Abortion Education in the UK: Failing our young people?
Abortion education in the UK: Failing our young people?  •  Education For Choice

Contents

  Executive summary  
  Full report
  Introduction
  Why is good quality abortion education important?  
  Highlighting bad practice – what’s the problem?  
  External speakers
  Groups which provide schools speakers on abortion
  Assessing current practice
  Outside the classroom
  How can we improve education about abortion? Recommendations

Appendix 1  Resources
Appendix 2  Information on anti-abortion organisations in schools
Appendix 3  Visual examples of anti-abortion materials
Appendix 4  Informal online survey of young people’s experiences of abortion education

Education For Choice (EFC) is a project within the national young people’s sexual health charity Brook. We are dedicated to ensuring that all young people can make and act on their own, informed choices about pregnancy. EFC believes that young people are entitled to accurate, evidence-based information and good quality, non-directive support around pregnancy and abortion.

www.efc.org.uk  •  efc@brook.org.uk

50 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8RT
Tel: 020 7284 6056

Registered charity number in England and Wales 1140431. Registered charity number in Scotland SC042132. Limited company registered in England and Wales number 7458731.
Executive summary

What is abortion education?
Abortion education is not a discrete or additional subject that teachers need to address, it is a topic that already exists within both the Sex and Relationships Education and Religious Education curricula. It should include exploration of pregnancy prevention, pregnancy options and decision-making, and abortion.

Abortion education: failing our young people?
In January 2012 EFC undertook a ten month project to investigate the current state of abortion education in schools; to raise public and professional awareness of the incidence and problem of poor educational interventions; and to promote good practice to ensure that all young people are able to participate in good quality, evidence-based education about pregnancy and abortion. This report summarises our findings and our recommendations.

Why is abortion education important?
Young people have a right to learn about issues that affect their lives, including sexual and reproductive health. The most recent statistics for under-18 conceptions in England and Wales show that over 34,000 young women became pregnant in 2010, and half of those pregnancies ended in abortion. At least a third of women will have had an abortion by the time they are 45. Unplanned pregnancy and abortion are part of our lives, and can affect people of all faiths and cultural backgrounds. It is crucial therefore that young people’s education on pregnancy options is sensitive and relevant to their experiences, as well as medically accurate.

Good quality abortion education
- Should be accurate and based on good quality medical evidence from reputable sources
- Should provide information on how young people can access impartial support and advice with pregnancy prevention and unintended pregnancy
- Should motivate young people to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancy and STIs
- Should provide an opportunity to explore a diverse range of viewpoints on a hotly contested contemporary issue

When it is done well education about abortion is interesting, is practical, supports physical and emotional wellbeing, and allows young people to develop and express their thoughts in an environment free from stigma or prejudice, and encourages them to access appropriate health services.

1 www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/healthandwellbeing/teenagepregnancy/0a064898/under-18-and-under-16-conception-statistics
2 www.rcog.org.uk/files/rcog-corp/Abortion%20guideline_web_1.pdf
By contrast research has found that lack of education about abortion and poor quality education can:

- Leave young people ill-equipped to make decisions about pregnancy
- Create delays for young people in identifying pregnancy and accessing medical services
- Create stigma and distress around the subject of abortion that compromises young people’s ability or willingness to access health services including contraceptive care following abortion
- Perpetuate myths (such as that abortion results in infertility) that can lead to repeat unwanted pregnancy

Our findings

EFC carried out surveys of schools and young people, and an audit of teaching materials. We found that some schools address the topic as part of a comprehensive scheme of sex and relationships education, in line with good practice recommendations. However, we also uncovered widespread evidence of bad practice. In some schools abortion is not addressed at all. In others anti-abortion groups are being invited in to talk about contraception and abortion to young people. Poor educational practice from these groups falls into three main categories: providing misinformation about abortion and contraception; reinforcing stigma associated with abortion; breaching schools’ equalities duties and diversity policies when addressing homosexuality and family life.

For example, SPUC (Society for the Protection of Unborn Children) has given school presentations which falsely link abortion to cancer, infertility and an invented medical condition called ‘Post-Abortion Trauma’. Earlier this year a SPUC speaker told pupils at a Cambridge school that,

“Rape is the ultimate unplanned pregnancy … for some people who’ve been raped and had the baby, even if they don’t keep it, something positive comes out of that whole rape experience”

A Christian organisation, Lovewise, refuses to teach about contraception for those who are unmarried, labelling it ‘sinful’ and produces the following slides which make medically inaccurate claims about abortion.

In some schools it is teachers themselves that are delivering lessons on abortion which are factually inaccurate and biased. Some lessons are unnecessarily distressing for young people – especially those who may have had, or go on to have, experience of unplanned pregnancy. A number of young people surveyed reported negative experiences:

“(I was taught that abortion) was immoral, murder etc., every child has the right to life sort of thing and that the mother would go straight to hell for it … we had no facts or balanced arguments.”

3 www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/23/abortion-what-children-schools
4 www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/07/18/abortion-anti-choice-christian-group-lovewise-british-schoolchildren-abortion-leads-to-holes-in-the-womb_n_1682856.html
“My R.E. teacher taught about the ‘evils’ of aborting a foetus that had mental or physical impairments. The women who came in showed us pictures and videos of late stage abortions ... All the experiences seemed designed to put students off abortion or make those who had already had an abortion feel guilty or like murderers. It was never presented as a choice that women sometimes choose, or something that happens every day”.

Other schools were found to be using inappropriate teaching materials such as the 1984 anti-abortion film ‘The Silent Scream’ to teach young people about abortion.

**Progress**

During the lifetime of the project the exposure EFC has given to some of the misinformation published by anti-abortion groups and the wider reporting of this in the general media has led some organisations to revise their websites and remove some of the offending documents. This is something to be acknowledged and celebrated, but needs to be part of a wholesale commitment by these organisations to comply with good practice over an extended period of time.

**Summary of recommendations**

- Education about abortion should be impartial, fact-based, inclusive, and non-stigmatising
- The Department for Education must be unequivocal in promoting evidence-based teaching on abortion and signpost schools to at least one reputable source of information (e.g. Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists)
- Head Teachers and school Governors must maintain an oversight of classroom practice and ensure that teaching and learning about abortion is factual, non-stigmatising and supports schools’ equalities duties and diversity policies
- Teachers should commit to providing accurate, impartial information from reputable sources and signpost students to local sexual health services where they can get confidential advice
- Teachers should take measures to protect their students from images or information that may cause distress, are stigmatising or discriminatory; and should follow the Sex Education Forum guidance on external speakers
- Young people should be consulted on what they want and need to learn about in relation to pregnancy prevention, pregnancy decision-making and abortion.

**EFC’s Abortion Education Toolkit** gives more information on best practice in this area and can be downloaded free from the website: www.efc.org.uk/PDFs/Abortion-education-toolkit.pdf
Introduction

Since its foundation in 1992, EFC has provided a range of balanced workshops and resources on pregnancy and abortion. We have long been aware of the problem of external speakers giving misinformation in schools and are glad to have received funding from The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust and The Scurrah Wainwright Charity to kick-start an improvement in UK abortion education by shining a light on bad practice and equipping education professionals with the information and resources they need to ensure the topic is being taught effectively. This report provides a summary of our findings.

