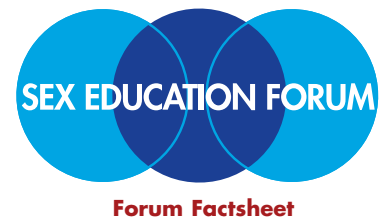


# Faith, values and sex and relationships education



This factsheet looks at the issues involved in developing an approach to sex and relationships education (SRE) which is inclusive of diverse faith perspectives. It draws on the findings of the Faith and Values in SRE Project. Funded by the Department of Health this project was carried out to support the development of SRE policy and preparation for classroom practice; to support teachers and other professionals whose aim is to support schools in delivering inclusive SRE; to provide practical ideas and strategies for schools to develop a positive consultation process with parents/carers and members of the wider community; to reduce the fear of creating conflict and causing offence; and to create support for developing effective SRE.

## Why SRE needs a multi-faith perspective

Children and young people from all faiths and cultures have an entitlement to SRE that can support them on their journey through childhood to adolescence and adulthood. One young woman, aged 15, emphasised the importance of receiving this entitlement: 'I have a faith and I trust my parents to talk to me about values. At school what I need in sex education is to understand about sex and relationships, and understand what different people think.'

Teaching SRE effectively means taking into account the many faiths and cultures of the children and young people in Britain today. This approach is supported by government policy. In its *Sex and Relationship Education Guidance*,<sup>2</sup> the Department for Education and Employment emphasises that SRE should be sensitive to the range of different values and beliefs within a multi-faith

and multi-cultural society. It stresses the importance of SRE being developed in partnership with parents and the wider community. The Department of Health also believes that faith communities need to be involved in efforts to reduce teenage pregnancy and support young parents, and has established a multi-faith forum.<sup>3</sup> For further information about this visit the website [www.teenagepregnancyunit.gov.uk](http://www.teenagepregnancyunit.gov.uk)

## Underlying principles

This factsheet shares the same three underlying principles of the resource *Faith, values and sex and relationships education*. First, that children and young people have an entitlement to SRE that is relevant to them, supports them in learning about different faiths and cultures and is underpinned by values promoting equality and respect. Children and young people need opportunities to understand the law and health issues in relation to sex, sexuality and sexual health. So, for example, even

if religious doctrine forbids sex before marriage or the use of contraception, young people need to know and understand the legal and health implications of these behaviours as well as different religious perspectives.

Secondly, valuing diversity and anti-discriminatory practice must be an integral part of the school's ethos, reflected in all areas of the curriculum. In SRE this involves professionals taking responsibility for consulting and involving faith communities in the development of policy and practice.

Third, we need to provide a framework and create a safe context within which parents and carers from faith communities, and members of the wider community, understand more about SRE, are able to discuss their views and beliefs, and feel involved with the process of developing SRE.

## **Inclusive SRE: What needs to be in place**

The Sex and Relationship Education Guidance from the (then) DfEE recommends that schools have an overall PSHE policy within which SRE is a discrete part (a model policy framework is on the Sex Education Forum website [www.ncb.org.uk/sef](http://www.ncb.org.uk/sef)). The guidance stresses the importance of developing policies that are both 'culturally appropriate and inclusive of all children':

*Primary and secondary schools should consult parents and pupils, both on what is included and how it should be delivered. For example, for some children it is not culturally appropriate to address particular issues in a mixed group. Consulting pupils and their families will help establish what is appropriate and acceptable for them.*

Both pupils and parents may need reassurance that the personal beliefs and attitudes of teachers will not influence the teaching of SRE, continues the Guidance. Instead, those contributing to SRE need to work within an agreed values framework as described in the school's policy.

## **Developing a moral and values framework for SRE**

The SRE policy will need to include a moral and values framework that is in line with current legislation. The revised National Curriculum<sup>3</sup> has an explicit statement of values which promotes respect for self, others, society and the environment. It also highlights the core values of justice, responsibility, care, love, commitment, marriage, protection and preservation. The values framework needs to be agreed in consultation with teachers, parents, carers, children and the wider community. The statement of values in the National Curriculum Handbooks and

the school's mission statement provide a good starting point for this process.

Those delivering SRE to children and young people may worry that exploring issues such as sex outside marriage, homosexuality, contraception and safer sex, and termination will be unacceptable to parents from traditional faith communities. Hence they may prepare to defend themselves against fear of attack, rather than creating opportunities for dialogue. Such dialogue may initially prove uncomfortable but, if carried out appropriately, it will result in SRE being developed in which faith and secular perspectives are integrated.

## **Schools with a religious character**

All schools will have a particular ethos and set of values that SRE should build upon and support. Schools with a religious character will have an ethos and values that reflects their particular beliefs, and the values promoted in SRE should reflect this. However, it is important that all schools enable children and young people to explore and understand that people have different values and beliefs, and that they know and understand their legal rights.

