course below the age of 16.

In some ways I have considerable sympathy for the media, because we need to be saying to parents that "Four out of ten are doing it, so have you talked to your young teenager?", but in the young people themselves we probably feel we should be saying "Six out of ten are not doing it, so why do you need to start?" in order to make them aware of the pressures under which they live.

"Knowing your partner"

Some of the recent HIV advertising has been looking at the need to "know your partner" before you have unprotected sexual intercourse, and Roger Ingham of Southampton University has been looking at what young people mean or understand by "knowing your partner" (8). Of his small sample of just over a hundred who claimed to know their partner, 25% had sexual intercourse within the first 24 hours of going out with that partner. Here are three quotes from his research:

A young female, 17, whose partner had had nine previous partners to intercourse, said: "He said I've only slept with you in the past six months and I said I've only slept with you so AIDS doesn't really bother me at the moment."

Or another young girl, aged 18:

"It's silly really, I don't really know a lot about him you know, I don't know much about his background. I mean he's like well brought up and comes from a good family and everything, and his Dad's like a job title and his sister's [job title] and he likes work in a laboratory. He's really intelligent so someone who's like intelligent like I expect him to know you, you know I trust him because he's a sensible bloke so obviously he's sensible that way."

Or a third girl, aged 19:

"They lived in the New Forest I don't think from the way he described them to me they don't seem to be the sort to sleep around and get it. I've met one of them and she doesn't seem to be the sort of person to be on drugs or I don't know I just don't think they come across as being that sort of person to me."

This girl's boyfriend had been extremely surprised and pleased that she was a virgin, because all the girls that he had been out with had already slept with quite a few others.

Well protected

I think we are finding that many young people are using condoms at the beginning of a sexual relationship, but the minute they place some trust in their partner the use of condoms is abandoned and previous relationships are forgotten about. It is extremely difficult for us to get the right messages across to make young people believe that it is serious, that they should be protected for both pregnancy and infection; but I would like to think that if we tackle the problem from all three points of view, through parents, through schools and through health professionals, we might get young women who can act like this, from Ingham's research:

"She produced condoms from the glove compartment of her car. She just said do you know what these are for, I said yes, she said good, use it and I thought right fair enough."

I have the feeling that this girl was also well protected from a contraceptive point of view.

References

1. Say Yes, Say No, Say Maybe. A comic-style booklet with cartoons and lively illustrations to help young people explore the issues surrounding HIV/AIDS. £2 each from Brook Education Unit.
3. Confidentiality in Secondary Schools: Ethical and Legal Issues (England and Wales). In-service training pack which looks at the important issue of confidentiality and how it affects secondary schools. £19.50 from Brook Education Unit.
4. Drunk in Charge of a Body. This pack consists of 12 short stories to help young people investigate the positive and negative influences of alcohol. £40.50 from Brook Education Unit.
6. Directory of Birth Control Services for Young People. £15 from Brook Education Unit.

The authors are part of the APAUSE team: a project based at the Department of Child Health, Postgraduate Medical School, University of Exeter, with the aim of improving effective sex education programmes. Fran Phelps is an Educational Research Fellow, and a teacher of science and PSE.

Alex Melanby is a Medical Research Fellow and family doctor. John Tripp is Senior Lecturer in Child Health.

So you really think you understand sex?

It is a well-known fact that some young people have misconceptions and believe 'myths' about sexual issues — but all our experience in the classroom had not prepared us for the significantly large number of year 9 pupils who came up with incorrect or wrong ideas, to say nothing of the number who had believed and agreed with the false statements offered on our starter sheets.

We discovered this in the first stage of a research project to improve effective sex education programmes. Fifteen schools, nine in Devon, four in Somerset and two in Norfolk, are taking part. The aim is to give pupils access to accurate and relevant information and to improve their communication skills, enabling them to make informed decisions, to resist pressure to become sexually active, and to be able to seek professional advice when necessary.

Part of this project involves a teacher and a doctor delivering a nine-week Human Sexuality module to pupils, aged 13-14, in two comprehensive schools. The aims of the sessions were to:

- Create/maintain a supportive atmosphere where pupils respect the values and beliefs of others and allow learning to take place;
- Assess and extend the pupils' current knowledge of puberty, anatomy and its prevention, the development of relationships, and the medical problems associated with early sexual involvement;
- Provide a foundation for the second part of the module focusing on relationships, presented by teams of students aged 16-17 years;
- Use role play/scenario to simulate real-life situations;
- Provide an opportunity to develop communication skills and interpersonal relationships;
- Use a variety of methods and techniques with which the pupils are familiar.

Ground rules

We had no objection to imposing ground rules, which was certainly better than the stage-management of 'agreement' which is actually controlled or led by the teacher. We do know that certain things are necessary for successful discussion, and these include: laughing, joking, and making people feel good — particularly by accepting their views and questions with respect. In our opinion this is not just sensible, but necessary. We also made it clear that we weren't...
not going to ask them personal questions about sex. Ground rules are not discussed with respect to sex, but to something else — like normality and puberty.