Why is good quality abortion education important?

Good abortion education helps young people to think about the importance of safer sex; increases motivation to use contraception properly and consistently; improves students’ understanding of abortion as well as giving them a safe and sensitive environment in which to consider their own beliefs and opinions, and make an informed choice should they be faced with an unplanned pregnancy in the future.

In a Department for Children, Schools and Family commissioned research into the causes of repeat abortion amongst young women in London the authors recommend that:

“A balanced, non-judgemental discussion of abortion ought to be an integral part of SRE (sex education) … this should include accurate information on abortion, and be developed as part of an effort to de-stigmatise abortion.”

The Independent Advisory Group on Teenage Pregnancy recognised that good quality education on pregnancy options including abortion is important to support young people’s decision-making and that misinformation can have direct negative consequences for young people’s health.

“Pregnant young women and their partners need to understand all the options open to them, including abortion, so that they can make an informed decision about whether or not to continue with their pregnancy. We are concerned that Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) programmes very often avoid the subject and do not provide sufficient evidence based information about abortion, therefore leaving pregnant teenagers ill-equipped to assess abortion as an option. Many myths prevail, including the fact that abortion may lead to infertility, which TPIAG is concerned may be a contributory factor to repeat abortions.”

Highlighting bad practice – what’s the problem?

Our research uncovered widespread poor practice in the area of abortion education. Here we outline our three main concerns:

Misinformation – in some instances young people are being denied their right to evidence-based accurate information about their health. A review of SRE by the External Steering Group stipulates that information provided to young people should be accurate:

“the fact that some young people received no information on topics such as contraception or pregnancy choices was denying them the knowledge that would enable them to make informed choices and to experience positive sexual health. Accurate and evidence-based information should be provided on these topics. While the school should be able to set out a particular perspective on an issue, which reflected the ethos and character of the school, the group was clear that schools must not give inaccurate information.”

The Government’s recent funding agreement for free schools also stressed the importance of providing young people with factual information.

Unfortunately, inaccurate information is being accepted in lessons tackling abortion. Misinformation relating to pregnancy, contraception and abortion can have a real and serious impact on young people’s future sexual and reproductive health. Those told that contraception is ineffective, damaging or causes abortion may be reluctant to access it when they become sexually active, putting them at possible risk of unintended pregnancy or contracting STIs. A misunderstanding of fertility, and the oft-repeated myth that abortion leads to infertility may lead young women to ‘test’ their ability to get pregnant and neglect to use contraception during intercourse. Lessons which exaggerate or invent physical risks of abortion may cause young women who do have abortions to delay their access to services, which can be detrimental to their health (abortion is safer and easier to access earlier on in pregnancy).

A Pregnancy Choices Counsellor we interviewed confirmed this:

“A significant number of the women I see think that having an abortion will affect their ability to become pregnant or carry a pregnancy to term, cause breast cancer, or lead to long term mental health problems because this is what they were taught at school, making a lot of women terrified when approaching abortion services.”

---

8 (24A) “The Academy Trust shall not make provision in the context of any subject for the teaching, as an evidence-based view or theory, of any view or theory that is contrary to established scientific and/or historical evidence and explanations.” Department for Education, (2012) Free Schools Model Funding Agreement www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/freeschools/a0074737/free-schools-model-funding-agreement
Stigma – abortion education which stigmatises the option of abortion can be distressing for those who have had, or will go on to have experience of unplanned pregnancy.

The American Psychological Association’s report on mental health and abortion found that “social practices and messages that stigmatize women who have abortions may directly contribute to negative psychological experiences post-abortion.”

A counsellor who speaks to women of all ages regarding their pregnancy decision confirms that those who have difficulty making their decision are often reacting to the stigmatisation of abortion they have received at school. She says that abortion is:

“Generally taught in debate format where students are either ‘for’ or ‘against’ abortion. With no challenge of misinformation or an opportunity to look at why women may choose to have an abortion some will come away thinking that abortion is in some way ‘bad’ or shameful … For a lot of women this was the only time abortion was discussed before they became pregnant … This can make them feel ashamed or embarrassed and the decision much more difficult.”

Lesley Hoggart’s interviews with young women in London support this:

“Abortion was viewed as ‘immoral’ by many young women, and this view makes abortion decision-making difficult and stressful. The way in which abortion is often covered as a discussion topic in Religious Education lessons within schools encourages such a framing of the issue. Feeling that abortion is ‘immoral’ contributed towards feelings of regret and/or guilt that some young women had following their abortion.”

Case study from young people’s counsellor, Manchester:

“Stacey had an abortion at the age of 13. Being brought up in a Catholic home Stacey told me she hasn’t felt able to talk about the termination and she said she couldn’t talk to anyone at school; in fact she said she was terrified anyone at school would find out. We explored this. Stacey told me that she was taught in school that abortion is murder; she struggled immensely with the guilt that she is a murderer. A year on from when she had the termination she was still finding it extremely difficult to stay in lessons where this was being taught. Stacey told me videos were used to scare young people into not having an abortion – she found these particularly distressing and this affected her in many ways – she would skip class, or sometimes get into fights with other students or teachers. The ability to hide how she was feeling was beginning to become more and more difficult and she found her emotions exploding at times, hence her request for counselling.”

14 Case study provided by young people’s counsellor in Manchester, 2012.
Abortion education in the UK: Failing our young people? • Education For Choice

Equalities – some groups invited into schools to speak about abortion hold views which are likely to be at odds with schools’ equality and diversity policies and may negatively impact students’ well-being.

In their ‘School Report’ Stonewall found that homophobic bullying was rife in British schools with over half of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people interviewed saying that they don’t feel able to be themselves at school.\(^\text{15}\) The 2010 Equality Act protects young people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual and/or transgender and/or pregnant from discrimination.\(^\text{16}\) However, we are concerned that a number of groups offering sex and relationships education in schools promote a viewpoint which is not in keeping with the inclusivity and well-being of all pupils. When groups like Lovewise declare that homosexuality is “damaging to the mind, body and spirit”\(^\text{17}\) or SPUC launch a campaign against same-sex marriage claiming that “making homosexual couples the legal parents of children is not in the best interests of children”\(^\text{18}\) what is the impact on young people who may come into contact with their materials?

“Young people have the right to be given the facts about all different kinds of people in our communities including all of the protected characteristics. Schools are diverse communities and therefore cannot pick and choose which diversities they highlight. We as educators, by law should deliver a broad and balanced curriculum that looks at all issues from all points of view to enable students to hold their own informed opinions”.

Elly Barnes, Schools Out\(^\text{19}\)

External speakers

One of EFC’s key concerns relating to abortion education in schools and colleges is the use of inappropriate external speakers.

Leading educational bodies agree that while external organisations may be useful in complementing existing programmes of work it is important that they are sufficiently assessed by the school.