## **Specific issues**

The policy will also need to include a section on addressing specific issues, such as the following:

### **Single gender groups**

For some, it may not be culturally acceptable to talk about sex and relationships in mixed gender groups.<sup>1</sup> Working in single gender groups can considerably ease concerns about SRE, and help to ensure that children and young people receive the SRE to which they are entitled. Single gender groups can also help boys and girls to feel safer and less embarrassed about airing issues and discussing relationships.

## **Choosing and using resources**

When selecting resources, consider whether they are inclusive of children and young people from a range of cultures and backgrounds. Also check that they are consistent with the school ethos, mission statement, equal opportunities statement and the values framework for SRE. Support in this area will be available as a result of a new project being carried out by the Sex Education Forum. Independent reviews of resources are on the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) website [www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk](http://www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk).

## **Outside visitors**

Ofsted (2002) reported that outside visitors could make a significant contribution to SRE. Outside visitors will need to be comfortable with and able to work within the schools values framework. It is not good practice to allow visitors who try to frighten children and young people, or provide information which is factually inaccurate (this often happens in relation to termination of pregnancy). Loco parentis remains with the teacher when an outside visitor is leading a class and it is important that the teacher and visitor have agreed roles and responsibilities so that they do not undermine each other.

## **Consultation**

Effective consultation lies at the heart of effective SRE in terms of developing both policy and practice. Built on the principle of valuing diversity, it involves seeking to include groups and individuals from many sections of society rather than those who are most powerful.

Below are some pointers for carrying out the consultation process.

Rationale:

- Recognise that as professionals it is your responsibility to include different people.

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- Professional attitudes of inclusion must take precedence over personal feelings in a situation of conflict.
- Understand that consensus is not necessary and that disagreement is not failure.
- Be clear about the school's values framework, the law, guidance and faith perspectives.
- Be clear about the school's aims for SRE, entitlement of young people, and the health and education benefits of SRE.

#### Preparation:

- Recognise that conflict often arises from people misunderstanding each other, not disagreeing with each other.
- Understand the situation as one where two 'sides' may be failing to communicate because of assumptions about each other's viewpoints rather than through an understanding and constructive dialogue.
- Recognise and believe in the positive intentions of the majority of people involved in the consultation.
- Recognise that communication across cultural boundaries requires skilful handling.
- Avoid viewing religious teachings as either the 'problem' or the 'answer'.
- Be aware of your power base – in relation to your professional position.

#### Process:

- Do not expect reciprocated respect until trust is established.
- Be prepared to use skills of professional empathy in situations of conflict.
- Be prepared to listen to contradictory and hostile opinions and attitudes without feeling personally challenged.
- Be prepared with a coherent explanation of your values

framework and how these relate to the wider context of the school mission and ethos.

- Recognise that discussion of core values can support positive dialogue and be proactive in exploring values and their meaning.
- Feel confident enough to explain that faith perspectives will be included as part of the continuum of perspectives which also contains the teaching of equality, freedom from discrimination and individual rights.

#### Overcoming common myths

During consultations as part of the SRE, Faith and Values Project, some persistent themes emerged:

- misunderstandings about SRE are common among parents and carers
- misunderstandings about faith perspectives on sex and sexuality are common
- misunderstandings and assumptions about faith communities' opposition to SRE are common
- misunderstanding is destructive as it impedes the development of effective SRE.

When working with diversity, consensus should not be an expected outcome of consultation. People cannot always agree.

Misunderstandings and differences of opinion need to be openly and respectfully placed on the agenda and clarified as part of the process whenever SRE is being discussed.

Above all, it is useful to remember that misunderstanding is potentially destructive, but that disagreement is not a sign of failure.

By keeping the expressed needs of children and young people central to the development of SRE, it is possible to find a way forward. Parents and faith leaders can develop greater confidence in school-based SRE if we work to examine assumptions and

beliefs about SRE and ensure that communication is effective.<sup>6</sup> The process can also be aided by developing an explicit values framework for SRE, and by including a range of religious and faith perspectives in classroom practice.

#### Avoiding hostility

In any consultation process, it is crucial that people feel that they are being heard and understood. Otherwise tensions can quickly rise leading to feelings of anger and frustration.

#### What can happen

Person A makes a point. Person B makes assumptions and expresses those assumptions in response to that point without checking out the meaning with Person A. Person B has misunderstood the point. Person A begins to feel annoyed and defensive. The emotional reaction of justification takes over from the intellectual response of clarifying the meaning of their original point. The interaction then escalates based on misunderstanding – as the assumption rather than the true meaning of the point is being debated and doubly clouded by irrational feelings of, for example, anger or fear.

