

Customer Voice Research Sex and Relationships Education

Sherbert Research



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Research objectives

Overall

To understand parents' views on sex and relationships education (SRE); including whether parents should have the option to withdraw their children from SRE and, if so, at what age parents feel it would be appropriate to remove the option for parents to withdraw children and young people from SRE.

More specifically the research sought to:

Understand what parents see as their role in providing sex and relationship information and advice to their children and explore how they have (or have not) approached the issue.

Explore where parents think their children are currently getting information on sex and relationship issues and what they think their children know.

Establish what parents currently know about the role of schools in teaching SRE to children and young people including:

- What is taught, when / frequency and by whom;
- The difference between what is taught within the curriculum in Science and SRE in Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education;
- Where and how parents find their information regarding SRE in schools and what their children are learning in sex and relationship lessons;
- Understanding whether SRE in schools is something which they have thought about.

Explore parents' knowledge and experiences (if any) about the parental right to withdraw children from SRE.

Establish parents' views on the parental right to withdraw their child from sex and relationship lessons in school including:

If and at what age parents feel it is appropriate for children to participate in sex and relationship lessons without the parental right to withdraw;

- 11 (Year 7), 14 (Year 9), 16 (Year 11), 19 - current situation (post 6th form)
OR
Parents should never have the option to withdraw their child from sex and relationship lessons.
- Exploring in depth the reasons for and against the different ages (motivations and barriers / fears).

Explore any differences between how parents feel about SRE from a personal point of view (concerning their own child) compared with their point of view regarding the parental right to withdraw in general.

E.g. testing the position, 'I am happy for my child to participate in SRE but I understand if other parents don't want their kids to participate in SRE lessons'.

Explore parents views on the proposal to make sex and relationship lessons part of the National Curriculum from September 2011.

Research methodology

Eight one and a half hour discussion groups with parents of children and young people aged five to nineteen:

- Four with mums; and
- Four with dads

47 parents in total, from a range of socio-economic backgrounds (AB, C1C2 and DE).

Research took place across England (rural, suburban and inner city locations) during October 2009

Key findings

Overall

Parents regarded sex and relationship education as hugely important in a child's overall development. The two key educators were parents and schools. Parents said that they rely on schools to educate their children not just in the mechanics of sex, but in broader, inter-personal and life skills.

Initially, parents conceded to having limited knowledge of the content of SRE and typically some felt uncomfortable that their children may not be ready to learn about sex and relationships. They therefore took comfort in their right to withdraw their children. However, it is interesting to note that once they were informed about the content of the curriculum the majority of parents in this sample did not believe any parent should have the right to withdraw their child from SRE. They felt that to do so would potentially disadvantage the child for life and rob them of fundamental life skills. Some also felt that their children would be stigmatised if withdrawn from lessons.

Most did not feel there should be any parental right to withdraw children and young people from SRE at all - but if an age for compulsory SRE was set, the beginning of Key Stage 3 (first year of secondary school, pupils aged 11-12) seemed appropriate to most.

Parents felt that schools should be proactive, using creative and inclusive means to inform parents about SRE content and help to reassure them that the material is appropriate so they will be happy for their children to participate.

Parenting in general

As we've seen consistently in previous waves of Customer Voice research, parents tend to describe their experience as mums and dads as a mixture of joy, pride, fear and frustration.

Parents with younger children (Key Stage 1) said that parenting was still new, full of discoveries and learning on both sides. Watching children grow, develop and blossom was also reported to be hugely rewarding. These parents revelled in their children's innocence and unquestioning love and felt incredibly protective.

By Key Stage 2, parents see that their children have gained more independence, especially those children who are making the transition to secondary school. Parents described how they felt, a sense of pride mixing with a fear over a 'loss of control' of their children - not from an anti-social perspective, but simply as a result of each child's broadening horizons meaning they were sometimes more interested in friends and technology than in their parents. Many parents reported that they began to experience a sense of swelling anxiety at this stage: their children are growing up - what comes next?

Key Stage 3 marks a real turning point. It's when parents described their children as truly developing into their own selves, striving to assert their own identity. Their children started to want to have a greater sense of freedom, wanted to be by themselves, or go to school or clubs alone. Some parents felt that at this age their children are becoming 'headstrong' or 'secretive', with laptops snapped shut as they enter the room, or disappearing in their own worlds of MSN, Facebook, Beebo, etc. The parents that we spoke with described their emotions as 'confused,' 'worried,' or 'preparing for the unexpected...'

