

This factsheet describes current law and policy regarding the teaching of sex education in Northern Ireland's schools. It is generally accepted that sex education forms a major component of health education. In official documents in Northern Ireland, sex education is increasingly being referred to as relationships and sexuality education (RSE). This factsheet will however use the term sex education, as some of the information provided refers to literature that uses this term.

## Government support for sex education

Initially the framework for sex education was established by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) in guidance Circular 1987/45.<sup>1</sup> It stated that schools should have a written policy on sex education endorsed by the board of Governors and communicated to parents. It further states that sex education:

"should be taught in a sensitive manner which is in harmony with the ethos of the school or college and in conformity with the moral and religious principles held by parents and school management authorities."

The 1989 Education Reform Order forms the legislative base for education in Northern Ireland. Health education is one of six cross-curricular themes. It aims to:

- enable pupils to achieve their physical, psychological and social potential, and to improve their self-knowledge and self-esteem;
- promote positive attitudes towards health;
- instil a sense of responsibility in respect of individual, family and community health;
- enable pupils to acquire skills on decision-making, in managing and handling situations of stress in relation to health;
- provide a knowledge base and the skills to interpret it.<sup>2</sup>

A Government strategy for health in Northern Ireland published in 1996 set the following target: "By 1998 a comprehensive health promotion

programme for schools in relation to sexual and reproductive health, which emphasises the importance of personal relationships, self-esteem and decision-making skills, will have been developed and implemented".<sup>3</sup>

In 2001 Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) disseminated guidance for primary and post primary schools on relationships and sexuality education (RSE).<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this guidance is to assist schools:

- to develop a policy statement in relation to RSE which reflects the ethos of the school and complements existing policies in relation to, for example, Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and/or child protection; and
- to provide a programme of RSE which is appropriate to the needs and maturity of the pupils.

The Department of Education's 2001 circular Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)<sup>5</sup> complements CCEA's guidance documents. It advocates that teaching should:

"put primary emphasis upon what is positive and good in relationships between the sexes and should also include treatment of those matters about which people have diverse and deeply held views, for example, methods of family planning, including contraception, abortion, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, homosexuality and pornography."

## Provision

There is no uniform pattern in the provision of sex education in schools and very little published research in this area. Some schools provide well-planned sex education within the personal, social and health education and science programmes, coordinated across the curriculum. Other schools provide sex education as an occasional one-off topic, while others have no formal sex education and only answer questions when they arise.

This approach does result in gaps: a 1994 survey <sup>6</sup> found that among fifth form pupils (average age 16), almost half the boys had not been given classes explaining menstruation or sexually transmitted infections (STIs), apart from

AIDS, and almost one in four had never had a class on puberty.

Almost one in eight girls had not been given classes explaining menstruation or puberty. For boys and girls, relationships were less likely to be discussed in class than pregnancy and contraception.

In 2002 **fpaNI** published the Towards Better Sexual Health survey on the sexual attitudes and lifestyles of young people in Northern Ireland aged 14 to 25 years of age.<sup>7</sup> Young people's main criticism about sex education was that sexual feelings and emotions or potentially contentious issues such as sexual orientation, abortion or how to make sex more satisfying could not be discussed with teachers in an open and unbiased way.

### What is sex education?

**fpaNI's** policy statement on sex education states that it should:

"be a lifelong learning process based on the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and the development of positive values and attitudes... it should equip young people to enjoy sex and relationships that are based on qualities such as mutual respect, trust, negotiation and enjoyment."<sup>8</sup>

The Sex Education Forum, an umbrella body bringing together national organisations involved in supporting and providing sex education, states that sex education should:

- be an integral part of the learning process, beginning in childhood and continuing into adult life;
- be for all children, young people and adults, including those with physical, learning or emotional difficulties;
- encourage exploration of values and moral issues, consideration of sexuality and personal relationships and the development of communication and decision-making skills;
- foster self-esteem, self-awareness, a sense of moral responsibility and the skills to avoid and resist sexual experience.<sup>9</sup>

### Why sex education?

The World Health Organisation believes that education for health is a fundamental right of every child. Education can help to increase

self-esteem, develop effective communication skills, and encourage each person to respect his or her own body, and understand their responsibilities to others.

Surveys among adults as well as young people regularly show considerable ignorance about issues related to sex and sexuality, resulting in confusion, unhappiness and the breakdown of relationships. The media bombards society with overt and often misleading information, which influences a young person's knowledge and attitudes to their own sexuality, as well as that of others. Families, parents and teachers often exclude young people from discussions about relationships and sexuality.