#### How the facilitator can help

Person A: I think that it is really important that boys and girls start to learn about sex and relationships when they are in primary school.  
Person B: So you don't think it matters that it might encourage them to have sex?

Facilitator: Can you say a bit more about why you think it might encourage them to have sex?

The role of the facilitator can be vital in ensuring that a consultation process works, and they play a key role in clarifying misunderstandings. Facilitators need to demonstrate that they hear and value the right of others to hold different perspectives and should also give equal

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prominence to these diverse views whilst highlighting common ground.

### Positive strategies

Below are some positive strategies for consulting with different partners.

#### Consulting with children and young people

Consulting with children and young people can be done in a number of ways, for example, through

- the school council
- classroom surveys
- SRE monitoring and assessing
- information communication technology on the website
- questionnaire at a health day
- older pupils review for young

#### Consulting with governors

Governors are responsible for ensuring that the school has an SRE policy. Some governors will not understand the significance of SRE or may be suspicious of its content. It is important to secure their commitment and involvement. One strategy might be to ask representatives from the school council to talk about why an SRE policy is important and what they think is needed. Alternatively, a survey of children and young people's views on SRE could be circulated and comments invited.

#### Consulting with parents

National surveys have shown that parents are generally supportive of

##### **Case study: Consulting young people about their views on SRE**

The Sex Education Forum and the National Children's Bureau worked with a group of young people to develop a video resource *Sex and Relationships, Myths and Education – Young people's views* (2002) for use with parents and governors in developing SRE policy and practice. The video shows discussion of some of the features young people would like to see in SRE.

SRE.<sup>5</sup> Consultation with parents about the content and organisation of SRE is likely to build their confidence and avoid some of the common misunderstandings.<sup>6</sup> Consultation can take place through specific meetings on SRE or through more general PSHE meetings. Research has shown that parents can be nervous about going to meetings on sex and relationships education, so it may be more effective to hold a meeting on the broader PSHE and Citizenship curriculum.<sup>7</sup> Consideration needs to be given to:

- how parents will be invited (for example by phone or letter)
- the language that is used for the invitations and whether there is any need for a translator
- the timing of meetings to avoid days or times which have religious significance
- whether meetings should be single or mixed gender.

#### Parental withdrawal

A very small number of parents choose to withdraw their children from SRE lessons. Ofsted figures show that about four children will be withdrawn in every ten thousand (0.04 per cent).<sup>8</sup>

Some parents/carers will withdraw their children even after effective consultation. This is not necessarily a sign that schools are doing a bad job. Some parents/carers believe that it is their responsibility to educate their children about sex and relationships. In this situation it is important that the SRE programme is not significantly compromised to meet the wishes of a tiny minority. However, it may be appropriate to offer parents/carers leaflets of details of organisations that can support them in talking with their child. The DfES provides a leaflet available by phoning DfES publications - 0845 602 2260 (reference code DfES 0706/2001) or from [www.dfes.gov.uk/sreandparents](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/sreandparents)

### Consulting with the wider community

Consultation with the wider community helps to build support for school-based SRE and ensures that there are consistent values being promoted across different settings. In planning and implementing the consultation, it is helpful to draw upon the skills and perspectives of a wide range of people, including Connexions advisors, learning mentors, the school nurse, the local healthy schools coordinator and representatives from faith communities.

#### Case study: Northumberland Sex Education Forum (NorSEF)

NorSEF is a county-wide sex education forum for those delivery of SRE to young people in a variety of settings. Faith schools and church representatives have participated since the forum was established in September 2000.

Faith representatives and others from the local community attended a consultation day at which a set of values and principles underpinning SRE were agreed and to which members of NorSEF sign up. Most faith schools in the area wanted to receive training, advice and support in delivering SRE to young people. Many were concerned about current rates of unintended teenage conceptions.

NorSEF has provided a mechanism for faith groups to meet up on a regular basis with others involved in the promotion and delivery of SRE and to receive support in taking forward this work. It provides a base to negotiate with those who have concerns about providing such information to young people.

## **Delivering SRE**

Inclusive sex and relationships education needs to be delivered in a way that engages young people and involves them in their own learning.

### **What sort of SRE should we deliver?**

SRE needs to be developed in line with the best available evidence as to what works. It should form part of an overall PSHE and Citizenship programme that aims to improve children and young people's self-esteem and support their emotional development. It needs to be based upon the developmental and expressed needs of children and young people and be mindful of their previous experience.<sup>9</sup>

### **Active learning methods**

Active learning methods provide a positive framework for enabling people to learn.<sup>10</sup> These methods work by using creative processes to help acquire information, develop skills, explore values and form positive beliefs. We need personal and social skills to put knowledge into action and we need to practise using them.

