

## The HEC Primary/Middle School Health Topics Project

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# Health topics and the parents

The aim, in most aspects of my researches in support of good practice in schools, has been to provide reliable data, in an intelligible form, to help schools to make their own decisions. These decisions must, of course, be reached in the light of their knowledge of the communities they serve, and also of the available resources.

The extensive interview work and pilot studies which occupied the first six months of the development of this curriculum planning method culminated in a field trial of the raw instrument in four school communities. It was possible to have reached this stage within so short a time only because the methodology was based on a widely-used enquiry method for secondary schools. These Health Topics Questionnaires, with accompanying methods for administration and data processing, have been available since 1978 from the Health Education Council under the title *Just One Minute*.

The data from the first primary/middle

school field trial is currently being processed. Despite one or two inevitable weaknesses in the methodology appearing at this stage of development, the results from the first use of this new enquiry method are, nevertheless, very interesting; hence, a selection of results from parental responses, and a commentary, are presented in this paper.

### Contacting parents

Opinion differs on the extent to which the parental view should help shape curricula in schools. In maths or language studies, for example, it may be more the place for the professional educator to decide. However, in the areas of health and social education, which are so much part of the experience of home life, the parental view is most important in shaping what, if any, contribution the school might be actively planning into its programme. But if a school decides to consult parents, how many can be effectively reached? A parents' meeting typi-

Personal Development and Health Education Enquiry  
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Please place ticks in columns to indicate your views.

LIST A	Importance for inclusion in the curriculum			Please circle age group or groups where the topic might be usefully taught
	Should be included	Useful but not essential	Not appropriate	
1. How the body works				5-6 7-8 9-10 11-12 13+
3. Normal growth and development				5-6 7-8 9-10 11-12 13+

cally attracts a relatively small percentage, and, of these, only the articulate few get heard. This can result in a seriously distorted impression.

In this enquiry method, however, all parents are invited to contribute anonymously in helping the school to plan its curriculum. The format of the questionnaire, with the first few topics, is shown on the previous page (the full list of topics appears on page 76). A letter accompanying the questionnaire is printed below, showing the form in which it went out to the parents attached to one particular school. It will be noted that the parents were invited to comment freely at the end of the questionnaire, and many of them did.

One of the Exeter schools (page 88) recorded a 100% response. This is exceptional, but experience with enquiries of this nature in secondary schools has shown that a 90% response rate from the parents of children in the first year is not uncommon. The potential for contacting a very large proportion of parents through this method is clearly very high.

### **The contribution of mothers and fathers**

Of the 233 completed questionnaires received from two middle schools, 16% were from fathers, 52% from mothers, and 32% were the combined effort of both parents. Therefore, 68% of fathers and 84% of mothers were involved in contributing views.

Dear Parents,

21st June 1983

### Health Education Enquiry

We are prompted by County policy to review Health and Social Education within the school programme. We would value your views on the extent to which these important parts of a child's personal development should be included in the school curriculum.

Would you please complete the enclosed questionnaire, which sets out a whole range of topics for consideration. This list of topics in no way represents a decision to include all or any of them in the curriculum, but it gives you the opportunity to express your views on them.

Designing an efficient questionnaire takes time, and we hope that this one is fairly easy to understand. There is a large space at the end in which to comment further on both the potential school programme and on any improvements in the enquiry method that would be helpful. This questionnaire is designed for parents; others have been designed for teachers, doctors, school nurses and health visitors, and for children. The questionnaire for children is somewhat different; it is shorter, is presented with great care, and concerns their levels of interest.

Please do not put your name on the questionnaire. The responses will be summarised for the school by members of a project team in Exeter University who will respect the confidential nature of the enquiry.

Yours sincerely,

(Project director)

(Head teacher)

P.S. Please return the questionnaire in the envelope provided within one week.

### How positive are parents?

Many demands upon curriculum time are made, and the object of the enquiry is to help clarify priorities for the inclusion of the various topics. Different parents, of course, had different attitudes (this is the essence of the enquiry), but it was interesting to find that 80% of parents indicated that 31 of the 43 topics either *Should be included* or were *Useful but not essential*. Space does not permit a commentary on all the topics, but the accompanying table on the right shows the items found amongst the most positive and least positive responses on the list, which was, it will be remembered, generated in consultation with teachers and health-care professionals.

