



United Kingdom

**Youth Parliament**  
MAKING OUR MARK

**Sex & Relationships  
Education: Where are we  
now?**

**REPORT**

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## **Foreword**

The United Kingdom has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in Europe, with 39,386 teen pregnancies recorded in 2002. STI's are also more prevalent than ever before, with 1 in 7 sexually active teenagers carrying chlamydeous infections.

There have been a number of solutions discussed to solve this problems; namely, openness in schools regarding sexual health, or promotion of abstinence, as used in the states. The DfES has clearly committed themselves to an open attitude toward sexual health through PSHE. The Department for Health has also been committed to the need for better sex and relationships education for some time now.

Effective sex education is about enabling young people to make informed decisions about their sexual health and relationships throughout their life. It is a life skill, and it is widely accepted that young people have a right to sex education.

This report sets out our conclusions relating to the problems with the sexual health education provided in secondary state schools via the Personal, Social and Health Education program. In our review of the Sex Education provided via the PSHE syllabus, we take a look at 'Where Are We Now?' since the government took power in 1997. The report concludes that sex education *must* be made compulsory if the government hopes to reverse the trend of confusion relating to sex amongst young people in the UK and leave a positive legacy for the health of the nation.

The UK Youth Parliament, as an organization of elected young people across the UK, has been conducting a survey on sex relationships education covered in the PSHE syllabus in all state schools in England.

At present, sexual health education has no obligatory standard of teaching via the PSHE syllabus. It is covered under the subsection for Key Stage 3 'Developing a healthy, safer lifestyle' as 'Pupils should be taught in a context of the importance of relationships, about human reproduction, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, HIV and high-risk behaviours including early sexual activity'.

This ambiguous description has led to discrepancies in the standard of sex and relationships education, as this report highlights.

Up until now, the government has refrained from introducing a 'compulsory' standard for sex education in schools. This may be due to fears of being perceived as a "nanny state". Indeed, this is often the case that many Government MP's and Ministers site as the main reason to avoid the introduction of compulsory Sex & Relationships education in schools. Further reasons such as potential aggravation of religious schools, as well as a reluctance to potentially remove independence from schools are also often sited. This must not, however, be an excuse for failing to offer every student the right to a good standard of sex and relationships education

This report will lay out the platform to build upon the existing framework provided via PSHE, and offer every student the standard of sex & relationships they deserve.

## **COMMENTS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE**

We interviewed a group of young people and asked them to comment on what their sex & relationships education was like. These were some of the comments we received:

*Taelor Moul from Essex (aged 13): "My sex education was rubbish, we mostly just watched videos and got so bored nobody really listened, there wasn't any conversation about it, was all boring work sheets that everybody just binned them!"*

**Gregory McCourty (aged 15) : "All my sex education lessons were terrible. We missed probably over 8 lessons due to the teacher being ill or away or the fact that other students in my class were always disturbing our teacher who to be honest was doing a great job of controlling the class. Also our class wasn't taught about relationships at all and just ended up with us moving immediately to alcohol and drugs. The lesson went quickly as there was a lack of work. I've learn near to nothing in my sex education classes. Which... is bad".**

*Rory smith, Kent (aged 17): "my sex education lessons were good because they told us all about STD's and why you should have safe sex and how if you don't have safe sex you can end up dead from AID's, HIV, STD's etc. it has made me more aware of to consider safe sex for your own health and others."*

**Saul Russell-Moyle, East Sussex (aged 16) : "I think that it is really important that everything to do with sex education is taught from the beginning of secondary school including LGBT issues. Basic family relationships and friendships should be taught in reception, already the sexual side of relations should only begin in yr 5/6. Lessons at this age should be taught separately (boys and girls in separate rooms) but they both need to be taught the same thing, instead of boys just being taught about boys puberty and girls just being taught about girls puberty".**

*Max Szyber, East Sussex (Aged 17) "The education about sex I received was good. I can't really imagine how it could have been much better... we had teenage mums come in who spoke about teen pregnancy and the implications it has. It might have been useful to have more info on STI's though. We didn't receive anything about relationships though."*

## How we conducted the survey

Surveys were conducted by Members of Youth Parliament, after the UKYP voted to adopt sex education as its main national campaign. This was following elections across England, in which a majority of young people in the elections (almost all secondary schools participate in UKYP elections) said that sex and relationships education was the main issue for them. This was the main motive for Members of Youth Parliament choosing this as the national campaign.

