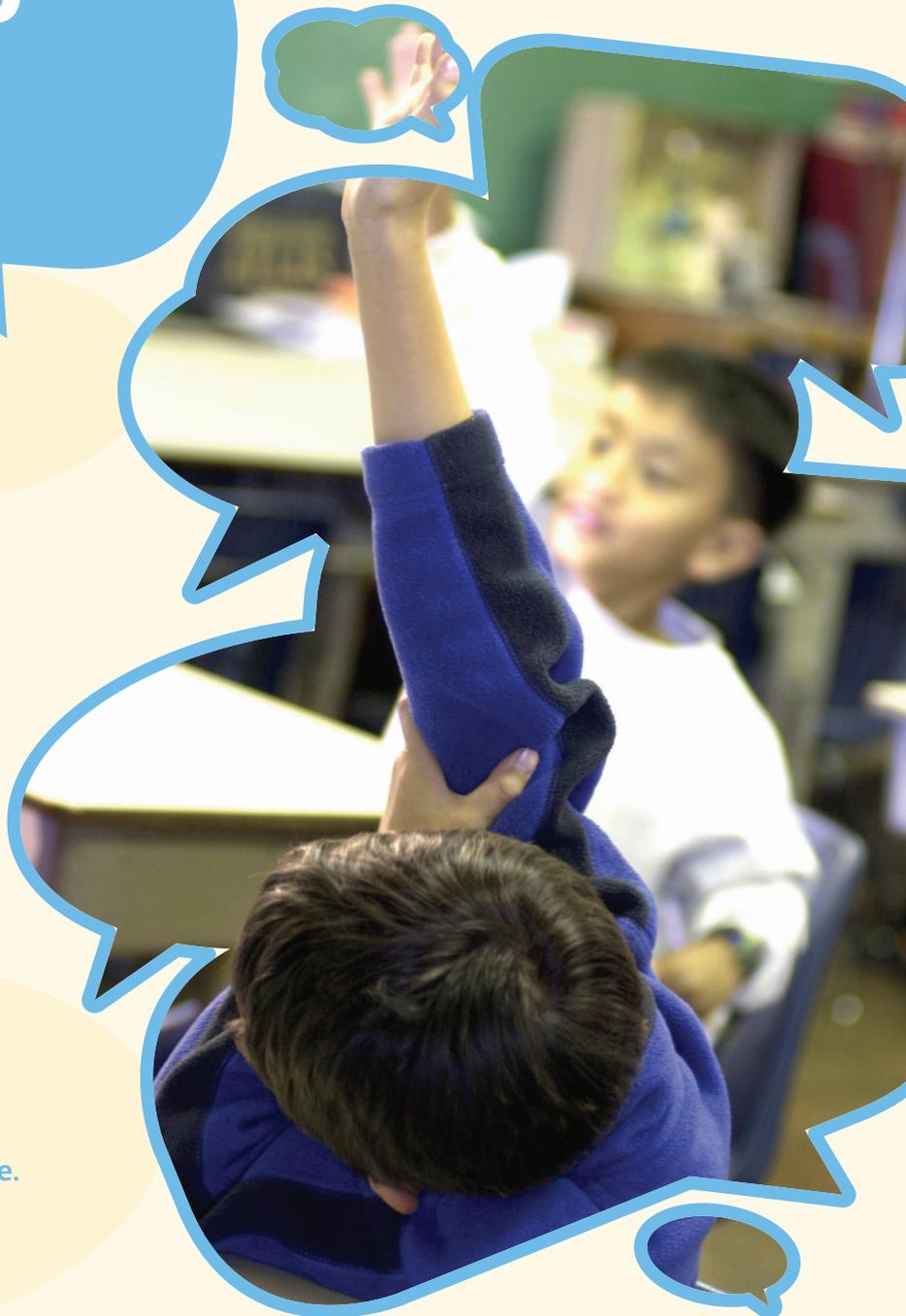


Answering Awkward Questions

This paper outlines research in Bolsover with over 1000 parents of primary aged children who were asked to share their experiences of talking to their children about sex and relationships. The results will be used to develop a range of useful resources and support for parents.

Through this briefing we aim to increase awareness of parents' needs and views around this topic and include some recommendations about how specialist organisations can support parents.

This research was undertaken by Derbyshire Healthy Schools and the School Health Service, North Derbyshire.



Why talk to children about sex and relationships?

