

*Does sex education in primary schools currently pay too little attention to gender differences in pupils' values and attitudes?*

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# 'Worlds Apart': the Sexual Values of Boys and Girls

Case studies show remarkable gender differences in the attitudes of 9 and 10 year-olds to reproduction, parenthood, relationships, contraception, and the value of the family.

**W**hen the two sexes meet, it is almost like two alien species meeting, so different are their ideals and expectations.' So says Jane Root<sup>1</sup> about young adults, and her observation will strike a chord with many of us.

But where do these differences come from? At what age do they develop? And what should sex educators do about them?

This article discusses some of the gender differences which came to light during a small-scale ethnographic research project carried out into the developing sexual attitudes and values of children.

What makes our findings so interesting is that we were not looking for them. The focus of our research was not gender difference, but children's values and the extent to which the values of sex education programmes take account of the existing values and attitudes of children. So we were ourselves surprised at the gulf which became apparent between the girls and boys even at the age of nine and ten in terms of their developing sexual attitudes.

### Background

The research was part of a larger project on 'Values and Sex Education' carried out at the University of Plymouth. It involved two primary schools in socially disadvantaged locations in the south-west of England, one a large city school and the other a smaller school on the outskirts of a generally fairly prosperous town. Despite the differences in size and location, we found no significant differences between the responses from the two schools.

We interviewed Year Five pupils (aged

9-10) who had not yet been taught sex education in school. Three or four visits were made to each school, and on each visit meetings took place with several groups of children, each containing six to eight pupils. In the first school, one male, one female and one mixed group were chosen at random from the register. However, the mixed group appeared to be far less willing to discuss issues freely, and so at the second school the teacher allocated four single-sex groups. The groupings remained constant throughout the visits to help build up a relationship of trust with the pupils. Each meeting lasted about 45 minutes.

### Research Method

An ethical code was devised which clarified issues of confidentiality and anonymity, the provision of information to parents, the obtaining of permission to carry out the research, the right of the children to confide in their class teacher about any issue that was raised, the right to withdraw from the research at any time, and the responsibilities of the researchers if revelations of abuse occurred. In the event, no children withdrew from the research. Detailed advance planning of the activities and research techniques was a further way of reassuring parents, teachers and children about the research, so that they knew precisely what information we wanted, why we wanted it and how we intended to gather it.

Children were seen in groups because this was probably less threatening and would enable them to take a greater lead in the discussions with less input from the researcher. We

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were also interested in relationships and interactions and observing how meanings were negotiated between children.

### School visits

Oral contributions were taped and later transcribed, and children were also invited to write or draw pictures in response to a variety of stimuli. We were aware of the danger that interviewers may unintentionally influence children's responses, and so we planned to keep our own input to the discussions to a minimum, though we had prompt questions to fall back on and we did occasionally intervene to enable less dominant members of the group to contribute.

The precise organisation of the visits varied according to the needs of each school, but the general pattern was that on the first visit the children were shown video extracts from a soap opera ('Neighbours' or 'Eastenders') as a stimulus for discussion. The children also had an opportunity to write about their reactions to the video clips and to discuss their personal interests and hobbies.

On the second visit the children were asked to discuss the people most important to them and what they thought their own future lives would be like. They were also encouraged to do some writing or draw a picture on the theme of the discussions. On the third visit they were asked to respond, both in writing and in discussions, to some problems adapted from teenage magazines focusing on relationships and puberty. They also discussed what, when and by whom they thought they should be told about sexual matters.

### Positive approach

The children had a very positive approach to the sessions, and although inevitably some were more vociferous than others, each member of each group did make some contributions. Some children asked the researchers' opinions about issues, but when the question was bounced back to them other children often offered opinions. It is clear, however, that they did not regard the researchers as equivalent to their teachers; they made several remarks about the dire consequences of talking about sex to teachers, but they seemed to exhibit considerable freedom of expression and very little sign of embarrassment in the presence of the researchers.

As a result of repeated listening to the interviews and re-reading the transcriptions, a number of common strands within the interviews were identified, including attitudes to relationships; reproduction and contraception; values in relationships; attitudes to parenthood;

and the value of the family. Subsequent analysis of the contributions showed interesting patterns of gender dominance in the take-up of the different themes, which we shall now examine more closely.

## Gender Differences: Findings

### Style of Discussion

Significant gender differences in styles of conversation and discussion emerged from the analysis of the data. For example, analysis of the conversational pattern of the boys' and girls' groups showed that only 13 per cent of the boys' contributions were more than one line in length, whereas 31 per cent of the girls' were. The analysis also clarified the way sex was discussed. The boys tended to talk over one another, while the girls often gave lengthier personal accounts of experiences. The boys appeared excited by the chance to discuss sex without sanction, but their contributions were often made up of joking or macho posturing.

