



# Heads or tails?

What young people are  
telling us about SRE

# Introduction

The Sex Education Forum ran an online survey for 6 weeks, from 2 November 2015 to 10 December 2015. The aim was to find out if young people have learnt about their body, sexual development and consent at school and whether or not their school SRE met their needs in this area. Questions were also included about discussions young people may have had at home. None of the questions were about a young person's personal experience of relationships or sex.

The survey was open to young people aged 11–25. Young people under 16 were asked to tell a parent or carer if they wanted to take the survey and to show them the information at the start of the survey and to ask their parent or carer to consent to them proceeding. 69% of responses were from young people aged 13–18 years old.

A total of 2,648 young people took part in the survey, but those who had not been to school in England have been removed from the survey data for the analysis contained in this report. This leaves 2,326 responses. Because not all respondents completed every question the total number of respondents to each question is included in this report.

Young people identifying as female accounted for 66% of responses, with 29% identifying as male and 4.5% as trans, non-binary or other.

Over 90% of respondents had attended a state school and 7% had attended an independent school. Less than 1% (15) of respondents had been home educated. The breakdown of responses was very similar for independent schools and state schools in England. For this reason respondents that attended independent schools in England are included in the analysis that follows. The 15 young people who ticked home education as their current or most recent form of schooling have also been included because some had attended school for part of their education.

The survey was disseminated via email and social networks to a range of organisations that work with young people such as schools, local authorities, the British Youth Council, NSPCC and Brook. Young people were asked how they heard about the survey and responses demonstrate a wide geographical spread to the networks involved in the survey as well as diverse sources of information including from friends or a teacher.

# Findings

## Part 1. SRE is slowly improving

The survey included the question 'Please give a rating for your school SRE as a whole'

- > 22% of respondents rated their school SRE overall as either 'bad' or 'very bad'.
- > Just 10% rated it as 'very good'.

**Table 1. Please give a rating for your school SRE as a whole**

Answer choices	Responses
Very good	10.42%
Good	25.99%
OK	41.86%
Bad	14.41%
Very bad	7.32%
	Total responses to this question: 2,255

However, male respondents were more likely than female respondents to rate their school SRE as 'good' (29%) or 'very good' (15%). Respondents identifying as trans, non-binary or other were least likely to rate their SRE as 'good' or 'very good'; 84% of these respondents rated their school SRE as 'OK', 'bad' or 'very bad'.

*"In the past years in school I have never had SRE"*

(Male, 13 years old)

*"Sex was still regarded as a taboo subject and the teachers seemed uncomfortable talking about it. The whole concept was approached purely biologically with no regards to relationships at all and was pushed into a few lessons at the end of term alongside drugs education."*

(Male, 15 years old)

The Sex Education Forum has carried out surveys with young people in 2008, 2011, 2013 and 2015. In each case we have included a standard question asking young people to rate the quality of their school SRE overall. In each case the survey involved at least 800 self-selected young people. While comparisons must be treated with caution (because the cohort varies when using a self-selected sample) there is a trend towards less young people rating their SRE as 'bad' or 'very bad' and more young people rating their SRE as 'good' or 'very good'.

**Table 2. School SRE quality ratings in successive Sex Education Forum surveys 2008–2015**

Year of Sex Education Forum survey data collection	% rating SRE as 'bad' or 'very bad'
<b>2008</b> Young people aged 16–25	34%
<b>2011</b> Young people aged 16–25 Young people aged 11–25	33% 28%
<b>2013</b> (published in 2014) Young people aged 11–25	27%
<b>2015</b> (published in 2016) Young people aged 16–25 Young people aged 11–25	31% 22%

## Part 2. Inequality in SRE provision puts children at risk

The survey included four questions which asked specifically about topics covered at primary school and focused on information that helps a child recognise the difference between behaviour that is and is not sexually abusive and how to get help.

- > Just over 70% of respondents ticked that they **had** learnt correct names for genitalia (e.g. penis and vagina) and that these parts of the body 'are private to you'.
- > 16% **had not** learnt the correct names for genitalia at primary school.

Looking at respondents who had most recently left primary school this decreased to 10% for respondents aged 11, 12 and 13 years old, suggesting that correct names for genitalia are more likely to be taught in primary schools now than in the past, but leaving 1 in 10 respondents who have left primary school in the last 3 years **without** basic vocabulary for describing sexual parts of the body.

Learning in primary school about the difference between safe and unwanted touch was much lower than learning about correct names for genitalia.

- > Overall, only 40% of respondents **had** learnt 'about the difference between safe and unwanted touching'
- > 34% **had** learnt 'how to get help if you experience unwanted touching / sexual abuse', 50% **had not learnt** about this and a further 18% were either 'unsure' or could not remember.

Amongst the youngest respondents (aged 11, 12 and 13 years old) the levels of learning on these issues were a little higher but within this age group 31% **had not** learnt 'how to get help if you experience unwanted touching / sexual abuse'.

Young people were more likely to have learnt about the difference between safe and unwanted touch from discussions at home (45%) than in school (40%), but home cannot be relied upon as **38%** of respondents said they **had not** learnt about the difference between safe and unwanted touch from discussions at home.

