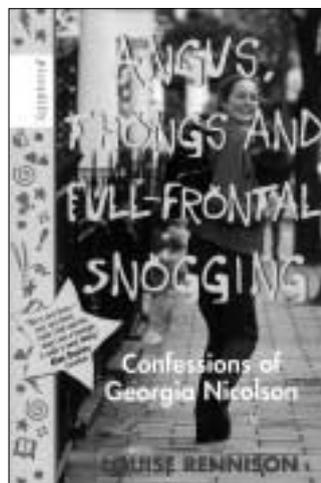
Research which shows that by Year 11 over a quarter of girls are on a diet and 56 per cent would wish to change something about their appearance is just one indicator of low levels of self-esteem amongst many girls. Self-esteem impacts upon behaviour and risk-taking. Girls' friendships can be one of the key sources of support for girls and women. The Sheffield Centre for HIV & Sexual Health having recognised this, have developed training resources and activities to strengthen the friendships that girls have. Their excellent resource and training pack *Girl Power – How far does it go?* provides ideas and practical strategies for building on the friendships that girls have. It gives them opportunities to consider their aspirations and needs and develop assertiveness skills.

Opportunities could also be provided for girls to look at the pressures and effects of living in a misogynistic society. One example could be to consider the limiting effects of the 'ideal' shape and looks that women supposedly should aspire to. The resource pack, *Life Size*, provides useful activities to consider these areas.

It is important that girls are provided with positive female role models who reflect the diversity of women's experiences. Events such as International Women's Day can be used to celebrate the achievements of women. It could also provide a chance for young women to consider the gains that have been made, and what 'battles' still need to be fought. This could be considered in many areas of the curriculum such as active citizenship.

### Using fiction

Fiction can provide funny and pertinent material when looking at families, relationships, the nature of friendship and the emotional changes experienced at puberty. Books by Judy Blume and Jacqueline Wilson, and the award winning *Angus, Thongs and Full-frontal Snogging* by Louise Rennison offer useful trigger material for work with girls on all these areas. Madeleine Lindley Ltd Book Centre provide specialist book lists for teachers, on areas such as PSHE and gender. The service can be contacted on 0161 683 4400.



### Specific subjects

When asked, there are a number of subjects that girls feel are not covered adequately in their formal sex education. These include, talking about relationships, talking about sex, abusive relationships and issues of consent, abortion, contraception, STIs and safer sex.

### Talking about relationships

The focus on reproduction can limit perceptions of young women's sexuality to the role of child-bearing. In this context, relationships, emotions and pleasure are all too often ignored. So too are other aspects of women's experience such as masturbation, the menopause and infertility. Recent research found that schools felt it was difficult to cover sex in a positive way for fear of appearing to condone underage sex. This pathologising of women's sexuality contributes to women's

negative feelings about their bodies and deters them from learning more about themselves. In turn, it actually leaves them *more* rather than *less* vulnerable to exploitation and the likelihood of having sex in an attempt to increase their self-esteem and their sense of 'belonging'.

Although the sources of information available to girls are widespread, many of the messages they receive from advertising, the media and elsewhere provide a limited picture of relationships as being all important, heterosexual and inherently beneficial. Developing activities or programmes around such themes as 'Daring to be different' could be a useful way of enabling young women to deal with the pressure to conform. Commercially available videos such as *Ten Things I Hate About You* – a re-working of *The Taming of the Shrew* could provide useful trigger material for looking at pressures to have a boyfriend and daring to be clever and smart.

To be relevant, sex education should address how women experience sex. It needs to include pressures to be sexually active; choices about whether to be sexually active or not; difficulties of taking responsibility for sexual health when 'girls are not meant to initiate sex', difficulties of negotiating safer sex with an older partner, risky situations, and the effect of alcohol and drugs. It should also acknowledge that for some young women, sexual experience has not been a choice. The resource *Shining Through* provides useful material in this area. Sex education should also acknowledge that for others the relationships they want are not heterosexual. All this needs to be linked to skills and self-esteem work.

The PSHE framework within the revised National Curriculum provides a clear structure for exploring the nature of relationships. Young people report that this is an area which is often poorly covered in formal sex education. Resources such as *Love Needs Learning* provide useful activities to enable young

people to consider their expectations of relationships including marriage, what makes them work or fail, and what pressures or life events impact on relationships. Marriage Care are currently updating their resources and intend to make them available via their website.

