Key findings
Young people's survey on sex and relationships education

SEX EDUCATION FORUM

Briefing Paper 2008

Introduction

I have a five-month-old son and had I learnt more about sex I don't believe I would of gotten pregnant at the age of 15. At schools we learn about periods and things like that but nothing about sex which is what really needs to be taught even if people are ashamed to. It's natural and many young people that I know are doing it…
(Young person, SEF survey, 2008)

This briefing is a summary of the key findings of an online survey designed to find out from 16- to 25-year-olds what their experience of sex and relationships education (SRE) was at school, what topics they were taught and what made their SRE particularly good or bad. In total 1,709 self-selected young people responded to the survey. The results confirm what young people have told us in previous surveys about their experience of SRE.

SRE needs to improve

One random contraceptive session in 12 months, I do not consider this to be adequate …
(Young person, SEF survey, 2008)

A third (34 per cent) of respondents said their SRE was bad or very bad. The results from this survey confirm what young people reported in the 2007 UK Youth Parliament (UKYP) survey in which 40 per cent of young people said that their SRE was either poor or very poor.

The comments the young people gave throughout the survey suggest that they were aware that SRE did not have the same status as other subjects in school.

SRE is inconsistent

Being completely unrepresented as a gay person. It was as if I didn't exist. (Young person, SEF survey, 2008)

This survey sheds light on young people's differing experiences of SRE. Over half of the young people in the survey who identified themselves as transgender, lesbian or gay or who reported having a physical disability felt their SRE was bad or very bad (56, 55, 54 and 50 per cent respectively). A larger percentage of respondents who attended some faith schools reported their SRE as bad or very bad (49 per cent). However, responses from young people who attended Church of England schools were similar to those who attended non-faith schools (32 and 33 per cent respectively). These variations are further evidence of the inconsistency that young people experience and point to specific areas for urgent improvement.

More teacher training is needed

The teachers also were embarrassed … They could have done with some sort of training so they knew how to tackle and explain things better. (Young person, SEF survey, 2008)

The quality of SRE teaching clearly had a huge impact on the quality of the young people's experiences. There is a link between those who rated their SRE as bad or very bad and those who responded that their teacher did not know enough. This suggests that a young person's experience of SRE can be affected by the competence and knowledge of the educator.

SRE is too biological

I understand the science side pretty well but it seems a bit like a pencil – I know it's made from wood and soft graphite that gets broken off, but does that tell me how to write?
(Young person, SEF survey, 2008)

Respondents were provided with a list of 19 SRE topics (see Appendix 1) that relate to the biological, social and personal aspects of sex and relationships and asked which they had learnt about at school. The topics that were most frequently taught included:

- Biology of sex and reproduction (92 per cent)
- Physical aspects of puberty (92 per cent)
- Contraception (87 per cent)
- STIs (80 per cent).

The topics that were least frequently taught included:

- Skills for coping with relationships (21.4 per cent)
- The enjoyable and good things about sex (34 per cent)
- Messages from the media about sex and relationships (positive and negative)(36 per cent)
- Feelings and emotions that we experience in relationships and sex (37 per cent).

These responses mirror the results from the teacher's survey carried out at the same time (SEF 2008). Respondents to the teacher's survey reported that the biological aspects of SRE were more likely to be taught than the relationships aspects.

SRE starts too late

She managed to cram all the stuff we needed to know … in year 10, which was way too late, should be in year 7 and 6. (Young person, SEF survey, 2008)

Comments made in the open questions section suggest that the young people felt that their SRE had not started early enough. In addition, they did not believe that SRE should be taught as a one-off session but should start in primary school and progress throughout secondary education.

Respondents were given the same list of 19 SRE topics (see Appendix 1) and asked what they considered to be the best age to start teaching each topic. There was strong consensus (95 per cent) that all the topics should be taught. For 18 topics the majority agreed that they should have been introduced before the age of 14. For example, more than half (52 per cent) thought that the 'different types of relationships and families' should be taught between the ages of 5 and 10, the majority (59 per cent) thought 'contraception' should be taught between the ages of 11 and 13. The only exception was the topic 'The enjoyable and good things about sex', which the majority (57 per cent) agreed was best taught between the ages of 14 and16.

SRE ends too soon

I don't see how they think that just because we're older it wouldn't be useful, considering I've only ever had one 'sex and relationships' lesson in my whole life, and that was when I was 12 … (Young person, SEF survey, 2008)

All respondents who took part in the survey were over the age of 16, and over three-quarters (81.3 per cent) were currently in education or training. Of those, four in five (80 per cent) said that they were not currently receiving any SRE. The qualitative responses indicated that there was strong support among the respondents for SRE continuing in post-16 education provision, which is the time when most young people start to become sexually active.

Better practice needed

It was a rushed one-hour session with an embarrassed biology teacher! You could tell she didn't want to be there teaching us about it and didn't put us at ease at all! Everyone just took it light-heartedly and played around!
(Young person, SEF survey, 2008)

Respondents had a clear idea of what they considered to be good and bad practice. The feedback from the open-ended questions confirms what is already considered to be 'good practice'. For example, the most cited criteria for good SRE include:

- being taught in a safe environment
- repetition of learning through the years
- a competent non-judgmental educator
- one-to-one help being made available after the class.

Characteristics for bad SRE include:

- not being relevant to young people's lives
- not being given enough teaching time
- being taught by embarrassed, untrained teachers
- not being inclusive in terms of sexual orientation.

The Sex Education Forum

This survey, which was developed by the Sex Education Forum with the UK Youth Parliament, was commissioned by the DCSF as part of the 2008 review of SRE in schools.

The Sex Education Forum is the national authority on sex and relationships education (SRE). It works together with its diverse membership to ensure quality SRE. It's objectives include to keep children and young people's entitlement to SRE on the policy agenda and to share information and build capacity amongst professionals.

For more information on the views of young people, see SEF's newest publication *Sex Education Forum (2008) We Want More: What young people want from sex and relationships education.* Charter for change (London: SEF/NCB).

If you want to consult young people on the SRE you deliver, see Martinez, A and de Meza, L (2008) *Are you Getting it Right? A toolkit for consulting young people on sex and relationships education* (London: SEF/NCB).

Both publications can be downloaded for free from our website: www.ncb.org.uk/sef

UK Youth Parliament

The UK Youth Parliament (UKYP) enables young people to use their energy and passion to change the world for the better. UKYP gives young people a voice, which is heard and listened to by local and national government, providers of services for young people and other agencies who have an interest in the views and needs of young people. For more information visit www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk, email info@ukyouthparliament.org.uk or call 020 7553 9890.

Appendix 1

List of 19 topics

Topic

- How our bodies change as we grow up and in puberty
- Our feelings and emotions when we are growing up
- The feelings and emotions that we experience in relationships and sex
- The biological things about sex and reproduction (including how our bodies and sexual organs work)
- Different types of relationships and families
- Understanding what is good and bad in a relationship
- Skills for coping with relationships
- Dealing with pressure from friends and other young people
- Making decisions about having sex and knowing if you are ready
- Sexual identities, including gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual and transgender
- Contraception
- All the choices you have if you get pregnant (including abortion, adoption and parenting)
- HIV and AIDS
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Where you can go if you need help with sex and relationship problems
- The enjoyable and good things about sex
- Messages from the media about sex and relationships (both good and bad)
- Influences from family, community and religion about sex and relationships
- The law about sex, including the age of consent, abuse, violence and rape

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