

Sex and Relationships Education fit for the 21st century

We need it now

Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in the UK is not good enough.

Research shows that schools lack the support, skills or tools to help young people develop safe, healthy relationships. As a result teenagers often leave school ill-prepared to manage this important part of their lives.

The way we are teaching relationships, sex and sexual health, still reflects and perpetuates unhelpful taboos that neither protect nor empower young people. The curriculum focuses on the pure mechanics of reproduction, at the expense of the contextual topics that underpin sex and sexuality – personal confidence, relationships and emotions. Right now, this broader information is taught to varying standards, or too often not at all.

SRE has the potential to allow young people to develop and practise judgement and critical thinking skills as preparation for handling controversial issues in real life. Discussing people's decisions and reactions to situations that include themes such as consent, sexuality and unplanned pregnancy can encourage reflective thinking and decision-making. This makes SRE not simply peripheral to the national curriculum, but a central part of it – helping young people think for themselves and to interpret information, not simply receive it.

We need to talk openly about sex and relationships in ways that have real meaning, and shed the stigma, embarrassment and fear that leaves young people exposed and vulnerable. SRE needs to be recognised as an essential, everyday subject which teaches life skills that are a vital part of personal well-being and happiness.

This is why our young volunteers launched Say YES to 21st century Sex and Relationships Education. The campaign is part of our wider Sex:Positive work to challenge persistent, negative attitudes and approaches to young people's sexuality, information and learning about sex and relationships. Our volunteers' e-petition has gathered over 1500 supporters, while the collected views of thousands of young people form a compelling argument for why SRE needs a radical overhaul and urgent improvement.

If we don't, we will collectively fail young people and we will again miss the opportunity to give young people the SRE they have been telling us at Brook for decades that they need.

It's time to grasp the nettle once and for all, and to treat both SRE and young people with the respect they deserve.

We call on Government to listen to young people, whose voice we have captured in this report, and ensure ALL schools deliver a Sex and Relationships Education curriculum fit for the 21st century.

Simon Blake OBE
Chief Executive
Brook



Unless noted otherwise, all data in this report comes from ResearchBods (formerly Dubit) 'Direct to You' research panel, September 2011. Total sample size was 2,029 14-18 year olds, and figures are representative of all young people in the UK.

Why is Sex and Relationships Education important?

Evidence shows that good quality Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) helps young people develop and manage their emotional and physical well-being. While they can find out about sex and relationships in many ways – including from friends, TV programmes, magazines and the Internet – school SRE has an important role in presenting balanced, factually accurate and positive information that these other sources may not always provide.

But every school teaches SRE, doesn't it?

By law schools must teach the sex education that forms part of the national science curriculum. This includes body parts, puberty, reproduction and, for secondary schools, information about HIV and sexually transmitted diseases and viruses.

Outside these science curriculum topics, schools can offer as much or as little SRE as they choose – and this can mean none at all. Governors decide the policy the school follows and the SRE agenda reflects this. Any non-compulsory SRE teaching is part of the school's wider, programme called Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) Education.

So, not every young person gets the same SRE?

Definitely not. Across the country there is huge inconsistency in SRE teaching. A lucky few get great SRE, but a quarter (26%) of secondary school pupils report getting no SRE in school whatsoever.

For the rest, SRE that falls outside the science curriculum is often a patchwork of occasional lessons led by teachers with no specialist training. A quarter

(26%) of young people who do get SRE in secondary school say their teacher doesn't teach it well.

As a non-compulsory subject, SRE has a low priority in a busy school timetable and there is little time made for discussion. For many young people this creates a crucial gap in their SRE - the opportunity to learn and talk about relationships and emotions in a relevant way.

Although uncommon, parents also presently have the right to withdraw their children from any SRE that is not part of the science curriculum up until they are 19 years old.

Aren't young people exposed to lots of sex information from other places?

Yes, they are – that's part of the problem. It's not the quantity, it's the quality and reliability of the information that counts, and we're failing to give young people the tools to process all the information they encounter.