Boy: "Oh, I'm going into labour."

Boy: "Who with? Tony Blair?"

Laughter was twelve times more prevalent in the boys' groups than in the girls', and sexual slang was used only within the boys' groups.

### Attitudes to Relationships

In discussing their ideal woman, the boys valued both looks and loyalty. This split allure is epitomised in the two volunteered examples of ideal women - Pamela Anderson and 'my mum'.

Researcher: "How important are looks in choosing a girlfriend?"

Boy: "Looks don't matter. It's what's inside."

Boy: "All that'll be inside is sort of love trying to burst out."

Boy: "No, what S means is what's under their clothes [giggling]."

Boy: "No, it's what's under their skin."

Boy: "I forgot to wear a vest today, miss."

Boy: "Don't be stupid. It's what's bursting out what's inside. Like someone could have a face like this [pulls grotesque face], and someone might love them, and we might think they're stupid, but inside they're a really nice person."

The boys sometimes expressed fear of being made to look foolish if they asked girls out:

Boy: "Are they gonna say no or are they gonna go off laughing and that?"

Boy: "No-one likes me."

Boy: "I've got a girlfriend, but she doesn't like me."

The boys seemed quite insecure about their

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attractiveness to girls, and were inclined to be dismissive and critical of others - particularly gays - to protect their own self-esteem. One boy gave some insight into the weighty responsibility of maintaining his masculinity in a competitive world:

Boy: "If you are a boy, you wish you were a girl sometimes."

But more commonly the boys hid their insecurity and confusions behind a facade of bravado, jokes and violent language, so that the emotions of desire and violence became mixed up:

Researcher: "Did I ask you last time about the things you're really looking forward to about being grown up?"

Boy: "Yeah."

Boy: "Having it with Victoria."

Boy: "Throwing my sister out of the house. I want her to get mugged."

Their attitude towards gays often appeared to be not so much one of violence and aggression as genuine repulsion. In response to a child's comment, the researcher at one stage asked what they meant by 'gay':

Boy: "We was in this club, and there was these gay gypsies in there, load of gays, then some bloke picks him up and starts kissing him and then these blokes start kissing and dancing together, so they get chucked out."

Researcher: "What do you think about it? Do you think it's OK?"

Boy: "Kissing each other, snogging, it's sick!"

Boy: "It's sick, sick, because it's two men."

However, such vehement disapproval was not universal; after a barrage of homophobic contributions, a lone voice spoke up for individual freedom of choice:

Boy: "I don't really like actual gay but I think it's up to the people, um, it's their decision to be actually gay if they want to be."

The self-protective aggression of the boys contrasts with the sad acceptance of being 'dumped' which the girls discuss in the following exchange about a boyfriend:

Girl: "He could change."

Girl: "Yesterday, Miss, he said he'd never dump me again, 'cos he dumped me three, um, two times, but yesterday he said he'd never dump me again."

Girl: "Yeah, but he will soon [*sad, wistful tone*]."

Girl: "But you don't know that he might not."

Girl: "Might still be together."

Researcher: "Why did he dump you before?"

Girl: "He wanted to go out with me and C. at the same time."

Some of the girls also seemed to be aware that it might not be long before they had their first sexual encounter, and that this might occur 'accidentally' (ie as a result of drinking, or sexual curiosity, or getting caught up in a sequence of events for which they had not planned). They therefore felt they should be told about sex at a comparatively early age, so that they knew what was coming and so that they could be more in control of what happened to them:

Girl: "I think in case just by accident you get into it, you need to know it."

Girl: "Sometimes, I know I'm only eleven, I feel like I was going to do it. I'm not being horrible or anything. It keeps coming into my mind, but I know I'm not going to."

Girl: "We should know most things but not things too serious like for us to get into, because we might get into it too quick."

Statements like this were not made by the boys, who were more interested in practical help in engaging in sex, within the context of a generally more flippant attitude.

Boy: "If you have a baby, like a little girl's just had one (I'm hearing now that she's only twelve and she's had one), we should know it - how to have sex - when we're younger, so that if we want we can have it when we're younger ... at the right time."

Some girls felt knowledge might lead to more involvement with sex, but this was counterbalanced by others who felt knowledge might deter experimentation. Curiosity could be a powerful force:

Girl: "You may want to do it so you know what it's like."