As the first phase of the campaign, we conducted a national survey across England in all secondary schools. Participants ranged from the ages of 11-19, and a total of 30,000 young people were surveyed nationally. This is this highest rate of response for any survey of young people ever conducted in the UK. We have listed our findings in a list of tables based on the age of students surveyed.

## The results

		<b>Under 11 years old</b>	
		Girls	Boys
1) How good is the sex and relationship education in your school?	Very good	80	48
	Good	176	192
	Average	354	81
	Poor	337	98
	Very Poor	182	182
2) Have you ever been taught how to use a condom?	Yes	145	200
	No	936	305
	Cant Remember	48	96
3) Do you know where your local sexual health clinic is?	Yes	288	241
	No	841	360
4) Have you been taught bout personal relationships at school?	Yes	377	336
	No	496	265
	Not Sure	256	0
5) Have you been taught about teenage pregnancy?	Yes	593	401
	No	392	151
	Not sure	144	48
6) What age do you think you should receive sex and relationship education?	younger than 11	441	339
	11-13 years	305	180
	13-15 years	305	33
	older than 15 years	37	17
		1139	620

		<b>11-13 years old</b>	
		Girls	Boys
1) How good is the sex and relationship education in your school?	Very good	283	241
	Good	374	99
	Average	377	458
	Poor	268	235
	Very Poor	157	196
2) Have you ever been taught how to use a condom?	Yes	307	565
	No	1137	631
	Cant Remember	17	33
3) Do you know where your local sexual health clinic is?	Yes	426	561
	No	1035	668
4) Have you been taught bout personal relationships at school?	Yes	540	580
	No	691	566
	Not Sure	225	83
5) Have you been taught about teenage pregnancy?	Yes	545	662
	No	851	535
	Not sure	65	32
6) What age do you think you should receive sex and relationship education?	younger than 11	644	757
	11-13 years	492	269
	13-15 years	178	101
	older than 15 years	147	102
TOTAL		1593	1299

		<b>13-14 years old</b>	
		Girls	Boys
1) How good is the sex and relationship education in your school?	Very good		46 212
	Good		209 433
	Average		751 1066
	Poor		396 1000
	Very Poor		165 469
2) Have you ever been taught how to use a condom?	Yes		906 1545
	No		659 1872
	Cant Remember		7 37
3) Do you know where your local sexual health clinic is?	Yes		866 1879
	No		704 1575
4) Have you been taught bout personal relationships at school?	Yes		944 2255
	No		492 1116
	Not Sure		154 73
5) Have you been taught about teenage pregnancy?	Yes		859 1913
	No		577 1476
	Not sure		134 65
6) What age do you think you should receive sex and relationship education?	younger than 11		701 1505
	11-13 years		510 1350
	13-15 years		275 546
	older than 15 years		84 58
			1847 3607

		<b>14-15 years old</b>	
		Girls	Boys
1) How good is the sex and relationship education in your school?	Very good	119	107
	Good	222	329
	Average	376	292
	Poor	314	237
	Very Poor	125	195
2) Have you ever been taught how to use a condom?	Yes	632	871
	No	489	244
	Cant Remember	36	11
3) Do you know where your local sexual health clinic is?	Yes	671	379
	No	453	739
4) Have you been taught bout personal relationships at school?	Yes	493	438
	No	557	632
	Not Sure	125	68
5) Have you been taught about teenage pregnancy?	Yes	652	715
	No	410	378
	Not sure	111	17
6) What age do you think you should receive sex and relationship education?	younger than 11	437	284
	11-13 years	351	451
	13-15 years	332	352
	older than 15 years	45	11