For those we spoke with, things sometimes began to steady out a little by Key Stage 4: a rhythm is reached, personalities became more established, and rules were more in place. Parents worry about their children, of course: Who are they seeing? What are they up to? When will they be home? But parents interviewed had 'good kids' they trusted. *'It all starts and ends at the home.'* For these parents, a lot of the hard work in guidance, discipline and 'making the right decisions' had been set in place, meaning they could start to enjoy a new-found sense of freedom - able to go out themselves sometimes and not constantly fret over their kids.

In addition to parental differences in perspectives according to their children's Key Stage, mums and dads differed markedly in their experiences of, and attitudes towards, parenting, which seemed to reflect their response to SRE, where mums initially took a more emotional line and dads seemed more pragmatic.

For the parents we spoke with mums tended to be at the family frontline, dealing with the reality of daily life and the constant challenges that brings. They were the primary cleaners, cooks, chauffeurs and confidantes in their families, providing the bulk of the emotional support. They felt that they were always in demand and were expected to be there when it matters.

Respondent dads, by their own admission, felt that parenting was more of a 'weekend job' where daily detail is less important. They often described themselves as anchors or authority figures in the family, there to earn the money, provide the final answer, or step in with practical support when things become 'too emotional.' Few of the fathers we spoke to waived much from this line.

Parental sex and relationship advice

When it came to the role of parents in sex and relationship education, it seems the talk about the birds and the bees may have passed - just a few of them said they had sat their children down for 'that chat.'

A minority of parents expressed that while they provide life advice for their children, they actively avoided talking to their children about sex as they felt embarrassed.

For all the others, talking about sex was a case of 'when they're old enough to ask, they're old enough to know,' as one put it. That is to say, this sample of parents' approach to sex education was reactive rather than proactive - they waited for questions to be raised (and answered) rather than plot out the right time and place. They saw themselves as there to fill

in the information gaps. This is the result of a greater appreciation of different stages of development, curiosity and 'need-to-know' in children than in previous generations. Parents now, it seems, like to be more intuitive than prescriptive. They like to 'be fluid and go with flow' and understand that emotional intelligence is probably more important than biological age when it comes to sensitive and potentially awkward discussions. Some also said that they were afraid of saying too much too soon and maybe their children would not be ready so they would wait until their children approached them. Although for the majority, they said that they try and make themselves accessible to their children.

"I just answer any of their questions and talk to them if they have concerns (Mum, North of England)

"I just want to pass on good values" (Mum, North of England)

"If they ask I'll answer but I won't just give it" (Dad, North of England)

"I talk about everything with my kids - no holds barred." (Dad, London)

Parents in this sample clearly understood the difference between detailing mechanics of sex to creating a fuller picture of relationships, love, intimacy and self respect. Most parents agreed that the biology of sex could be taught in an afternoon. What was far more important to them was the need to instil in their children their values around sex and relationships and highlight the importance of sex as part of a relationship. In an age of perceived promiscuity, parents we talked to were adamant that their role, more than anything else, was to give sex education in context, discussing notions of respect, love, kindness, meaning and safety, rather than simple anatomy.

There were some parents who were overwhelmingly more conservative and protective of their children in sex and relationship education. None reported having any real experience of SRE with their children, and with fathers of daughters in particular, the sense was that they simply wished the subject would never come up. Despite the emotional support that mums provided, some expressed that they found it a difficult conversation to have and avoided it altogether. This was because they admitted finding their own childhood experiences embarrassing so lacked the language and confidence to share information.

"My daughter came home and said they'd talked about babies, I felt uncomfortable - she was 10. You don't want them to know" (Mum, London)

Across all groups, the dominant attitudes towards a parent's role in sex and relationship support included:

Openness;

Honesty;

Truthful answers when the questions arise;

Correct terminology and facts;

No more 'storks,' myths or euphemisms;

An open mind and a willingness to be there, whenever needed;

A gentle approach, when they are ready;

An encouragement to talk, even if it's embarrassing;

Pragmatism (use condoms, other forms of contraception, be careful, be aware of, and understand, sexually transmitted infections);

The need to impress upon a child that they should not be pressured, do anything too soon, or do anything they do not want to;

Most of all, to understand trust and respect in relationships. That this is not just 'sex';

Girls appreciating their bodies; and

Understanding puberty.

