

Written evidence submitted by the Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY), University of Sussex

Key principles for SRE and PSHE:

1. That SRE and PSHE should be understood as an entitlement for all young people, irrespective of the kind of educational institution in which they are located, or their stage of development
2. That schools are recognised as important spaces for the teaching of SRE and PSHE – ensuring the delivery of this entitlement to all young people / ensuring all young people can access this entitlement and the promotion of methods and creation of safe spaces for all members of the school community that will enhance wellbeing.
3. That vulnerable, disadvantaged and isolated young people may need additional opportunities, with specialist providers and educators playing an important role.
4. That locality matters and that schools are best supported at a local level in order to address the needs of particular groups or address issues arising from these, and to access local resources, services and expertise.
5. That good SRE and PSHE is provided by confident and well supported teachers and that this is a priority.
6. That SRE and PSHE should employ a skills- and strengths-based model, recognising young people's knowledge, expertise and ability to engage critically with challenges such as a fast-changing media landscape and shifting conventions in popular cultural representations.
7. Participatory methods and a commitment to exploring values may be more important than the provision of information in the age of the internet.

To the Education Select Committee:

Sex and relationships education (SRE) has come a long way over the past twenty years, both in terms of improved provision to children and young people in the classroom, and greater access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. As a direct result, teenage pregnancy rates in the UK are at their lowest in forty years¹. However, schools have also changed dramatically during this period.

¹Family Planning Association (2013) Teen pregnancy rates continue to fall in England and Wales. www.fpa.org.uk/news/teen-pregnancy-rates-continue-fall-england-and-wales. Accessed 9 May 2014.

Local Education Authorities (LEAs) have come and gone; the school leaving age has been increased; the structure of the school system has been transformed; sources of public health funding have been destabilized; and there is a danger of a loss of expertise supporting the provision of SRE in schools. The rapid pace of change within the education system provides overwhelming challenges to continuity in schools as a whole, and SRE in particular. Moreover, the state of wellbeing in schools – among teachers and students alike – has been identified as in need of great improvement and focus².

Our recommendations are based on a model of **young people's universal entitlement to receive comprehensive sex and relationships education**, grounded in the rights-based model established by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)⁴ and expanded in the IPPF's Declaration on Sexual Rights (2007)⁵. Our assumptions are that SRE should be **statutory, embedded within the National Curriculum, and available to all schools and all ages**. Recent examples have underlined the desperate need for children and young people in independent schools to have access to support and guidance relating to sex and relationships, while it is essential that the needs of children and young people at all state-funded schools and sixth form colleges are also met.

As well as being school-based and embedded within the National Curriculum, **confident teachers** are essential for the provision of quality SRE. Teachers must be supported in both initial teacher education and continuing professional development in order to gain this confidence to talk to young people about sex and relationships. SRE must also be located within a **wellbeing** agenda⁶; all young people should be able to access **safe spaces** to discuss sex and relationships at school, and teachers should equally have safe spaces in which they can receive support from colleagues in order to respond to these issues.

There are also important issues emerging in relation to the **amplification of risk**, and these must be addressed. It is essential that the needs of extremely vulnerable young people are addressed, but it should also be recognised that such young people are a disadvantaged minority. It is crucial to attend to the needs of this minority while also providing for the majority of young people. This may include ensuring that there is local provision outside of and independent from schools that can be accessed by young people who are at risk. Through our collaborative work with Brook we have become aware of some excellent examples of participatory and creative projects involving often very vulnerable young people at risk of harm. For example, Brook run local P+ participation groups which meet on a weekly basis and support young people with diverse needs to become involved in Brook's campaigning and lobbying, set up their own social action projects and form part of decision-making processes that will help shape development and delivery of Brook's services.

In addition to these general principles, specialist work is required to ensure the quality and relevance of sex and relationships education. This would involve **localised experts** supporting schools and school networks by providing training and advice for teachers, and specialised support

²Gray, J., M. Galton, C. McLaughlin, B. Clark & J. Symonds (2011) *The Supportive School: Wellbeing and the Young Adolescent*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing; UNICEF (2013) *Child wellbeing in the world's richest countries*. Geneva: UNICEF.

⁴United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child. <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>. Accessed 9 May 2014.

⁵International Planned Parenthood Foundation (2007) *Sexual Rights: An IPPF Declaration*. London: IPPF.