This mixture of secrecy, lack of knowledge and negative media messages confuses young people and encourages poor self-esteem, resulting in uninformed choices being made. These may lead to unplanned pregnancy, STIs including HIV/AIDS, or deeply unhappy and damaging relationships.

In Northern Ireland, the Department of Education circular recognises the need to provide young people with guidance and the opportunity to examine sexual issues in a supportive environment.<sup>5</sup>

The Towards Better Sexual Health survey produced the first ever comprehensive Northern Ireland wide data on the sexual lifestyles of young people in Northern Ireland.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore not possible to comment on whether young people are having sex at an earlier age. The survey does however show that, of those young people who had experienced sexual intercourse, 36.7% had sex before 17 (the legal age of sexual consent), and 27.4% had sex before 16. Young men reported earlier sex than young women, and Catholics were less likely than other respondents to have sex before 16.

There were no significant differences in the data produced by the Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey also in 2002, which included sexually active young people aged 16 to 24 years.<sup>10</sup> The data from the Towards Better Sexual Health survey also compares well with the 1997/1998 Health Behaviour of School Children study<sup>11</sup>, which revealed that in a sample of 3,450 young people from years 9-12 (approximate ages 13 to 16), 655 (14.9% of this age group) reported at the time of the survey

that they had experienced sexual intercourse. The average age of first sexual intercourse was 13 for boys and 14 for girls. The majority of those who had experienced sexual intercourse (79.2%) reported using some form of contraception.

The Towards Better Sexual Health survey also showed that approximately one quarter of respondents failed to use contraception when they first had intercourse and over 40% of young men and 33% of young women said that they were drunk when they first had sex.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most popular arguments against sex education is that it encourages early sexual activity. Yet a 1993 World Health Organisation review of 35 sex education studies in the USA, Europe, Australia, Mexico and Thailand, found no evidence that sex education leads to earlier or increased sexual activity.<sup>12</sup> The survey showed that sex education programmes can actually encourage young people to postpone penetrative sexual intercourse, or, if they are already sexually active, to reduce their number of partners or have safer sex.

- In all 35 studies, sex education did not result in earlier or increased sexual activity.
- In six studies, young people delayed their first sexual intercourse, or reduced their overall sexual activity.
- In 10 studies, individuals who were already sexually active had less unprotected sex.
- Studies of two programmes providing counselling and contraceptive services reported neither earlier nor increased sexual activity.
- The programmes that promoted a range of options were more effective in encouraging safer behaviour than those promoting abstinence alone.
- Programmes that introduced sex education before young people became sexually active achieved better results.

### **Where should sex education be taught?**

Ideally, sex education should be tackled both at home and in school, and possibly through religious and community groups. However, while

research indicated that both parents and children would like to discuss sexual issues, many parents lack the confidence to do so. A 1992 study undertaken by the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland found that, although parents in Northern Ireland believe they have a responsibility to contribute to their children's sex education, many feel unable to talk about it comfortably.<sup>13</sup>

Research carried out by the Health Promotion Agency in 1996<sup>14</sup> revealed that 98% of parents in Northern Ireland want schools to play a role in teaching sex education to children and young people. Seventy-two per cent of parents and teachers said that they should share equal responsibility for sex education. Despite this view however, many parents had not discussed any sexual issues with their children.

### **Teaching methods**

Sex education is taught in a variety of ways in schools but, as with provision, a full picture is not available.

The classroom setting and traditional mode of teaching may not provide opportunities for discussion, for examining attitudes and values, or for exploring facts and feelings in relation to the young person's everyday life. Informal approaches, such as group discussion, role-play, and quizzes, encourage participation and make the information more relevant to the young person's experience. It is important that the group feels safe, comfortable and relaxed so that they enjoy themselves as well as learn.

The young people who participated in the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland's evaluation of the Theatre in Education project<sup>15</sup> 'Yours Truly' were very positive about informal approaches such as a drama group discussion. They were clearly dissatisfied with the provision of sex education in school, feeling that while the facts are important, they also need an opportunity to discuss how these relate to their everyday experiences.

It is significant that the Agency's 1996 research indicated that, while 65% of post primary schools surveyed had a written policy on sex education, 68% of primary schools surveyed had not. Eighty-one per cent of primary school teachers involved in teaching sex education reported that they had received no specific training, as did over half of the post primary teachers.<sup>14</sup>

**Conclusion**

Sex education is part of both health education and personal and social education. It should promote positive sexual health and be a compulsory part of every school curriculum. Young people have the right to sex education, appropriate to their age and comprehension, which offers exploration of emotions, feelings and personal values, as well as information about reproductive biology and sexually transmitted infection.