In their 2011 study into the delivery of PSHE for the Department for Education, researchers found that just over half of secondary schools use external groups for the delivery of SRE and assert that, “whilst the use of specialist external input can help resolve a lack of confidence or skills amongst teachers, it is important to note that it is expertise and quality that is significant, not being external per se.”\(^\text{20}\)

---

17 Lovewise promotional document, (2011) available on request.
19 EFC email conversation with Elly Barnes, 2012.
In 2009, the Department for Children, Schools and Families included a similar word of caution in its PSHE review:

“Use of visitors must be planned and managed by the lead teacher in the context of the full PSHE education programme. Further, the content of what is delivered by external contributors must be consistent with the core entitlement and underlying aims of PSHE education. Information on certain issues carries more weight and credibility from outside agencies than teachers”.

As pointed out, an external speaker often bears the mark of an ‘expert’ and therefore their materials, presentations and wider work in the community must not only cohere with the school’s PSHE work and equality policies, but must provide reliable, factual information which is of educational value to young people.

When abortion appears in the curriculum, teachers are encouraged to achieve balance by addressing a range of moral and religious perspectives. Unfortunately, teachers often interpret the notion of balance as providing a polarised debate in which two speakers with opposing views present their ideas. In doing so they present the pro-choice and anti-abortion positions as equivalent and the information they provide is given equal weight regardless of its accuracy or impartiality. This polarising debate style often results in students being deprived of relevant information. As stated in the Department for Education’s SRE Guidance:

“It is all too easy to create a classroom debate in which pupils’ views become polarised and miss the purpose of sex and relationship education in preparing pupils for the responsibilities and challenges of adult life. When abortion is covered within a programme, the challenge is to offer young people the opportunity to explore the dilemmas, enable them to know and understand about abortion, and develop the communication skills to discuss it with parents and health professionals.”

Though anti-abortion organisations are often invited in to address pupils studying Religious Education they largely do not represent or speak from a religious position. The leading anti-abortion organisations, LIFE and SPUC, say that they are not religious organisations. So, they cannot be said to be presenting a religious position on abortion, beyond that which a teacher could more competently provide.

Crucially, the main groups which deliver presentations on pregnancy and abortion in the UK have all, at some point, been found to give medical misinformation in their materials. We provide more information below and in Appendices 2 and 3.

Groups which provide schools speakers on abortion

The three groups which came up most frequently in our research were Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC), Life and Lovewise. For more detailed information on these and other groups operating locally in schools across the country see Appendix 2.

**SPUC** is perhaps the most well-known anti-abortion group in the UK. The organisation was formed in 1967 as a reaction to the Abortion Act, “to uphold the principle of respect for human life, in particular the life of the unborn child”.

SPUC makes claims about contraception and abortion which run contrary to scientific evidence. For example, its leaflet, *Contraceptives: What you need to know* argues that hormonal methods of birth control such as the implant and the pill can cause abortion, despite the fact that this was disproven by law in 2002. SPUC recently came under fire in the press when one of its school talks containing such misinformation was exposed, with the speaker claiming that abortion is linked to breast cancer and infertility, as well as stating that “for some people who’ve been raped and had the baby, even if they don’t keep it, something positive comes out of that whole rape experience.”

**Life** was established in 1970 “to uphold the utmost respect for human life from fertilisation (conception) until natural death”. As well as providing pregnancy counselling and housing for young mothers Life carries out educational work claiming to have taken “the Gospel of Life to young people not just in Catholic and ‘faith’ schools but to those with no religious adherence”.

Last year, Life was appointed to the Government’s Sexual Health Forum which caused some controversy in the press regarding its expertise and suitability to advise on matters of sexual and reproductive health. Since this appointment, Life has been removing website content which gives overt misinformation relating to contraception and abortion or which uses language that may prove incendiary to critics. However, this leaflet available in Freezepage format shows that Life has falsely linked abortion to mental health problems, increased risk of suicide, breast cancer, placenta praevia and ectopic pregnancy (all of which are discounted by the RCOG’s professional guidelines on abortion).

**Lovewise** is a newer organisation, set up in 2002 by two doctors and a head teacher with the intention of encouraging young people to “consider the God-given design of marriage and the rightness and benefits of keeping sex for marriage.”

---

23 SPUC website (accessed 2012) History [www.spuc.org.uk/about/history](http://www.spuc.org.uk/about/history)
30 (Freezepage) Life, (2011) *After Abortion leaflet* [www.freezepage.com/1319468556TSSRJGUDX](http://www.freezepage.com/1319468556TSSRJGUDX)
As a result of EFC’s research, The Huffington Post recently posted articles addressing the misinformation given in Lovewise’s school presentations, including the claim that women who have abortions double their risk of getting breast cancer and are seven times more likely to commit suicide.  

In a promotional document sent to schools, Lovewise states its opposition to teaching about non-heterosexual relationships and contraception use outside marriage:

"Marriage will be promoted as the only context in which honouring, fulfilling, secure and healthy sexual activity may take place ... All other contexts including homosexual activity are damaging to mind, body and spirit"

"Contraception will not be promoted in our presentations ... In the unmarried, the use and promotion of contraception will be explained to encourage something that is wrong and threatens health."

One parent and school governor we spoke to said pupils at her son’s school felt ‘undermined and belittled’ by Lovewise presentations and was concerned by what she referred to as ‘scaremongering’ by the organisation.

Both Life and Lovewise are members of the SRE Council, set up last year to represent “value-based, parent-centred sex and relationships education (SRE) providers”. The umbrella body of largely pro-abstinence education, anti-abortion groups has been welcomed by education minister Michael Gove prompting Labour MP Dianne Abbott to issue the following statement:

“I’m calling on Michael Gove to distance himself from this group, rather than support it in the way he is. I think it is very wrong and the Government needs to step in because we can’t teach children at an impressionable age this sort of propaganda. Sexual health education is supposed to be based on facts, these people are just pedalling bigotry.”

Assessing current practice

Over the years EFC has gathered anecdotal evidence on the way the subject of abortion is being taught in UK schools. In addition to our existing knowledge of this field, we undertook extra research and collection of material for the purpose of this report. This included speaking to professionals working in education and sexual health services as well as parents and young people. Methods of evidence-gathering included:

---

33 Lovewise promotional document, (2011) available on request.
34 EFC interview with parent and governor of a secondary school in Tyneside
Freedom of Information requests sent to over 250 schools in England

Due to difficulties receiving information from direct contact with teachers we decided to approach schools through the more formal process of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. We could not approach every secondary school in England, and did not aim to get definitive data on the precise number of schools using anti-abortion groups or their materials. We hoped to provide a snapshot of what is happening across England, get a sense of how widespread poor practice is, and to assess whether this practice is concentrated in specific geographical areas or types of school.

In order to ensure geographical spread, FOI requests were sent to approximately 30 schools in each of the nine regions of England, including all the secondary schools in one town or city. For example ‘East of England’ covered all secondary schools in Southend (15) and Peterborough (12). This ensured that a range of schools (academies, grammar schools, comprehensives, faith schools etc) were contacted.