We do not discuss our own experiences, and we actively discourage pupils from discussing their own. There is a strong tendency — among staff and pupils alike — to talk about one’s own experiences. It is always gripping stuff, but we actively discouraged it for all sorts of reasons — it’s distracting, it’s a bad model, and it will alarm others (age, staff and pupils) who do not want to discuss their history but think it will be expected if we do.

We often use anecdotes, but these are always anonymous, third-person, bare-bones-only cases which illustrate and make concrete particular situations and issues.

Back to basics

We discovered that young people are aware of current issues, and know much of the essentially technical vocabulary — but their understanding is often poor. Therefore, although we started off with a very carefully-planned series of lessons, we soon discovered that we needed to be very flexible — one small group of girls clearly didn’t have a clue where menstrual blood was coming from even though they had "done it" before, so we had to go back and get the basics sorted out before we could get on with what we saw as the main issues.

Many pupils have startlingly inaccurate ideas of the geography of the human body.

Table 2. References to dreams or fantasy in responses to What are ‘wet dreams’?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of response</th>
<th>All %</th>
<th>Male %</th>
<th>Female %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dreams of girls</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreamfantasy</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreams of sex</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls and sex</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes dirty/n naughty</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No mention of dream</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of pupils</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many pupils have startlingly inaccurate ideas of the geography of the human body. — image 0x0

Table 3. References to eggs or ovum in responses to What is menstruation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference to eggs/ovum</th>
<th>All %</th>
<th>Male %</th>
<th>Female %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eggs/ovum</td>
<td>93.6</td>
<td>94.7</td>
<td>91.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfertilised egg/ovum</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead/old/reseeds eggs</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td>79.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploding eggs</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reference</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of pupils</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

dreams” or “fantasy” in their responses; 45% made no reference to either. Table 2 details pupils’ responses related to ‘wet dreams’. We treat every question a pupil asks as serious — even if it is not, and even if they are trying to embarrass or test us. Perhaps even especially if they are jokey — the things people laugh about are often the most important. It is often only the compassion which will have the braveness to ask what everybody else is thinking about.

One of the things we hope to be able to achieve is to make people more comfortable about not knowing things — while making it possible for them to find out.

The next part of this article outlines and discusses pupils’ individual responses to two questions from one of the worksheets.

‘Wet dreams’

What are ‘wet dreams’?

This was an open-ended question, and we performed a content analysis of the responses from 420 pupils (219 boys and 201 girls).

Semenal fluid, 25% of pupils made no reference to fluid release in their responses, 71% of boys and 63% of girls referred to semen or ejaculation. For 25% of all pupils, this was their only comment about ‘wet dreams’.

Table 4. References to menstrual flow in responses to What is menstruation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference to menstrual flow</th>
<th>All %</th>
<th>Male %</th>
<th>Female %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blood entering vagina</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood from uterus lining</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood from (exploding) eggs</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasting/clearing out</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reference to blood</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of pupils</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The idea of sperm build-up recurred elsewhere — particularly in connection with vasectomy.

Menstruation

What is menstruation (a girl’s period)?

In all classes, the pupils were asked to write down everything they knew about ‘periods’, what they were, why they happened, how often they occurred, and any other descriptive information. Again, a content analysis was performed.

Ova or eggs. Table 3 details the pupils’ responses.

From the sample of 420, 55% of the pupils referred to eggs or ova in their response to this question; 18% used the term ‘unfertilised’ and 13% described the eggs/ova as ‘dead’, ‘old’, ‘wasteless’ or more surprisingly, as ‘exploding’; some used phrases such as a ‘good clean out of the eggs or dead egg cells that collect up each month’. Then they disperse out of the vagina (the complete answers given by two girls). Just under half of the pupils, 45%, made no reference to ova/eggs.

Where on earth does the idea of ‘exploding eggs’ come from?

We wondered about a piece of footage often used, which shows the moment of ovulation — which is very dramatic, and fills the whole TV screen with no idea of scale. But it may have fuelled an idea of exploding eggs, and fragments scraping down the womb and vagina producing bleeding.

Menstrual fluid. Table 4 details the pupils’ responses. Just over a third, 35%, made no reference to menstrual fluid in their responses. 31% of the responses described blood as coming from the uterus lining in responses such as the blood is a thickened lining of the womb coming off (male) or when the egg and the womb walls burst out of the vagina (female). Others included explanations such as ova or (exploding) eggs as the source of the blood, or when a girl produces an egg and is let out through the vagina every month (female).
In discussion, many of the pupils said that it was normally difficult or embarrassing to talk freely.

The commonest topic of free question — any age, any group — was oral sex.

If knowledge is power, then most of these young people lack the power to communicate effectively about their own sexuality.

References