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## Lisa Hallgarten

### 'Talk About Choice'

This year 'Education For Choice' was awarded the fpa Pamela Sheridan Award for excellence in Sex and Relationships Education.

Any organisation would be glad to have the quality of their work recognised by receiving such an award, but it was especially important for us because the *Talk About Choice* project addresses abortion. Abortion is the Cinderella subject - the topic that is left at home when all others are invited to the ball. It is often deemed too sensitive, too controversial, and too complicated to address.

Struggling for funding, we recently employed a fundraising consultant who told us to forget applying for money from charitable foundations unless we stopped using 'the A Word' because, "It puts people off". Although 1 in 3 women in the UK will have an abortion during their reproductive lifetime and though 20,000 teenagers each year will opt for abortion, it remains a taboo.

*Talk About Choice* is the only UK education project specifically aimed at providing young people with evidence-based information about abortion. Although teachers may be anxious about the topic and some schools may steer clear, students are hungry for information and bursting with opinions, views and questions about it. Teachers who have had us in their classrooms know it is possible to talk about abortion in a way that is accurate, interesting, respectful, and non-dogmatic.

#### What questions do young people ask?

The following list provides examples: How old do you have to be to have an abortion?

Why do people choose abortion? How much does an abortion cost? What are the different methods? Does it hurt? Is it safe? Is it morally acceptable? Who would I talk to? Does abortion affect a woman's fertility? Would I have to tell my mum or my doctor? What do different religions say about abortion?

We encourage students to ask a lot of questions and we answer everything with information sourced from reliable research bodies, such as the Office of National Statistics and Department of Health, and established medical bodies, such as the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. We also point students in the direction of reliable websites in order to avoid those with misinformation or gory images.

Our visits provide an opportunity to address all the myths and misinformation students routinely share about abortion. For example the most commonly held belief, which is untrue, is that abortion will make women infertile. Most women are fully fertile within a few days of abortion and must use contraception immediately if they want to prevent a further pregnancy.

#### Talking about decisions

Factual information, however, is only a part of the story. The main focus of *Talk About Choice* is to get young people talking about the decisions that may lead to unintended pregnancy and the decisions that will result from it. Topics include: Why unplanned pregnancy happens; What could be done to prevent it happening; What it would feel like to face the dilemma of an unintended pregnancy; Who you would be

able to talk to about it and what their reactions might be; What it would feel like if you and your girlfriend/boyfriend felt differently to each other about the pregnancy; What the different pregnancy options are and what is positive and negative about each of them; Which pregnancy option you think you would choose and why; How you would make the decision.

## Role-play

We use a role-play exercise with students playing a couple awaiting a pregnancy test. This situation raises all the issues, adds an element of suspense and normally results in an uproar of either joy or horror as the students find out the randomly allocated results of their tests.

The facts are important, but so is the opportunity for young people to empathise with someone making this decision, to walk in their shoes and consider what it would feel like. They can voice their own opinions about abortion and recognise others' views. They can think about issues relating to gender and rights, consider their own support mechanisms and how their family would react to the news of pregnancy. Most importantly they can assess which would be harder, to use contraception or to face the decision to continue with or end an unintended pregnancy.

## Evaluation

Routine evaluations of students attending *Talk About Choice* workshops show an increased motivation to use contraception, especially amongst the boys. These are boys who have sat through many a condom demonstration, but in a *Talk About Choice* workshop they suddenly experience the 'Aagh!' moment when they realise that if they got their girlfriend pregnant she may or may not talk to them about her decision, but ultimately it would be her choice and they would be powerless.

*Talk About Choice* is a small project,

available in a limited number of inner London schools. It informs all our work and has formed the basis of a range of resources that teachers can use to deliver this work themselves. Several recent pieces of research (see below) have recommended that evidence-based education on abortion supports better health outcomes including: reducing the number of young women accessing later abortions; improving young women's pregnancy decision-making capacity; and reducing repeat abortions. It's good for young people's health to talk about choice; better still, they love it!

## Resources and Information

(All Internet references accessed November 2010)

Lee, E., Clements, S., Ingham, R., Stone, N. (2004). *A Matter of Choice: Influences on young women's decisions about abortion or motherhood.*

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/influences-young-womens-decisions-about-abortion-or-motherhood>

Ingham, R., Lee, E., Clements, S., Stone, N. (2007). *Second-trimester abortions in England and Wales.*

[http://www.soton.ac.uk/lateabortionstudy/late\\_abortion.pdf](http://www.soton.ac.uk/lateabortionstudy/late_abortion.pdf)

Hoggart, I. (2010). *Young People in London: Abortion and Repeat Abortion*

<http://www.younglondonmatters.org/uploads/documents/tpyoungpeopleinlondonabortionandrepeatabortion.pdf>

Best Practice Guidance on abortion education and factsheets from: [www.efc.org.uk/Forprofessionals/Resources](http://www.efc.org.uk/Forprofessionals/Resources)

Education For Choice also provides training for health and education professionals  
[www.efc.org.uk/Forprofessionals/Training](http://www.efc.org.uk/Forprofessionals/Training)

Email [efc@efc.org.uk](mailto:efc@efc.org.uk) for information on any aspect of Education For Choice work

Pamela Sheridan Award

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