**Table 3. Learning at primary school**

At primary school, did you learn	Yes	No	Not sure	I can't remember	Total responses to question
Correct names for genitalia (e.g. vagina, penis)?	72.37%	16.04%	3.97%	8.80%	2114
That the genitals (e.g. vagina, penis) are private to you?	71.75%	16.92%	6.87%	6.68%	2110
About the difference between safe and unwanted touching?	39.58%	44.47%	9.30%	8.83%	2107
How to get help if you experience unwanted touching / sexual abuse?	33.75%	50.29%	8.22%	9.65%	2104

**Table 4. SRE at home – basic safety information**

	Yes	No	Not sure	I can't remember	Total responses to question
At home, did a parent or carer explain to you the difference between safe and unwanted touching?	44.53%	37.86%	8.71%	11.74%	2113

## Part 3. Learning (or not) about safe and respectful relationships

The survey included a further set of questions which asked about specific topics covered at school, either primary or secondary, and whether or not these topics were adequately covered. Questions covered both healthy and abusive relationships, sexual consent and pleasure.

- > 53% of respondents **had not** learnt about 'how to recognise when someone is being groomed for sexual exploitation' (increased to 86% for young people aged 20–25 and reduced to 33% for young people aged 11–13)
- > 46% **had not** learnt about 'how to tell when a relationship is healthy'
- > 44% **had not** learnt about 'how to tell when a relationship is abusive'
- > 50% **had not** discussed scenarios that helped you to consider real-life situations to do with sexual consent
- > 34% **had not** learnt about sexual consent
- > 48% **did not** learn all that they needed to about sexual consent
- > 43% **had not** learnt about 'the responsibility for getting consent as well as the choice to give consent'

A Sex Education Forum survey of over 800 young people carried out in 2013 and published in January 2014 found that 30% of young people **had not** learnt about sexual consent in school compared with 34% in this survey.

Questions were included about sexual pleasure. This is an aspect of education about sex and relationships that young people have said is often completely neglected.

- > 60% **had not** learnt about sexual pleasure
- > 65% **did not** learn all they needed to about sexual pleasure

These findings paint a picture in which a young person's chances of learning about safe and respectful relationships in school are about 50 / 50. Learning about sexual pleasure is even less likely.

**Table 5. Relationships – learning at school**

At school did you learn about	Yes	No	Not sure	Total responses to question
How to tell when a relationship is healthy?	47.92%	46.31%	6.70%	2045
Sexual consent?	59.86%	33.66%	7.56%	2038
How to tell when a relationship is abusive?	50.66%	44.08%	6.78%	2035
How to recognise when someone is being groomed for sexual exploitation?	37.82%	53.24%	10.51%	2036
The responsibility for getting consent as well as the choice to give consent?	48.48%	42.98%	9.81%	2038
Did you discuss scenarios that helped you to consider real-life situations to do with sexual consent?	35.41%	50.37%	14.22%	2039
Sexual pleasure?	30.58%	59.98%	10.87%	2024

**Table 6. Did you learn all that you needed to? – consent and pleasure**

<b>At school, did you learn all you needed to about</b>	Yes	No	Not sure	Total responses to question
Sexual consent?	43.35%	47.62%	10.10%	2039
Sexual pleasure?	22.36%	65.00%	14.07%	2026



## Part 4. Learning about female genital mutilation (FGM)

Young people were also asked if they had learnt about female genital mutilation (FGM) at either primary or secondary school.

- > Overall, just 24% of young people said they had learnt about FGM
- > 7.6% did not understand the question
- > Amongst the youngest respondents (aged 11, 12 and 13) 40% had learnt about FGM and 14% did not understand the question.

An open text comment box was included after the question on FGM and comments included:

*"We should have learnt about this"*

(Male, 15 years old)

*"I'm in year 10 and I don't even know what that is"*

(Female, 14 years old)

**Table 7. Learning about FGM**

	Yes	No	Not sure	I don't understand the question	Total responses to question
Did you learn about female genital mutilation at school (either at primary or secondary school)?	24.17%	58.09%	10.13%	7.61%	2102

## Part 5. Discussions with parents and carers at home

Young people were little more likely to discuss safe and respectful relationships at home than they were at school:

- > 46% of respondents **had not** discussed with a parent or carer 'how to tell when a relationship is healthy'
- > 48% **had not** discussed 'sexual consent' with a parent or carer
- > 49% **had not** discussed with a parent or carer 'how to tell when a relationship is abusive'
- > 66% **had not** discussed sexual pleasure

**Table 8. Discussions at home – sex and relationships**

Did a parent or carer discuss with you	Yes	No	Not sure	Total responses
How to tell when a relationship is healthy?	46.49%	46.29%	8.36%	2022
How to tell when a relationship is abusive?	44.88%	48.84%	7.17%	2021
Sexual consent?	45.01%	47.94%	7.99%	2015
Sexual pleasure?	24.34%	66.07%	10.83%	2013

## Discussion

A means of measuring the adequacy of school SRE is whether or not children leave primary school knowing the correct terms for genitalia and being confident about how to get help if they experienced sexual abuse. Our survey shows that 1 in 10 children (amongst respondents aged 11–13) are leaving primary school without having been taught words for sexual parts of the body and 3 in 10 not having learnt about how to get help. Overall, 50% of the young people surveyed **had not** learnt how to get help if you experience unwanted touching / sexual abuse’.