Schools were asked if, as part of PSHE or RE, they had had contact with, used the resources of, or invited a speaker in from the following organisations (all known to have given inaccurate or biased information about abortion in some of their organisational materials):

- Life, SPUC (Society for the Protection of Unborn Children), Care Confidential (Evaluate), Lovewise, Right To Life

Of the 254 schools which were contacted 191 responded, though many of these gave incomplete responses or were unable to provide the information requested. In all but one of the nine regions at least one school had used a speaker or materials from Lovewise, SPUC or Life. The 18 schools which had invited in a speaker or bought resources broke down into eight comprehensive schools, eight Catholic schools and two academies. The materials were used in a range of subjects, including science, R,E and SRE.

Overall, the level of response from schools was patchy. Many failed to reply at all, despite reminders, and some gave an incomplete response. Previous FOI requests to schools have shown that some have refused to answer what they consider to be ‘sensitive’ information, while others have given partial or misleading information.

According to our findings over 9% of schools confirmed that they had used speakers or materials from anti-choice organisations. If these figures are an accurate reflection of the scale of the problem, if extrapolated to all schools, it means that young people in at least 287 schools in England are routinely exposed to information/misinformation from anti-abortion organisations.

However, EFC’s own experience of working with schools on this subject gives us strong reason to consider this snapshot to be an underestimation of the actual number of anti-abortion groups delivering presentations. The main organisations offering abortion presentations to schools themselves claim a much greater spread. Life, for example, claims to have reached over 32,000 young people in the past year. Lovewise’s most recent annual report states that it has delivered over 300 presentations across the country, and SPUC says it has sent its fetal models to every state secondary school.

---

Although this audit cannot be said to give us a complete picture of abortion education in England it indicates that the use of anti-abortion speakers and materials is widespread – taking place in a range of different types of school across the country, and within a variety of subject areas.

**Informal online survey of young people’s experiences of abortion education**

EFC created a short online survey asking young people about the abortion education they had (or hadn’t) received at school/college. 100 responses were received from those aged 14–20, and gave us a flavour of how young people are learning about abortion, and the impact such lessons have on them.

Of those young people surveyed:

- Just fewer than 30% had not learnt anything about abortion at school.
- The majority who had learnt about abortion had the lesson(s) in year 10–11.
- The majority who had learnt about abortion at school said that this was covered in an R.E lesson, followed by PSHE, then Citizenship. A few had covered the subject in science lessons.
- Most young people had this lesson delivered by an RE or PSHE teacher. 21% had a lesson on abortion delivered by an external speaker. Those mentioned by name were EFC, Brook, Lovewise, CedarOaks and Girl Talk (the latter two are both ‘crisis pregnancy centres’ run by Care Confidential, formally a project within the anti-abortion charity CARE40). Some young people had forgotten the name of the organisation which had spoken: “Unsure, but it was definitely Pro-Life” “It was a religious organisation, although I’m not sure which one”

The survey captured a range of experiences. Some respondents praised the abortion education they had received and felt that it had been a worthwhile learning experience. Unfortunately, these responses were few and far between and a large proportion of the young people responding to the survey reported attending lessons which they felt were biased, misleading and gave inaccurate information.

Some were subjected to highly judgemental and biased accounts of abortion, based on the teacher/speaker’s own beliefs, or shown materials which they found upsetting or misleading:

“(I was taught that abortion) was immoral, murder etc, every child has the right to life sort of thing and that the mother would go straight to hell for it ... we had no facts or balanced arguments.” 17, Newcastle

“We were briefly given a sheet detailing some of the stages of a foetus and the laws regarding abortion, with a couple of graphic descriptions of suction and surgical processes ... (The lesson made me feel) fairly disturbed. There was nothing regarding why you might want an abortion, or where to get it. The graphic descriptions of certain procedures and possibility the foetus could feel pain left me feeling pretty sick.” 20, London

---

Worryingly, some respondents reported having been ‘humiliated’ or ‘singled out’ for their own personal views or experiences of abortion:

“He (RE teacher) gave us a very basic explanation then called on a girl who had had an abortion and asked for her opinion on the matter. No one else was encouraged to discuss what they thought and I left the lesson feeling as though abortion was something to be ashamed of … (I felt) very under-informed and angry on behalf of my friend who was singled out.” 14, Wales

It was clear from the survey responses that as part of their abortion education some young people had been given information which was inaccurate, judgemental and which, in some cases, had a direct impact on their wellbeing and safety.

This survey highlighted the fact that education about abortion is patchy – in some schools the subject is not addressed at all, whereas in others it’s taught effectively and allows students to consider the moral questions surrounding abortion as well as giving them accurate, relevant information about pregnancy options and sexual health. Unfortunately, a number of those responding to the survey suggested that the education they received on this subject was misleading or upsetting for those who may have had, or go on to have, experience of abortion. A disconcerting number of young people wrote about the negative impact on their personal wellbeing of lessons which used graphic images or biased and personal accounts of abortion. Specific feedback from this survey is provided in Appendix 4.

Research into existing resources and materials used in abortion education

Although it can be very difficult to assess which materials individual schools are using to teach about abortion; FOI requests, internet research and contact with teachers has enabled EFC to gather some examples. We have uncovered a range of materials which use inaccurate information or have the potential to be distressing for students.

Some UK schools have shown the 1984 film ‘The Silent Scream’ to teach young people about abortion. A Catholic school in Essex41 confirmed that they screened the film from 2005 to 2011. ‘The Silent Scream’ claims to depict an abortion procedure but has been widely debunked by doctors and members of the scientific community as containing inaccurate claims about abortion.42 It is extremely graphic and likely to be distressing and confusing for students.

Other materials sent to us by teachers, or found on the T.E.S (Times Educational Supplement) website (where teachers are able to upload and share resources) suggest that the use of misleading information and emotive language is not restricted to lessons delivered by external speakers. One teacher’s Powerpoint presentation claims that the contraceptive and morning after pills are abortifacients, another states that “abortion can lead to complex mental trauma for the woman involved, for example, intense feelings of guilt and on occasions, mental illness”. For these and other materials used when teaching about abortion please see Appendix 3.

Outside the classroom

We also have concerns about the work of groups like SPUC, Life and Lovewise beyond their classroom materials and school speakers.

All three groups have shown a distrust of sex and relationships education, SPUC going so far as to set up a campaign entitled ‘Safe at School’ which attacks so-called ‘explicit sex education’. Representatives of SPUC have denounced comprehensive sex education, which gives information on contraception, in extremely strong terms. Dr A Majid Katme, head of SPUC’s Muslim division, implores parents to join the ‘Safe at School’ campaign against “this explicit vulgar offensive insensitive immoral attractive sex education” as “all parents will be asked by almighty God: Why did you not protect your small innocent children from all these types of satanic haram education and behaviour?” Speaking at a SPUC meeting last year Lynette Burrows described routinely used sex education materials as having been “put together by crazed paedophiles, drunk with the freedom to talk dirty to young people”.43

All three groups also have links to ‘crisis pregnancy centres’ which offer counselling to pregnant women. SPUC44 and Life45 signpost to these centres on their websites, and the director of Lovewise, Chris Richards, is also a trustee of Foundation For Life which runs the Tyneside Pregnancy Advice Centre46 (TPAC). A leaflet from TPAC states: “We have heard of about 20 women who have decided to keep their baby after their visit to the Centre – some have already given birth. How encouraging to think that these lives have been spared and mothers protected from the trauma of abortion.” SPUC signposts to a set of crisis pregnancy centres run by ‘Good Counsel Network’ which have been found to offer extreme misinformation on abortion47, and Life’s own ‘Care Centres’ came under attack in the press48 when some were revealed to be giving biased information to mystery shoppers.