The lack of relevant SRE in schools and at home means 81% of teenagers are getting most of their sexual health knowledge from less reliable sources, leaving them vulnerable and ill-prepared to navigate their way through relationships. At Brook we know that this gap in quality SRE is being filled by misinformation, picked up anywhere - from rumours passed around at break times between friends, to internet porn.

International research¹ shows that good, planned SRE within schools does not foster promiscuity or irresponsible sex. It is far more likely that young people receiving comprehensive SRE will delay starting sex and use contraception when they do. They are also better able to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, resist pressure to engage in sex before they are ready, and stay safe and healthy.

What do parents think?

Past studies² that an overwhelming majority of parents support SRE in schools and feel it should be part of the national curriculum. Also, most feel strongly that schools have an important role in teaching more than just the biology of sex. Many parents mistakenly assume that schools cover more in SRE classes than they actually do, so don't raise the subject at home themselves.

Who says SRE is failing?

Inspectors

A study published last year by **Ofsted**, the organisation responsible for inspecting standards in England's schools, signalled that Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) is often weak³. In more than a third (34%) of the secondary schools visited, students' knowledge of sex and relationships was found 'no better than satisfactory' or 'inadequate'.

The report comments that in primary schools:

"...Pupils often had only partial understanding. Therefore, a sizeable minority of the pupils, including those going through puberty, lacked a good understanding of emotional changes and their impact on relationships."

And, in secondary schools:

"Students' knowledge and understanding was often good about the biology of sex but weaker about relationships. They said that their Sex and Relationships Education was taught too late and there was not enough of it to be useful. Discussion was sometimes limited because of the teacher's embarrassment or lack of knowledge. In these schools, the students did not have the opportunity to explore the nature of relationships in any depth."

Parents, teachers and governors

Others agree that current SRE teaching is not meeting the needs of young people. In a report recording the views of **parents**, governors and teachers, only 15% of parents, 8% of **teachers** and 7% of **governors** said that current SRE in schools is preparing children 'very well' for the future⁴.

In fact, four in every five teachers said they did not feel sufficiently trained and confident to present SRE topics. They felt further inhibited by a lack of good teaching materials – only 9% of teachers said their available resources were very useful. Nearly 40% admitted that resources were not useful, their school didn't have them or they didn't know how to get them.

1 <http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/documents/teenpreg.pdf>

2 Sex Education Forum GFK NOP Parents' Survey 2006; also, Department for Children, Schools and Families survey

3 Personal, Social Health and Economic Education, Ofsted, July 2010

4 Sex and Relationship Education – a partnership study by Durex, the National Association of Head Teachers, the National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations and the National Governors' Association, October 2010.

"As a non-statutory subject, schools are not always able to put the necessary resources into delivering SRE, and it is often taught by teachers with no formal training, using a 'one size fits all' approach rather than lessons which are personalised to meet the needs of students. With schools and young people under pressure to perform in exams and achieve their potential in core subjects, SRE has a low profile and as a result it tends to be lumped together with other subjects or neglected altogether."

Jo Edwards,
Secondary school Citizenship teacher

"If SRE lessons aren't preparing children and young people properly for life as adults, then they need to be improved. More needs to be done to ensure teachers are trained in how to deliver sex education."

David Butler,
PTA-UK

"The key issues for teachers must be training and resources. It is essential that they are of a standard to allow SRE to be delivered properly. This is an urgent need that must be addressed if we are to prepare young people properly for their futures."

Sion Humphreys,
National Association of Headteachers

"The results show that parents, teachers and governors recognise the importance of SRE. It is vital now to ensure that the tools and training are there to deliver it properly."

Gillian Allcroft,
National Governors Association

But, most importantly, young people themselves say SRE isn't working for them...

Our research gave thousands of young people the chance to voice their opinions about current Sex and Relationships Education (SRE).

We asked...

What do you think of SRE at your school?