RELATE also provide useful training and resources in this area.

fiction can provide funny and pertinent material

### Talking about sex

It is often assumed that girls are good at talking about sex with their friends. Research has found this to be only partly true. Information about the ups and downs of relationships may be shared but the factual details of sex itself are not always shared. Young lesbians may feel particularly isolated in this respect. The BBC Key Stage 4 video in their *ID Learning to be You* series includes a programme called *Saying It For the Girls*. This provides an excellent series of interviews with young women who talk in a frank and honest way about their expectations and experiences of sex, both lesbian and heterosexual. The young women talk confidently about their enjoyment of sexual fulfilment, whilst at the same time giving serious messages about the importance of being ready, keeping safe, and the benefits of sex within a relationship. Another programme on this video, *Saying It For the Boys* would give a clear insight for girls into the pressures on boys where sexual relationships are concerned. Careful use of the video with preparation time and follow-up activities would make this a really useful resource. A research project currently being conducted in Scotland has found that role playing activities intended to enable young people to practice assertiveness or communication skills in 'sexual situations' were problematic. First, the negative scenarios didn't fit with the young people's experiences or expectations of romantic relationships, or secondly, they lacked the experience of a

relationship on which to draw. A video with 'stop and discuss the options' opportunities seemed to provide a more realistic or helpful experience.

**Abusive relationships, and issues of consent**

The all pervading emphasis on 'romantic love' in society and the status that having a boyfriend (any boyfriend) brings can seriously affect girls' abilities to assert their wants or needs within relationships. Research shows this can begin at an early age, with girls aspirations revolving around a desire to be dressed up in a white wedding dress. Books such as *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch can encourage younger girls to explore relationships. Working together on creating a Bill of Rights can act as a powerful awareness raising tool and can help workers and young women focus on what equality and justice would mean in their lives. (*Girl Power* provides a useful exercise)

The example bill of rights (below) taken from *Girl Power – How far does it go?* could provide a starting point for work with young women.

Young women's magazines, although a useful source of information for girls can sometimes collude with the notion

that having a boyfriend is all important. It could be useful to bring in a selection of magazines to explore with young women what covert/overt messages they are providing.

As the statistics at the beginning of this factsheet show, many young women will experience an abusive relationship at some time. Negative aspects of some relationships need to be explored in formal sex education, if girls and young women are not to be left feeling that an abusive relationship is somehow their fault and if they are to be well-prepared to resist, protest at and leave such relationships.

A number of initiatives are now beginning to appear which address issues around consent, abuse and controlling or negative behaviours. Barnardo's have produced a video as part of their campaign to raise awareness of children abused through prostitution. *Whose Daughter Next?* has been used with service providers to raise awareness of the grooming process that is often used to lead young women into prostitution. Loud Mouth Theatre in Education company have also developed a play *Working for Marcus* which provides young people with a chance to consider abuse and control. Although abuse through prostitution is relatively rare it is one end of a spectrum of abusive and controlling relationships. A project worker from the Barnardo's Streets and Lanes Project in Bradford has worked in schools

to raise young people's awareness about their own vulnerability, about spotting controlling adults and identifying high-risk situations.

**Abortion**

There is a temptation to treat abortion as an interesting topic for a debate. This often polarises what is a complex issue, ignores young women's personal experience and doesn't give young women opportunities to consider abortion in an objective way. Teaching as in any area of sex education should aim to provide young women with the basic factual information they require – what options are available to them, how they might access an abortion if needed and provide a chance to explore what factors might influence attitudes and values around abortion. This is best placed in a comprehensive programme which might cover choosing not to have sex, using condoms and contraception if choosing to have sex, accessing emergency contraception in the event of unprotected sex, and if pregnant either having an abortion, having the baby adopted or keeping the baby.

**Contraception and emergency contraception**

There is a tendency to teach about contraception in a didactic way describing every type of contraception available! Contraception education needs to address young women's particular concerns about accessing contraception, confidentiality, and negotiating its use. It is important that sexual health is not defined only as 'not becoming pregnant' but that it explores the importance of condom use to prevent STIs such as chlamydia and HIV. Surveys show that many women lack basic knowledge about fertility, and effective contraception use. Limited time for consultations at the GPs surgery may impact upon young women's confidence and consequent effective use of contraception. One sexual health project provides an outreach service within a GP surgery. The team provide extra support for young

women seeking contraceptive advice, and are seen as non-medical and more approachable.

**Connecting with sexual health services**

In surveys, girls are more likely than boys to be aware of a local sexual health or advice service. Knowledge of a service's existence doesn't necessarily translate into the skills or confidence to make use of it. It is important to make links with the services concerned to de-mystify the processes involved; to reassure young women that the staff are non-judgemental; to deal with their fears about possible 'medical's involved; and to confirm that confidentiality will be kept. Research by Brook Advisory Centres has shown that 'free', 'confidential', and 'sex advice' are the key words young people want to see in publicity about services. The teenage pregnancy strategy promises high profile media campaigns to reinforce this message. Teaching could link with these campaigns. In addition, the teenage pregnancy campaign highlights that schools must provide accurate and precise information about local advice services. This is expected to be included in the new sex and relationships guidance to schools.

