

Sexual Health Special Interest Group

Professional Briefing Number 1: Sex and Relationship Education

Introduction

This is the first briefing from the Faculty of Public Health Sexual Health Special Interest Group and is designed to bring together information from experts and evidence on subjects. This briefing will look at sex and relationship education (SRE) in schools. It includes articles from the PSHE Association, the Sex Education Forum and those working in the field delivering SRE within England.

Sex and Relationship Education provides children and young people with information, skills and values to make informed choices and take responsibility for their sexual health. As well as contributing to behaviour change (use of condom and contraceptives, reducing the frequency of unprotected sex, and reducing the number of sexual partners), SRE also has a very important part to play in safeguarding (reducing harmful behaviours such as abuse, assault and predatory relationships)[[1]](#footnote-1). There is an argument access to information on sex and reproductive health is essential for young people’ health and development and is enshrined in the human rights outlined by UNESCO in 2000 and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2003[[2]](#footnote-2).

Writing for UNESCO, Kirby (2011) states that by reaching young people, as or shortly after entering puberty, schools can provide them with the information and skills they need to make responsible decisions about their future sexual lives. School also provide the best venue to reach large numbers of young people with different socio-economic backgrounds via structured programmes which are replicable and sustainable.

In reviewing evidence from 97 international studies, Kirby concluded that sexual education based on a comprehensive curriculum can delay onset of sexual activity, reduce the frequency of intercourse, reduce the frequency of unprotected sex, and reduce the number of sexual partners and increase condom and contraceptive use. The review also highlighted that sexual education programmes do not shown any increase in sexual activity amongst young people; this is echoed in evidence reviews by other researchers[[3]](#footnote-3). However, he also found many limitations on the programmes being reviewed poor evaluation designs, small samples, lack of adjust results for multiple analyses, and no long term studies to identify whether the SRE had an impact on teenage pregnancy or sexually transmitted infection rates.

The House of Commons Education Select Committee during their 2014-15 session gathered evidence on SRE and PSHE in schools. In reviewing the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal) is was identified that men and women who said that lessons at school were there main source of information about sex were more likely to have started having sex at a later age than those for whom parents or other sources were their main sources, even after taking account of age and educational level[[4]](#footnote-4).

However, the Education Committee also found that Ofsted had reported in May 2013 that learning in PSHE required improvement or was inadequate in 40% of schools surveyed and that SRE required improvement in over a third of schools. Evidence provided by a UK Youth Parliament survey of over 21,000 young people in 2006-7 found that 40% of the respondents thought that SRE they had received was poor or very poor and 43% had not received any information about personal relationships. The 2014 Health Behavior in School Aged Children survey found that only 47% of 11, 13 and 15 year olds in England felt that sex and relationships issues were very well covered by PSHE lessons.

In its 2015 Heads or Tails survey[[5]](#footnote-5) the Sex Education Forum found that only 31% of young people rated their school SRE as good or very good; 16% had not learnt the correct names for genitalia at primary school, 60% had not learn about the difference between safe and unwanted touching. Fewer than 50% of students had learnt how to tell when a relationship is healthy and 75% hadn’t learnt about FGM. In a supplementary report on puberty education[[6]](#footnote-6), Sex Education Forum found that 24% of female respondents hadn’t learned about periods before they started having periods.

Sex and relationship education is not a statutory subject in the UK. The Sex Education Forum report emphasises that there has never been a consistently applied policy on SRE in England to ensure that all children and young people get a basic level of education about sex, relationships, the law and safety from sexual abuse. There is a major variation in the quality and extent of SRE in schools (Sex Education Forum, 2015). In Wales and Scotland guidance on SRE has been produced by the devolved government, which supports teachers in developing curriculum.

The House of Commons Education Select Committee concluded that measuring specific outcomes from the provision of PSHE [and SRE] is challenging but the context is a wide range of pressures and risks to health which young people are exposed. They have a right to information that will keep them healthy and safe. Delivery is particularly important for the most vulnerable children. Schools need to provide this information, and to develop the resilience and character of young people.