**References**

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13. Parental attitudes towards sex education in Northern Ireland. Exploratory research prepared for the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland by Ulster Marketing Surveys Limited, 1992.
14. Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland. Views from parents and schools. Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland, 1996.
15. Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland. "Yours Truly" - evaluation of a theatre in education project for post primary schools. Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland, 1994.

**Resource list**

These titles are available from fpaNI, 113 University Street, Belfast, BT7 1HP. Tel: 028 9032 5488  
A comprehensive catalogue of books and resources about sexuality and relationships is also available. Please send an A5 SAE.

**Abortion: just so you know**

This fpa booklet provides young people with accurate information about abortion. It covers current UK abortion law, attitudes towards abortion, abortion procedures and sources of further information and advice. Full colour and highly illustrated. Meets curriculum guidance for key stage 4.

**4 Boys: a below-the-belt guide to the male body**  
fpa's most popular leaflet ever! This full colour, highly illustrated booklet for young men aged 13 to 16 uses simple text and humorous illustrations to provide information on testicular self-examination, contraception, STIs and safer sex. Meets curriculum guidance for key stages 3 and 4.

**4 Girls: a below-the-bra guide to the female body**  
This full coloured 16 page companion booklet to *4 Boys* for girls aged 12 to 16 gives girls the facts they want to know about physical changes and sexual development. An invaluable resource for youth workers, teachers and everyone working with young women. Meets curriculum guidance for key stages 3 and 4.

**4 Boys, 4 Girls, talking with young people about sex and relationships**

Activity manual for teachers and youth workers has been produced to accompany fpa's best-selling series of booklets for young people. The manual explores and develops the themes of the booklets. It uses a variety of learning methods including drama, art, test your knowledge and attitudes, activities to promote discussion of puberty, sex and relationships, peer pressure, contraception, STIs, abortion and sexual health services.  
Suitable for work with young people aged 12-16.

**Contraceptive display kit**

*A brand new version of this essential resource.*  
The contraceptive display kit is an ideal way to stimulate interest and discussion about contraception. A sturdy briefcase style holder containing samples of contraceptives in a lift-out tray: condom demonstrator: user manual containing a variety of exercises, including photocopiable activity sheets; fpa leaflets on contraception; selected fpa factsheets. Ideal for use by teachers, youthworkers and school nurses, the contraceptive display kit will: increase young

people's understanding of contraceptives and how they work so they can make informed decisions; promote awareness of condoms and how to use them properly; provide an understanding of how to access sexual health advice and services; trigger discussion on feelings and attitudes about sexual health through guided quizzes and group exercises. Suitable for use with young people aged 13-16.

**Holding the baby** (*VHS video 24 mins and training manual*)

How does it feel to be a teenager and pregnant? Produced in Northern Ireland, this video aims to help young people aged 13+ explore the realities of these issues. Dramatised in three parts, it follows four teenage girls as they discover their pregnancy and tell family, boyfriend and friends, and how they cope as teenage parents. Exercises in the accompanying manual develop issues raised in the video.

**Is everybody doing it?** *Your guide to contraception*

A full colour, highly illustrated 16 page booklet which deals with peer pressure, the issues involved in starting a sexual relationship, going to a family planning clinic, different contraceptive methods and STIs. For 13 to 17 year olds. Research by the National Adolescent and Student Health Unit found this to be adolescents' most popular contraceptive leaflet. Meets curriculum guidance for key stages 3 and 4.

**Let's make it happen:** *Training on sex, relationships, pregnancy and parenthood for those working with looked after children and young people*

Looked after children and young people are particularly vulnerable to poor sexual health and research on care leavers has demonstrated that disproportionate numbers of young women are pregnant or already have a child when they leave care.

A joint **fpa** and National Children's Bureau publication, this innovative manual aims to support experienced trainers working in health, social services, education and voluntary agencies. It will enable them to deliver training to professionals who work with looked after children and young people. It provides:

- information on key guidance and legislation;
- advice on working with different groups of looked after young people;
- advice on developing, planning and evaluating training;
- a variety of training exercises on policy development, sex and relationships, pregnancy and parenthood;
- suggested training programmes;

- photocopiable handouts and OHPs;
- useful resources and contacts lists.