School nurses in some areas have been instrumental in arranging visits to 'mock' clinics (that is, where the clinic/service involved does not prescribe during the visit). These visits are really popular with young people and research with parents has shown a general approval for this type of initiative.

Making sure that services or support are easily accessible is crucial. Initiatives such as the Monday morning drop-in clinic at one school in Bath ensure that girls are able to access advice and support and services such as emergency contraception when they need it. Other schools provide onsite confidential advice services to their pupils.

**Sexually transmitted infections including HIV**

The contraception needs of young women need to be

creating a Bill of Rights can act as a powerful awareness raising tool

**Bill of Sexual Rights**

- I have the right to:
- Clear information about sex
  - Express and explore my sexuality as long as it does not hurt anybody
  - Sexual pleasure
  - Not be judged because of my sexuality
  - Change my mind
  - Ask for what I want
  - Access to services without judgement
  - Be respected for who I am and what I am
  - Say 'no' to any sex that I don't want at any time
  - Knowledge that helps me acknowledge and control my sexual health
  - Be taken notice of

explored in a broader context than simply protection against pregnancy. Girls are more physiologically susceptible to STIs than boys. The long-term consequences may also be more serious for girls as some may result in infertility or cervical cancer or, as in the case of HIV a chronic and life-threatening condition. Teaching therefore needs to include STIs and safer sex. A recent HEA survey of young people found that a disturbing proportion believed that the pill offered protection against STIs. Awareness of chlamydia, the STI which most commonly affects the 16-25 age group, is low. Knowledge of symptoms and treatment is important but as some STIs are symptomless, awareness of activities which may put young women at risk is important too. Assertiveness and communication skills are once again integral to contraceptive use and practice of safer sex. As myths about the so-called 'morning after pill' still prevail, work should also be carried out to raise girls' awareness of emergency contraception, where it can be accessed, and how long after unprotected sex it can be effective.

### Teenage pregnancy

The teenage pregnancy report identifies that there are many factors associated with early pregnancy – including poverty, employment prospects, educational achievement, family experience of teenage pregnancy and experience of public care. The report is however low on strategies to tackle these factors. There is little research into young women's decisions to continue with a pregnancy (either unintended or planned). Until this has been undertaken there is little basis for assuming that highlighting the negative aspects of parenthood will motivate those 'at risk' to delay parenthood. Indeed those who have used approaches such as the *Baby Think It Over* infant simulator dolls stress that although they provide experience of some aspects of parenting, they do not provide young women with the skills to access

contraception or negotiate its use. It may be much more useful (and is certainly cheaper!) to consider other young women's experiences through accounts such as those included in the Women's Press book *Tough Choices*. Visits from young mothers as part of a broader sex and relationships programme can provide useful insights into the realities of early parenthood and are very beneficial for the young women themselves. There are some concerns that such programmes can present young mothers as admirable role models, in control of their lives, who girls and young women may wish to emulate. As the Social Exclusion Unit report acknowledges, support rather than stigmatising and stereotyping young mothers is vital. It is therefore important to also acknowledge the many positive aspects of early parenthood for some young women.

### Reviewing the resources used

Because so much sex education teaching is about reproduction, resources can be biased in how they represent women's bodies and sexuality. The following is a quick checklist for things to look out for when evaluating resources for use with girls and young women.

#### Does the resource:

- present female sexuality as primarily emotional?
- depict young women as enforcers of sexual safety and morality?
- present a narrow definition of what it is to be a woman (thin, white, able-bodied, heterosexual, mother, young)?
- prescribe roles for women that are restrictive and restraining?
- present female sexuality as passive, and less urgent than male sexual desire?
- present the visual context for sex as being reproduction, disease or pleasure?
- give full and accurate descriptions of the female body?
  - The pressures and demands on girls are continually chang-

ing. Sex education needs to change too. It needs to be honest about the experiences of young women and to reflect the ways in which they learn and want to learn about sex and relationships. Girls are not homogenous, and therefore targeted approaches in different settings are required if we are to get anywhere near meeting the real needs of girls and young women.

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## SEX EDUCATION FORUM

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Policy and practice are always changing. In 1999, the Government introduced new initiatives on teenage pregnancy, sexual health, public care, healthy schools, PSHE and sex and relationships education. You need to have the latest information and find out what it means for you and your organisation. We can provide it.

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