Nearly half (47%) of secondary school pupils say that SRE doesn't cover what they really need to know about sex.

One in four (26%) say they don't get any SRE in school at all. Of those that do, a quarter (26%) say their SRE teacher isn't able to teach it well.

On average, one out of five young people (22%) rate their SRE as poor or very poor.

Where do you get your sex information from?

Only 13% of young people say their main source is their SRE teacher. And just 6% get most of their information from either mum or dad.

46% of young people learn most about sex from their peers, including boyfriends and girlfriends.

8% say they learn mostly from TV, and another 8% from sexual health websites.

5% of young people say they learn most about sex from online porn.

And learning about relationships?

Only 6% of young people say they get most of their relationships information from their SRE teachers.

Mums and dads do slightly better, with 15% of young people saying they learn most about relationships from either one or both parents.

Friends, including boyfriends or girlfriends, are, as before, the most popular source of information. 56% of young people say they learn most about relationships from their peer group.

Psst..did you hear that...

Sex and relationships information from outside school or home isn't always wrong, but a lack of reliable facts makes a fertile breeding ground for myths, rumour and misinformation. Of the young people we asked:

- 59% had heard pregnancy can't happen if a man withdraws before he ejaculates.
- 58% had heard women cannot get pregnant during their period.
- 25% had heard women can't get pregnant if they have sex standing up.
- 33% had heard pregnancy can't happen if it's the woman's first time.
- 25% had heard you only get HIV from gay sex.

Given the results of our survey, is it any surprise more than four out of five young people say schools should listen to their views about SRE and the teaching they need?

Young people tell it how it is...

"My school didn't offer SRE classes until Year 11, when I was 15 going on 16, by which time I was pregnant so it was too late. I wasn't allowed to take part in lessons as the teacher said it wouldn't be relevant for me, so I had to look elsewhere for information which was often incorrect."

Yessica, 18

"I do not blame school for my decisions...but if I was taught SRE sooner and had honest, accurate information when I needed it, I would have made different choices."

"I worked as a sex ed advisor. We had people writing up their anonymous sexual health questions and then we'd sit there and answer them and it worked really well."

Alice G, 16

"I just think it would make it a lot easier for people not to feel pressured about being gay if it was included in sex education and relationships."

Lauren, 19

"I think there's a hard balance between trying to stop teenage pregnancy but supporting people in that situation. When you help someone who is pregnant you can be seen to be helping them without being seen to encourage it."

Poppie, 16

"Once we got an acting group in, and they did a play about a relationship and how it had affected them and their social circles. And then they did a Q&A so that was good."

William, 15

"I think of all the sex education lessons I've had, probably 60 to 70% of them have been about STIs."

Billy, 15

"My sex ed was really awful. The first time I had sex ed, we watched about half way through the video and our teacher said it was just too rude and fast-forwarded it. And then my teacher didn't know how to put a condom on to a dildo. He messed up about three of them, and it was really awkward."

Max, 16

"This young person came in to us, they showed us things about getting tested – like where you go and what happens, which I thought was quite good because I'd never really known about any of that."

Alice N, 17

"I think that highlighting the difficulty of parenthood would be really good. A lot of people that I know left school at 16 and quite a few of them have kids and I'm sure some of them are happy but I'm sure a lot of them as well have found it really difficult because you don't realise how difficult it is having kids until you've had one."

Lauren, 19

Say YES to 21st century SRE

This is what the thousands of young people we've spoken to have to say:

Successive governments have failed to deal with inconsistent, poor quality SRE. It's time to stop kicking it down the road like a tin can. Good SRE is a crucial part of our development and its impact lasts for life.

We need a Sex: Positive future. One where young people can get open and honest information about sex and relationships and develop their sexuality in a way that is right for them. Learning needs to be real and relevant, and taught by people with professional training.

