

Parents and SRE

A Sex Education Forum evidence briefing

This evidence briefing sets out the views and experiences of parents in relation to the sex and relationships education (SRE) of their children – both at home and at school. The thoughts and experiences of children and young people about their parents' role in SRE are presented in parallel.

The briefing addresses the following eight questions, with key findings summarised at the end.

- 1 What is sex and relationships education?
- 2 Who do children and young people want to learn from?
- 3 What role do parents see for themselves in SRE?
- 4 What role do parents see for schools in SRE?
- 5 What role do parents take in reality?
- 6 What enables or limits good communication?
- 7 What support do parents want?
- 8 What impact do parents have on their children's sexual behaviour?

1. What is sex and relationships education?

Sex and relationships education (SRE) is learning about the emotional, social and physical aspects of growing up, relationships, sex, human sexuality and sexual health.

SRE aims to 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.

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

2. Who do children and young people want to learn from?

Children and young people are clear that parents are an important source of learning about sex and relationships, as these comments from a Sex Education Forum survey show:

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.

How parents raise their children is their own business to a certain extent. But they should be – try to be – open and honest with their kids (once they're mature enough to understand) and set a good example themselves.

Sometimes it shouldn't be a parent's job to teach their child SRE as some have a tendency to 'sugar' their words and the child is only getting half the story.

Young people responding to Sex Education Forum survey 2008

Parents may be viewed as a more trustworthy source of information – as half of the young people (aged 11–14) in one survey said they wanted to talk about sex with parents because they don't trust the information they get from friends (Populus 2008). A third felt talking about sex and sexual health would help them feel closer to their parents (Populus 2008). The tendency that children want to learn about sex and relationships from their parents is confirmed in a review of literature published between 2000 and 2006 (Turnball and others 2008).

Some research has asked children and young people about what kind of person makes the best sex and relationships educator. Real-life experience was seen to legitimate parents, grandparents, older siblings and in some cases friends as sex and relationships educators (Powell 2008).

3. What role do parents see for themselves in SRE?

Most parents feel they **should** have a role as sex and relationships educators. Nine out of ten parents surveyed in one region of England felt they should discuss sex with their children, but only half reported actually doing so (Ingham and Carrera 1998 – survey of 750 parents in Wessex). In another survey with 500 Bristol parents, 77 per cent said children should be getting information about sex and relationships from their parents (NHS Bristol 2009).

Parents recognise that talking about sex and relationships can benefit their relationship with their child. Over half of parents say that being able to talk about sex, sexual health and relationships with their teen would make them feel like a better parent. And 41 per

cent believe that talking would help them understand their teen better (Populus 2008).

The majority of parents support the concept of educating children about sex and relationships. Focus groups in England found that 'parents regarded sex and relationship education as hugely important in a child's overall development' (Sherbert Research 2009 – focus groups with 47 parents).

A few parents do not want to encourage discussions in the home about sex and relationships, and a minority reported actively avoiding talking about sex (Sherbert Research 2009). This matches findings from an Australian study in which 2 out of 53 parents interviewed spoke negatively about openness about sexuality (Kirkman and others 2005).

4. What role do parents see for schools in SRE?

Parents see school and home as the two main sources of SRE (Sherbert Research 2009, and Durex and others 2010). Most parents (84 per cent) believe that school and home should both be involved. A small percentage of parents (6 per cent) believe that SRE should be taught only at school and 7 per cent believe it should only be taught at home (Durex and others 2010). Parents have described school SRE as an effective supplement to SRE at home (Sherbert Research 2009). It has also been suggested that parents rely on schools to provide SRE because they find it difficult to provide themselves (NFER 1994). A minority of parents express concerns that values taught at school may not be the same as theirs (Sherbert Research 2009).

I think young people are hardly getting any messages from their parents as they think it is up to the education service to do this, however the education service seem to think it is up to the parents.

Young person responding to Sex Education Forum survey 2008

There is a gap in parents' level of knowledge about what is taught in school. Over a quarter of parents 'didn't know' how well school SRE prepared their child. Evidence also suggests that some parental concerns about SRE derive from misunderstandings about what is meant by 'sex' or what is included in teaching. The use of the word 'sex' is sometimes interpreted as relating only to sexual intercourse – not to the wider social and emotional context (Goldman 2008).

