

*This survey provides a snapshot of the current provision of sex education and gives an indication of the main problem areas.*

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## James Lawrence & Annabel Kanabus

# Sex Education Provision in Secondary Schools

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**W**ith high teenage pregnancy rates and mounting evidence showing that young people now rely on teachers rather than their parents for their sex information the government has started to move positively to improve sex education.

To find out what teachers actually think of their sex education provision, AIDS Education and Research Trust, (AVERT) commissioned the Schools Health Education Unit to carry out a postal survey of 300 Health education co-ordinators in schools, inviting them to return a copy of their sex education policies along with their completed questionnaires.

This yielded 105 responses from the 334 schools approached, 26 of which participated in a follow-up telephone survey.

### Topics Covered

Of the schools that responded, an impressive 97% cover Sexually Transmitted Diseases, and 78% cover homosexuality. However, only 88% of schools cover safer sex, 9% lower than those covering HIV transmission.

Similarly there is a worrying mismatch between those teaching safer sex (88%) and those equipping young people with essential skills to put this knowledge into action such as keeping safe and resisting pressure (76%) and decision-making and personal choice (74%).

Whilst 96% include contraception and family planning in their sex education, talking about sexual topics (72%) and negotiating about relationships (67%) are less well covered, a situation that has worrying implications for young people.

When asked to grade their level of coverage of topics in sex education, it became obvious that many schools by their own admission face an uphill struggle if they are to improve sex education.

For example, only 52% consider that they give full coverage to accessing and using sexual health services/agencies, services that will prove vital in reducing the record numbers of teenage pregnancies and STIs.

Similar essential life skills also receive less attention in the classroom, with decision-making, negotiating about relationships and talking about sexual topics all receiving low 'considerable coverage' scores; 51%, 31% and 45% respectively.

Actual discussion of 'love-making', arguably the most relevant part of sex education as it actually covers sex, scored equally lowly, with just 45% of schools reporting considerable coverage.

### Biology vs Emotions

By comparison, however, there are subjects that receive much better treatment; puberty, parts of the body and contraception (83%, 79% and 77% respectively).

At first glance it would be tempting to attribute this to a division between those subjects that are 'easy' to teach as they have a biological focus and those subjects that can be more contentious as they have an emotional focus.

However, comments received during the telephone follow-up suggest that there are more complex factors contributing to this situation.

Also, such a division cannot account for the mere 43% of schools who feel they address the topic of sex and the law in good detail.

Given that 14% of schools reported not covering the topic at any point in any year, one wonders how exactly young people are expected to make informed choices about their lives with a lack of such basic information.

### Age appropriate

Timing is also a crucial element in sex education. If one starts from the premise that sex education needs to be age appropriate, thereby giving young people the information they need in order to make informed decisions, it would seem sensible that basic education around puberty be delivered prior to girls experiencing menarche.

It has been widely accepted for some time that the average age of puberty for girls is 12-13, and it is unsurprising to find 84% of schools covering puberty in Year 7.

However, a significant number of schools are revisiting puberty in Year 9, with one school addressing the topic for the first time, two years after the average age of menarche and useless for girls who started puberty aged 8.

Organisations such as AVERT are increasingly becoming aware of such instances, where girls are left open to trauma unaware of why they are bleeding.

### Influencing factors

If sex education provision is to improve, then we have to establish what is currently limiting schools from providing an ideal curriculum.

When asked, the schools rated 'teacher confidence/commitment' (91%), 'supplementary resources' (84%), 'planning time' (65%) and 'INSET' (63%) and 'ITT' (59%) as being amongst the most influential factors upon sex education.

Yet when asked how satisfied the schools were with these factors in relation to their provision of sex education, a different picture emerged.

Whilst 84% were either satisfied or very satisfied with their resources, 51% of schools reported being unhappy with their ITT and 43% were unsatisfied with their INSET.

Strangely though, this appears to have had little bearing upon their confidence or commitment, with just 4% unsatisfied with this.

However, in contradiction to the long-held belief that teachers are mostly constrained by time allocation on the timetable, only 13% reported that they were unsatisfied with the time allotted in their school for sex education.

This however is open to interpretation,

given the responses to the depth of the sex education currently provided. Given many schools' apparent reluctance to broach the more contentious topics in the questionnaire with their pupils, one has to ask whether insufficient training combined with time constraints is responsible for some teachers remaining with and revisiting basic topics.

### Non-statutory subject

Alternatively it could be argued that teachers are currently maximising their time with young people, ensuring that they have a solid knowledge base.

However, if it becomes essential for teachers to move beyond this base, then time pressures will become more acute, and the number of teachers unsatisfied with the time allotted will inevitably rise.

With sex education remaining a non-statutory subject, it seems unlikely that this situation will improve much, when one takes into account mounting pressures on the timetable.

### Telephone survey

When asked directly in the telephone survey if they had any additional concerns, the following points were raised.

Nearly half of those interviewed had had difficulty in treating sex in a positive way, for fear they were perceived as encouraging under-age sex.

Other schools reported that they were more concerned about the quality of provision in their feeder primary schools, than in their own.

Finally, when asked whether sex education could be said to be 'too little, too late and too biological' in their schools, the majority (65%) disagreed, saying that whilst it may previously have been true or may apply elsewhere, it was not the case in their school.

Since this research was completed, schools have been given new guidance on sex and relationship education from the DfEE. We welcome the fact that there is guidance and were pleased to be invited to comment on it, but we are afraid that the final document leaves something to be desired.

Despite its length, the document is still not clear enough, and is in some places contradictory. Teachers may still struggle to make and implement clear policy

While the number of schools involved in this survey only provides us with a snapshot on the current provision of sex education, at the very least this gives us some indication of where the main problem areas may be.

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Further details of the survey are provided in the report *A Survey of Sex Education Provision in Secondary Schools* by James Lawrence, Annabel Kanabus & David Regis. Published by AVERT, ISBN 1-898616-13-2, price £12.

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