

Sex and relationships education

April 2009

Sex and relationships education (SRE) can be defined as 'learning about sex, sexuality, emotions, relationships, sexual health and ourselves', which should be an integral part of a lifelong learning process.¹

Definition of Key stages:

| | |
|--------------|-----------------|
| Key stage 1: | 5–7 years old |
| Key stage 2: | 7–11 years old |
| Key stage 3: | 11–14 years old |
| Key stage 4: | 14–16 years old |

Legislation and government policy

England

Legal framework for SRE

The *Education Act 1996* consolidated all previous legislation, and key points related to SRE are:

- The sex education elements of the National Curriculum Science Order are mandatory for all pupils of primary and secondary school age. These cover anatomy, puberty, biological aspects of sexual reproduction and use of hormones to control and promote fertility.
- Secondary schools are required to provide an SRE programme which includes (as a minimum) information about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS
- Other elements of personal, social and health education (PSHE), including SRE, are nonstatutory.
- All schools must provide, and make available for inspection, an up-to-date policy describing the content and organisation of SRE outside of national curriculum science. This is the school governors' responsibility.
- Primary schools should have a policy statement that describes the SRE provided or gives a statement of the decision not to provide SRE.

The *Learning and Skills Act 2000* requires that:

- young people learn about the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and bringing up children.
- young people are protected from teaching and materials which are inappropriate, having regard to the age and the religious and cultural background of the pupils concerned
- school governing bodies have regard for the guidance
- parents have the right to withdraw their child from all or part of SRE provided outside national curriculum science

Following a review², the Government announced in October 2008 that comprehensive SRE will be made compulsory as a part of a statutory PSHE curriculum³.

Government guidance on personal, social and health education (PSHE)

The aspects of SRE that are not included in the science curriculum are delivered through personal, social and health education (PSHE). The Government is committed to improving SRE as part of PSHE and citizenship, which is also supported by the National Healthy Schools Programme (NHSP).⁴ PSHE and citizenship are non-statutory at Key stages 1 and 2. At Key stages 3 and 4 citizenship becomes statutory, although PSHE remains non-statutory.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) publishes guidance on the whole curriculum. A new national curriculum, published in 2000, outlined the non-statutory framework for PSHE and citizenship for all four key stages, which includes learning about sex and relationships.^{5,6} This was followed in 2005 by guidance on what is expected to be learned at every key stage.⁷

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A new secondary school curriculum was introduced from September 2008 which extends PSHE to include economic education. Initially only introduced for students in year seven, this will eventually replace the current programmes of study.⁸

Government guidance on SRE⁹

In 2000, the Department for Education and Employment (now the Department for Children, Schools and Families) published guidance on the delivery of SRE through the PSHE framework. The guidance aims to help schools to plan SRE policy and practice and includes teaching strategies, working with parents, and confidentiality.

- There should be an emphasis on developing knowledge, skills and attitudes and appropriate teaching methods.
- Primary schools should ensure that both boys and girls know about puberty before it begins.
- Teachers should develop activities that will involve boys and young men as well as girls and young women.
- Policies should be developed in consultation with parents, young people, teachers and governors.
- All schools have a duty to ensure that the needs of children with special needs and learning disabilities are properly met.
- Puberty, menstruation, contraception, abortion, safer sex, HIV/AIDS and STIs should be covered.
- The needs of all pupils should be met, regardless of sexual orientation or ethnicity.
- SRE should be planned and delivered as part of PSHE and citizenship.

Elements of the guidance are supported by the *Learning and Skills Act 2000*.

Wales

Legal framework for SRE

Under the *Education Act 2002*, SRE became a compulsory part of the basic curriculum in all

secondary schools. Primary schools are also required to have a policy on SRE, outlining details of their SRE programme or explaining their decision not to provide SRE. The Welsh Assembly Government recommends that primary schools have a graduated programme of SRE tailored to the age and emotional maturity of the children.

Personal and social education (PSE) became a compulsory part of the basic curriculum in both primary and secondary schools in September 2003.¹⁰ Schools are expected to base their provision of SRE and PSE on guidance produced by the Welsh Assembly Government.

Welsh Assembly Government guidance

From autumn 2008 all schools, colleges and other learning providers in Wales have been basing their PSE provision for 7–19 year olds on a new framework published by the Welsh Assembly Government.¹¹ The five themes of the framework are:

- active citizenship
- health and emotional wellbeing (which includes SRE)
- moral and spiritual development
- preparing for lifelong learning
- sustainable development and global citizenship.

Learning outcomes are set out for each theme at each key stage.

SRE guidance

The National Assembly for Wales published guidance in 2002¹² on how schools should develop SRE policy, teach SRE, handle sensitive issues, and work with parents and the wider community.

The guidance highlights key points that schools need to address through their provision of SRE:

- Both boys and girls should be prepared for puberty.
- Girls should be prepared for menstruation before their periods start.