		<b>15-16 Years old</b>	
		Girls	Boys
1) How good is the sex and relationship education in your school?	Very good	44	38
	Good	144	219
	Average	276	215
	Poor	349	290
	Very Poor	196	137
2) Have you ever been taught how to use a condom?	Yes	325	572
	No	680	321
	Cant Remember	4	6
3) Do you know where your local sexual health clinic is?	Yes	399	607
	No	610	293
4) Have you been taught bout personal relationships at school?	Yes	646	379
	No	337	499
	Not Sure	26	21
5) Have you been taught about teenage pregnancy?	Yes	533	437
	No	316	414
	Not sure	160	48
6) What age do you think you should receive sex and relationship education?	younger than 11	323	341
	11-13 years	283	282
	13-15 years	268	233
	older than 15 years	135	42
		1099	824

		<b>Over16</b>	
		Girls	Boys
1) How good is the sex and relationship education in your school?	Very good	34	68
	Good	108	100
	Average	199	491
	Poor	314	83
2) Have you ever been taught how to use a condom?	Very Poor	65	32
	Yes	319	410
	No	198	199
	Cant Remember	3	165
3) Do you know where your local sexual health clinic is?	Yes	597	548
	No	174	251
4) Have you been taught bout personal relationships at school?	Yes	206	278
	No	608	493
	Not Sure	2	3
5) Have you been taught about teenage pregnancy?	Yes	419	416
	No	295	324
	Not sure	2	34
6) What age do you think you should receive sex and relationship education?	younger than 11	323	400
	11-13 years	272	178
	13-15 years	98	99
	older than 15 years	27	97
		745	33

TOTAL RESPONDANTS: 14,713

## Key findings

-Young people want change. The surveys found that 75%\* of young people believed that 11-13 was the optimum age to be taught about sex and relationships.

-1 in 3 of respondents\* said that the standard of their sex and relationships education was of a 'poor' or 'very poor' standard.

-Despite the governments requirement that all students should be taught how to use a condom by the age of 13-14, just under a third of students age 13-16+ had not been taught how to use a condom.

-Relationships education isn't being taught: 50% of respondents said that they had never been taught about relationships.

-Drop in clinics don't work. Just over half of students knew where their local drop in clinic is. Many drop in clinics are also not accessible enough. One drop in clinic in East Sussex is only open for an hour and a half each week. This means that each student in that area would only be able to visit the clinic for a total of 3 minutes throughout the entire year.

-Students don't know the details about pregnancy. 43% of students said they had not been taught about the details of pregnancy. A further 6% claimed they were 'unsure' of whether they had actually been taught about pregnancy, indicative of a lack of clarity in the teaching of this issue.

-The standard of sex and relationships education differs greatly from school to school, with different schools teaching different things.

-Young people are receiving differing amounts of education at different times, with 11-14 year olds being more likely to have had a "very poor" standard of SRE- if any

## Key Recommendations

-Sex education needs to be taught throughout a pupils time in education. This means teaching the foundations of a relationship in primary schools (as is already done), and ensuring that pupils are taught about sexual health as soon as they enter secondary school from year 7.

-Schools should have the resources to employ specialist personnel for the specific purpose of teaching sex and relationships. A common complaint received by young people is that they do not want to learn about sex and relationships from their Geography or Science teacher, and that they feel these teachers are not best equipped to teach them about this specific issue.

-Relationships need to be taught as part of SRE. Young people believe that they are only receiving the mechanics of sex and relationships, ie, using contraception. Whilst this is imperative, it is equally important that young people are getting the information they need to make informed decisions about sex and how they can make secure relationships.

-Teenage pregnancies must be taught to all students. Both sexes have an equal obligation in avoiding unwanted pregnancies; this needs to be taught.

