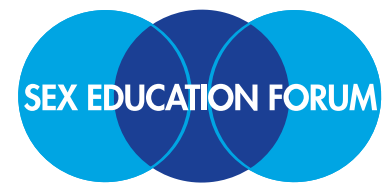


Sex and Relationships Education Framework



Forum Factsheet 30

The Sex and Relationships Education Framework is the core document of the Sex Education Forum. It is also for professionals who work with children and young people in all settings and who want to support the effective development of SRE policy and practice.

This Framework outlines the following:

- Definition of SRE
- Importance of SRE in today's context
- Legislation and guidance
- Principles of good practice
- Key elements to SRE
- Sex Education Forum

Definition of SRE

Sex and relationships education (SRE) is learning about sex, sexuality, emotions, relationships, sexual health and ourselves. The term 'sex and relationships education' will be used throughout this document and represents learning about sex and relationships in *all* settings including home, care, community, youth, secure, school and other educational settings. The Sex Education Forum believes that learning about sex and relationships should be:

- an integral part of the lifelong learning process, beginning in early childhood and continuing throughout adult life
- an entitlement for all boys as well as girls; those who are heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual; those with physical, learning or emotional difficulties; and those with a religious or faith tradition – everyone whatever their background, community or circumstance
- provided within a holistic context of emotional and social development across all settings.

Importance of SRE in today's context

Numerous surveys repeatedly confirm that children and young people want better SRE. They describe what they receive as 'too little, too late and too biological' and say that it avoids the broader issues of relationships, emotions, sexuality, contraception, sexually transmitted infections and abortion. Furthermore, surveys of parents consistently show support for SRE. However, many feel they lack the skills, confidence and knowledge to talk to their children about SRE and look to professionals for support.

Children and young people already receive information about sex and relationships both formally and informally, from a variety of sources and in a variety of settings. These include friends, family, the media, music and films as well as education and health settings. However, despite many examples of excellent practice, strong commitment and exemplary skills, the quality of SRE varies. Indeed some informal sources such as friends and the media can be misleading and inaccurate. Professionals must be adequately trained and supported to enable them to challenge misinformation confidently, and to provide children and young people with their entitlement to good quality SRE.

The UK has one of the highest rates of conceptions amongst under-18-year-

olds in Europe. Although the rates are slowly declining in response to the National Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (SEU 1999), sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, continue to rise. Reasons for poor sexual health, teenage pregnancy and early parenthood are complex. Nevertheless these issues are more common amongst those who experience social inequality such as poverty, low educational achievement and employment prospects, homelessness or being in care. SRE must be both specific to the needs of children and young people and also integrated into the mainstream to improve the sexual health and well-being of *all* children and young people.

Legislation and guidance

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children and young people have the right to enjoy the highest attainable health, access to health facilities (Article 24), and access to information which will allow them to make decisions about their health (Article 17). It also states that those professionals working with young people 'shall take appropriate measures to develop preventative health care, guidance for parents, and family planning education and services' (Article 24). Children and young people also have the right to be heard, express opinions and be involved in decision-making (Article 12). They have the right to education which will

help them learn, develop and reach their full potential and prepare them to be understanding and tolerant to others (Article 29). Additionally, children have the right not to be discriminated against (Article 2).

In school settings the law relating to SRE is contained in the Education Act (1996) and the Learning and Skills Act (2000). Every local education authority, head teacher and governing body has a statutory responsibility to take account of this guidance which requires that SRE is provided. The biological content of SRE must be taught as part of the statutory National Science Curriculum. Furthermore a written SRE policy, which is open to Ofsted inspection, must be in place and should be available to anybody working within the school setting. The DfES SRE Guidance (DfES 2000) builds on these legal requirements and emphasises best practice by recommending that SRE is planned and delivered as part of Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education.

Guidance is also available for other settings. The duties and responsibilities of local authorities for children and young people being looked after are contained in the 1989 Children's Act and in the DoH guidance *Promoting the Health of Looked After Children* (2002). Guidance on the delivery of SRE is also available for social workers (TPU 2001), Connexions personal advisers (DfES 2002), youth workers (TPU 2001) and Young Offender Institutes (SEF 2001).

Principles of good practice

An overview of research (HDA 2003) and evidence from practice suggests that SRE which is developed according to certain principles is likely to be most beneficial for the sexual and emotional health of young people. These principles,

which apply to all settings, are summarised here under the headings of Planning, Delivering and Reflecting.

Planning

- developing a clear SRE policy within a values framework in consultation with children and young people, parents and carers, and other professionals from the wider community. This will ensure that it addresses the needs of children and young people, as well as their educational and health priorities
- working with teenage 'opinion leaders' and peers but taking into account their level of understanding and support needs
- selecting and training staff who are committed to SRE and the needs of children and young people and striving to ensure all staff are aware of these needs and entitlements
- providing SRE before the start of puberty and sexual activity, and as an on-going programme
- developing relevant SRE which is appropriate to the needs of the child or young person, taking account of age, ability, gender, sexuality and cultural background
- informing and supporting parents and carers to ensure they have the skills and confidence to take an active role in delivering SRE to their children.