We are concerned that through contact with these groups in an educational setting young people facing an unplanned pregnancy may end up visiting independent advice centres which are not necessarily providing accurate, impartial information on pregnancy options. These groups’ rejection of comprehensive SRE and provision of information on safer sex leads us to question their appropriateness for teaching in this area. The government’s SRE guidance clearly states that “Young people need factual information about safer sex and skills to enable them to negotiate safer sex”49 something which is unlikely to be provided by groups like Lovewise which states that “when we promote the condom, we are promoting fornication. We are aiding and abetting a sinful act”.50

50 Lovewise promotional document, (2011) available on request.
How can we improve education about abortion?

Recommendations:

**Education policy**

Current education policy resists telling schools in detail what and how to deliver subjects, but it is essential that the Department for Education is unequivocal in its support for evidence-based information on this issue. It should support teachers in interpreting conflicting messages on the topic by signposting them to at least one reputable source of information e.g. the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

**School policies and responsibilities**

- School Governors and Head Teachers should ensure that their school policies clearly set out the need for teachers and external speakers to provide accurate information on pregnancy options; take measures to prevent students feeling stigmatised, distressed or discriminated against by information or images used; and take responsibility for ensuring that the classroom is a safe space in which young people feel respected and included regardless of their sexuality, sexual history or family background.

- School Governors and Head Teachers should retain oversight of classroom practice in relation to teaching and learning about pregnancy options and abortion in both PSHE/SRE and within Religious Education.

- Schools should aim to meet the needs of their students, by consulting them on the content and timing of sex and relationships education lessons including lessons on pregnancy and abortion.

**Teachers and classroom practice**

- Teachers should always include discussion of safer sex, STIs and pregnancy prevention in any lessons about abortion.

- When teachers deliver lessons themselves it is crucial that they are aware of which organisations’ websites and resources provide scientifically sound, evidence-based information about contraception and abortion. Teachers should assess the accuracy of medical information they provide – against reliable sources such as the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, whose information on abortion is based on large literature reviews of research from around the world.

- Teachers should follow best practice guidance on teaching about abortion from EFC, and the Department of Health.

- Teachers should acknowledge a range of different moral and religious perspectives on abortion and provide an opportunity for students to discuss these. They should not seek to impose their views on students.

- Teachers should emphasise young people’s legal right to confidential sexual health advice and signpost them to local services that can provide this.

- Teachers should be sensitive to the family lives and personal experiences of students and seek to make lessons inclusive and non-stigmatising.
External speakers

- Teachers should assess the materials used by external speakers before inviting them into the classroom and ensure that they do not aim to misinform or cause distress, and are not discriminatory.

- Teachers should ensure that when external speakers signpost students to websites and advice and guidance services, that they are clear about what these services can and cannot offer; whether they have a particular agenda or perspective; and that they comply with good practice and offer evidence-based information and impartial support.

- With regard to using external speakers the Sex Education Forum gives the following advice:

“The Sex Education Forum recommends that the following factors be in place for external visitor input into SRE to be safe and worthwhile:

— Schools are clear about their reason for working with the visitor;

— External input is factually correct and there is differentiation between fact and opinion;

— The values of the external visitor are clear and there is no hidden agenda;

— The visitors are adequately trained and competent;

— Responsibility for teaching and learning remains with the school;

— If in doubt about the credentials of a particular organisation or visitor, schools can consult with the local Healthy Schools Team or SRE advisor.

The input of external visitors, as with all SRE, should be based on good practice informed by evidence. For example, it should be informed by the needs of children and young people; be factually accurate; delivered by a trained facilitator; and use participatory techniques.”

www.ncb.org.uk/media/183595/external_visitors_and_sre_10.pdf

Thanks to the British Humanist Association for supporting this project by providing additional information and materials.
Appendix 1

Resources

Further reading and resources to support good quality teaching on abortion

- **Best Practice Toolkit: Abortion Education, Education For Choice (2008)**
- **Sex and Relationship Guidance, Department for Education (2000)**
- **External Visitors and Sex and Relationships Education, The Sex Education Forum (2010)**
- **The Sex Education Forum** is a unique collaboration of member organisations and practitioner networks. Their main aim is to work together with members, practitioners and other stakeholders to achieve quality SRE.
- **The PSHE Association** is the subject association for all professionals working in PSHE education. Their aim is to raise the status, quality and impact of Personal Social Health and Economic education (PSHE) and enable high quality PSHE education teaching and learning for all children and young people.

Further research referencing importance of good quality abortion education


Media coverage of anti-abortion groups in schools

- **Shock Tactics, Guardian, (2008)**
- **Revealed: What children are being told about abortion, Guardian (2012)**
- **Christian group Lovewise teaches schoolchildren ‘Most rape victims regret abortion’, Huffington Post UK (2012)**
- **School bans anti-abortionist group Lovewise after ‘considerably controversial’ presentation, Huffington Post UK (2012)**

Useful websites for factual information about sexual and reproductive health

- **Education For Choice**
- **Brook**
- **Family Planning Association (FPA)**
Appendix 2

Information on anti-abortion organisations in schools

This section gives further information about EFC’s concerns regarding the main groups providing presentations and resources on abortion to UK schools. Unfortunately, getting hold of the presentations used by these groups has proven very difficult: SPUC refuses to send its slides to teachers prior to a school visit and Lovewise claims not to sell its abortion presentation without a signed declaration from the teacher of ‘respect for human life’ (i.e. support for an anti-abortion position). The following information is based on internet research and materials which have been sent to us by teachers.

Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC)

SPUC is perhaps the most well-known anti-abortion group in the UK. The organisation was formed in 1967 as a reaction to the Abortion Act, “to uphold the principle of respect for human life, in particular the life of the unborn child”.1

A recent Guardian article2 exposed the use of misinformation in a SPUC school presentation where the speaker made claims that abortion can increase the risk of breast cancer (a theory which is not supported by reputable scientific research).3 SPUC’s graphic abortion presentations also featured in a 2008 article quoting the RE teacher who invited them in:

“I told SPUC the talk would be to 16-year-olds and that I didn’t want them to show anything too graphic, and they said that was fine. Yet the images the presenter used were so shocking that one teacher walked out and another felt she had to turn her back to the class. Many of the students also turned away, while a few left the room and a couple even went home because they were so upset. We had to bring all the students who remained together afterwards and apologise. As far as I’m concerned, it wasn’t a case of those pictures not being appropriate for that age group – they’re not appropriate for any age group. There was a question of things being outdated, too. One of the images they used was from 1978 and some of the procedures they talked about aren’t even used today.”4

SPUC claims that it no longer uses these graphic images of abortion in its school presentations but the same photos remain available via the ‘education’ section of its website and could easily be accessed by children researching the topic.5

---

1 SPUC website, (2012) History www.spuc.org.uk/about/history
Abortion education in the UK: Failing our young people?

The SPUC website (and accompanying materials) contains information about contraception and abortion which runs contrary to scientific evidence. For example:

- “The morning-after pill can also act as an early abortifacient … One of the difficulties a woman faces after taking the morning-after pill is that she will probably never know whether it caused an abortion or not”

See also, 2012 leaflet claiming that the contraceptive pill, implant, injection and other methods of contraception can cause abortion.