It is important to note that SRE on its own is not enough. Access to sexual health and contraception services in convenient locations is also vital and this can continue to contribute to early reporting of sexual abuse, reduced unplanned pregnancies, prevention and early identification of STIs and reducing the gap in health inequalities (Sex Education Forum, 2015).

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Coordinator, FPH Sexual Health SIG

Case Study: Shropshire Respect Yourself: Relationship and Sex Education

The Shropshire Respect Yourself RSE curriculum year 6-11 won the Pamela Sheridan award for innovation in 2012 and received the PSHE Association quality kite mark in 2013. The primary curriculum Respect Yourself: Eat Better, Move More, RSE was a finalist in 2015. It provides primary and secondary schools with a spiral, cross phase scheme of work. Schools only receive the resource once they have committed to teacher delivery of five one-hour lessons for each year group. Heads and governors receive advice and support to adopt a whole school approach, consistent with related policies, pastoral care, and on site school based services (such as school nurse drop ins etc.) as well as outside agencies. They are supported to ensure that the taught curriculum is congruent with the lived curriculum and to strengthen home school partnership.

Parents’ sessions are held and training for staff, teaching and non-teaching staff is provided. The resources include assessment and a tracking methodology, which enables vulnerable pupils to be identified. Pupil consultation, feedback and review as well as, differentiated learning and interactive techniques to address skills and attitudes are integral. Since the programme was introduced in 2010, the under 16 rate for teenage pregnancy has decreased. 85%of all primaries have adopted the programmed and all state seconadries and two private schools are delivering the programme.

In addition to the RSE work Shropshire helped develop the emotional and mental health curriculum for the PHE Association, piloted with 35 schools and over 2,000 primary pupils and 10 seconadries consulted on the key stage 3 and 4 materials. This work along with updated drug and alcohol policy guidelines, training on LGBT RSE inclusive approaches and a transgender policy supports and complements the relationship and sex education programme, helping children and young people in Shropshire develop healthy relationships, a strong sense of identity and resilience as well as confidence to ask for help, advice and support.

It is recognised that this work contributes to the Council’s strategic and objectives, especially safeguarding and emotional health and wellbeing. Questions on RSE policy and practice are part of schools annual Safeguarding Section 11 statutory reporting process, and are included in Governor link training. The Director of Children Services and Public Health and members receive regular briefings and reports go to Children’s Trust, Child Sexual Exploitation group and Scrutiny. The young people group for the Shropshire Safeguarding Children Board, Members of Youth Parliament, Health Champions and the X,Y,Z ( LGBT youth group ) inform the RSE/PSHE work on a ongoing basis. They have developed a RSE pledge and good practice guidelines for PSHE which schools are being encouraged to use to audit their practice.

Visit <http://www.healthyshropshire.co.uk/topics/sexual-health/relationships-and-sex-education/> for more details and video of schools ' reflection on the RSE programme

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**SRE in England**

Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education is the school subject which prepares young people for life and work in this changing world, helping to keep pupils safe, healthy and boosting their life chances. In England it is the subject through which relationships and sex education (RSE) is taught, and the wider PSHE education curriculum also covers often related areas such as physical and mental health, safety (online and offline)challenging extremism and radicalisation as well as employability and careers.

Despite this breadth, PSHE education is not a parade of topics. Rather, it is a holistic subject designed to develop skills and attributes – for example confidence, communication, resilience and an understanding of risk – that can be applied to various aspects of young people’s lives, from healthy relationships to responsible decisions about drugs and alcohol.

PSHE education is currently a non-statutory subject and as a result provision is patchy and the subject is squeezed from the curriculum in many schools. This also means that schools are really only obliged to address the biological aspects of relationships and sex education – such as reproduction and some information on STIs– covered in the Science curriculum, but not aspects such as healthy, safe relationships, sexual health, body image, and dealing with the prevalence of online pornography; and how these aspects relate to other aspects of PSHE education, such as mental health.

