

Sex and relationship education (SRE) in primary schools: guidance for parents of primary school children

The idea of teaching sex and relationships education (SRE) to children as young as those in Key Stage 1 (5 – 7 year olds) may seem inappropriate and alarming to some parents. However, a deeper understanding of SRE can reduce concerns.

Why is this work so important?

- Our ability to make, maintain and perhaps even end healthy, positive and productive relationships is part of what makes us human and is fundamental to a caring and supportive society. Our relationships come in a wide variety of forms: colleagues, family, casual acquaintances, close friendships and eventually, sexual.
- Our children learn by looking at and listening to all the messages they experience. They are constantly trying to make sense of the world around them.
- In our society, children are confronted with sexual images in advertising and stories and messages about celebrity lifestyles and relationships in the media. Pornography is readily available on the internet.
- How many parents have found themselves saying, *'I can't believe my child asked/knew/thought that!'*
- Using their natural curiosity combined with wonderful 'child logic', our young children often put together their own complex ideas about where babies come from. This understanding can be a mixture of correct, almost correct and completely incorrect ideas.

Many children will also enter puberty whilst still at primary school and without suitable preparation from parents at home. This can be a confusing, embarrassing and even distressing time.

So what is the purpose of SRE in primary schools?

- A planned, progressive programme of SRE *gradually and appropriately* begins to prepare our children for adult life. It teaches the skills they need to fully manage the natural physical and emotional changes that will happen to them as they grow and mature into healthy, confident and responsible adults.
- SRE teaches the skills children need to develop positive healthy relationships. It supports their moral development, helping them to understand themselves and to respect and care for others.

Parents do have the right to withdraw their children from sex education lessons (but not from sex education that is part of the science curriculum) but few take this option.

But what *exactly* do children learn?

All schools' programmes are slightly different, reflecting the needs and values of their unique community and the children and families in it.

In reception and Key Stage 1 (4 - 7 years old)

- Children might learn about their special people; friends and friendship; learning to recognise and react to different feelings and how to keep safe.
- They might explore how we show love and express feelings in our relationships. They might learn how we are all special and what makes us the same, what feelings we all share and what makes us different. They explore how we feel when our special people go away or even die.
- They learn about good and not so good *promises* and *secrets* and how to say *"No!"*, *"Don't"*, *"I'll ask"* and *"I'll tell"*.

- They might explore growing and changing in animals, plants and people and understand that growing and changing is a natural part of living.

In year 2 and 3 (6 - 7 years old)

- Children continue to explore growing and changing. Children learn to recognise and name main body parts. This helps children understand the differences between males and females and how they change as they get older.
- They bring in photographs of themselves as a baby, toddler and child and explore how they have grown and changed and what they can do now that they couldn't do before.
- They explore the different stages of human development, understanding how some people's needs and responsibilities stay the same whilst some change as they get older.

During Key Stage 2 (8 -11 years old)

- Children explore emotional changes and how to manage feelings towards themselves, their families and others in a positive way.
- They learn that we all go through physical and emotional changes but the age at which changes happen will depend on their own personal 'body clock'.
- They learn that although people's bodies may be ready to have/make babies, they as people are not ready in many other ways (emotionally, financially, and educationally) for a long time.
- Towards the end of their time in primary school children learn the process of conception and understand the importance of loving, stable relationships. Revisiting differences in reproductive system between boys and girls, they learn how they change during puberty.
- They learn that being able to talk sensibly and learn about this is an important part of growing up.

- Some parents may have concerns about whether SRE in their children's school will include an explanation of homosexuality and same sex relationships. Children are naturally curious and they may ask their teachers questions about different types of relationships and lifestyles.

In maintained schools, all teaching resources used and the approach taken for responding to questions are determined by the school's sex and relationships policy. This is the responsibility of the school's governing body produced in consultation with parents and the wider community. All teaching must be undertaken in accordance with the school's SRE policy.

SRE is not about '*encouraging sexual experimentation*', '*taking away a child's innocence*' or over-ruling the wishes and rights of parents.

SRE in primary schools prepares children for secondary school where learning will broaden to include human reproduction, contraception, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and HIV.

If you have concerns about SRE or are worried about your child, speak to their teacher.

This guide has been endorsed by:

Parentchannel.tv: www.parentchannel.tv is an online service designed to support and encourage parents and carers of children aged 5-19, with a collection of videos addressing day-to-day questions and concerns spanning wellbeing, behaviour and learning. Relevant videos include: Talking about sex/ The courage to talk about Sex/ Sex/ My teen is gay/ Parent teens and young fathers.

Mumsnet works with the PSHE Association to engage parents in issues covered by their children's personal, social health and economic education. Visit the Mumsnet Campaigns page (<http://www.mumsnet.com/campaigns>) for more information.

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