Parents, schools, and sex education

Are parents aware of their right to withdraw their children from sex education? Can they foreseen a need to exercise that right? Do they feel that they are kept sufficiently informed about what the school is doing? Do schools feel happy with what they are offering?

The 1993 Education Act Amendment 62 gave parents the right to withdraw their children from any 'sex education' that did not include work covered by National Curriculum Science Orders. We decided to conduct a year-long project within the Loddon NHS Trust District to look at the ways in which parents and schools communicated with each other regarding sex education.

We initially contacted all 16 secondary schools within the area covered by the project. The plan was to conduct semi-structured interviews with PSE co-ordinators, governors, and parents, but although the initial feedback from schools was positive, the parents' response to the letters of invitation to be interviewed was low, and several schools dropped out of the project.

To boost the parental representation, self-completion questionnaires were sent home by pupils in Year 10 (representing Year 5 and Year 11 pupils) in each of two schools.

The final tally of data came from 31 interviews with governors, PSE co-ordinators, and parents, and 55 postal questionnaires returned by parents.

Main findings
Parents and sex education

1. The majority want schools to have a role in the provision of sex education.
2. The majority want to withdraw their children from sex education. The criterion for withdrawal would be connected with the quality and method of delivery rather than a general objection to the topic being taught.
3. However, very few thought it likely that they would want to withdraw their child.

Parents and schools

1. The majority of parents were satisfied with the programme at their children's school, and did not make any suggestions for change, even though they were invited to do so.
2. In fact, parents did not seem to know much about the sex education programme and the materials used. Despite this, they felt that communication between the school and themselves was good.
3. Ease of access to the school and to relevant teachers, by being able to telephone rather than having to make an appointment to visit, was considered very important.

A parent commented: 'All the staff there are very accessible and easy to talk to, you don't feel as if you are being a nuisance.'

4. Some parents expressed a wish for a more detailed timetable of the PSE programme so that they might be prepared for discussion or questions arising as a consequence.

Parents as 'educators'

1. In contrast to the national study (Parents, Schools and Sex Education, HBA, 1994), the majority of parents thought talking with their children about their problems was a good idea, and that this dialogue about sexual matters with their children, but they did not perceive their children as being comfortable in discussing the topic with them.

A parent commented: 'I'm sure it may take a bit of encouragement and that my daughter might say a bit of encouragement and that my daughter might say it was the same when I was at school, there are some things you don't...'
Low parental involvement: lack of interest, or confidence in the school?

want to talk to your parents about.

3. They also thought that this information would be useful to themselves.

4. They thought that parents and schools had a joint responsibility for sex education, schools having the advantage with the more "biological" aspects, morality and relationships being addressed at home.

Staff and sex education

1. Only one of the schools undertook formal pupil evaluation.

2. Anecdotal evidence indicated a need for monitoring and evaluating sex education programmes. This was perceived as very important for newly-qualified teachers or staff new to this area, as lack of criteria left them unclear about accessing resources and agencies.

3. Teachers did not perceive themselves to be in need of additional basic information, but expressed a wish to explore less conventional teaching methods. Theatre-in-education and similar initiatives were cited as key areas of interest.

4. Homosexuality and abortion were acknowledged as difficult topics, and staff were interested in strategies for addressing these areas.

Schools and parents

1. The data from the survey suggest a discrepancy between schools' and parents' perceptions of parental involvement. The parents in the study report a high degree of confidence in their school and cite as a reason for not getting more involved. Conversely, the schools appear to want more parental involvement and perceive their detachment as lack of interest!

2. Several co-ordinators referred to the fact that they seem to hear from parents only when there is a problem. The mechanism for this is clearly defined in the school prospectus, but it is felt that there is little opportunity for staff to receive positive feedback from parents.

3. A co-ordinator commented: It's really difficult to get the parents into the school, much less become actively involved in anything.

Recommendations

Keeping parents informed

1. A timetable of topics to be sent to parents before the sex education programme begins.

A co-ordinator commented: One idea that did seem to work quite well was sending the parents a booklet covering the same topics as the school. The feedback was positive; we were told it helped to raise the issue in the home and make discussion easier.

2. Regular newsletters to parents, including information about the sex education programme.

3. Parents' evenings on sex education, with the opportunity to view the materials and talk with the teacher, were felt to be a 'good idea', but with reservations about the attendance.

A co-ordinator commented: We tried it once a couple of years ago but it was hardly worth doing, the people who did come didn't really need the information, the ones that didn't come are the people that would have benefited the most.

4. A parents' leaflet detailing contact numbers and addresses of local organisations and describing what services or information they provide. Local agencies such as Family Planning and GUM should be requested to update schools regularly with respect to opening times, etc.

A parent commented: I know the Family Planning clinic have information, if that didn't work I suppose I would look in the local directory, depending on what the problem was.

5. Members of staff, or groups of staff, whom the parents are encouraged to contact if there are any concerns or queries, should be clearly identified.

Clarifying the school's programme

1. The school's sex education policy needs to ensure that there are clear guidelines regarding the teaching of sensitive subjects (for example homosexuality and abortion), so that staff feel they have the appropriate internal organisational support, as well as the opportunity of utilising outside agencies if necessary.

2. A clear mechanism for monitoring and evaluating both the pupils' learning and the programme itself is needed. This could be internal or external. Monitoring and evaluation should include regular reviews of the written policy and of the use of outside speakers and resources. An infrastructure of this nature would particularly benefit new staff members.

Copies of the full report may be obtained from the Loddon NHS Trust Health Promotion Service for £4.50 including postage.

John Balding & David Regis

More alcohol down fewer throats?

Are fewer young people now drinking alcohol than they did in the Eighties? This question was prompted by a parliamentary researcher working for an MP, who recently asked us to look back over the last 11 years of our surveys to examine alcohol consumption by young people.

From regional data to nationwide statistics

To some extent any interpretation is difficult, whatever you find, because different parts of the country are represented in each annual sample. Locally, survey co-ordinators work hard on getting an appropriate selection of schools to participate; but if you discover a difference between successive years in a nationwide collection you cannot know if young people have changed throughout the country between successive years, or if they have always been different in the parts of the country represented in the successive surveys.

This is a particular difficulty for us, because there are no comparable attempts at national data collection for many of the items in our questionnaire to which we could refer for guidance. For example, while OPCS assesses children's smoking, there is no national screening of their self-esteem, participation in aerobics, or the type of breakfast they eat.

Consistency

One of the arguments that strengthens the case for comparing our data from different years is the consistency of the levels of certain behaviours reported across the years. This consistency suggests to us that for these items at least the percentages are probably representative of the nationwide picture. Moreover, if trends year-on-year can be seen in one behaviour, while others remain steady, then these probably are a reflection of a genuine nationwide trend.

If a difference is found between successive surveys in one district, it can be helpful to discover the same difference in other districts, and in the collection of all districts, surveyed in the same year.

We believe that we have just identified one such trend. In 1989 we looked at smoking and drinking over the five years from 1984 to 1988, published in Young People in 1988. Since then we have struggled to find the time to look at other behaviours and in other years, although a start was made when we published two volumes of our Young People into the Nineties series. Although the interest and possibly the value of doing so is great, we have insufficient funds to support our research of the data base as well as provide the service we do --- there are, after all, 11 years of data and hundreds of questions to examine.

Fewer drinkers in 1994?

However, any one behaviour doesn't take too long to look at, and when this parliamentary researcher recently picked up Young People in 1994 and compared the tables in it with the trends shown in Young People in 1989 we were prompted to do so.

The proportion of young people reporting that they had drunk alcohol during the week previous to the survey was fairly steady.