Most expressed being cautious, giving information only when asked for so as not to encourage their children to be sexually experimental and be willing to wait until they are ready.

“Sex should be special. Precious. Not some throw-away thing” (Mum, Midlands)

Sex and relationship information sources

All of the groups consistently listed the same dominant sources of sex and relationship education for their children:

- Parents
- Schools
- Internet
- Older siblings / cousins
- Playground / peers
- TV / Media
- Teen magazines

Of this list, only parents and schools were seen as wholly accurate information sources. Parents naturally assumed they would give their children correct information, and had most faith in schools to deliver a holistic level of sex and relationship education that went beyond their own understanding. However a minority of parents expressed some concern that teachers' values when teaching SRE may be at odds with their own, which they feared could give their children conflicting information.

Parents were far less trusting of other potential information sources on sex and relationships. The internet, particularly in sexual matters was generally seen as 'terrifying.' Playground gossip was described as a hotbed of misinformation, ignorance and possible bullying. TV, magazines and wider media were criticised as overtly sexualising teen aspirations and distorting children's views on what a 'healthy relationship' could be. The only exception here was the perceived positive value of factual programmes around sex and relationships occasionally broadcast and, for a handful of parents, the usefulness of 'Dear Deidre' type columns in girls' magazines.

“You can't block it from them - it's on TV and everything, they discuss it amongst themselves” (Mum, London)

The role of schools in sex and relationships education

All parents described school as fundamental in their child's sex and relationship education, going hand-in-hand with their own role as positive influencers.

Levels of understanding and involvement with what is taught at school, at what age, etc. varied greatly among parents. The majority had very little idea of what was taught or when. Instead, they were mostly happy to rely on the schools to do a good job as 'they know more than we do' and are trained to teach children and young people. A minority of mums took an active role in studying the course material and even pre-watching educational DVDs that the school used with their children to ensure they would feel comfortable in the class environment.

The importance of a 'rounded' SRE programme was stressed by a large majority of parents; that is, the need for children to be educated in issues beyond sex itself. Parents were supportive of schools' roles in teaching their children morality, respect for others and broader sexual health. They were keen that the voice used is impartial and the values do not contradict their own.

For some mothers, schools were criticised for not doing enough in SRE. Many felt schools could go further or start education earlier. A number of parents linked the UK's high teenage pregnancy rate and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) with a failing of SRE. For them, SRE needed to be a much bigger part of education overall to begin to tackle many teenagers' sexual health ignorance. They saw it as an essential part of their learning and development.

By far the biggest criticism of SRE in schools was its perceived lack of standardisation. Some schools were seen as excellent - communicative, involving and active, whilst others were seen as more vague in their approach.

Parents said they relied on their children to share with them what they have been taught. They wanted greater levels of understanding of SRE structure and would welcome a more generalised approach where every pupil, regardless of school, is educated in the same areas at the same time. When they had the opportunity to explore the content in the research sessions they were surprised and reassured at how age appropriate it seemed and its soft approach. They would therefore like schools to share with them what they are doing so that they can feel reassured and informed and if they choose, reinforce the messages at home.

"I think schools need to let parents know more details about what's being taught. If there was a newsletter sent out each term which explains what your child is going to be learning, if I'd have known what they were teaching in sex education, I could have reinforced what they were learning". (Dad, London)

SRE and right to withdraw: Spontaneous response

Many parents were surprised to learn of a parent's right to withdraw their child from SRE. All were surprised to learn that right extended to the age of 19. They questioned this age in light of young people being allowed to marry (with written parental consent) and have sex at 16 and vote at 18. Some struggled to grasp the reasons behind this age and all thought it was appropriate to reduce the age of parents' right to withdraw.

In simple terms, the overall response to this can be summed up by one mum: *"Rubbish. Absolute Rubbish."* (Mum, South East England)

"I'm surprised it's up to 19 - if the child's not getting it (SRE) at school and the family aren't either, you are going to get problems" (Dad, London)

None had exercised their right to withdraw their child from SRE, nor knew anybody who had. One mum had thought about withdrawing her child in primary school but went to speak to the teacher and she explained what would be taught and the Mum felt reassured so chose to keep her daughter in the lesson. Only six in the entire sample of 48 people appeared to genuinely want to retain their right. For others, it appeared as largely irrelevant but they could understand it from the point of view of other parents.