As we shall see below, many girls were aware of the problems of early pregnancy, but some could not wait to be more grown up and tended to see a connection between sexual experience and being grown up:

Girl: "'Cos when you're young you sort of want to be able to do it."

### Reproduction and Contraception

Having information about sex seemed to be important to the boys' image as competent masculine figures. One boy provided a full and fairly accurate account of how babies are made, but more commonly the boys struggled to make sense of the snippets of information they gleaned from a variety of sources.

Over two-thirds of the contributions about contraceptives and abortion were from boys. Apparently they had seen many condoms on the streets, and friends of the same age had bought them, albeit to play with or chew. Both

girls and boys were aware that they were used to prevent sperm from entering a woman's body and that they came in different flavours. Boys also cited abortion as a way to stop having babies, but appeared unclear about what this meant. Another way mentioned to avoid having babies was 'not doing sex', but a boy responded, 'No, but you enjoy it.' Boys and girls were also aware of contraceptive pills, and injections were mentioned by one girl. This awareness seems to have occurred despite reported reluctance by parents to explain:

Girl: "My dad let it out when I was 7-9. I was in the room and dad brought in this big packet of those things, and I thought that and I asked my dad what it is, and he said, 'You do not want to know.' I said, 'Please tell me.' ... He said, 'Oh, it's nothing you need to know about. If you want to know, ask your mother.' So I went to my mum and my mum said, 'No, I'm not going to tell you.' But my dad accidentally let it out one day ... I told him I could hear, and he goes, 'I suppose you want to know the proper reason why then.' He goes, 'When you actually put it on, it stops it going in, the sperm, into the woman's body, 'cos they don't want to have kids.'"

#### Values in Relationships

Two-thirds of the comments about values within relationships were from girls. This may reflect a more analytical understanding of relationships by the girls, or a greater spiritual awareness.<sup>2</sup> The positive values identified included honesty, being straight with people and telling them face to face when a relationship was over. The motivation for this seemed to be partly that this was preferred to finding out by another route, and also for personal safety, as not being straight could lead to violent consequences:

Girl: "I'd rather tell them up front than use an excuse, because they're gonna find out the excuse anyway. They'll find out what you're doing anyway."

Girl: "I'd be straight 'cos if you lie they're gonna find out anyway and might harm you."

Loyalty was also valued, and 'standing by' or 'sticking up for' were frequently mentioned. Divorce was not wholly condemned, however. Both boys and girls were uncertain over whether divorce was too easy, and seemed to pass judgment according to whether couples were 'right' together.

Girl: "I reckon she goes better with David. I don't know why, she just does."

Girls discussed the impact of drink and drugs on relationships far more than boys. They did not want to marry drug-takers because they

felt they could be dragged down by it, although one girl pointed out that women could become drug-takers themselves. The girls were very aware of male violence perpetrated against neighbours and acquaintances. One girl cited her babysitter who had family problems and had taken an overdose after being raped. Another knew the names of all the drugs which an acquaintance had taken when depressed and suicidal. They reported that underage drinking was quite common, and linked alcohol to violent behaviour:

Girl: "There's someone in our street - he's an alcoholic - and his girlfriend's just had a baby, and she won't let him see it because he won't stop drinking, and she's turned round and told him that if he really cared about the baby he'd stop, and yesterday he went round and smashed the whole flat up."

The girls related issues of violence and drug-taking to their plans for their own future lives, for example, by not wanting a husband who smoked or took drugs.

#### Attitudes to Parenthood

While the comments on conception and the care of babies were evenly divided between boys and girls, the girls made far more contributions about when to have babies and about the 'ownership' of babies and the possibility of losing them. Girls also mentioned the risks of smoking and drinking while pregnant, but were divided on the issue of breast-feeding. Several boys and girls had experience of babysitting and caring for younger siblings. Some boys agreed that the responsibility of caring for babies should be shared:

Boy: "Both parents, halfy halfy."

Another boy, however, jokingly suggested that his wife would do all the work. A further boy implied, without any sense of having said something sexist, that babies were girls' business:

Boy: "We're going on about babies, but the girls should be going on about that really."

The girls were generally very well aware of the problems associated with having a baby young:

Girl: "There's two things I'm not looking forward to when I'm getting older. One is having a baby when I'm too young and I won't have any help, like in Emmerdale. And the other one is like having a baby. It scares me, 'cos when you watch it on telly it looks hard work."

Their main concern was the impact having

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a baby would have on their lives and the lack of support they would receive for what was seen as hard work. Some girls suggested their parents would take a supportive role:

Girl: "... Although they'd be a bit angry, I think they'd be pleased to have a grandson or daughter."