Delivering

- establishing a safe learning environment in which open and non-judgemental discussions about sex, sexuality and sexual health can be held
- developing a group agreement to ensure acceptable boundaries for discussion that safeguard children, young people and professionals
- ensuring that one-to-one work also acknowledges the need for boundaries and supportive frameworks

- respecting the privacy and confidentiality of children and young people within the boundaries of child protection, and informing young people of these rights
- using methods that encourage children and young people to participate in their learning
- linking SRE to information about advice services that children and young people can access.

Reflecting

- assessing what children and young people have learnt and understood
- monitoring and evaluating the methods used to deliver SRE to ensure effective future planning.

Key elements to SRE

Good quality SRE is mindful of children's early experiences and is based on their developmental and expressed needs. It provides consistent messages, is on-going and progressive, and supports children's confidence and self esteem as they move from childhood to adulthood. It helps them understand themselves, negotiate their relationships and prepare them for adulthood. It should prepare them as young adults to take responsibility for and enjoy sexual and emotional relationships, and neither exploit others nor be exploited themselves. It should also provide them with sufficient information and skills to resist pressure, have a sense of their own rights and protect themselves and their partner from unintended/unwanted conceptions or sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

There are three key elements to SRE: acquiring information; developing skills; and exploring attitudes and values. Information about sex alone can never be enough. All three elements are closely interrelated and a proper consideration of attitudes and values is vital to the development of essential

life skills. In turn these skills will help children and young people acquire and use relevant information.

Information

Children and young people are entitled to clear, relevant information which is accurate and non-judgmental. The content of SRE should address:

- what children and young people know already
- what children and young people say they need
- the emotional, biological, legal, social and cultural aspects of growing up, sexual development, sexual behaviour, sexuality and sexual health
- the potential consequences of unprotected sex, for example unintended pregnancy, young parenthood, abortion, and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV
- the effect and impact of ignorance, prejudice, discrimination and stigma
- the advice and confidential support available to children and young people including leaflets, websites, help-lines and other health and support services
- how they are able to participate in their own learning.

Skills

Children and young people are entitled to learn and practice key life-skills which should include:

- emotional skills – managing emotions confidently, developing empathy for others, building emotional resilience and resourcefulness, developing independence of thought and behaviour
- social skills – developing and maintaining relationships with others, taking responsibility for their own and others' emotional and sexual health
- communication skills – learning to participate effectively, to listen and

ask questions, express emotions, give opinions, challenge and to be challenged

- negotiation skills – resisting peer pressure and ensuring that they get what is best for them, managing and resolving conflict, asking for what they want and not pressurising others
- practical skills – caring for self and others, accessing support and advice
- decision making skills – managing real life dilemmas, assessing risk, making informed choices and being able to act on them.

Attitudes and values

By exploring and challenging attitudes and values, children and young people can be helped to develop a positive attitude to sexual health and well-being through:

- developing a positive values and moral framework that will support their decisions, judgements and behaviour
- gaining an understanding of the range of different social, cultural, ethnic and religious frameworks and their value systems
- developing a critical awareness of value systems represented in the media and amongst peers
- recognising that prejudice, discrimination and bullying are harmful and unacceptable
- understanding that sexual intimacy involves strong emotions, and should involve a sense of respect for one's own and others' feelings, decisions and bodies
- understanding that all rights have responsibilities and all actions have consequences
- recognising the value and right to active participation in their learning.

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Sex Education Forum

The Sex Education Forum is the national authority on SRE. Established in 1987, the Forum is a unique collaboration of over 50 organisations.

The Forum aims to:

Ensure that *all* children and young people receive their entitlement to good quality SRE in a variety of settings.

The Forum's objectives include:

- to create an environment which supports this entitlement and keeps SRE on the agenda
- to share information and build capacity amongst professionals and parents/carers to support them with planning and delivering good quality SRE.

The Forum works at a variety of levels including:

National and local policy and practice development, media work and information dissemination, through seminars, publications, fact sheets, e-mail and a website.

Membership:

All Forum members agree to the SRE Framework, the Values Framework and meet the membership criteria. Applications for membership are received by the Chair and considered by the Advisory Group. Forum members approve all membership applications.

Values Framework:

- We value ourselves and others as unique.
- We acknowledge the diversity of society for example in relation to gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, culture, age, religion and ability and welcome this richness.
- We actively support the protection of children and young people against any form of exploitation and against pressurising or exploiting others.
- We respect the privacy and confidentiality of young people within the boundaries of child protection, and believe young people should be informed of these rights.
- We recognise the diversity of family groups and settings in which children and young people live their lives.
- We encourage a critical awareness of the messages and value systems of others such as those represented in the media or within ones peer group.
- We believe that sex and relationships education must be provided in a learning environment which is safe for the children, young people and adults involved. Any environment which colludes with bullying, prejudice and discrimination is unacceptable.

A publication catalogue is available on request.

For more information about the Sex Education Forum and its work:

- email sexedforum@ncb.org.uk
- phone 020 7843 1901
- or visit the SEF website at www.ncb.org.uk/sef

Sex Education Forum Members

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