⁶Bonnell, C., N. Humphrey, A. Fletch, R. Anderson & R. Campbell (2014) Why schools should promote students' health and wellbeing. *BMJ* 348, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.g3078>.

for young people in parts of the country where, for instance, trafficking and female genital mutilation (FGM) might present specific challenges. For example, *Healthy Schools* in Islington, London have developed a resource for teachers to 'raise awareness of the practice of FGM and to inform young people of the facts and issues, and how and where to get help if they need to'⁷. This resource was developed locally in consultation with FORWARD a national charity that works to end FGM and the local HomeSpace domestic violence prevention officer. It is designed to be used alongside a film developed by FORWARD about FGM that is publically available on YouTube⁸. Evaluation of the resource by educators at Brook showed the resource is useful in raising awareness of FGM with Year 7 pupils and teachers. Rather than resorting to marketised solutions, strategies to secure **localised funding** to support this specialist work will be required, and public health and pupil premiums are examples of potential funding sources.

The **methods** used when providing sex and relationships education must also be addressed. It is important to move away from a knowledge-based approach to SRE, and towards a **values-based approach** which promotes an equalities agenda. Giving young people a **path to the curriculum** will ensure that topics discussed in SRE are relevant to their needs and experiences, while a developmental curriculum which is designed to stretch across primary and secondary education can ensure that SRE is provided in an age-appropriate manner. **Participatory work** and arts-based projects both engage young people and provide safe methods for teachers to engage young people in sensitive and contentious topics. Artist and educator Mary Robson's work on children's health, well-being and personal development in primary schools provides a clear example of the strength and potential of arts-based work in schools and local communities⁹. Professor Emma Renold's work with young people in Wales for the NSPCC / National Assembly (drawing in part on earlier work for the Scottish Executive) also demonstrates the power of participatory, creative methods for engaging young people in talk about sexual and relationship cultures¹⁰. In such work, diverse **media portrayals** of sexual and relationship issues can be seen as a **resource** for both young people and educators, rather than a source of misinformation. Young people should also be engaged in the political aspects of sex and relationships education; the High School Feminism project has shown that involving young people as activists and researchers is a highly effective means of exploring issues relating to gender and sexual equalities at school¹¹.

Finally, it is important to consider what makes schools so uniquely well-suited to providing children and young people with sex and relationships education. Schools are **unique communities** in which children and young people participate for a significant length of time, during which they learn and form **values** as part of a group. **Parents** are also a key part of these extended communities, and the majority of parents support the teaching of SRE in schools¹². Effective SRE will not be achieved

⁷Healthy Schools (no date) *KS3 FGM Lesson in SRE Covered: all you need to teach about sex and relationships in secondary schools*, p. 3. www.healthyschoolslondon.org.uk. Accessed 9 May 2014.

⁸Forward (2010) *Think Again: The Film*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzBNTtR7toE. Accessed 9 May 2014.

⁹Robson, M. (2010) Mary Robson: Arts in Health and Education, <http://www.maryrobson.co.uk/en/portfolio/a20>. Accessed 9 May 2014.

¹⁰Renold, Emma (2013) *Boys and girls speak out: a qualitative study of children's gender and sexual cultures (age 10-12)*. Cardiff: Cardiff University; Buckingham, D., Bragg, S., Russell, R., & Willett, R. (2010). *Sexualised Goods Aimed at Children: a report to the Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee*. Glasgow: Scottish Parliament.

¹¹Jimenez, I. (2014) Feminist Teacher blog, <http://feministteacher.com/>. Accessed 15 May 2014.

¹²National Children's Bureau (2011) *Parents and SRE: A Sex Education Forum Briefing*. London: NCB.

simply by having a counsellor in every school, but by creating **supportive local networks** between schools and localised experts through which resources and expertise can be shared. Moreover, in order to involve children and young people in positive sex and relationships education, schools must be viewed as spaces which **create attitudes** that promote wellbeing, rights and values in their wider communities.

This statement has been composed by members of the Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY) at the University of Sussex and associates with expertise in research and practice relevant to SRE and PSHE. June 5th 2014

The authors include:

Sara Bragg, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Brighton, co-author of the Scottish Parliament commissioned report on 'Sexualised goods aimed at children' and expert on children and the media.

Richard DeVisser, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Sussex with research expertise in public health, alcohol and sexuality.

Padmini Iyer, PhD candidate, School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sussex, researching sex education.

Ester McGeeney, youth practitioner and social researcher. Currently postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Sussex and holder of ESRC Knowledge Exchange Grant with Brook, exploring young people's understandings of 'good sex'.

Colleen McLaughlin, Professor of Education at the University of Sussex, a former teacher and LEA adviser with research interests in counselling and care of young people, particularly including issues around vulnerable children and exclusion, sexuality education, and teacher development.

Rachel Thomson, Professor of Childhood & Youth Studies at the University of Sussex and the first co-ordinator of the Sex Education Forum, a sociologist with research interests in youth transitions, teenage sexuality, parenthood and the post war history of school sex education.

Elsie Whittington, youth worker and Masters student at the University of Sussex.