Legally and medically pregnancy begins at implantation, meaning that the morning after pill and other forms of contraception prevent rather than end pregnancy.

- “Post abortion trauma: PAT is a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder … Research indicates that at least 10% of women who have an abortion will suffer PAT at some point between having the abortion and the end of their lives.”

‘Post-abortion trauma’ is not a recognised medical condition and reputable studies have found that abortion is not linked to severe mental health problems.

- “The risk of ectopic pregnancy may increase up to 30% after a first abortion and 160% after two or more”

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists states that there is no evidence of a relationship between abortion and ectopic pregnancy.

SPUC is currently heading the ‘Safe at School’ campaign which lobbies against so called ‘explicit’ sex education in schools. SPUC blogs have labelled the sex education materials being used in schools as ‘pornographic’, ‘sexual sabotage’ and ‘paedophilic’. Many of the groups and individuals involved in Safe at School are controversial for their campaigning against LGBT rights. For example, SRE Islamic, which hosts a number of the ‘Safe at School’ meetings has been criticised for alleged links with Hizb ut Tahrir, an extremist group which campaigns against homosexuality. Core Issues, another supporter of the Safe at School

13 John Smeaton’s blog, (2011) MPs support parents in fight against pornographic sex education http://spuc-director.blogspot.co.uk/2011/12/mps-support-parents-in-fight-against.html
campaign “funds ‘reparative therapy’ for gay Christians who believe that they have homosexual feelings but want to become straight”.

SPUC also runs an independent campaign against same-sex marriage which purports a link between equal marriage and abortion:

“Marriage as an institution protects children; both born and unborn ... Same-sex marriage represents an attempt to redefine marriage, thus undermining marriage. This undermining lessens the protection for unborn children which true marriage provides.”

John Smeaton, the director of SPUC goes further in his blog claiming that:

“The fundamental argument against gay marriage is that homosexuality is disordered, as it is radically at variance with the truth and meaning of human sexuality ... Catholics must proclaim loud and clear that it is impossible for any homosexual relationship to be a marriage because genuine personal, sexual and spiritual union between persons of the same-sex is impossible.”

SPUC’s website offers links to organisations under the tab ‘Help in a Crisis’. Both Abortion Recovery Care and Helpline (run by SPUC) and The Good Counsel Network give misinformation on their websites about ‘Post Abortion Syndrome’. The Good Counsel Network runs crisis pregnancy centres and the London centre mystery-shopped by EFC was found to be giving inaccurate and extremely biased information regarding contraception and abortion. Audio excerpts of this encounter can be heard via the EFC blog and a leaflet given out at the centre claiming that “condoms have naturally occurring holes, or pores in them. These holes are large enough to allow the tiny sperm through, allowing pregnancy to occur” can be seen on the EFC Twitpic site.

Life

Life was established in 1970 “to uphold the utmost respect for human life from fertilisation (conception) until natural death”. As well as providing pregnancy counselling and housing for young mothers Life carries out educational work claiming to have taken “the Gospel of Life to young people not just in Catholic and ‘faith’ schools but to those with no religious adherence”.

Last year, Life was appointed to the Government’s Sexual Health Forum which caused some controversy in the press regarding its expertise and suitability to

---

18 John Smeaton’s blog, (2011) Gay marriage’s here to stay if Catholic leaders don’t witness to the whole moral truth about homosexuality [http://spuc-director.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/gay-marriage-will-be-here-to-stay-if.html](http://spuc-director.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/gay-marriage-will-be-here-to-stay-if.html)
21 Education For Choice blog, (2012) 40 Days for Lies? Audio Files [http://educationforchoice.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/40-days-for-lies-audio-files.html](http://educationforchoice.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/40-days-for-lies-audio-files.html)
advise on matters of sexual and reproductive health. Since this appointment, Life has been removing content from its website which gives overt misinformation relating to contraception and abortion or which uses language that may prove incendiary to critics. We have been unable to view Life’s most recent school presentations and are unaware whether the various inaccuracies which were given in Life’s public literature are repeated in schools. The following links are largely from website pages which have recently been taken down from Life’s website.

The publications section of the website no longer allows visitors to download a leaflet called ‘After Abortion’ (available in Freeze Page format). The leaflet links abortion to mental health problems and increased risk of suicide, breast cancer, placenta praevia and ectopic pregnancy (all of which are discounted by the RCOG’s professional guidelines on abortion). Similar myths were repeated on a ‘Preg Help’ website run by Life (taken down this year) which also stated that “The abortion ethos depends upon denying that the deliberate killing of the unborn child has any traumatic effect on anyone involved … abortion exploits everyone involved.”

Life has recently come under fire for claiming the HPV vaccination “gives young people another green light to be promiscuous” and has also posted a blog claiming that “abortion is a leading factor in breast cancer.” As a result of sending Freedom of Information requests to schools in England, EFC was sent a number of (dated) educational leaflets which had been provided by Life and contained the following misinformation:

“There is a clear link between abortion and breast cancer as well as between abortion and infertility.”

“The condom does not give much protection against any of them (STIs) even AIDS. Instead, by encouraging sexual activity, it may be making matters worse.”

“Abortion is the panic reaction. It is violent and negative. Many would say it’s really an uncaring, unloving way of trying to solve someone else’s problem.”

In the Summer 2012 newsletter a Life education speaker says:

“I was telling a story a counsellor had shared with me and an incredibly brave girl stood up in front of the whole year group and said: ‘That’s exactly how I feel, I had an abortion two weeks ago.’ Thankfully, I was able to put her in contact with our counselling service.”

Last year, EFC’s mystery shopping report found that some Life counselling centres were giving inaccurate and biased information regarding pregnancy options. Our concern is that young people listening to Life school speakers may be directed to pregnancy counselling services which do not offer impartial, evidence-based support with pregnancy decision making. Life’s Care Centre work recently received a large grant from the Big Lottery Fund.

Lovewise

Lovewise is a newer organisation, set up in 2002 by two doctors and a head teacher with the intention of encouraging young people to “consider the God-given design of marriage and the rightness and benefits of keeping sex for marriage.” Lovewise has recently come under fire for the misinformation included in its abortion presentation for schools which states the following:

“Physical consequences of abortion to the mother: Long-term – infertility especially due to infection, premature labour in subsequent pregnancies, breast cancer – twice the risk”

“What are the emotional consequences of abortion? Depression – up to three times more likely to get depressed. Violent death – 7 times more likely to commit suicide.”