**Love STINGS:** *a beginner's guide to sexually transmitted infections*

In brilliant comic strip style, this booklet raises and answers young people's questions about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) – their symptoms and long-term effects, how they are treated, and how they can be avoided. Above all, it presents a reassuring picture of the sexual health clinic and the importance of a check-up if there is any reason to think you could have an STI. For 14 to 18 year olds. Meets curriculum guidance for key stages 3 and 4.

**Moving goalposts:** *setting a training agenda for sexual health work with boys and young men*

Groundbreaking new resource for professionals training those who work with boys and young men. *Moving goalposts* contains everything needed to plan and run a training programme, including: a detailed rationale for working with boys and young men; guidance on planning, delivering and reviewing training; exercises focusing on skills, emotions, attitudes and values; photocopiable handouts; useful addresses and resource list.

**Periods:** *what you need to know*

This colourful booklet for girls aged 9 to 12 prepares young girls for menstruation by explaining why girls and women have periods, what happens and how to deal with them. Meets curriculum guidance for key stage 2.

**Pregnancy:** *A young person's guide*

An exciting new addition to fpa's ever popular young people's comic-style booklets, *Pregnancy* covers reproduction, preparing for pregnancy, the development of the fetus and birth. It also describes the physical and emotional changes of pregnancy and the role men play in pregnancy and birth. It aims to give young people a realistic view of what pregnancy entails. For 12-16 year olds. Meets national curriculum guidance for key stages 3 and 4.

**Sex, storks and gooseberry bushes:** *talking to children about sex (VHS video 30 minutes)*

Broaching the subject of sex with their children is not easy for any parent. This valuable video resource aims to encourage positive communication about sex between parents and their children and equip parents with the skills to answer questions confidently as they arise. For professionals and peer educators working

with groups of parents, the video acknowledges that all families are different and that there are no 'right' ways of talking about sex, rather that it's all about honesty and communication and a lot of trial and error!

Using a mix of interviews with parents and dramas depicting real-life situations, it presents ideas, advice and support in a non-threatening manner. With accompanying user notes.

**Strides:** *a practical guide to sex and relationships education with young men*

Clear advice and practical tips for those working with 14 to 25 year old men in youth and community settings and schools.

Includes: advice on preparing and supporting your work; practical tips on setting up a group and keeping it going; over 30 participatory activities suitable for a variety of settings; back-up notes and photocopiable handouts; list of useful resources and organisations. This innovative resource will give you all the confidence, skills and ideas you need to make working with young men fun and rewarding. Endorsed by the National Youth Agency.

**Talking to your child about sex**

Packed with support and advice for parents and carers of young children on how to respond comfortably to those awkward questions.

**Talking to your kids about sex** (*VHS video 25 minutes*)

Sally and Martin know it's time they started talking about sex to their two kids, Daniel and Carrie, but they're embarrassed. Where do they begin? What should they say? How should they say it?

Martin's liberated mum, Gloria has some ideas and in this humorous fpa video she helps Martin and Sally face up to their embarrassment. They also get advice (via their TV set!) from relationship experts Dr David Delvin and Christine Webber.

This video for parents and carers of children aged 8-14 years also comes with a free booklet offering tips and advice on how to talk to kids about puberty, sex and relationships. A must have for every parent who has ever been stumped for what to say and where to start!

**Teentalk:** *Parents and young people communicating about sex and relationships*

A step-by-step guide to developing and delivering training to people who work with parents and carers to support young people in their sexual, social and emotional development.

The guide is based on the experience gained by fpa in developing and delivering a national two day roadshow. Many of the exercises illustrate the learning gained by participants during Teentalk and practical tips are given to help avoid potential pitfalls. The training can also be used for professionals working directly with young people.

Teentalk also contains a resources list, examples of evaluation questionnaires and photocopiable handouts.

**The fairy godfather** (*VHS video 15 minutes and accompanying manual*)

The fairy godfather has arrived to help any teacher newly recruited to providing relationships and sexuality education (RSE). This entertaining video highlights the challenges and opportunities encountered by teachers involved in the provision of RSE. Through classroom scenarios, it shows how some of these challenges can be met and opportunities maximised.

The accompanying manual offers advice on developing an RSE policy. It includes a mock RSE school policy, which teachers can adapt and use to develop their own policy and guidelines. There are also lists of useful resources and contacts. An invaluable resource for anyone who has ever asked "Where do I start?".

