

Understanding Sex & Relationships Education

A Sex Education Forum briefing

The Sex Education Forum believes that all children and young people are entitled to quality sex and relationships education (SRE). SRE is the joint responsibility of schools, parents, carers and communities and is an important element of children's and young people's development.

The following overview sets out what SRE is, why it is important and the principles and values that should underpin good quality SRE in a variety of settings.

What is sex and relationships education?

Sex and relationships education (SRE) is learning about the emotional, social and physical aspects of growing up, relationships, sex, human sexuality and sexual health*. It should equip children and young people with the information, skills and values to have safe, fulfilling and enjoyable relationships and to take responsibility for their sexual health and well-being.

Why is SRE important for children and young people?

Sexual development and intimate relationships are fundamental aspects of human life, yet many people find them difficult to talk about. Adult embarrassment can prevent children and young people getting honest answers to their questions. Many children go through puberty and adolescence without a basic understanding about how their bodies work.

Children absorb ideas, attitudes and beliefs about sex and relationships from their family, friends and community – even when no-one at home talks about it.

Advertising, TV, radio, magazines, newspapers, video games, music videos, the internet and mobile phones all communicate messages that suggest what is 'acceptable', or 'desirable' for relationships, our bodies and sex.

In the 21st century SRE in schools and at home is more important than ever. It ensures that children and young people have a source of reliable information and an opportunity to explore the messages they are receiving in a safe learning environment.

Good quality SRE provides structured learning opportunities with consistent messages that are built on year by year. SRE needs to start early in primary school so that children and young people learn what is safe and unsafe and can get help if they need it. SRE helps children and young people to understand themselves and others and to be prepared for the physical and emotional changes of puberty and adolescence. Young people will be more prepared to take responsibility for and enjoy sexual and emotional relationships free from exploitation.

SRE makes an important contribution to well-being by supporting children and young people's ability to learn, achieve and flourish. In recent years, schools have been expected to promote children's well-being as well as their achievements.

The UN convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by the UK, states that children and young people have the following rights, which support the provision of sex and relationships education.

Children and young people have the right to:

- > access information that will allow them to make decisions about their health (Article 17)
- > enjoy the highest attainable health, access to health facilities, preventative health care, and family planning education and services (Article 24)
- > be heard, express opinions and be involved in decision-making (Article 12)
- > education to help them learn, develop and reach their full potential and prepare them to be understanding and tolerant to others (Article 29)
- > not be discriminated against (Article 2)
- > government protection from sexual abuse and exploitation (Article 34).

What is the evidence that SRE works?

National and international research shows that good quality SRE has a protective function as young people who have had good SRE are more likely to choose to have first sex later (Kirby 2007). All those involved in sex and relationships education want young people to wait until they are ready before they start having sex. For some young people, this may not be until they get married – but it is vital that all young people are helped to develop the emotional skills needed to make responsible choices.

Research also shows that young people who have attended a good quality SRE programme are more likely to use condoms and contraception if they do have sex (Kirby 2007). In contrast, there is evidence that education programmes that focus only on an abstinence message do not have positive effects on young people's behaviour. So a broad programme of SRE is absolutely essential.

Good quality SRE is not the only thing that young people need to support them to be sexually healthy and safe. Young people also need to be able to

access sexual health and contraceptive services in places that are convenient to them and to be supported in their emotional development and self-esteem. Research carried out in England has found that areas of the country that have achieved the greatest reductions in teenage conception rates in recent years have provided both good quality school SRE as well as accessible services for young people (DfES 2006).

Who supports quality SRE?

There is a high level of public and professional support for quality SRE. The Sex Education Forum (SEF) and its members (Martinez 2006), which includes representatives from children's, parents', disability, education, health and faith-based organisations, as well as teachers, young people and parents have all called for SRE to be improved (SRE Review Steering Group 2008, DCSF 2008).

What is the role of schools, parents & carers and the community?

SRE should come from a variety of sources with contributions from schools, the community, parents and carers. Each has an important and complementary role in SRE.