It's not just about sex - children need to know about the way their bodies change, how their feelings are changing and how to keep themselves safe from harm. They need to know about making good decisions in friendships, treating people well, respecting themselves and dealing with pressure.

Children are exposed to messages about sex and relationships from a very young age, from television programmes, the news, magazines, games, websites and popular music lyrics and videos. Children need support in making sense of these messages and interpreting them. Without this support they will make up their own minds, or consult their friends who are also confused! This can often lead to myths and misinformation as well as forming attitudes which may not support their healthy emotional development.

Support needs to start early, with parents answering the first simple innocent questions that children have about their bodies.

When children feel that their parents are comfortable, confident and reliable when answering 'awkward questions' they feel more secure in approaching them with their views or concerns.

Recent research shows that children and young people want to talk to their parents and carers about sex and relationships and that discussion about sex and relationships in families is likely to result in young people delaying their first sexual encounter. This indicates that answering their 'awkward' questions from an early age can support them to make safe and healthy choices, reducing the chance of unplanned teenage pregnancy, unhealthy relationships and other risks in later life.

Parents have a right and a responsibility to talk to their children about sex and relationships; however many parents feel they lack the skills or confidence to do so.

Why Bolsover?

To make the study viable it was necessary to choose a specific location in which to carry out the research. Bolsover district was chosen primarily because it currently has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the county and this has an impact on the health and social and economic wellbeing of the young people, children and families in Bolsover. There is also a high rate of sexually transmitted infections. Delaying parenthood beyond teenage years and having aspirations are important messages for young people to receive. Working with parents as key partners in communicating these messages is a central feature of good Sex and Relationship Education.

This research is useful for schools and agencies across the whole county. The issues raised by parents in Bolsover are also represented in many other studies with parents across the UK.

How do you talk to boys about puberty if you haven't been through it yourself?

Guidance for Schools on Sex and Relationships Education (SRE)

Since September 2000 schools are required to have an up to date policy on Sex and Relationships Education. This should outline where and when SRE is taught. Good practice includes the delivery of a spiral curriculum, which covers three aspects of learning:

- knowledge, - for instance learning about the body, reproduction, puberty,
- skills development – taking responsibility, emotional literacy, friendship skills,
- the exploration of values and attitudes- challenging media messages , celebrating diversity, learning about respect.

These are taught from an early age at a level appropriate to a child's age and understanding. Through a 'spiral' approach they are revisited regularly to build on existing knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Governing bodies and head teachers should consult parents in developing their SRE policy to ensure that 'they develop policies which reflect parents' wishes and the culture of the community they serve', as well as meeting the needs of the pupils.

Parents have a legal right to withdraw their child from SRE in school, although not from aspects that are taught as part of the science curriculum. This means that all children will be taught the biology of reproduction, but those withdrawn will not receive lessons regarding the emotional and social aspects. The number of parents who do choose to withdraw their child is generally very low, especially in schools where thorough and effective consultation takes place.

The guidance can be viewed at www.dcsf.gov.uk

We are fighting against the media. SRE needs to 'de-sexualise' children.

What we did

In January 2009, parents of every child in 8 primary schools in Bolsover district were invited to complete an anonymous questionnaire with the following questions:

- Have your children started to ask you any 'awkward' questions?
- Do you sometimes find it difficult or embarrassing to answer?
- Would you like to see a range of simple books that you could look at with your child?
- Would you like to discuss possible answers with other parents?
- Would you help us to discover what support parents want by attending a discussion meeting with us and other parents?

With a view to reaching a range of parents, some were approached outside school and asked if they had completed a questionnaire. If the answer was 'no' their verbal answers to the questionnaire were recorded. The response rate overall was 33 %, which was very positive.

Following this, discussion groups were held with parents who had volunteered to help us further. They took place during April and May 2009 over three separate meetings in venues across Bolsover. Again parents from a range of backgrounds were represented, including parents of pupils with special needs. No men attended. The views of parents attending these sessions are represented in the points outlined in this leaflet.

What parents told us...

Sex and relationships education (SRE) is essential

Parents valued the opportunity to reflect on how they learnt about sex and relationships. Some were disillusioned with their own early sexual experiences and wanted better situations and relationships for their children. Whilst less than 2% on the questionnaire stated that 'their child was too young', all parents in the discussion groups agreed that children should be able to discuss sex and relationships with their parents and that good SRE is essential.