Family was most often mentioned as who they would want to have around them when they had a baby. Their boyfriend was less definitely part of the picture:

Girl: "He'll probably be working."

Girl: "Yeah, but he'll stand by you, I expect."

Girl: "If you got married, he'll be down the pub drinking! [Laughing]."

In spite of the general rejection of early pregnancy, there seemed to be a very strong awareness among the girls of the potential strength of maternal feelings. This came out through their discussion of the loss of a baby through miscarriage, cot death or other cause, and also the discussion of the rights of the natural mother, no matter how young she was. Giving birth seemed to confer a special privilege, which the girls rated more highly than the rights of the father or adoptive parents. Overall, however, the girls seemed acutely aware of the pain that violent families, loss of children and early pregnancy could cause and were afraid of being left alone without support.

#### The Value of the Family

The family, particularly mothers and older sisters, was the main provider of sexual information for the girls, though sometimes, as we have seen, the children picked up information accidentally by listening in to family discussions. Some of the boys were waiting for the 'big talk' from their parents, but far more boys than girls appeared to rely on friends, TV, videos and magazines for their sexual information. However, the films they mentioned often had 18 certificates, and some of the boys were familiar with pornographic videos and magazines. This may provide an explanation for the links they often made between sex and violence, and also their view of sex as a cause for much hilarity. It may also explain why there appears to be such a gulf between the family-oriented sexual values of the girls and the 'adult' entertainment-oriented sexual values of the boys.

In the group interviews, the girls made significantly more references to family than the boys. Their pictures and written descriptions of families also seemed to suggest that family was more important for girls. Strong family bonds

were very clearly evident in girls' diagrams of the 'people most important to me', and sometimes their pictures of family members showed their arms around each other. Boys, on the other hand, were more likely to depict their 'cool' friends and peers than members of their family (where 'coolness' is defined in terms of wearing sunglasses and trainers with high status brand names), and one boy included his 'worst enemy' in the 'people most important to me'.

Sometimes girls portrayed the family as unconditionally supportive:

Girl: "Even if you did do wrong, they always stick up for you."

But feelings of family loyalty rarely spilled over into sentimentality among the girls. They were often critical of their mothers, for interfering or for not respecting them or taking account of their feelings:

Girl: "She may want to listen to her mum, but sometimes you don't have to because it's up to you what you want to do because it's *your choice*."

Girl: "I'll have the baby when I think is right."

Girl: "Sometimes mums can take your babies away."

Girl: "Sometimes they can be like pests when you have your baby."

Girl: "If I was pregnant and I tell my mum and she pesters me and that, I'd just say, 'Get lost.'"

Fathers too came in for criticism, usually for being overprotective towards their daughters:

Girl: "My dad, if he had a boy, he wouldn't be like it, but because it's a girl, he's so protective over girls. Because he's so protective, he won't let us go near boys, so whenever we're in school I got to stay away from boys, but I don't ... My dad said if he catches me going anywhere near a boy he'll absolutely kill me, but I do anyway at school."

Although the family was evidently very important for girls, they were also beginning to make up their own mind about issues and becoming aware of the fallibility of the adults around them. Such signs of growth towards independence and autonomy were not so apparent among the boys. One boy seemed to go out of his way to annoy his mother, though this did not necessarily meet with the approval of his peers:

Boy: "I want to be a pop-star, you know ... Yeah, that's because my mum doesn't want me to be one, so I'll be one just to get on her nerves."

Boy: "You don't like your mum."

Boy: "You should do, you should do."

One group of children was asked to write

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down thoughts about their own future lives, and marriage and having children featured in the comments of both boys as girls more frequently than future jobs or careers. The boys' responses were sometimes stereotypical and sexist:

Boy: "I'll get married, I prefer one boy and one girl 'cos then a girl can do shopping with their mum and the boy can go off and play football with the dad."

However, the girls had generally thought through the reality of marriage and parenthood more fully; they often had names already for chosen for their children, and, as already noted, also had a clearer idea of the kind of behaviour they would consider unacceptable in a partner, such as smoking or taking drugs.

### Implications for Sex Education

There are always dangers in trying to generalise from the responses of a small sample. However, as a snapshot of the sexual attitudes and values of a group of 9-10 year-old boys and girls, this study provides useful insights into the way that they have been socialised to think about sexual matters and into the enormous differences between boys and girls even at this age in their attitudes to sex. Some of the implications for policy and practice in sex and relationship education are summarised here.