The Government’s recent measures to improve on PSHE education and RSE are therefore a welcome step in the right direction as they have decided that RSE will be statutory on the curriculum from 2019 in all secondary schools and ‘relationships education’ will be statutory in all primary schools, with a consultation process on the nature and content of these proposals due to begin soon. The Government has also expressed its support for making PSHE education in its entirety statutory from 2019, though this will be decided following consultation.

This is a great opportunity for meaningful change, though there is much work to be done to ensure the proposals meet their potential. The consultation details are yet to be announced, but one concern is the possibility of RSE, relationships education and PSHE being treated as separate subject areas. This is unclear from the proposals as they stand. As the national body for PSHE education, we – along with RSE experts such as the Sex Education Forum and national head teachers union NAHT – are firm in our belief that RSE continues to be delivered in the context of broader PSHE education to ensure its effectiveness, given the overlap with other parts of the PSHE curriculum.

We will also be keen to ensure that the proposals are strong enough from a safeguarding perspective to ensure pupils of all ages are supported with the knowledge and skills that help keep them healthy, informed and safe from harm.

You can keep up to date with the latest on this and other PSHE education and RSE news by visiting us at: <https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/news-and-blog>

**John Dillon,** Marketing & Communications Manager

PSHE Association

**SRE in Scotland**

Relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education is an integral part of the health and wellbeing area of the school curriculum in Scotland.  The curriculum is not statutory and it is for local authorities and schools to decide how to deliver the curriculum based on local needs and circumstances.  However, we are specific about the need for children and young people to gain knowledge appropriate to their age and stage of education.  This aspect of the curriculum is intended to enable children and young people to build positive relationships as they grow older and should present facts in an objective, balanced and sensitive manner within a framework of sound values and an awareness of the law on sexual behaviour.

Learning about RSHP education begins early on in primary school right up to S4-S6. Schools will equip young people with information on a wide range of issues, depending on their age and stage. They will be encouraged to discuss these subjects with their peers and parents, to help them gain knowledge, and the skills to become confident in making healthy lifestyle decisions for themselves.

It is for schools to decide how they deliver RSHP education, based on the needs of the children or young people in their classroom.  We ask teachers to work closely with parents in the delivery of RSHP education, by discussing proposed lessons and resources with them in advance.

In 2014, we published guidance on the [Conduct of Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education in schools](http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/12/8526) that clearly states how important it is that RSHP education addresses diversity and reflects issues relating to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex young people or children with LGBTI parents, such as same sex marriage and hate-crime reporting. Through the delivery of RSHP education, all children and young people are encouraged to understand the importance of consent, dignity and respect for themselves and the views of others.

**Stuart Downes,** Support & Wellbeing Unit

DG Learning & Justice, Scottish Government

**Sex and Relationships Education in Wales**

**Current Status**

The current definition of Sex Education is outlined in Section 579 (1) of the Education Act 1996 as including education about:

(a) Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome and Human Immuno-deficiency Virus,

and

(b) any other sexually transmitted disease.

The difference between Sex Education and Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in practice is around misunderstanding that they mean the same thing. The term SRE is commonly used to reflect the range of learning and support which schools provide regarding the emotional, physical and social aspects of relationships, sexual health and well-being. This is predominantly delivered through Personal and Social Education (PSE).

In Wales, Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) is statutory, with all maintained schools required, through their governing bodies, to make, and keep up-to-date, a written statement of their policy for providing SRE. This statement has to be available for parents to view, and the policy has to allow for the right for a parent to withdraw their child from SRE. A [sample template](http://learning.gov.wales/docs/learningwales/publications/140626-sample-template-for-school-sex-education-policy-en.pdf) for the SRE policy statement was provided to schools, to assist in the formation of their policy. [[7]](#endnote-1)

With regard to the curriculum, there is not a requirement for primary schools to provide SRE as part of the basic curriculum, but they can do if they wish. Section 101(1) of the Education Act 2002 does not require primary schools to provide sex education as part of the ‘basic curriculum’. Primary schools can provide sex education but whether they do so is at the discretion of the school.