Primary aged children have questions about sex and relationships

There was general recognition that children are exposed to information and messages about sex and relationships from a variety of sources such as siblings, neighbours, and the media. These stimulated children to ask questions about a range of related topics e.g. making babies, puberty, body parts, nudity, miscarriage, relationships, kissing, sex, condoms, love, gay, gender, stereotypes, marriage, drugs and feelings.

Guidance and information about how much to tell children and at what age

Parents expressed concern about answering questions 'at the right level'. They wanted to know what information is appropriate, at what age, and what language to use. For instance, some felt that they could answer questions for older children but didn't know how to put it into words for younger ones.

They felt that some issues were more complicated to answer than others, such as questions about gay sex or masturbation. When dealing with incidents at home they were not always sure what constituted normal healthy sexual development and this made it difficult for them to respond.

Boys need male support

It was apparent that male carers are less involved in this aspect of parenting and many women said they would welcome input from their partners in this area. Single mothers commented that it would be helpful to have a male point of contact for support, particularly when talking to boys, as they themselves had not experienced boys' changes.

Children need to learn about good friendships and relationships

Parents recognise good SRE is not always just about biology – it's about supporting children and young people to form happy and safe friendships and relationships. Many were concerned that as their children grow older they may feel pressure to have a 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend' and that they need to understand the qualities of a good friend or partner when forming relationships.



82% of parents and carers said that their children were asking them 'awkward' questions and 27% said they sometimes find it difficult or embarrassing to answer.

Pregnancy, emotional safety and legal issues

Parents told us it is important that their children learn that the legal age of consent is 16 and protect themselves by learning what physical contact is and what isn't socially or legally acceptable. Parents voiced concerns about risks from strangers, paedophiles, and future unplanned teenage pregnancies. They wanted their child to feel safe emotionally as well as physically.

Trust and more open access needs to be developed between parents and agencies

Some parents felt unable to ask for help with their child in areas related to sex or the body, in case professionals overreacted to their concerns. They were not always aware of who they could ask for advice or how to access them. For instance, some were not sure how to contact the school nurse.

If you get embarrassed it's harder to answer.

The best support includes a range of approaches

Some parents were already talking to their child about SRE, using a range of strategies to gain confidence. Some had informal sharing with other parents. Others used leaflets and books about puberty that they'd seen at health centres. Suggestions for further support including more formal peer support through regular meetings, a website with a parents' forum, comprehensive leaflets including information about answering questions, school SRE, normal healthy sexual development, and targeted work with Dads.

Parents valued more partnership work and consistency between schools and parents

Parents highlighted the variance in SRE provision across the range of schools. Where this occurred, parents valued regular information about the content and timing of SRE lessons so that they could answer questions at home. Some suggested that schools should all have a consistent SRE programme so that it is clear to parents what will be taught and when, whatever the school.

62% of parents would like to see some simple books that they could share with their child. 23% would like to meet up with other parents to discuss ways to answer their children's question.



Recommendations for schools

- Keep parents informed of the content of your SRE Programme for each year group. A simple list of objectives will act as a guideline for parents on what is age appropriate learning in SRE.
- Always let parents know before the SRE programme starts in school. This will help them to be prepared for any questions they may be asked at home and give them the chance to be the first to teach their child about sex and relationships if they wish.
- Make sure that the emphasis in your school's SRE is on relationships, and that parents are aware of this. Whilst many children and young people can feel pressured to have a relationship, parents felt that learning should focus on the qualities of a good relationship.
- When teaching older pupils about intercourse and conception, ensure that they are taught about the legal age of consent.
- Make privacy and respect for personal space a key message. Make sure staff are aware of policy and practice regarding any unwanted touch or sexual behaviour.
- Address personal safety (including emotional safety) and avoiding pregnancy issues. Ensure these are covered in an age appropriate way in your SRE programme.

The society we live in makes people frightened to ask for help with this - everything's taboo.

- Store resources in school that parents can use to help them answer awkward questions. Ensure you have a range of resources that will be suitable for different ages and abilities. Remember to advertise the 'SRE Book Bag for Parents and Carers' when possible e.g. at parents' evenings, when the SRE programme starts or on your school website.
- Make sure parents know who they can approach to ask for help with SRE. Designate a teacher, or the school nurse. Make sure parents are aware of who the school nurse is by adding her photo and details to the staff notice board.
- Monitor how your school engages boys in SRE. Encourage boys to talk to their fathers or male carers. It is crucial to provide boys with positive role models.