Children and young people are clear that they want an open channel of communication with their parents and carers about sex and relationships. Parents and carers consistently show support for SRE but many feel they lack the skills, confidence and knowledge to talk to their children – they look to professionals for support. Schools and parents need to work together to make sure children and young people get the information and support they need.

Communities shape the realities of children and young people's experiences and can also be a rich resource for SRE. Youth groups provide an ideal setting for informal SRE in small groups and an opportunity to explore particular viewpoints of different faiths and beliefs. Visitors from community organisations can also make a valuable contribution to classroom SRE by relating sex and relationships issues to cultural and

social contexts. Partnerships with cultural and faith groups on SRE can help build stronger communities.

It is important that all schools provide SRE because it is the one place that reaches almost all children and young people. The classroom environment makes it possible for a peer group to hear each others' views and ideas in a safe space facilitated by a skilled teacher who can access up-to-date information and teaching materials.

How do I plan for quality SRE ?

Children and young people have told us that there is still a big gap between the SRE they need and what they are getting in schools. SRE in England is inconsistent, with some schools offering an excellent planned programme and others choosing to teach nothing more than the biological basics of human reproduction in science.

The Sex Education Forum has campaigned for SRE to be a compulsory subject in schools. But as well as being an

entitlement for all children and young people, SRE must be taught by trained and competent teachers – who can make the learning experience rich and positive.

SRE will flourish when it is supported by school leaders, taught by trained teachers, and is responsive to the needs of children and young people. It is at its best when it is a living process of learning, reflection and development. The structures and systems for teaching SRE that are listed below are based on evidence of good practice and recommendations from young people, Sex Education Forum and Ofsted (2007, 2010).

Leadership for SRE

Where leadership is in place at a local level, schools and other youth settings benefit from a network of support in sharing teaching materials, good practice, SRE policies and curricula, training opportunities and consultation and evaluation processes. Head teachers and governors have an important leadership role in demonstrating the value of SRE, supporting staff and listening to parents, carers and young people.

What are the principles and values which underpin quality SRE?

The Sex Education Forum believes that quality SRE should:

- > be accurate and factual, covering a comprehensive range of information about sex, relationships, the law and sexual health, in order to make informed choices. In schools this should be part of compulsory curriculum provision
- > be positively inclusive in terms of gender, sexual orientation*, disability, ethnicity, culture, age, religion or belief or other life-experience, particularly HIV status and pregnancy
- > include the development of skills to support healthy and safe relationships and ensure good communication about these issues
- > promote a critical awareness of the different attitudes and views on sex and relationships within society such as peer norms and those portrayed in the media
- > provide opportunities for reflection in order to nurture personal values based on mutual respect and care
- > be part of lifelong learning, starting early in childhood and continuing throughout life. It should reflect the age and level of the learner
- > ensure children and young people are clearly informed of their rights*, such as how they can access confidential advice and health services within the boundaries of safeguarding
- > be relevant and meet the needs of children and young people, and actively involve them as participants, advocates and evaluators in developing good quality provision
- > be delivered by competent and confident educators
- > be provided within a learning environment which is safe for the children, young people and adults involved and based on the principle that prejudice, discrimination and bullying are harmful and unacceptable.

SRE policy in place

Developing a clear SRE policy provides an opportunity to consult with children and young people, parents and carers, community members and relevant professionals. The policy can explain how the teaching of SRE is consistent with the ethos and values of the school (or other setting).

A developmental curriculum

Good quality SRE starts early in childhood ensuring that children develop the language and skills to talk about emotions, relationships and their bodies. A timetabled SRE programme with clear learning outcomes ensures regular and repeated input that builds year on year.

SRE in context

A well designed SRE programme should make links with other topics such as emotional health, self-esteem and body image, and the association between alcohol and sexual behaviour. Cross-curricular links with subjects such as English, citizenship and RE, and 'themed topics' help provide a context for SRE. Children and young people also want SRE to relate to real life.

Young people involved in design and development

SRE should be based on the actual needs of children and young people so that it is relevant to their lives. Children and young people can be consulted through focus groups, questionnaires, discussion in class and the school council.