Some could understand that a parent could object to SRE on religious or moral grounds, but the overwhelming sentiment among parents was that all children, regardless of background, had a fundamental right to SRE. To deny it would be to disadvantage them for life. Most felt it is as essential as literacy and numeracy.

"There's a huge stigma for withdrawal, they'd be ridiculed and bullied by their peers, not knowing about the same stuff as them" (Dad, London)

"I think everyone should have a degree of education (SRE). If removed, what message does that give to other children? It opens up a door to bullying and sets the child back." (Dad, Midlands)

"I can't see any benefit in taking them out at any stage. It's all learning. What's the difference between them doing this or maths?" (Mum, North of England)

"It depends how it's portrayed - if it gets a headline, people get the wrong end of the stick - don't get that it's about relationship but as the act of sex is such a small part of the subject." (Mum, North of England)

Or, as one dad put it, SRE is

'one thing from school you take with you forever.' (Dad, Midlands)

Some parents felt very strongly that SRE was a way to arm children with the tools to understand inappropriate sexual behaviour and understand and therefore report abuse. They felt strongly that withdrawing them could indicate that they are more vulnerable.

SRE by key stage

When presented with a summary of SRE by key stage parents were overwhelmingly supportive of the programme laid out. Few had any amendments or criticisms at all. Comments tended to be very positive, rather than questioning, with many notes of 'very good!' written in the margins. Salient points:

Key Stage 1

Praised for its focus on interpersonal relationships, safety, and how to deal with bullying.

In science, right to name body parts correctly and begin the conversation around reproduction.

A few mums in London felt the link to animals was strange, but did not want it removed.

Key Stage 2

Overall, the vast majority felt the topics in PSHE and Science were exactly right. Relationship skills, caring, empathy and diversity in particular were praised. They want and expect this to be taught and reinforced.

The only common criticism was that the age band is simply too broad - they felt that what's appropriate for an 11 year-old is very different to what is appropriate for a 7 year-old. So parents wanted the key stage broken down further, to understand what will be introduced to their child at what age and how it will be taught

Key Stage 3

'All good' as one parent said. Again, this stage was praised for its focus on inter-personal relationship as much as more practical reproductive learning. The inclusion of cultural and racial diversity, as well the importance of stable relationships was welcomed.

Only the inclusion of bereavement caused some concern. For many, this appeared as too personal an issue to be taught to a wider class. Instead, it should perhaps be explored one-on-one, when relevant.

Key Stage 4

As with previous stages, all parents were in broad agreement with the content laid out. The focus on media, in particular, was singled out for praise. Many parents felt it right to remind children that they are 'mostly good kids' and can often be negatively portrayed. For a number, this component could and should be included at Key Stage 3.

Overall, "It covers everything. Bang on." (Dad, Midlands)

Parents seemed more comfortable generally looking at KS3 and KS4 SRE because their children are older and more mature, and so they felt less protective about them knowing about sex.

"I don't see that there is anything contentious on the curriculum therefore parents don't ever need to withdraw their kids from it" (Dad, North of England)

"It is a kids right to be taught it. They need to be educated on what is right and wrong. It protects them". (Dad, North of England)

Parental right to withdraw their child from SRE

Once they understood the content of SRE, the majority in this sample said parents should not have the right to withdraw their children. However, if there is a parental withdrawal right at all, parents felt SRE should be compulsory for all children from age 11 (Year 7).

SRE as part of the National Curriculum

As the private vote would suggest, the majority of parents welcomed the move to integrate SRE into the National Curriculum. Few understood why it should remain outside it. As many parents noted, for some children, SRE could be one of the most important things they take from school. They felt that SRE in this sense is a life skill with huge implications for every child's future. As such, respondent parents saw it as something which must be taught to all.

Name of subject

The preferred name was Relationship and Sexual Health Education, as relationships felt more important overall and including health in the title covers the essence of the subject.

"Relationships & Sexual Health - it focuses on relationships and then the sexual health follows that" (Dad, London)

"It will still be called sex education by the kids, won't it?" (Mum, London)

In Summary

Parents viewed SRE as a fundamental part of their children's education that will stay with them for life. Overwhelmingly, parents felt that it is every child's right to receive SRE, just as they would any other subject. It should therefore be part of the National Curriculum and integrated into every child's rounded, balanced education. To maintain it as an 'optional subject' is to continue, for many parents, to stigmatise the subject.

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