In a promotional document sent to schools, Lovewise states its opposition to teaching about non-heterosexual relationships and contraception:

“Marriage will be promoted as the only context in which honouring, fulfilling, secure and healthy sexual activity may take place … All other contexts including homosexual activity are damaging to mind, body and spirit”

“Contraception will not be promoted in our presentations … In the unmarried, the use and promotion of contraception will be explained to encourage something that is wrong and threatens health.”

The director of Lovewise, Chris Richards, has made similar public pronouncements in which he labelled provision of contraception for the unmarried as ‘sinful’: “when we promote the condom, we are promoting fornication. We are aiding and abetting a sinful act”. He is also the director of an anti-abortion charity called ‘Foundation for Life’ which runs the Tyneside Pregnancy Advice Centre offering ultrasounds and counselling to pregnant women seemingly to persuade them out of having abortions: “We have heard of about 20 women who have decided to keep their baby after their visit to the Centre – some have already given birth. How encouraging to think that these lives have been spared and mothers protected from the trauma of abortion.”

39 Tyneside Pregnancy Advice Centre leaflet, available on request
The Huffington Post recently reported on a school discontinuing their relationship with Lovewise after negative feedback from pupils and their parents, saying that the presentations had “become too one-sided and dogmatic” ... “There is also an issue with them saying girls should believe their contraception statistics, not the school nurses.”

Care Confidential/Care/Evaluate

There is a lack of clarity on the leadership of Evaluate: Informing Choice: ‘a relationship and sex education programme’. Although the programme is listed as a project of CARE (Christian Action Research and Education), links with the network of ‘crisis pregnancy centres’ called Care Confidential (now independent of CARE) are still apparent.

In their most recent annual report CARE claim that the Evaluate programme has been delivered to over 18,000 young people in England and Scotland. CARE’s Scottish arm has produced a guide to Sex and Relationship Education which states:

“Teachers should be aware that, for most Christians, a homosexual lifestyle would not be considered as equivalent, morally or otherwise, to a heterosexual one”

CARE campaigns against equal marriage and has a history of lobbying against LGBT equality, even hosting a conference offering ‘therapeutic approaches to same sex attraction’, a practice which has recently been publicly opposed by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

Care Confidential, which appears to retain links with the Evaluate schools programme, has been found to give misinformation and a biased anti-abortion agenda in its crisis pregnancy centre materials.
The Right to Life Charitable Trust

The Right to Life Charitable Trust was set up in 2003 and boasts a number of high-profile patrons including The Lord Nicolas Windsor and Ann Widdecombe. The Trust’s Winter 2012 newsletter states that its educational materials have been sent to 625 faith and non-faith secondary schools. They have plans to extend the education scheme to primary schools.\(^5\)

The materials contain some misinformation on contraception, for example:

“True contraceptives include barrier methods that try to prevent sperm and egg meeting such as condoms and diaphragms. All other methods of so-called contraception will sometimes cause early abortions depending on how accurately they are used … Both types of contraceptive pill can be said to keep the female body in a permanently morbid, unnatural state.”

“Coils, technically called IUDs (IntraUterine Device) mechanically interfere with implantation causing an early abortion. The copper in the coil can also act as a poison.”\(^5\)

This information on contraception is misleading and appears designed to dissuade young people from using non-barrier methods. Medically and legally pregnancy begins at implantation meaning that contraceptive devices prevent pregnancy (whereas abortion ends an existing pregnancy).\(^5\)

Appendix 3

Visual examples of anti-abortion materials

www.spuc.org.uk/documents/leaflets/contraceptives201207

SPUC leaflet which claims that all hormonal contraception can cause abortion – this is not based in medical or legal fact.

www.spuc.org.uk/education-abortion/warning

Although we have access to SPUC’s 2008 school presentation, featuring many graphic images, we have chosen not to include these images in this report. However, this ‘warning’ screen shows proof that SPUC retains these images on its website.
Abortion education in the UK: Failing our young people? • Education For Choice

This is an example slide from SPUC’s 2008 school presentation (they have refused to provide schools with an updated version). It shows three myths related to abortion which are not supported by scientific consensus.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

• to make the MAP yet more available, especially to teenagers, is to encourage yet more sexual activity and promiscuity, especially among young people. It is a further attack on those who strive to develop self-control and self-esteem. It makes young people yet more vulnerable to peer pressure and exploitation.

• over-the-counter sales of the MAP, especially to young women (aged 16 and over), will be especially hazardous. Pharmacies are busy shops yet pharmacists are being asked to find 10 minutes in their schedule to discuss every customer’s situation with her, be sure of her age and assess her suitability for the drug. Many teenagers may know little about their family’s health history. Is it right to place so much responsibility on a pharmacist?

• the MAP is increasingly to be distributed to underage girls without parental consent or knowledge. Thus parents’ responsibility and family solidarity are being further undermined.

• the MAP - Levonelle - is made by Schering AG, Berlin, Germany and distributed in the UK by Schering Health Care Ltd. Schering is the biggest pharmaceutical company in Europe.

• wider supply of the MAP is not in the best interests of women or anyone else - except the manufacturers and their shareholders. It is not something for society as a whole to celebrate.

Please think carefully when deciding whether to take the Morning-After Pill

This Life leaflet on the supposed ‘dangers’ of emergency contraception (such as ‘promiscuity!’) is an example of materials sent to us by schools as a result of our Freedom of Information requests. A blog on the Life website (now removed) also states that the morning after pill ‘is undoubtedly an abortifacient’.

THE MORNING-AFTER PILL

THINKING ABOUT TAKING IT?
PLEASE READ ON...
Another Life blog which has now been removed from the site (saved in January 2012) claims that ‘abortion is a leading factor in breast cancer’.

Life ‘Preg-Help’ website (now removed, saved May 2012) falsely claims that abortion is linked to breast cancer and other physical as well as mental health issues.
Abortion education in the UK: Failing our young people? • Education For Choice

Example slide from Lovewise abortion presentation (now removed from website, saved July 2012) giving misinformation on physical risks of abortion.

Example slide from Lovewise abortion presentation (now removed from website, saved July 2012) giving misinformation on mental health outcomes following abortion, with no references for claims.

Lovewise ‘Code of Practice’ which states that ‘homosexual activity (is) damaging to mind, body and spirit’ and that contraception for the unmarried ‘will be explained to encourage something that is wrong and threatens health’.
Abortion education in the UK: Failing our young people? • Education For Choice

The Right to Life Charitable Trust’s materials (sent to all faith schools) give misinformation on contraception and abortion. This example resource claims that contraception ‘will sometimes cause early abortions’ and that the contraceptive pill ‘can be said to keep the female body in a permanently morbid, unnatural state.’
Abortion education in the UK: Failing our young people? • Education For Choice

Sample slides from a teacher’s ‘Matters of Life and Death’ presentation uploaded to the TES website.

