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# Sex and relationship education and pupils with additional needs

*Do school policies for social and relationship education really meet the needs of pupils, asks Head **David Stewart**, and what happens in the real world of the classroom?*

Every child, whether they are in a mainstream or special educational setting, has a right to a sex and relationship education (SRE) which supports them and prepares them for the realities of life. Parents of children with additional needs have identified that they wish schools to work with them on what is seen as a difficult aspect of their child's life. Citizenship education assumes that young people have a good grasp of self worth and respect for others, and anti-discrimination legislation demands that pupils with special needs are not disadvantaged in

terms of access to the full curriculum. While there may seem to be no shortage of reasons for ensuring that these pupils receive appropriate SRE education, evidence would suggest that the reality is very patchy.

Small scale research in individual authorities paints a picture of very mixed practice. There is no doubt that in some schools there will be exemplary practice. However, this is often down to a particular member of staff who has a passion for SRE. What happens if they leave or retire? Is the whole school signed up to this education?

In other schools, both special and mainstream, some pupils appear to receive almost nothing at all; it is not uncommon to hear comments such as "It is difficult for us discussing issues such as masturbation being a faith school." Some schools might have a written policy but no clear guidance on who is teaching what. So often the role of covering SRE is given

to teaching assistants who may have had no training in special education or sex education. Even if they have been on training courses, they have no authority in the school to change practice or timetabling.

Staff often identify lack of resources or training as key problems, and there can also be a lack of support from senior leadership. Governors who have a responsibility for this area of the curriculum may not question what is being provided for pupils with additional needs. While there is every hope that future OFSTED inspections will question access for all pupils, I think there are some key areas for schools to consider now:

- Does the SRE policy reflect all the needs of pupils? There are many situations in school which are not necessarily covered by the policy, so how are these monitored and assessed? For instance, with issues of personal and intimate care, staff may have a degree of uncertainty about what is deemed appropriate. Are behaviours excused due to disability? There can be a real danger





skills which will help them keep safe. If they are not encouraged to do this, what happens when they find themselves in a problematic situation aged sixteen and they do not have the skills to make decisions and be assertive?

- Work with parents is essential. If one is talking about masturbation being a private activity, i.e. in the young person's bedroom, then discussion with parents is

that pupils are not provided with the appropriate boundaries

- Rather than working in isolation, schools should set up support groups including relevant agencies and individuals. Indeed, for 25 years, my school has had a sex and relationship monitoring group. Members include staff, governors, parents, and colleagues from health, police and educational psychology. They work with staff on the delivery of the education and provide training for parents on a wide range of issues. They have also produced a series of booklets for pupils and parents to support their work
- When should sex and relationship education begin? In the early years, children should be given clear guidance about dignity and modesty, and they need to have a suitable vocabulary to help them understand their bodies. At this age, opportunities to make choices must be introduced. They need to know that they can say no. From an early age, children need to develop the

essential. Parents often feel isolated concerning this area of their child's life, and this is a topic they feel less inclined to talk to other parents about. They need a forum where they can feel comfortable and realise that there are other parents who are dealing with similar issues and can often offer support and advice

- There is a need for on-going training and professional development. I would always recommend a general all staff training to begin with. While many staff members may not be involved in direct teaching of SRE, they will encounter a wide range of issues during the course of the school day and their reactions and responses to situations can be as powerful as formal teaching. If it has been agreed that a pupil should be dealt with in a particular way, then all staff need to have signed up to this. Staff will have a wide range of views, but they also have a duty to support the pupil with appropriate education. Too often schools simply respond to a crisis rather than having thought

through possible scenarios and appropriate responses in advance

- Education should be prophylactic. Pupils need to understand what is happening to them as they grow up. Social stories which prepare for periods or wet dreams can dispel a great deal of anxiety. For those pupils who dislike change, the changes of adolescence can be particularly traumatic
- Issues of friendships and relationships need very sensitive handling, and young people need to know what the social rules are. Children with additional needs can feel very isolated and have little opportunity for friendship, let alone relationships. While responsibility for this area of a child's life is not just the school's, clearly, a school is in a good position to support pupils in the development of friendships.

This is not an area of choice for schools; it is one of absolute duty. Schools must support some of the most vulnerable children and young people in society and help them to have happy, safe and fulfilled lives. **S**

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