Throughout the Foundation Phase, children are given opportunities to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding through being involved in a range of experiences. As part of social development, children are also given opportunities to **form** relationships and feel confident to play and work cooperatively, value friends and families and show care and consideration, appreciate what makes a good friend.

Sex education is considered part of the basic curriculum for all maintained secondary schools, with the school required under section 101(1)(c) of the Education Act 2002 to include, as part of the ‘basic curriculum’ of the school, sex education for all registered pupils.

In relation to maintained special schools and Pupil Referral Units, these can provide sex education for primary-age pupils and must provide it for secondary-age pupils. There is no requirement for special schools in hospitals to provide sex education, but if they provide secondary education, they must have a policy on sex education.

The current SRE guidance for schools, published in September 2010, is [available to view](http://learning.gov.wales/docs/learningwales/publications/130425-sex-and-relationships-education-in-schools-en.pdf) online. [[8]](#endnote-2) The guidance provided information to schools on planning for SRE, developing effective SRE programmes, and working in partnership with parents/carers and the wider community. The guidance was supported by supplementary materials to help schools in the delivery of their sex and relationships education programmes, such as the policy template mentioned above.

Prior to the publication of the SRE Guidance, in 2008 a [Framework for Personal and Social Education](http://learning.gov.wales/docs/learningwales/publications/130425-personal-and-social-education-framework-en.pdf) was published. [[9]](#endnote-3) This outlined requirements for Key Stage 3 learners to be able to understand ‘*the law relating to aspects of sexual behaviour [and] about contraception, sexually transmitted infections and HIV within the context of relationships [and] the features of safe and potentially abusive relationships’* [[10]](#endnote-4), and for Key Stage 4 learners to be able to understand ‘*the range of sexual attitudes, relationships and behaviours in society [and] the importance of sexual health and the risks involved in sexual activity including potential sexual exploitation’* [[11]](#endnote-5). For post-16 education, learners are expected to understand *‘the potential consequences of sexual activity for themselves and personal relationships.*’ [[12]](#endnote-6)

All policy, guidance and information for education professionals in Wales are hosted on the [Learning Wales](http://learning.gov.wales/?lang=en) website [[13]](#endnote-7), with classroom resources available for educators on [Hwb](http://hwb.wales.gov.uk/).[[14]](#endnote-8)

**The Future of SRE in Wales**

Following a review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales, [Successful Futures](http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/150317-successful-futures-en.pdf) [[15]](#endnote-9), in February 2015, the Welsh Government is currently undertaking a comprehensive overhaul of the curriculum for young people aged 3 to 16. One of the six key areas of ‘Learning and Experience’ identified in the new curriculum is health and well-being, and it is anticipated that there will be updated guidance on sex and relationships education linked to this. The new curriculum and assessment arrangements are due to be in place by September 2021. More details about the new curriculum are available on the [Welsh Government](http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/curriculuminwales/curriculum-for-wales-curriculum-for-life/?lang=en) website.[[16]](#endnote-10)

On 1st March 2017, the establishment of a new expert group to advise on Sex and Relationship Education in the current school curriculum was announced.[[17]](#endnote-11) This expert group will look at a range of areas including improving understanding of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues, violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, respect and consent, sexism and bullying. It has not been publically announced when this group will report on its findings; however it is anticipated to report within the calendar year.

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5. Education For Choice (2016) *Heads or Tails? What young people are telling us about SRE* [*http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/media/34250/Head-or-tails-SRE-2016.pdf*](http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/media/34250/Head-or-tails-SRE-2016.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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10. Ibid., 21a. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
11. Ibid., 23a. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
12. Ibid., 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
13. Welsh Government, ‘Learning Wales’, *Learning Wales*, 16 April 2013, <http://learning.gov.wales/?lang=en>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
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