
VIEWPOINT

Rebecca Jennings

Too much, Too soon? Or Too little, Too late? The case for Sex and Relationships Education in Primary Schools

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T*oo much, Too soon? Or Too little, Too late?*
As a Sex and Relationships Education Consultant, Teacher and Trainer over the past 14 years, I have heard these two statements on numerous occasions. *Too much too soon*; often the response from parents I meet who sign up to the parent meetings I deliver prior to pupil sessions. Quite often I have walked in to a school only to be ambushed at the gate with questions from panicked parents worrying that their little one is about to find out exactly how they were made.

On the other hand I meet teachers and staff concerned as many pupils as young as 7 years of age are beginning the process of puberty, in particular young girls beginning to menstruate. In most cases now, I start to deliver 'the period talk' to a group of year 6 they stop me mid-way and declare 'Miss, we know, it's already happening!'

In my experience of working with older pupils in secondary schools, it is apparent that young people know so much more as they have access to so many ways of finding out information about

sex and relationships. It is up to us as adults to ensure our children learn the correct information. We do not wish to make a child feel they have done something wrong by asking a question about their body, relationships or reproduction.

We need to understand that if we feel offended or embarrassed by a question it is because we have learnt, through our own values and beliefs, that talking openly about a particular subject is bad. Shouldn't we feel safe in the knowledge that the future generations feel comfortable to approach us to learn and find out the correct information from a source they can trust? So often children and young people find misinformation via the Internet or they learn to believe that asking questions about their bodies or relationships is a bad thing and should be swept under the carpet. If this is the reaction children are receiving from adults, then how are they meant to have the confidence to maybe one day discuss, with a future partner, issues such as contraception, keeping safe and feelings?

We didn't need sex education at school so why should children need it now?

Often a misconception from some parents and primary teachers, who feel that they 'got by' without knowing much about 'the birds and the bees' - so why do we need to tell children about it now?

Children now have access to the wrong information. In the 1990s *Just Seventeen* magazine and a few 'rude' words in the dictionary seemed to be how young people discovered information about sex. Outside influences are now giving children and young people a very unhealthy message about topics such as body image; self-esteem; relationships; puberty and sex. The media have a major part to play in a child's life, including music lyrics and music videos which are almost always sexualised. An example, I always use in staff training, is that of a primary school I worked in several years ago (way before firewalls for Internet safety). One class were making Easter cards and had started to use the Internet to look for the words 'Cute Chicks' - you can imagine the images that were produced. If children don't find out the correct information from adults they trust, then they can be at risk of finding out all sorts of misinformation which can lead to further curiosity and possible confusion around growing up.

Finding a balance

So where and how do we find a balance? It's all about starting these conversations early; the key is to ensure the information we give to children is appropriate to their age and level of understanding. Whether you are a parent or teacher working with a child it is paramount that we understand what they are asking and what they think the question means. Where did they hear the word? Find out and then answer them honestly and openly in a way they will understand.

As an example, a 3 year-old child in a supermarket may point at a display of sanitary towels and ask, "What are these?" A simple answer could be "something that girls use when they are a little bit older". If that child was 6 years old, it may be worth discussing that as a girl grows up they have a monthly change, describe the change and explain because of that change they need to use sanitary towels.

Setting up your Sex and Relationships Education in Primary School

In my [book](#) 'Sex and Relationship Education in Primary Schools', I discuss effective techniques in answering questions correctly and a chapter entitled 'naming body parts'. Using the words penis and vagina with a very young child can seem extremely difficult and in some ways very inappropriate. These parts of the body seem to be the ones we discourage children to talk about when in fact ensuring they are educated keeps them very safe.

Many adults are concerned that giving children the correct language and information will take away their innocence. As a mother myself; I get it! I know I don't want my daughter running around using those words all the time but it is vital that children know the names for their own body parts. Having that knowledge about their own body does not stop a child wanting to paint or build sand castles, a little bit of knowledge empowers children. It is a fact that some children are sexually abused. If a child is aware of private parts of their bodies and the names for those parts they are more likely to speak out. The NSPCC campaign [The Underwear Rule: PANTS](#) ensures children are educated to talk about abuse and to ensure they know that private parts are private!

Of course, if families have a certain name for body parts it's okay for them to use that and if people feel more comfortable that's great! Children just need to know the correct words so that they are aware and when they start to have more lessons around puberty and growing up then they are able to cope with the language that will be used.

Puberty sessions are the 'bread and butter' of my Sex and Relationships Education [SRE] world. I love all the questions young people ask in every session I deliver and dispelling myths is my forte! I love working in schools, who then follow up with their own SRE sessions and continue to reinforce those messages throughout the year. SRE is not about giving children too much information and it is certainly not about making young people promiscuous! In fact, if children find out information they are less likely to see SRE as a mystery subject and more likely to make informed choices as they grow up based on correct information.

All young people will eventually go through puberty and experience changes to their body due to the actions of different hormones. Therefore we need to let them know that: Yes, they could feel emotional; Yes, they will have feelings

towards others sometimes and it's up to us as professionals, parents and teachers to ensure their transition to adulthood is as smooth and as safe as it possibly can be.

Education and Health

The journal, published by SHEU since 1983, is aimed at those involved with education and health who are concerned with the health and wellbeing of young people. Readership is worldwide and in the UK include: primary; secondary and further education teachers; university staff and health-care professionals working in education and health settings. The journal is online and open access, continues the proud tradition of independent publishing and offers an eclectic mix of articles.

Contributors (see a recent list) - Do you have up to 3000 words about a relevant issue that you would like to see published? Please contact the Editor

Education and Health Archive

Each issue of the journal, published since 1983, is available via the [archive](#). There are several simple indices that help to identify articles by keywords; year/issue number; author surname and article title. It can be seen that some contributors have had a number of articles published and there are a range of topics that have been covered over the years. Sometimes a contributor will update their article or develop points raised by another contributor. The [pages](#) on the website, that have been provided for the Education and Health journal, usually have the highest number of 'reads' across all pages on this Internet [site](#). One of the most frequently read articles is '[The educational benefits of videogames](#)' published in 2002 and written by Dr Mark [Griffiths](#).

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