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- Young people need access to, and full information about, confidential contraceptive information, advice and services.
- Young people need to be aware of the moral and personal dilemmas that can be involved in abortion and how to access a relevant agency if necessary.
- Young people need to be aware of the risks of STIs including HIV/AIDS and know about prevention, diagnosis and treatment.
- Young people need to know what safer sex is and why it is important. They also need to build the confidence and skills to negotiate safer sex with a partner.

Scotland

There is no statutory requirement in Scotland for schools to teach sex education.

In 2001, the Scottish Executive published a circular on sex education in Scottish schools which encouraged all schools to provide sex education within a comprehensive programme of personal, social and health education and religious and moral education.¹³

Relevant national advice and guidelines on sex education for all stages of schooling was summarised by the Scottish Executive in 2001.¹⁴ This requires that sex education should present facts in an objective, balanced and sensitive manner within a framework of social values, but programmes will vary between local authorities and schools.

Schools are expected to:

- make sure that sex education takes account of each child's age, understanding and stage of development
- work in partnership with parents
- have simple, direct procedures in place for parents to raise concerns
- have a method of consulting with pupils
- respect the different cultural, ethnic and religious environments of the home
- respect the different home circumstances and needs of all young people.

Parents can withdraw their children from all or part of a planned sex education programme. They are expected to discuss with the head teacher how they intend to provide this education themselves. Guidance is available for schools on how to consult effectively with parents and carers.¹⁵

Northern Ireland

Legal framework for relationships and sexuality education (RSE)

RSE is included on a statutory basis in the school curriculum through the science programme of study and a learning area covering personal development.

From September 2007 a revised school curriculum introduced personal development and mutual understanding (PDMU) in primary schools, which develops into learning for life and work (LLW) in post-primary schools.¹⁶

At Key stage 3, pupils should have opportunities to:

- explore the qualities of relationships including friendship
- explore the qualities of a loving, respectful friendship
- develop coping strategies to deal with challenging relationship scenarios
- develop strategies to avoid and resolve conflict
- explore the implications of sexual maturation
- explore the emotional, social and moral implications of early sexual activity.¹⁷

At Key stage 4, three of the skills that pupils should develop are:

- recognising, assessing and managing risk in a range of real-life contexts
- developing their understanding of relationships and sexuality and the responsibilities of healthy relationships
- an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of parenting.¹⁷

Government guidance.

All schools should have a written policy on RSE and there is guidance to assist schools to

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develop an appropriate policy and a programme of study.^{18, 19, 20, 21}

See **fpa** Northern Ireland factsheet *Relationships and sexuality education in schools* for further information.

Confidentiality

The SRE guidance in each country aims to help schools in drawing up their own policy on confidentiality, which should be clear, meet the best interests of young people and be workable by staff.^{9, 12, 14, 18} Policies and guidance may vary in different parts of the UK.

Teachers will not always be able to maintain confidentiality where a young person discloses information either in the classroom or in a one-to-one situation. Where they believe that a young person is at risk of physical or sexual abuse, the school child protection procedures should be followed, and there is specific guidance for education authorities on this.^{22, 23, 24, 25}

Teachers are not legally obliged to inform anyone if they learn of or suspect sexual activity in pupils under the age of consent (16 in each UK country) if there is no evidence of abuse or exploitation. However, all school staff should be familiar with and follow their school's confidentiality and safeguarding (child protection) policies regarding disclosure. If a teacher learns that a pupil under the age of consent is sexually active they should encourage the young person to talk with a parent or carer, ensure that any child protection issue is addressed, and provide adequate information about confidential sexual health advice and treatment services. This information should be freely available to all pupils.

Local policies may vary, particularly around child protection issues for young people under the age of 13.

School nurses and other outside visitors involved in the delivery of SRE should follow the school's confidentiality and SRE policy. In one-to-one clinical situations, health professionals and other outside visitors are bound by their professional codes of practice.

Is SRE beneficial?

Reviews of international research show that school-based SRE, particularly when linked to contraceptive services, does not increase sexual activity, but can have a positive impact on young people's knowledge and attitudes, delay sexual activity and/or reduce pregnancy rates by the use of contraception and safer sex.^{26, 27}

In England, a review of the Teenage pregnancy strategy identified strong delivery of SRE and PSHE by schools as a key feature of high performing local authorities where teenage pregnancy rates had gone down.²⁸ There is no evidence that abstinence-only education programmes delay the initiation of sex, increase a return to abstinence or decrease the numbers of sexual partners.^{27, 29}

Parents' and young people's views of SRE

Many organisations support the call for PSHE to become a statutory subject.^{30, 31}

Surveys show that the majority of the general public,^{32, 33} parents,^{34, 35} young people,^{36, 37} and education professionals³⁸ agree with this, and think that SRE should cover emotional and relationship issues as well as biological aspects.

In one UK survey³⁶ of over 20,000 young people aged under 18:

- 40 per cent thought the SRE they had received was either poor or very poor
- 61 per cent of boys and 70 per cent of girls reported not having any information about personal relationships at school
- 73 per cent felt that SRE should be taught before the age of 13.

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Further information

For further information on the material covered in this factsheet, and other subjects related to sexual health, contact **fpa's** Library and Information Service.

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