#### What?

The latest official guidance on sex education in England draws attention to the continuing widespread 'uncertainty about what sex and relationship education is and how it should be taught'.<sup>3</sup> Our research suggests that sex education must help children to reflect critically on the sexual values, attitudes and understanding that they have already started to pick up in the course of their everyday lives, including the gender-differentiated attitudes, so that as they mature physically their values, attitudes and understanding may also correspondingly mature and they may be able to form lasting, meaningful relationships. It is this critical reflection which makes the activity of sex education genuinely educational rather than simply a matter of instruction or training or the transmission of information.

#### Why?

Sex and relationship education is needed as a way of supporting children through the difficult emotional and physical changes that take place on the way to sexual maturity, but our research suggests that the needs of boys and girls may differ significantly. As far as the girls are concerned, they appear more aware than the

boys of the importance of the family, the dangers to relationships of alcohol and other drugs, and the need for loyalty and honesty in relationships.

Our research lends no support to apocryphal stories of young girls getting pregnant intentionally or wanting babies as an unquestioning source of love. On the contrary, the girls in this sample seemed very well aware of the problems of early pregnancy. However, there was a sense among some of the girls of not being fully in control of their own lives, and they were aware of the possibility that their early sexual encounters might occur 'accidentally', i.e. unintentionally as a result of drink or fear of being 'dumped' or rebellion against overprotective fathers or simply out of curiosity. This suggests that what they need most is help to gain more control over their own lives through assertiveness training and education for personal autonomy.

The needs of the boys, on the other hand, appear more diverse. Sex education must help boys to develop a positive self image based not on macho posturing but on a sense of having an important and responsible role to play within the family and the broader society. It must also help boys to develop appropriate critical responses to the 'adult' videos and magazines they see and to reflect critically on the links they make between violence and sex. In addition, it should spell out the unacceptability of all forms of homophobic bullying and the need to respect others and treat them fairly whatever their sexual orientation.

#### When?

Our research clearly supported the need for an early start to sex education, for boys and girls. Many of the girls saw periods as imminent, and were concerned; and assertiveness training is likely to be most effective if it starts early. As for the boys, if sex education is to counter the influence of violent movies which some watch, and help them to develop balanced attitudes towards sex and relationships, it must likewise start early.

#### Where?

Our research shows that children generally look to their parents for sexual information and guidance, whether this takes the form of direct guidance, teaching by example or providing information in a more haphazard way. However, it is clear that not all parents teach their children about sex, and that much information, particularly in the case of boys, is picked up from peers and from the media.

Consequently, the school has an important

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threefold role in relation to sex education:

- ✓ to work in partnership with the parents where possible - not only informing parents about the content of sex education lessons but positively trying to build on what has been taught at home
- ✓ to add to children's existing knowledge
- ✓ to help children to make sense of the total input and construct their own sexual knowledge, values and attitudes both reflectively and systematically on the basis of the variety of influences to which they have been subjected.

#### Who?

There is a possibility that the predominance of female teachers in primary schools may result in unintentional marginalising of boys' distinctive needs and perspectives. We may have fallen into this trap in our research by using an excerpt from a soap opera to stimulate discussion; soap operas have been seen as relationship-oriented feminine narratives with multiple characters and plots and no endings, in contrast to masculine narratives which are goal-centred with single plots, fast action and minimal dialogue.

The gender of the teacher may also be important in other ways: the boys in our research appeared to believe that speaking to female teachers about sex was a punishable offence, and relished the chance our research provided for them to discuss sex in school without sanction. Other research also suggests that delivery of sex education by a female teacher may tend to inhibit boys' ability to respond and ask questions.<sup>4</sup> In sex education, as in other areas, boys clearly benefit from male role models. Male teachers may perhaps be able to respond more easily to the role of humour in boys' responses to sexual issues.

Other means of delivering sex education need to be explored. In the light of the claim of some boys we interviewed to 'know it all

already' (though their knowledge was often inaccurate), sex educators must find a way of retaining the interest of boys by providing acceptable approaches (such as up-to-date TV programmes or peer educators) which can correct misunderstandings in a context which does not undermine their developing self-image and self-esteem.

#### How?

The question arises whether early sex education should be provided in mixed or single-sex groupings. Both boys and girls in this research were emphatic that they preferred to be taught separately (though there is evidence that this changes as they grow older). The main reason given was embarrassment, which made it more difficult to be honest about worries or ignorance in the presence of the opposite sex. In the mixed group, for example, one girl coded periods as 'P'. On the other hand, research<sup>5</sup> shows that pupils found it particularly helpful to learn about the feelings and views of the opposite sex, and mixed discussions would seem to be an obvious and important way of achieving mutual understanding, and thereby starting to narrow this gender divide.

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