-OFSTED inspections carried out on PSHE need to be made to take in to account what pupils experience of their sex and relationships education has been. Pupils should be involved in reviewing and implementing effective teaching of SRE; PSHE guidelines state that PSHE programmes should take in to account the wants of parents and the community, but no emphasis is given to what young people feel they need to learn.

-Young people should be the only ones who can opt out of sex and relationships education; parents cannot make this decision for them.

-Drop in clinics need to be better resourced to provide young people with STI screening and advice outside of school if they wish.

## **Analysis of key findings and recommendations**

From the key findings, we are able derive a number of key recommendations for the DfES to improve the standard of SRE in schools.

Firstly, it is imperative that emphasis is given to the need to teach about relationships, with half of students not having been taught about relationships.

At the Conservative party conference, the Shadow Secretary of State for Health, Andrew Lansley, said of the UKYP campaign for improvements in SRE "They didn't just emphasise the need for better sex education, but better *relationship* education. To this I say- Absolutely."

A relationship is the foundation of society. A majority of experts agree that the family unit is the best for a child to be brought up in: by teaching relationships, students should be taught about the realities of a relationship and the importance of choosing the right partner before engaging in sex.

In our surveys, we found that relationship education is often left aside in the teaching of the PSHE module for "Developing a safe, healthier lifestyle." Even in cases where young people received a 'good' standard of *sex* education about sexual health issues, it was often said that relationships were left aside. One young person said that "the education about sex I received was good" but that he "received no education about relationships."

By ensuring there is a standardized sex & relationships education, the Government can tackle a number of problems: firstly, it will help reverse the issue of family breakdown, by educating futures generations how to successfully resolve conflicts within a relationship. It would also teach the importance of making informed decisions about sex in a relationship, and that the foundations of a stable relationship *should not* be built on sexual intercourse.

Yet some young people will still have sex. Therefore, sex and relationships education needs to be taught consistently throughout a student's time in education. This means starting elements of the teaching from year 7, and gradually developing the teaching until year 11. By doing this, it would ensure that every student leaves their school with a knowledge of sex and relationships which enables them to make informed decisions about their sex and relationships. It is also of great magnitude that young people are taught how to use contraception from an early age. Young people can have sex at any age, and all too often, this is happening before they are receiving education about how to use contraception. Many experts are united in agreeing that by making sure young people are taught about contraception from an early age, it is far more likely that unwanted pregnancies and transmission of diseases and infections can be avoided. The government must make sure that young people learn about contraception before they are having sex, which in many cases, is before the age of 16.

The government must begin to ensure that this is being taught in every school by making PSHE subject to more rigorous OFSTED inspections. This means that pupils from each year (7-11) should be involved in reviewing the standard if the sex and relationships education they receive. This is important because an OFSTED inspection will only take place once around every four year, yet the teaching of sex

and relationships needs to be taught at a consistent level. Therefore, the input from young people is important in ascertaining an accurate assessment of sex and relationships education within a school.

It is unacceptable that a third of students are leaving full time education unaware of how to use contraception, which can lead to unwanted pregnancies, STI's and STD's. This means every school must teach about contraception. This must include religious schools, where young people will usually receive no teaching about contraception. Yet the most successful models in Europe, such as Switzerland, keep teachings of contraception and religion separate. In these societies, a consensus has been reached that the interests regarding the health of young people are paramount. A similar consensus can be reached in the UK, but the Government must first lead the way by insisting that every young person is taught how to use contraception, irrespective of religion.

It is also imperative that emphasis is given to education for teenage pregnancy. This means clarity in teaching, and a uniform standard of teaching within each and every school. Young girls should be advised on the implications of having a child and the impact this has on their education, job prospects and social life, as well as the responsibility that comes with being a mother. Likewise, males must also be educated about the roles of a father and how to support a family.