Relying on parents and carers to talk about these issues at home is not effective because 38% of respondents **had not** learnt about the difference between safe and unwanted touch from discussions at home.

Data from the Children’s Commissioner Inquiry into child sexual abuse has found that only one in eight victims of sexual abuse come to the attention of statutory authorities (2015). A Cochrane review (2015) has concluded that ‘Children who are taught about preventing sexual abuse at school are more likely than others to tell an adult if they had, or were actually experiencing sexual abuse’.

*“I was sexually abused and no one told me what was done to me was wrong. We got stranger danger and how to cross the road and that was it. He was my granddad. I didn’t like it but didn’t know it was wrong but thought I should be embarrassed as i thought it was my fault. If I had known it was wrong and that I could say something and someone had listened, it might have stopped earlier than it did if I had known more or I might have told before I did.”*

(Female, 16 years old)

*“Our SRE at primary school was next to non existent and included solely periods and names for genitals. Needed at secondary age is consent, sexuality, relationships, abuse, pleasure etc. as well as the science”*

(Male, 15 years old)

Comments from survey respondents

As children progress through secondary education they need to develop their learning so that they can recognise when a relationship is healthy or abusive and when behaviour may constitute grooming. Young people have also called for the use of real-life scenarios in lessons to help them think through different situations.

Sexual assault is something that a significant minority of young people experience: one in five women and one in 20 men in Britain experience attempted sex against their will (Macdowall 2013) and this is more likely to happen to young men and women. The level of reporting of incidents of sexual violence is very low.

However the findings from this survey of over 2000 young people educated in England shows that the odds of learning about relationships in schools is no different from tossing a coin for heads or tails.

Comparison can be made with other sources of evidence about SRE. The third British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3) carried out in 2010–2012 gathered information about sexual experiences, behaviours, and views from nearly 4,000 young people (16–24 years). Those who took part were asked how they

learned about sex when they were growing up, what their main source of information was, whether they knew enough when they first felt ready for some sexual experience and, for those who thought they ought to have known more, who they would have liked to provide that information. It is possible to track change over time by comparing the responses of 16–24 year olds in the first, second and third surveys (Natsal-1 in 1990–1991, Natsal-2 in 1999–2001 and Natsal-3 in 2010–12).

Around 40% of young people now say (Natsal-3 data) that lessons at school are their main source of information about sex and this proportion has increased over the past two decades, while the proportion of men saying friends (of about the same age) were their main source, and women saying their mother or their first boyfriend/sexual partner was their main source has decreased.

This trend supports the trend appearing in successive Sex Education Forum surveys that school based SRE is improving or increasing. However, the rate of improvement is very slow; since the first Sex Education Forum survey in 2008 the number of young people describing their SRE as ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’ has reduced by approximately 3%. It might take until the year 2029 to get another 3% improvement.

*“A lot of us are turning 16 and it’s legal to have intercourse, we need to be educated, and [about] signs of an abusive relationship emotionally”*

(Female, 15 years old)

*“I wanted to learn about abusive relationships so that I can spot the signs in case anything happens in the future”*

(Male, 13 years old)

*“We were lucky to have great sex-positive teachers who fostered healthy discussion but the curriculum was still heteronormative and focused on reproductive biology”.*

(Female, 18 years old)

*“[I would have liked to have learnt] to know if a relationship was unhealthy- I ended up in an abusive relationship at 15 and did not know how to get out of it or even why I didn’t feel comfortable.”*

(Female, 18 years old)

Comments from survey respondents

## Evidence about the impact of SRE

The evidence about the protective functions of SRE is summarized in 'SRE – the evidence' (Sex Education Forum 2015). This evidence includes benefits for sexual health and relationships:

- 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 choose to have sex for the first time later.
- The findings from Natsal-3 show that those whose main source of information was lessons at school were less likely to have an unplanned pregnancy later in life (Wellings, 2013).
- In a large study carried out in the United States, female respondents who had received 'comprehensive sexuality education' were less likely to have a partner with a big age difference (3 years or more younger/older) at first sex and more likely to describe first sex as wanted, compared to those receiving abstinence only or no SRE. Male respondents were less likely to have had an age-discrepant partner at first sex if they had had either type of SRE. In this United States study Lindberg also found that young people who had received comprehensive SRE were less likely to describe first sex as unwanted (Lindberg, 2012).

## Conclusion

The findings from this survey paint a picture of inequality in the provision of SRE at home and at school in England today, and also indicate a trend towards SRE improving, albeit very slowly, over time.

There is overwhelming evidence about the protective function of SRE at both primary and secondary school level. The case for accelerating improvement in SRE cannot be made more strongly.

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