While knowledge of what is taught in school varies, most parents interviewed for the Sherbert Research study (2009) trusted school to get it right. A few of these parents had been actively involved, for example by viewing educational resources used at school in advance of lessons – but others felt there was a lack of communication from school about what they provided. Some parents were critical of the variation between what schools provided; and in some cases felt school SRE started too late (see also Stone and Ingham 1998).

Currently in England, parents have a right to withdraw their child from sex and relationships education in primary and secondary school as it falls outside the National Curriculum Science. In practice, Ofsted found that less than one per cent of parents choose to withdraw their children (2002). In the Sherbert Research study, some parents were unaware of their right to withdraw children from SRE in school up to the age of 19, and suggestions were made to lower the age of withdrawal to 11. None of the 48 parents in the sample had chosen to withdraw their child, although six parents wanted to retain their right (Sherbert Research 2009).

When discussing difficulties with SRE, parents have repeatedly suggested a positive role for schools in providing information about what SRE is being taught – thus making it easier to link with SRE at home (Turnball and others 2008).

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
- > potential 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
- > authority and boundary-setting role may mean children keep things from parents – that's the nature of adolescence and parenting
- > 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
- > home is not always a safe place
- > depends how confident and comfortable parents are about sex and relationships

5. What role do parents take in reality?

Evidence gathered from parents in England consistently shows a gap between the ideal role that parents aspire to as educators and what happens in reality. Young people also perceive this gap:

Most parents gives 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!

Wanting to seem like they are on your side and are being understanding but at the same time, deeply embarrassed but thinking they shouldn't be.

Young people responding to Sex Education Forum survey 2008

Parents may underestimate the extent to which their children want to communicate with them (Walker 2001). For example, a survey of parents in Bristol revealed that around two-thirds of parents believe their teenagers have no desire to discuss sex (NHS Bristol 2009). Another survey found 45 per cent of parents believe that conversations about sex don't happen because their children want to avoid it (Populus 2008).

When parents do take a role with SRE there are particular qualities to their communication, such as **what** parents talk about, **when and how** parents communicate and **who** communicates with who.

5a. What parents talk about with their children

Parents generally see their SRE role as focused more on the emotional aspects of SRE, such as 'discussing notions of respect, love, kindness, meaning and safety, rather than simple anatomy' (Sherbert 2009 and see also Ingham and Carrera 1998). In reality, many parents had not fulfilled this aspiration, for example 95 per cent of parents felt they should have a major role in discussing the role of emotions, but 52 per cent had discussed these topics with their children 'never or a little' (Ingham and Carrera 1998).

Young people's comments reflect on the value-based messages they learn from their parents about relationships and sexuality – partly through the presence or absence of discussion about particular topics.

Depends on parents. I was taught that sex is a very intimate expression of love that should only happen within a committed marriage relationship.

My parents were really open with me about sex until they found out I was gay and now it's something that's just not talked about.

No messages about the relationships side, as parents don't discuss them and, apart from always be safe, not many about sex – many ignore the fact that you're having it, meaning you can't talk to them about it or you know they will be disapproving so you have to be secretive about it.

Young people responding to Sex Education Forum survey 2008

The topics parents discuss with their children may change with the age of the child. A shift from providing more biological and factual information in answer to questions from young children, such as 'where do babies come from', to more emotional and social discussions with older children is reported by Walker (2001) who interviewed families in Leeds.

5b. When and how parents talk to their children

While parents may identify that it is easier to talk to younger teens, two-thirds of parents believe that 10–12 years is 'too early for sex talks' (BMRB 2004) and wait until later, only to find the 'generational divide' may prevent them from talking at all. Parents have also identified topics that are suitable for primary school SRE including 'respect', 'dealing with peer influence' and 'puberty' (Durex 2010). Children have repeatedly said that the SRE they receive both at home and school is often too late (Sex Education Forum 2008).

The timing of SRE is compounded by some parents thinking of sex education as a one-off event or ‘**the big talk**’, rather than an ongoing process. Anxiety about initiating such a talk proved to be a barrier (Walker 2001). In fact, parents are more likely to take a reactive rather than a proactive approach – responding to a child’s question rather than initiating discussion (Turnball and others 2008, Walker 2001 and Sherbert Research 2009). The Sherbert Research characterised this approach as ‘when they’re old enough to ask, they’re old enough to know’.

Parents and carers are often surprisingly open with their children about SRE, but will only talk if prompted – which can be daunting – because they are under the illusion schools cover sex and relationships.

