

OPEN SEASON

THE KEY OBJECTIVE FOR SEX EDUCATION SHOULD BE TO COVER WHAT STUDENTS WANT – AS WELL AS WHAT THEY NEED – TO KNOW, SAYS **LUCY EMMERSON...**

Embarrassing or enlightening? What is your experience of teaching SRE? Being asked to provide cover for a sex and relationships education (SRE) class at the last minute is at best an inconvenience and at worst an awkward and embarrassing ordeal for teachers. Like any subject, SRE is best when taught by teachers who are willing and interested in the subject and are specially trained.

Nationally, the standard of SRE provision is not good enough. It is hardly surprising that Ofsted found a third of schools have inadequate SRE given that many teachers haven't had training in the subject. Another obstacle is the fact that requirements for teaching SRE are arguably more complicated and convoluted than for any other subject. However, schools have a statutory obligation to promote pupil well-being and to 'prepare pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life'; and high-quality SRE is a critical element of delivering on those objectives. While the Department for Education is clear that schools are free to develop their own PSHE programme to reflect the needs of their

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pupils, any school that provides SRE has a statutory duty to have 'due regard' to the Secretary of State's guidance on Sex and Relationship Education (DfEE, 2000).

So there is a green light from government to provide SRE, but how much is provided is left to individual schools to decide. Part of the problem is that the statutory guidance published in 2000 lags behind the times and fails to address key topics such as sexual consent and the impact of the internet. Furthermore, Ofsted expressed concern that secondary schools tend to shy away from addressing certain issues in SRE such as the use of homophobic language, pornography, domestic violence and sexual exploitation.

The Sex Education Forum recently surveyed almost 900 young people and found that they were more likely to have learnt technical and legal facts, such as the age of consent, but really wanted a chance to discuss real-life

relationship scenarios and what to do 'if something happens'. There was also a recurring concern that SRE neglected LGBT issues – effectively making young LGBT people invisible. Young people also suggested that the default tone in SRE is negative and that it would be good to learn about emotions and pleasure.

Have you asked pupils to prioritise topics they want to learn more about?

If the idea of talking about emotions with a class of teenagers fills you with horror it may be that you need to spend some time thinking about distancing techniques and safe boundaries for discussion. Pupils must be reminded that lessons are not a place to discuss their personal experiences and issues – or to ask others to do so – through the establishment of ground rules or a working agreement.

Making SRE inclusive is also part of the fabric of good SRE practice and ground rules should include respectful behaviour and language. It's important to be consistent in sticking to the rules. One teacher remembers the day a pupil used homophobic language in her SRE lesson. As the class had already agreed that this was unacceptable and had included the point in their ground rules for SRE, there was a class consensus that the individual should leave the lesson. The teacher followed up with a one-to-one discussion with the pupil. After that, his behaviour was perfect. He didn't want to miss the SRE lesson again because it was just too enjoyable and informative!

Teachers should never assume that all intimate relationships are between opposite sexes. All sexual health information should be inclusive and should include LGBT people in case studies and scenarios. Pupils can explore topics from a different gender's point of view. Inclusive SRE will foster good relations between pupils, tackle all types of prejudice and promote understanding and respect, enabling schools to meet the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and to feel the benefits in school life.

Remember that curiosity about sex is natural, but basic information about the sexual parts of our body often gets neglected. Bearing





this in mind, it's worth asking if there is any learning about anatomy or explanation of sexual pleasure included in the school SRE programme. Reflecting on her school SRE one young woman told us: "there wasn't any suggestion that we might *want* to have sex". Sexual response, orgasm and masturbation can be explained quite factually, but if they are ignored it leaves a gap in young people's learning. Teachers can't assume that students will arrive at secondary school with the basics in place because primary schools sometimes fail to prepare pupils adequately for puberty or to teach correct names for genitalia. In fact an introduction to basic anatomy including labelling the vulva and clitoris – which may not feature in text book diagrams of the menstrual cycle – will guarantee an attentive class.

Young people say that SRE needs to be relevant to real life. Using techniques that allow pupils to draw on their existing knowledge and experiences helps achieve this. For example, rather than setting up a moral and abstract debate about different pregnancy choices, consider using an activity that encourages pupils to empathise with real-life pregnancy dilemmas. It is also vital to include information about where help is available locally and how to get it. When examining any topic in SRE, but especially an issue like pregnancy choices, the teacher needs to help pupils to keep fact and opinion separate.

Young people told us that teaching about consent needed to be part of a continuum of

learning about how to deal with emotional pressure, sexual assault and rape. Again, there is a need to link learning to real-life situations, and the practical information and skills needed to cope 'if something happens'. The level of reporting of incidents of sexual violence is very low, and in the Sex Education Forum survey we found that knowledge about local services – both for sexual health and support in the event of sexual assault – were lower than knowledge of legal facts. School lessons not only need to provide signposting to services, but to nurture health literacy skills and the confidence needed to use a service, for example by role-playing a conversation between a young person and a nurse or receptionist.

There is a lot to do to get SRE up to standard – but help is at hand. Recognising the need for up-to-date information, Brook, the PSHE Association and the Sex Education Forum have

worked together to produce Supplementary Advice to help bring SRE into the 21st Century. The Advice provides information to teachers on topics that are missing from the current government guidance including pornography, technology, consent and violence in relationships. It also provides numerous links for further support and resources and gives clear information about how to teach topics such as 'sexting' and how to make SRE inclusive. It is freely available to all schools via the Brook, PSHE Association and Sex Education Forum websites: sexeducationforum.org.uk/resources/sre-advice-for-schools.aspx. To become part of a community of people committed to improving SRE join the Sex Education Forum's network (sexeducationforum.org.uk/membership.aspx), which provides regular updates on SRE, free resources and ongoing support. We look forward to hearing from you.

★ 6 THINGS YOUNG PEOPLE SAY THEY WANT FROM SRE

1. Treat LGBT issues better
Are you using scenarios that include LGBT young people?
2. Explain pleasure
Does teaching about the body include discussion about sensuality and the sexual response including masturbation and orgasm?
3. Teach us the practicalities of health and services
Have you contacted the school nurse and local sexual health service and asked how they can contribute to SRE?
4. Go into more depth about consent, assault and rape
Do your lessons challenge victim blaming and rape culture? Have you discussed what coercive behaviour is and how to recognise it?
5. Keep technology and the law in balance with other things we need to learn
6. More about emotions and relationship realities, please
Have you used distancing techniques like role play, scenarios, advice columns, and pictures to explore people's different points of view and feelings in relationships?