Equally, it is crucial that the emphasis of sex education is diverted towards what the pupil needs. At present, parents have the right to withdraw their child from sex education. This is not the case in many European countries, and has contributed to an environment of disparity between young people and their parents, with 51% of parents not knowing whether their child is sexual active. The Government must revoke the right of parents to withdraw their child from SRE, instead offering ONLY the child the right to withdraw. This would ensure children could withdraw from the teaching if they objected on moral grounds, whilst making sure that a child's parents do not have the ultimate say on whether their child is taught about the consequences of sex

Whilst it is understandable that the government does not want to be seen as 'telling schools what to do', there is no excuse for failing to provide each and every student a high quality standard of sex and relationships education. In a society built on equal opportunities, the government must attach the utmost priority to offering every student a standardised sex and relationship education.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the UK, we are caught in a limbo between the European model and the US model. We have not adopted an approach of openness about sex and relationships in schools, nor have we moved towards the approach of the USA in abstinence. Yet the UK Government has made tentative steps towards the European model of openness.

Given the success of the European approach in comparison to the US approach of abstinence, the UK must continue to further the EU model.

Holland starts teaching sex and relationships education at the age of 5, and also has the lowest teenage pregnancy rate in Europe. Sweden starts to teach Sex and Relationships education from 10-12 (which we believe the UK Government should begin to do). Cecilia Ekéus, a nurse midwife with a PhD in public international health who works with the Institute of Women and Child Health at Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, says Swedish society teaches that sex should occur in a committed relationship "and also that teenagers should use contraceptives, be informed and take responsibility. But in general we are open and positive and think that it's okay." Additionally, A 2001 Guttmacher Institute report, drawing on data from 30 countries in Western and Eastern Europe, concluded: "Societal acceptance of sexual activity among young people, combined with comprehensive and balanced information about sexuality and clear expectations about commitment and prevention childbearing and STDs [sexually transmitted diseases] within teenage relationships, are hallmarks of countries with low levels of adolescent pregnancy, childbearing and STDs." The study cited Sweden as the "clearest of the case-study countries in viewing sexuality among young people as natural and good."

We feel that it is extremely important that we begin to teach the foundations of relationships from an early age, so our young people and children grow up as balanced individuals and have the basic knowledge to bring up a controlled family unit whilst carry forward the skills that the learned in the early years of education and being gradually developed through their educational life.

This means acting upon the recommendations made in this report, namely, the need to teach sex and relationships consistently through a pupils time in education. We expect the government to introduce a standard of sex & relationships education which is taught upon a students arrival in secondary school- from year seven. This is absolutely imperative in the drive to reduce teenage pregnancies and STI's, which can only be done by making sure our young people are in possession of the fact about sex, which can happen at any age.

Also, Given that Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that "every child must be listened to and have their views respected," the Government must take the findings of this survey in to account: 75% of

students have said that SRE needs to be given from year 7. The Government must ensure that every school provides this.

It is also interesting to note that a majority of parents hold similar views to students regarding what they want their children to learn in sex and relationships education. A recent survey conducted by Teachers TV conducted by ICM showed that 96% of parents believed their children should be taught sex and relationships education before the age of 14. There was also a broad consensus from parents on emotional aspects of sex and contraception: 80% of parents wanted their children to learn about the emotional aspects of sex, and a further 86% said that children had to learn about contraception.

The UK Youth Parliament acknowledges the progress that the government has made with regards to sex and relationships, yet ambiguity is still present in the PSHE guidelines. The government has led the way with reforms to education, smoking, gay rights and racism for the greater good of society. Given this, we want to see the Government continue to be progressive and ensure that young people feel able to speak openly about sex and relationships.

With the evidence from our surveys, the government needs to act: they need to listen to the voices of 15,000 young people from the South East region and 30,000 from across England. The Government needs to act on the voices of the young people and move to ratify the pandemic of confusion, which has led to the UK being blighted as the teen pregnancy capital of Europe. Young people are not just the future: we are here now, and what young people say counts. It's about the health of our nation.

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