Young person responding to Sex Education Forum survey 2008

Communication about sex and relationships can take **verbal and non-verbal** forms. In speech, messages are transmitted by features such as tone of voice, speed and choice of words. Non-verbal communication includes body-language signals, such as facial expressions and eye contact. These qualities of communication can help in understanding the psychological and emotional factors involved in communicating about sex and relationships (Turnball 2008).

Warmth or coldness in communication can be a result of both verbal and non-verbal signals. Girls have reported home sex education as conveying more warmth, whereas boys have described their experience as cold (Measor 2004). Warmth may imply ‘**openness**’ in communication – and the majority of parents and children used this concept to describe good communication about sexuality (Kirkman and others 2005). Only two of the 53 people interviewed referred to openness about sexuality as something negative. But ‘openness’ is defined by parents in different ways.

What is openness?

Apparent contradictions about openness emerged in interviews with parents and children encapsulated by comments such as ‘we don’t really talk great deals about it. I mean if they want to talk about it, I’m quite open’ (quote from father interviewed in research by Kirkman and others 2005). Kirkman suggests that these apparent contradictions are actually attempts to define ‘openness’ more specifically in the context of communication about sexuality. Five ‘delineations’ of the meaning of openness emerged:

- ‘openness means answering questions’ (not necessarily bringing up the topic)
- ‘openness can mean having an open-minded attitude’
- ‘openness does not mean keeping a spotlight on the topic’ (thus reducing embarrassment)
- ‘openness and privacy need to be balanced’ (not invading private aspects of sexual experience)
- ‘openness is adjusted to the maturity of the child’ (responding to child’s moods as well as age).

Discussions with parents and children also revealed variations in openness depending on gender, the level of taboo of particular topics, and concerns about judgements from society about deviating from the norm in family communication.

Parents also saw levels of openness with regard to communication about sexuality as founded on open communication in the family in general. A further complication noted in the research was that there were differences between how parents described openness as an ideal and what they did in practice.

(Kirkman 2005)

5c. **Who communicates with who – differences between parents**

Gender dynamics of parent–child communication

I find that most of my friends, both male and female, think that their mothers or female figures in their lives are better and more open about discussing and educating on the topic in comparison to fathers and male figures.

Young person responding to Sex Education Forum survey, 2008

Gender differences in parent–child communication about sex and relationships are repeatedly noted in research. The dominant pattern is that mothers communicate with their children more than fathers; and that same-sex communication (mother–daughter and father–son) is more common than mother–son or father–daughter communication (Wight and others 2006, Powell 2008, Kirkman and others 2005, Populus 2008, NHS Bristol 2009). For example, only 11 per cent of boys receive sex information, and just 6 per cent receive relationship advice from fathers, compared with 66 per cent and 68 per cent respectively from mothers (Populus 2008).

Boys and girls report very different levels of comfort in talking to their parents. In a randomised trial of a school sex education programme, 16 per cent of girls were ‘very comfortable’ talking with their mothers compared with 7 per cent of boys; and 7 per cent of boys were ‘very comfortable’ talking with their fathers compared with 3 per cent of girls (Wight and others 2006).

Extended family

Grandparents, aunts and uncles have been described as ‘a generation apart’, making it more permissible for them to discuss sexual matters than parents (see Walker and Milton 2006). One study in Cardiff, UK, found that extended family (uncles, cousins, grandparents) were less likely to be used as a source of information about sex and relationships than parents – but for a small percentage (2 per cent) of young people, extended family was a source used ‘all the time’ (Powell 2008).

Beyond the extended family, research with African American mothers highlights the importance of wider community members as collective educators of the community’s daughters about sex and relationships issues (Nwoga 2000).

Social and cultural factors

Some research studies have looked for patterns linking social factors with parent–child communication about sex and relationships. One study found that owner-occupiers and parents with higher levels of education were more likely to talk with their children about sex (Wight 2006). In the same study there was little link between parents’ social class (defined as manual or non-manual) and likelihood of having talked to children about sex.

Cultural background does appear to have a role. Pakistani and Indian young people were less likely than white young people to talk with their parents about sex (Wight and others 2006). A small sample of Asian and Asian-British young people reported being less likely to use mothers and siblings for information than their non-Asian peers (Powell 2008). And the level of support for SRE from parents from Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities (49 per cent, 78 per cent and 75 per cent respectively) suggests that cultural and/or religious background plays a part in parental attitude (Sex Education Forum 1996).

Countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden have often been held up, in contrast to Britain, as culturally more liberal and open in talking about sex and relationships (for example Goldman 2008, Turnbull and others 2008 and Lewis 2001).

6. What enables or limits good communication?

Over half of parents say they find it embarrassing to talk about sex with their child (Populus 2008). Lack of knowledge can also be a barrier because parents are concerned about exposing ignorance on sexual matters to their children (Walker 2001) or believe their children know things already (NHS Bristol 2009).

Parents have also said that not having a good experience of sex education oneself makes it harder, although in some cases parents were determined for the cycle to be broken (Kirkman and others 2005 and Walker 2001). This may help to explain why fathers are less likely than mothers to talk to their children about sex and relationships – as fathers often had less sex education – so the cycle is perpetuated (Lehr 2005).

Although much research has focused on parents' inadequacy when it comes to discussing sex and relationships, there are also studies that identify the positive assets of parents as educators, for example Walker (2001) found some parents:

were very skilful in treading a fine line between raising the subject and making a big issue out of it and also creating an atmosphere of openness without invading personal privacy.

Such skills were demonstrated through non-verbal communication. In some cases, communication may have been so subtle that children did not remember their parents discussing sex and relationships with them. Walker also found that parents used educational strategies such as:

- > *being available*
- > *being approachable*
- > *being supportive*
- > *revisiting topics*
- > *using intuition*
- > *employing humour*
- > *giving unconditional respect*
- > *being open and honest*
- > *listening*
- > *checking out understanding.*

Walker 2001

The use of written communication between parents and children about sex and relationships issues has emerged from interviews and focus group research. One young woman (aged 14) explained that she writes notes to her mother and puts them under her pillow and her mother replies (Powell 2008). In some cases resources such as books are used as a substitute for conversation, but can also be a trigger for discussion (Walker 2001).

7. What support do parents want?

More than 9 out of 10 (93 per cent) parents surveyed in Bristol (NHS Bristol 2009) said they wanted support with their role as educators. There is also support from parents to be more involved in school sex and relationships education (Walker 2001). Parents have suggested that suitable resources, such as simple books, would help them to engage with their children on sex and relationships (Walker 2001 and Derbyshire Healthy Schools 2010). In one study, mothers suggested that resources written from a male viewpoint would be helpful in engaging their sons (Walker 2001). Parents also wanted advice on answering questions at an age-appropriate level for their child (Derbyshire Healthy Schools 2010).

Concern was expressed by parents in the Derbyshire survey about asking for help with sex and relationships questions for fear of professionals overreacting. Parents were also unsure about who to turn to for help (Derbyshire Healthy Schools 2010).

Young people have also suggested that parents need more support, for example through parent classes or information sent home.

Parents could be doing with some further education re: sexuality, and possibly lessons letting them know what the children are already aware of but not able to speak to them about. This would give parents an idea of what level to speak to children – not just 'the birds and the bees'.

Parents avoid the subject, therefore training or parent classes should be available to help parents to talk about sex and relationships with their children.

Information should be sent to parents etc. about how to explain sex and relationships to their children as some are not very good at it and are embarrassed.

Young people responding to Sex Education Forum survey, 2008

Some schools in England are already working closely with parents on SRE – but Ofsted notes that this is the exception rather than the norm (2010). Ofsted visited 165 schools and found that six had worked hard to establish links with parents and carers. One primary school had invited parents to attend discussion about SRE before their children began learning about it. As a result of the discussion, the girls' SRE was moved to start one year earlier.

Further examples of schools that are working closely with parents on SRE are available from the Sex Education Forum website: www.ncb.org.uk/sef/practice/parents_and_sre.aspx The examples show a variety of ways of working with parents, including:

- setting homework tasks to encourage discussion at home that builds on classroom teaching
- communicating to parents what will be covered in SRE and when, including the language to be used
- organising family workshops jointly for parents and children to encourage communication
- SRE courses for parents organised by the school
- finding out parents' views through surveys.

The Sex Education Forum has also published a list of SRE resources that parents and carers can use with their children. This can be downloaded from www.ncb.org.uk/sef/resources/curriculum_design.aspx

Case study: Parents and Children Together (PACT) programme

A programme was developed in Cornwall with the aim of developing partnerships between school and home, with a particular emphasis on children's personal development, aged 8–11, in relation to SRE. Participating parents at eight intervention schools received weekly lesson plans about the SEAL (social and emotional aspects of learning), PSHE, Citizenship and SRE curricula. A series of nine, weekly, one-hour sessions were delivered by teachers. Parents were given a pack of resources at the start of the programme and, each week, children took home a 'family chat time' activity. Children and parents were able to record their comments through a 'thought diary' during the duration of the programme.