One topic, *Mugging*, is particularly interesting because of the apparently strongly polarised response, 41% of this sample of parents indicating that it should be given attention at school, and 42% saying that it has no place in the curriculum. This, apparently, is a very sensitive issue for both these groups, but the under-

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#### Topics for inclusion

% response from 248 parents associated with 2 middle schools

Should be included  
Useful but not essential  
Not appropriate

#### Amongst the most positive

Human reproduction	84	14	2
Drug-taking and glue-sniffing	77	12	11
Honesty	84	11	5
Safety in traffic	95	3	2

#### Amongst the least positive

Mugging	41	27	42
Separation from parents	19	48	33
Stress and relaxation	17	49	34
Death and bereavement	23	50	27

#### Topics which should be included

% response from 248 parents associated with 2 middle schools

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Fathers only  
Mothers only  
Joint effort

Growth and development	49	65*	41
Illness and recovery	31*	26	11
Drug-taking and glue-sniffing	67	75	81*
Mugging	37	45*	32
Separation from parents	14	24*	13
Shoplifting	50	64	67*
Building self-confidence	75*	69	61
The difference between boys' and girls' behaviour	26	36*	24
Family relationships	39	44*	24

lying reasons for this response must remain speculative until interview work with the responding parents has been completed.

### Mothers v. fathers

The table (left) lists topics where mothers and fathers differed noticeably in their response to the opinion *Should be included*. It is interesting to note the following points:

1. Fathers are the most positive of the three groups towards *Illness and recovery* and *Building self-confidence*.
2. In only two topics (*Drug-taking and glue-sniffing* and *Shoplifting*) does the response of both parents combined result in the most positive support.
3. The response to *Family relationships* reveals much less support from parents who combined to answer the questionnaire. Perhaps the very act of this co-operation signals something of the nature of existing relationships within the home.

### Sons v. daughters

Inspection of the two lists shown here suggests that, in general terms, the bias seems to be towards the more "caring" topics for girls (sugar and spice), while the parents of boys are drawing attention to the less desirable behaviour (slugs and snails). Those people in the community who seek "equality" may find themselves with a lot of work still to do!

Topics which should be included	Parents with...	
	Sons	Daughters
Spare-time activities	43*	30
Mugging	42*	35
Separation from parents	22*	11
Shoplifting and pilfering	66*	59
Vandalism	73*	60
Bullying	72*	63
How the body works	73	84*
Caring for old people	39	46*
Understanding people of different race/religion	42	54*
Food and health	53	66*
Family relationships	32	43*
Making decisions	43	51*
Health and Social Services	18	29*
(% responses from 248 parents associated with 2 middle schools)		

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### Parent power

Some head teachers are, naturally, wary of consulting parents on curriculum matters, fearing that they could eventually "decide" the curriculum. But the parental view, if it is allowed to be expressed, often reveals anxieties about aspects of health and social education; for example, it has been found that many parents want schools to teach about drugs. In discussion with parents, it quickly emerges that they know nothing about illegal drugs, are frightened that children may be damaged by them, and want schools to intervene in such a way as to protect their children. The figures on *Drug-taking and glue-sniffing*, as given in this article, came as no surprise.

On the other hand, the parental demand needs to be considered against the professional view or views, and in the case of drug abuse there is evidence that the work can be counter-productive, actually creating an interest in experimenting for oneself.

Knowledge of the parental view is very useful to a school wishing to clarify its position. If it finds that an area which parents feel is very important is not being taught, then it will have to be for very good professional reasons. Similarly, if it includes work on aspects which parents feel should not be attempted, it will have to clarify its reasons for doing so.

### Conclusion

In this enquiry, I have presented data which suggest that the parental view is influenced by:

- (a) The nature of the topic under consideration, which is the nub of the enquiry;
- (b) The sex of the parent;
- (c) The sex of the child.

It is not surprising to find differences of view between mothers and fathers; but it could be valuable for a school to reflect upon the reasons for these differences. Similarly, it is not unexpected to find that parents with sons have different curriculum priorities from parents with daughters. (Priorities for teachers may also be expected to show variations according to sex and the age group being taught; the primary/middle school teachers' questionnaires have not yet been fully analysed, but the *Just One Minute* results for secondary-school teachers were published in *Education and Health*, January 1983, p10.)

Finally, my experience of schools which have consulted parents is:

1. The parents have been very supportive, and pleased to be consulted.
2. The position of the school in curriculum planning has always been strengthened — so necessary in this sensitive and important part of the curriculum.