**The weird and wonderful world of Billy Ballgreedy** (*VHS video 20 minutes and training manual*)

This popular video pack focuses on the sexual health needs of young men. The video and training manual combine to: enable young men to learn about their sexual health; develop relationship skills based on respect and responsibility; explore gender issues and how these influence behaviour; examine issues such as peer pressure, drug and alcohol misuse and how these affect choices and actions around relationships and sexual activity.

Filmed in Northern Ireland, the video follows the fictional character of Billy as he negotiates his way round the challenges of puberty, girls and sex. Realistic scenarios show Billy talking about how puberty has affected him, visiting a family planning clinic, learning about condom use and going to a party with his mates. It also includes young people talking about their own experiences. The accompanying manual includes activities on puberty, contraception, sexually transmitted infections and relationship skills. For use by teachers and youth workers with young men aged 13+.

**Useful Addresses**

**ACET: AIDS Care Education and Training**  
3 Fitzwilliam Street, Belfast, BT9 6AW.

Tel: 028 9032 0844. A voluntary Christian based agency providing practical care to those with HIV infection and aiming to reduce the number of new infections by providing information and education. Provides speakers for school, community and church groups.

**Brook Belfast** 29a North Street, Belfast BT1 1NA. Tel: 028 9032 8866. Offers young people free, confidential contraceptive advice and supplies, and help with emotional and sexual problems.

**Childline** Tel: 0800 1111. A free national helpline for children with any problems.

**fpaNI**

113 University Street, Belfast BT7 1HP.  
Tel: 028 9032 5488. 2nd Floor, Northern Counties Buildings, Custom House Street, Londonderry, BT48 6AE. Tel: 028 7126 0016. Telephone helpline and drop-in service providing advice and information on sexual issues. Also provides a non-directive unplanned pregnancy counselling service. This voluntary agency also offers training for professionals.

**Genito Urinary Medicine Clinics**

Outpatient department: RVH, Belfast. Tel: 028 9089 4777. Londonderry. Tel: 028 7161 1257. Coleraine. Tel: 028 7034 4177. The clinic provides information, counselling and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

**Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland**

18 Ormeau Avenue, Belfast BT2 8HS. Tel: 028 9031 1611. Regional organisation responsible for promoting health through public information, regional projects, education and training, policy development, research and evaluation.

**Life Pregnancy Care Service** Bryson House, Bedford Street, Belfast. Tel: 028 9024 9414.

Offers free pregnancy testing, counselling, practical help and accommodation.

**National AIDS Helpline** Tel: 0800 567123. Freephone. The lines are open 24 hours a day.

**RELATE - Marriage Guidance and Relate Teen**

76 Dublin Road, Belfast BT2 7GU. Tel: 028 9032 3454. Relate Teen offers a counselling service for young people who face problems following the breakdown of their parents' relationship. Relate also provides an education service in schools and youth clubs, and also professional courses.

**The HIV Support Centre** Tel: 0800 137437 Mon-Fri 9am-5pm, 7-10pm; Sat 2-5pm. The Helpline is one of a range of preventative and care services operating from the Centre at the Warehouse, 7 James Street South, Belfast BT2 8DN. Services offered include complementary therapies, support groups, and domiciliary support.

**The NEXUS Institute (formerly the Rape & Incest Line)** 105 University Street, Belfast BT7 1HP. Tel: 028 9032 6803. PO Box 32, Londonderry. Tel: 028 7126 0566. PO Box 220, Craigavon (correspondence only). Counselling, training and education agency.

Support training, information and resource materials may also be obtained from the Health Promotion Department/Unit of your local Area Health and Social Services Board.

**Eastern Health and Social Services Board**

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.  
Tel: 028 9032 1313.

**Northern Health and Social Services Board**

Spruce House, Cushendall Road, Ballymena BT43 6HL. Tel: 028 2563 5575.

**Southern Health and Social Services Board**

Tower Hill, Armagh BT61 7DR. Tel: 028 3741 0041.

**Western Health and Social Services Board**

Health Promotion Dept., Westcare Business Services, Gransha Park, Clooney Road, Londonderry BT47 1TS. Tel: 028 7186 5127.

**Other Northern Ireland factsheets are:**

*Abortion*

*Teenage pregnancy*

*Family planning services in Northern Ireland*

*The legal position regarding contraceptive advice and provision to young people*

*Sexually transmitted infections*

For further information contact **fpaNI** at:

113 University Street, Belfast BT7 1HP

Tel: (028) 9032 5488 or

2nd Floor

Northern Counties Buildings

Custom House Street

Londonderry BT48 6AE

Tel: (028) 7126 0016.

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