The programme was evaluated using pre- and post-intervention questionnaires together with material from the thought diaries. Four schools participated as 'comparison schools' to serve as a control. After the intervention, participating parents were more likely to say they frequently discuss a range of topics (including growing up and peer pressure) with their children. Many parents reported better understanding of what was taught at school. Children in the intervention schools rated themselves better on emotional literacy than those in the comparison schools. A few parents (approximately 3 per cent) were less positive; in some cases because they were already used to discussing the topic. Those involved in implementing the programme have noted the potential to apply the programme to other curriculum areas and anticipate benefits to children's educational attainment more generally.

(Adams 2010)

8. What impact do parents have on their children's sexual behaviour?

The majority of parents believe SRE is beneficial for their children, but is there any evidence linking parental SRE and their children's sexual behaviour?

Research studies looking at factors linked to teenage conception and risky adolescent sexual behaviour have found a range of links with parental and family factors. Risk factors include changes in parents' marital status; and mothers' early age at first sex and first birth. Protective factors include a high level of parental education; high parental income; parental support and family connectedness; conservative parental attitudes about premarital or teen sex; and positive parental attitudes about contraception (Kirby 2001).

None of the factors identified are specifically about parent-child communication about sex and relationships, although this falls under the protective factor: parental support and family connectedness. There is evidence that parent-child communication about sex increases the confidence of children and young people in **talking** about sex (Wellings and others 1995, and Ingham 1997 cited in Walker and Milton 2006).

Studies looking at parenting styles, levels of 'parental control' and parent-child communication have highlighted the complexity of the relationship between parenting factors and the sexual behaviour of young people. Difficulties with measuring communication, defining what is meant by 'parental monitoring', and the subjectivity of parents' and children's perceptions limit these studies (Wight and others 2006). Findings are not straightforward, as the examples show:

- boys who were 'very comfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' talking to parents were more likely to report sexual intercourse than those 'in between' (Wight and others 2006)

- girls and boys with 'high parental monitoring' were more likely to have first sex at an older age (Wight and others 2006)
- girls who were 'comfortable' talking to fathers about sex were more likely to always use condoms, but boys who were 'uncomfortable' talking to their fathers were most likely to use condoms consistently (Wight and others 2006)
- parent-son communication about sexual matters increased use of contraception but parent-daughter communication did not (Wellings 2001).

Explanations for this complexity could be that a young person's behaviour influences parenting rather than the reverse (Wight 2006). Another possibility is that peers are more influential than parents: Wight and others' longitudinal study of Scottish teenagers (2006) found that having friends who smoked was strongly linked with early sexual behaviour for both girls and boys, but there may also be parental influence on friendship choices.

The impact of education about sex and relationships on the sexual behaviour of young people has been studied more fully in relation to school programmes as opposed to parent input (Walker and Milton, 2006). There is strong evidence that young people who receive good quality SRE programmes that start early and are taught either at school or in the community are more likely to first have sex at an older age, to have fewer sexual partners and to use contraception (Kirby 2007). For more details, see the Sex Education Forum evidence briefing *Does sex and relationships education work?* (2010).

Summary of key points

- > Children and young people see parents and carers as an important source of information about sex and relationships.
- > Most parents feel they should discuss sex and relationships with their children.
- > Many parents fail to discuss sex and relationships with their children as much as they wish to.
- > Many parents underestimate how much their children want to communicate with them about sex and relationships.
- > Fathers are less likely than mothers to talk to their children about sex and relationships.
- > The majority of parents support school SRE.
- > Some parents are unaware of what SRE is provided at school.
- > A small minority of parents choose to withdraw their children from school SRE.
- > Embarrassment, lack of knowledge and poor experience of own sex education are factors that limit parents' communication with their children.
- > Some parents are skilful in discussing sex and relationships education and use a variety of subtle techniques.
- > The majority of parents want support with SRE and more involvement with school SRE.
- > Many schools are failing to involve parents in SRE – but there are examples of good practice.
- > There is a complex relationship between parenting and the sexual behaviour of children.
- > There is strong evidence that young people who have good quality SRE that starts early are more likely to choose to have sex at an older age, to have fewer sexual partners and to use contraception.

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