Sample slide from a ‘Christian attitudes towards abortion’ presentation uploaded to TES which gives misinformation about the mental health outcomes of abortion.
Abortion education in the UK: Failing our young people? • Education For Choice

Sample classroom activity based on ‘Prayer before birth’ suggested in a teacher’s RE magazine.
Appendix 4

Informal online survey of young people’s experiences of abortion education

EFC created a short online survey asking young people about the abortion education they had (or hadn’t) received at school/college. 100 responses were received from those aged 14–20, and although the results are not comprehensive they give us some sense of how young people are learning about abortion, and the impact such lessons have on them.

Of those young people surveyed:

- Just fewer than 30% had not learnt anything about abortion at school.
- The majority who had learnt about abortion had the lesson(s) in year 10–11.
- The majority who had learnt about abortion at school said that this was covered in an R.E lesson, followed by PSHE, then Citizenship. A few had covered the subject in science lessons.
- Most young people had this lesson delivered by an RE or PSHE teacher. 21% had a lesson on abortion delivered by an external speaker. Those mentioned by name were EFC, Brook, Lovewise, CedarOaks and Girl Talk (both ‘crisis pregnancy centres’ run by Care Confidential). Some young people had forgotten the name of the organisation which had spoken:
  
  “Unsure, but it was definitely Pro-Life”
  
  “It was a religious organisation, although I’m not sure which one”

Some of the young people who were not taught about abortion felt that this was a wasted opportunity:

“|I was not taught about it. I am annoyed that I was not taught about it as obviously it’s a really important issue.” 19, Lincolnshire

|It was certainly referenced, but I’m not sure it was properly ‘taught’. As it was merely a glancing reference normally, it didn’t have much impact. Looking back, however, I’m disappointed by how glaring this absence was, especially as I went to an all-girls’ school which didn’t exactly have the lowest teen pregnancy rate.” 19, London

Some respondents praised the abortion education they had received and felt that it had been a worthwhile learning experience:

|Lesson was from a priest, but from an honest, unbiased perspective.” 18, Oxfordshire

|Because we had received a comprehensive abortion education, I felt secured and safe knowing all the facts and the choices that I could make.” 17, London
“I actually felt well-informed. My teacher was not judgmental or nasty, thinking back I’m pretty sure she was pro-choice, but she gave both sides of the argument and allowed us to form our own decisions.” 20, Northampton

Unfortunately, these responses were in the minority and a large proportion of the young people responding to the survey reported attending lessons which they felt were biased, misleading and gave inaccurate information.

Some felt that because the lesson took place in an R.E setting there was very little scope for finding out practical information about sexual health and abortion:

“The RE and Philosophy lessons were really interesting; I think it’s good to learn the different views on abortion … However, I think particularly as I attended an all-girls school, the technicalities of the operation itself and also how to seek help should have been provided.” 19, Sussex

Others were subjected to highly judgemental and biased accounts of abortion, based on the teacher/speaker’s own beliefs:

“(I was taught that abortion) was immoral, murder etc, every child has the right to life sort of thing and that the mother would go straight to hell for it … we had no facts or balanced arguments.” 17, Newcastle

“My R.E. teacher taught about the ‘evils’ of aborting a foetus that had mental or physical impairments. The women who came in showed us pictures and videos of late stage abortions … All the experiences seemed designed to put students off abortion or make those who had already had an abortion feel guilty or like murderers. It was never presented as a choice that women sometimes choose, or something that happens every day.” 20, Surrey

“She was from a Christian based charity that helped girls decide whether abortion was the right thing to do for them … She had a long chart with diagrams of different stages of pregnancy. She then had labels to stick on such as when the baby could feel pain, grew fingernails/eyelashes/fingers. I found it too emotive to be unbiased … the majority of my class felt as though they were listening to a ‘professional’ so she’d know best but she didn’t tell us how an abortion works or how a lot of women feel positive after having an abortion.” 17, London

“They said god said it was wrong and that it murdered babies and psychologically damaged women.” 20, Northern Ireland

Some young people had been subjected to inappropriate materials, some containing graphic images of abortion which they found upsetting or misleading:

“There were images of aborted foetuses, but I’m fairly sure the times given were incorrect i.e. they looked much more developed than they should have done at the weeks given.” 20, Oxfordshire

“We were briefly given a sheet detailing some of the stages of a foetus and the laws regarding abortion, with a couple of graphic descriptions of suction and surgical processes … (The lesson made me feel) fairly disturbed. There was nothing regarding why you might want an abortion, or where to get it. The graphic descriptions of certain procedures and possibility the foetus could feel pain left me feeling pretty sick.” 20, London
“I know that a pro-life group supplied my school (an all-girls school) with replicas of babies at different stages of development, but these models were actually designed to look more baby-like than a fetus would at any of the stages illustrated. These models were used in Biology because they were the only models my school had, but my teacher explained the situation to us.” 19, Sussex

Perhaps most worryingly, some respondents reported having been ‘humiliated’ or ‘singled out’ for their own personal views or experiences of abortion:

“They said (abortion) was wrong, and that it was much better to bring the pregnancy to term … No details were ever given of the procedure and the child was always spoken of being murdered and murder was wrong. My personal views, I was told they were wrong because I agree with abortion but everyone who agreed with the teacher was not humiliated in front of the class … (I felt) humiliated and that my life and opinions were not wanted and that I wasn’t regarded with respect because I allow everyone to have a choice.” 16, County Antrim

“He (RE teacher) gave us a very basic explanation then called on a girl who had had an abortion and asked for her opinion on the matter. No one else was encouraged to discuss what they thought and I left the lesson feeling as though abortion was something to be ashamed of … (I felt) very under-informed and angry on behalf of my friend who was singled out.” 14, Wales

It was clear from many of the survey responses that as a result of some lessons on abortion young people had been given information which was inaccurate, judgemental and which, in some cases, had a direct impact on their wellbeing and safety:

“It was framed as a debate … RE teacher was pro-life … a lot of students being very insensitive, calling people who get abortions ‘stupid’ ‘sluts’ ‘irresponsible’ … (The lesson made me feel) irritated, frustrated, powerless.” 19, Essex

“The lack of education was an issue later in life when I actually had to deal with a potential un-planned pregnancy.” 20, Oxfordshire

“I felt we were told very little of the reasons women get abortions and it was made clear that none of us should ever be entitled to one.” 16, Northern Ireland

“I came away thinking that if the condom/pill failed then it was a divine sign of things which are meant to be.” 19, Kent

This survey highlighted the fact that education about abortion is patchy – in some schools the subject is not addressed at all, whereas in others it’s taught effectively and allows students to consider the moral questions surrounding abortion as well as giving them accurate, relevant information about pregnancy options and sexual health. Unfortunately, a number of those responding to the survey suggested that the education they received on this subject was misleading or upsetting for those who may have had, or go on to have, experience of abortion. A disconcerting number of young people wrote about the negative impact on their personal wellbeing of lessons which used graphic images or biased and personal accounts of abortion.