Partnership with parents and carers

From early years upwards parents welcome information about the teaching materials used and the topics covered in SRE with suggestions for how they can take an active role and follow up at home. Homework tasks and feedback on pupil progress provide opportunities for dialogue about SRE between children, parents and carers and school.

Staff trained and supported

Effective teachers of SRE want to teach the subject and are trained and supported to do so. Training and ongoing CPD ensures that staff have specialised subject knowledge, the skills and confidence to facilitate participative learning and to manage personal boundaries.

A safe learning environment

A safe learning environment that promotes open and non-judgmental discussions about sex and relationships is needed for every SRE lesson. Use of a group agreement helps establish acceptable boundaries, promote respect for each others' views and supports anti-discriminatory practice.

Participative learning methods

The knowledge and beliefs that young people bring to the classroom should be the starting point for SRE. Varied and interactive teaching methods should be used which give young people opportunities to express their own ideas, learn about the views of their peers and to reflect on discussions. Examples include activities in pairs and groups, games, class discussions and role play. Good quality SRE is also fun!

One-to-one help available

Teachers need to be prepared to refer pupils for one-to-one help after SRE lessons if necessary. Expert help from a trained professional, such as a school nurse, should ideally be available and learning about where pupils can get help should be included within the curriculum. Targeted SRE for small groups of children and young people, provided by trained professionals or support staff can make it easier for some children and young people to participate and can help to address health inequalities.

Routine assessment

Assessment as part of each SRE unit checks if the intended learning has been achieved. SRE can be assessed through quizzes, portfolios and observation. Schools may also consider end of year tests and some education providers run awards and certificates at various levels, which provides an accreditation system.

Evaluation and development

The SRE curriculum and policy should be reviewed regularly to respond to children's and young people's changing needs. Young people can evaluate SRE using participative activities, see for example the SRE audit toolkit *Are you getting it right?* (Martinez and de Meza 2008). Regular reporting to school governors helps to ensure accountability and dialogue with teachers, parents and young people about how subject delivery can be improved. Teachers need to evaluate the success of the programme in terms of how it relates to perceived needs. Subject leads need to monitor the delivery of the programme to ensure that what is supposed to be delivered is being delivered to all pupils and to make judgements about the quality of that delivery.

Community engagement

Professionals with particular areas of expertise can enrich a programme of SRE that is planned and managed by a teacher. Members of the community who are trained and supported to work with children and young people can share and reflect on their knowledge, real-life experience and the beliefs and culture of the communities in which they live. Classroom input by staff from local health services can help build the confidence and knowledge of children and young people to use local services if and when they need to.

Common myths relating to SRE

MYTH

There is no evidence that SRE works.

REALITY

This is FALSE.

There is good international evidence that SRE, particularly when linked to contraceptive services, can have a positive impact on young people's knowledge and attitudes, delay sexual activity and/or reduce pregnancy rates (Kirby 2007).

MYTH

SRE encourages early sexual experimentation.

REALITY

This is FALSE.

There is no evidence to support the view that increased provision of SRE reduces the age of onset of sexual activity or increases the frequency of sex or the number of sexual partners (Kirby 2008). In fact, the evidence suggests that the opposite is true.

MYTH

SRE will make children lose their innocence; they don't need this kind of information.

REALITY

This is FALSE.

Children need good quality age appropriate SRE, not only to answer their questions, but also to provide balance to the range of often misleading and inappropriate messages about sex in the media and other sources. Good quality SRE provides children with factually correct information and helps them to challenge misinformation. Quality SRE is protective, especially to help younger children be safe.

MYTH

The best sex education is telling young people not to have sex. Teaching them about contraception will just encourage them to have sex.

REALITY

This is FALSE.

All parents and professionals want young people to wait until they are ready to have sex. This message forms the basis of all good quality comprehensive SRE programmes. There is good evidence to show that just telling young people not to have sex, without providing them with any information about contraception is not effective in changing behavior in the long term. Also, teaching young people about contraception does not contradict messages about delaying first sex (Kirby 2008).