I want them to be confident to ask, so we have to be confident to answer.

- Ensure your staff has the training and confidence to support parents in SRE.
- Work with the family resource worker or other local agencies to ensure they are aware of the SRE curriculum in school and all are giving consistent messages and support to families.
- Consider working with local schools through extended services or cluster groups to develop a co-ordinated approach. Parents felt that a common framework across schools would give them a level of confidence in supporting their child.

Recommendations for agencies

- Ensure your staff are aware of SRE issues in your setting, and have the training and confidence to support parents in SRE.
- Make sure parents are clear what support regarding SRE your agency can offer them, and how your organisation may respond to children's questions. This may involve including them in developing policy.
- Show parents resources you may use with children. Ensure you have a range that will be suitable for different ages and abilities. Parents may also need to brush up their own knowledge and understanding for instance about puberty changes, so leaflets and resources for parents would be useful also.
- Reassure parents it is ok to ask for help with SRE issues and that this does not mean professionals/practitioners will automatically assume that there is anything wrong. Ensure the access route is clear for parents and make sure you are able to point parents in the right direction if they need more support.
- Remind parents of legal issues that their children need to be aware of, such as the age of consent, use of mobile phones and the law about having partners staying over in their bedroom etc.
- Ensure that your work with boys and men covers SRE issues e.g. supporting boys in expressing their feelings, asking for help and understanding their body changes. Encourage dads and male carers to be involved - their role is just as important to children. Offer a male point of contact for extra support.
- Remind parents to check their children's understanding and have a discussion about when or where or with whom they might talk about this topic. Establish boundaries such as 'if you have more questions, I'm happy for you to come and ask me or your dad, but it's not ok to talk about this with your little sister as she is a bit too young just now.' 'This is something we can talk about at home together, but it isn't a conversation we should have in the supermarket/on the bus.'
- Create opportunities for parents to meet up and to develop their skills in talking to their children about sex and relationships. You may have opportunities at coffee mornings or drop in sessions to showcase resources or invite someone to answer questions about SRE. Local parenting programmes, for instance, Living with Children/Teenagers do integrate SRE issues into their work with parents.

**We need to drum
in the legal side of
it - it's not covered
enough.**

- Offer guidance on what is normal, age, appropriate social emotional and sexual development for children at different ages, e.g. "its not unusual for children aged X to start thinking about Y."
- Encourage parents to talk about relationships as much as the biology, perhaps using the media to help, e.g. (whilst watching soap together) 'How do you think X feels when Y says/does that? Is that a good way to treat someone/be treated? Why?'

**With my oldest I
can explain 'sperm
and egg' but it's
not so easy with the
youngest.**

Further sources of help and support

Derbyshire Healthy Schools and the Primary SRE Adviser are available to work with schools and agencies when implementing any of these recommendations. We will work with you to identify your needs and are available for consultation, policy development and training.

In response to this research we intend to develop a range of resources for parents (including a leaflet aimed at dads), and further development of our website. For more information, please contact:

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Primary SRE Adviser**

Tel: 01773 525096

Email: jane.o'byrne@derbyshirecountypct.nhs.uk

Visit: www.derbyshirehealthyschools.co.uk

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Visit: www.derbyshirehealthyschools.co.uk

Derbyshire Healthy Schools, 1 Church View,
Coney Green Road, Clay Cross, Derbyshire, S45 9HA

The School Community Nursing Service can support schools in enhancing their SRE through classroom delivery and parent support through 'school drop-ins' or referrals on SRE and other health related issues. Please contact your school nurse or:

**Trudie Pollock,
Sexual Health Co-ordinator (North Derbyshire)**

Tel: 01246 516096 /07887625268

**Helen Baker,
School Nurse, Sexual Health Advisor (South Derbyshire)**

01283 818093/ 07766768562

The Health Promotion Resource Library based at Clay Cross hold a range of SRE resources and free leaflets for children and parents available to anyone living or working in Derbyshire. They have a free delivery service. Please contact:

**Sam Chambers,
Marketing and Resource Library Manager**

Tel: 01246 868407

Derbyshire Health Promotion Service,
Church View, Clay Cross, Derbyshire



Thank you to schools and parents in Bolsover for taking part in this project.
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