What young people want:

- **Teaching without embarrassment:** 86% want an SRE teacher who is not embarrassed to answer any question asked by a pupil in the lesson. This is because 79% say SRE lessons are a chance to ask questions they can't ask at home.
- **In everyday language:** 83% want SRE teachers to talk using everyday language they understand.
- **Input into SRE lessons:** 82% want schools to listen to what they want when deciding what is covered in SRE.
- **Training for teachers:** 76% think the teacher taking SRE should be specifically trained.
- **Delivered in smaller groups:** 55% want SRE taught in small groups rather than a whole class together, although only 33% think boys and girls should be taught SRE separately.

It's not simply sex, it's the missing R - relationships

Time and again young people tell us it's the contextual knowledge that underpins sex that they want, not more information about sex itself. They need to know more about personal body confidence, forming relationships and managing personal feelings.

Just look at the **top 10 responses** we got when we asked young people what they wanted 21st century SRE classes to cover:

- 72% said **body confidence**
- 71% said **how to avoid peer pressure to have sex**
- 69% said **how to treat a boyfriend or girlfriend**
- 65% said **love**
- 61% said **virginity**
- 60% said **whether I am feeling the same as others my own age**
- 58% said **sexual attraction**
- 56% said **how to behave in a relationship**
- 54% said **whether my experiences are similar to others my own age**
- 52% said **homosexuality**

Young people also want quality teaching to include the methods they prefer: in-class videos; open or anonymous Q&A sessions; and external speakers.

When do we want 21st century SRE? **Now!**
Learn more and join our campaign at

www.sexpositive.org.uk

Brook's recommendations

The current standard of Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in schools is too varied. Many young people are missing out on important areas of SRE with consequent impacts on their ability to make positive choices about their relationships and sexual health.

SRE that is not part of the science curriculum is discretionary and the pressures on school timetables, coupled with lack of training and support for teachers, means it does not always get the attention it deserves.

Above all, we are not listening to what young people repeatedly tell us about SRE and what they say they need from it. And with the UK a long-standing signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that sets out the importance of involving children and young people in decisions that affect them, we are failing.

Changing how we teach SRE is fundamental to creating a Sex:Positive society, one that deals with sex and relationships in an upfront, frank way, so young people move through adolescence into adulthood safely and confidently.

We welcome the Government's review of PSHE education, and recommend the following actions to improve sex and relationships teaching in schools:

- 1. Make SRE compulsory in ALL schools and protected by law.** This will make sure that young people receive SRE as a right, teachers are trained in SRE, and action can be taken if provision is inadequate.
- 2. Put young people at the centre of SRE content development,** and consult them about both creating national guidance and making local policy within schools.
- 3. Create formal SRE teaching qualifications** that will help develop high-quality leadership, management and teaching of SRE.
- 4. Make SRE right for the age, maturity and understanding of both children and young people,** and make sure the learning is as rigorous and as challenging as all other subjects in the curriculum.

We need to start by teaching primary children about friendships, feelings, boundaries, names of body parts and the physical and emotional changes experienced during puberty.

Secondary school SRE teaching needs to focus on relationships as well as the biological aspects of sex. Topics should include body confidence, respect and consent, sexuality, pregnancy and pregnancy choices, risk-taking and how to communicate and interpret personal feelings and emotions.

These recommendations form part of our formal, more detailed response to Government's review of PSHE. You can get this document from www.brook.org.uk



Brook helps young people make informed, active choices about their personal and sexual relationships so they can enjoy their sexuality without harm.

We are the UK's leading provider of sexual health services for young people under 25. Run as a charity, we offer services in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Jersey. Our work reaches over 300,000 young people every year.

**Brook
421 Highgate Studios
53-79 Highgate Road
London NW5 1TL**

**Tel: 020 7284 6040
Fax: 020 7284 6050
Email: admin@brook.org.uk**

**Ask Brook helpline: 0808 802 1234
Text Ask Brook: 07717 989 023 (standard SMS rates apply)**

**Website: www.brook.org.uk
Twitter @BrookCharity
Facebook: BrookCharity**

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