Learning about growing up, relationships and sex from 3-19

The following summary can help parents and carers, schools and other educators understand what children and young people want to learn about in relation to growing up, relationships and sex from ages 3-19**. Schools can use these questions to help design their programme of work. In addition we would recommend consulting pupils to ensure the curriculum meets their particular needs.

→ Age 3-6

At this age children are interested in the differences between boys and girls, naming body parts, where babies come from, and friends and family. What areas of the body are private and should not be touched and who they can talk to if they are worried are also important.

→ Age 7-8

At this age children are interested in the changing nature of friendships, the emotional and physical changes of growing up, similarities and differences between boys and girls, coping with strong emotions and how babies are made from eggs and sperm. How to look after our bodies and how to be safe and healthy are also important.

→ Age 9-10

At this age children are interested in knowing about love and the different kinds of families, they will be curious about puberty and sexual feelings and changing body image. They will want more details about conception, how babies develop and are born and why families are important for having babies. They will be interested in knowing about how people can get diseases, including HIV, from sex and how they can be prevented. They will also want to know who they can talk to if they want help or advice and information about puberty and sex.

→ Age 11-13

At this age most young people will be entering puberty and will be interested in hormones, how they will be affected by them, the menstrual cycle, wet dreams, erections, fertility, pregnancy – how it can be avoided,

and safer sex. They may also be wondering if their physical development is 'normal'. They will want to know about the difference between sexual attraction and love and whether it is normal to be attracted or in love with someone of the same gender. Young people will be asking questions about relationships, when is the right time to have sex, how to avoid pressure and where they can get more information if they need it, including the best websites, confidential services etc.

→ Age 14-16

At this age some young people will either be sexually experimental or know friends who are. They will be interested to know what they should expect of a partner and how to talk to them. They will need more information on contraception, sexual health and how to access services. They will want to know about different types of relationships and homophobia. They may want to know about how to cope with strong feelings and how to cope with the pressures to have sex. They will start to ask questions about parenthood and may like to know how they can talk to their own parents or a trusted adult. They will also be interested in other influences on sexual decision making such as the law, different cultures and religious beliefs, pornography, the media and the effects of drugs and alcohol.

→ Age 16-19 (and beyond)

At this age young people are at the legal age of consent and many, but not all, will be in intimate relationships and will be interested to know about the challenges of long-term commitments and the qualities needed for successful loving relationships. They will be interested in what issues can be difficult to talk about in intimate relationships, for example sexual pleasure and contraception and how this can be addressed. They will be interested to know more about being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Young people at this age will need more information on sexual risk, pregnancy, sexual health, fertility and infertility. They will be keen to discuss gender stereotyping, violence, exploitation, the law, and discrimination. Learning about the relationship between self esteem and body image and how to challenge negative messages from peers, the media and society is also important.



Who is the Sex Education Forum?

The Sex Education Forum is a unique collaboration of organisations and practitioners who believe that ALL children and young people are entitled to good quality sex and relationships education in a variety of settings. For more information about the work of the Forum, our resources and who our members are visit www.sexeducationforum.org.uk

Are you working to improve the quality of SRE for children and young people?

Why not join the Sex Education Forum?

Being a member can help you to:

- > exchange ideas and practice with hundreds of other professionals delivering SRE
- > be up-to-date with SRE news via email
- > get quick links to national policy and guidance on SRE
- > know about new research and statistics
- > have a voice in national policy
- > be part of discussions about new and challenging ideas on SRE.

Our members are vital to our work, and we welcome new members who are actively involved in and want to make a positive contribution to quality SRE. Through collaboration we create a stronger voice for all children and young people's entitlement to quality SRE.

We have three types of membership: **Core**, **Associate** and **Network Membership**. For more information visit www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/membership or email sefmembership@ncb.org.uk

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Footnotes

* For a list of full definitions for the terms used above visit: http://www.ncb.org.uk/sef/about_us/what_we_do/values_and_principles.aspx

** For a full list see 'Children and young people's questions about growing up, relationships and sex' www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/resources

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