Abortion Education in the UK: Failing our young people?

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\(^1\). At least a third of women will have had an abortion by the time

\(^1\) www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/healthandwellbeing/teenagepregnancy/a0064898/under-18-and-under-16-conception-statistics
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.

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” 3

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.4

![Image showing examples of medical inaccuracies in Lovewise's slides](image)

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.”

“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.

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
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