### **The benefits of active learning methods**

Using active learning methods ensures that a range of faith and secular perspectives can be discussed within the process of learning. Views and opinions can be explored, rather than prescribed as fixed. Effective when used with groups of all ages and abilities, this type of learning also acknowledges that young people have many different starting points for their learning based on their levels of knowledge, background, experience and many other factors. We also know that a variety of learning experiences increases energy levels and interest, and that both young people and staff find them fun.

## **Including different perspectives and celebrating diversity**

The Forum's experience of working with teachers and other sex educators has shown that many shy away from including religious perspectives on issues such as marriage, homosexuality or contraception in case they frighten or exclude young people. Individuals with a religious tradition do not all believe the same thing and there will be a diversity of views within and between religions.

It is important to include a range of both religious and secular perspectives, and to ensure that children and young people know about their legal rights. So, for example, a lesson on contraception may include a variety of religious views including the Catholic belief that forbids contraception. Young people also need to know that they are legally able to access confidential contraception services and advice even if they are under sixteen.

The teacher also has a responsibility to ensure that all young people feel supported and affirmed. For example, homosexuality is an issue where there is general disapproval from orthodox religious perspectives. A lesson covering this issue will need to ensure that young people know that homosexuality is legal, that the school upholds positive beliefs about diversity, and that discrimination and prejudice is not acceptable.

## **Working in community settings**

There are positive opportunities for developing SRE in the community, for instance through youth clubs, faith communities, young mothers' groups, and other locally run projects. Community settings can provide targeted approaches which meet the needs of particular communities or groups. They also offer young people a more flexible,

informal setting than school for learning about sex and relationships. Another benefit is that they operate in real-life environments – often in places where health compromising behaviour takes place. Hence SRE carried out in community settings can be successful in reaching marginalised young people who have slipped through mainstream sex education in schools and who do not access other services. *Faith, values and sex and relationships education* provides examples of such consultations within a wide variety of community settings.

## **Reviewing and developing SRE policy and practice – an agenda for action**

The steps outlined briefly below will help in reviewing or developing SRE, both in terms of policy and practice. The criteria for the SRE themes within the National Healthy School Standard will also be helpful in this process.

The criteria for the SRE theme are that:

- The school has a policy which is owned and implemented by all members of the school, including young people and parents, and which is delivered in partnership with local health and support services.
- The school has a planned SRE programme (including information, social skills development and values clarification) which identifies learning outcomes, appropriate to the young people's age, ability, gender and level of maturity and which is based on needs assessment and a knowledge of vulnerable young people.
- Staff have a sound basic knowledge of sex and relationships issues and are confident in their skills to teach sex education and discuss sex and relationships.
- Staff have an understanding of the role of schools in contributing to the reduction of unwanted teenage conceptions and the promotion of sexual health.

### Steps for reviewing and developing SRE

**Step 1:** Identify how the development of SRE fits with other priorities – such as LEA development plans and local health priorities such as teenage pregnancy.

**Step 2:** Review existing policy and practice – for example, whole school ethos, SRE policy.

**Step 3:** Identify what the children, young people, parents and carers, the wider community and staff need and want from SRE.

**Step 4:** Identify local issues and trends which need to be addressed within the programme, for example, alcohol use and sexual risk taking, racism, homophobia.

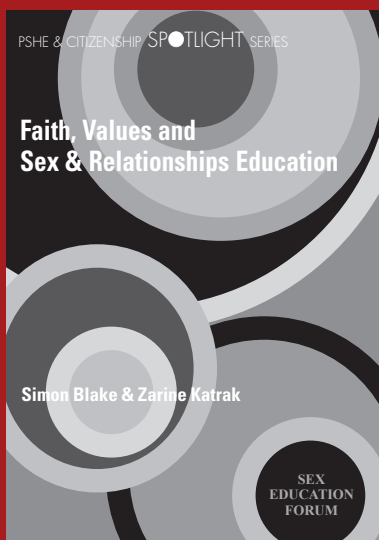
**Step 5:** Consultation and drafting policy – include how children, young people, parents and carers, and staff will feed into this process.

**Step 6:** Implementing and monitoring the policy – how this will be done and when.

*Faith, values and sex and relationships education* provides a full step-by-step guide to reviewing and developing SRE policy and practice. It also includes guidance on developing working agreements, and a number of exercises which can be undertaken as part of staff development. A series of useful appendices provide different views on why children and young people need SRE; core values to avoid the assumption that everyone attributes the same meaning to each value; working definitions to provide some information on the distinctions between culture and religion, the sacred and the secular; and finally a list of useful organisations.

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### Faith, Values and Sex & Relationships Education

by Simon Blake and Zarine Katrak

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Sex and relationships education in a multi-faith society often causes workers to ask, 'How do I meet children and young people's needs without offending parents and communities?' This book offers approaches and strategies for developing SRE policy and practice to help workers engage with and understand the issues.

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