



HeadsUp Forum # 34

www.headsup.org.uk

Sex Education - Do you get enough?

(1 March– 19 March 2010)

The sex education forum examined a subject that many teachers, politicians and parents see as controversial and often embarrassing. An open and honest dialogue about sex, how it should be taught and by whom, still seems problematic despite the UK having some of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Europe. This forum went directly to the people that these debates matter most to - the young people - who are rarely asked about their views on how they should be taught about sex.

Eight decision-makers pledged their support for the *Sex Education* forum and were involved in providing a statement for the Backup materials and/or took part in the debate. Their involvement and support was, as always, crucial to the success of the forum. The decision-makers involved in this forum were:

- **Annette Brooke MP** - Liberal Democrat Shadow Spokesperson, Children, Schools and Families
- **Nerys Evans AM** - Plaid Cymru Spokesperson, Education, Children and Young People
- **Mike Hancock MP**
- **Professor Roger Ingham** - University of Southampton
- **Bethan Jenkins AM** - Plaid Cymru Spokesperson, Child Poverty and Culture
- **Anna Martinez** - Coordinator, Sex Education Forum
- **Jenny Randerson AM** - Welsh Liberal Democrat Shadow Minister, Economy, Transport and Education
- **Janet Ryder AM**

www.headsup.org.uk is a safe, online space for 11-18 year olds to debate the political issues important to them. **Young people** share viewpoints with their peers and **decision-makers** up and down the country. Through the forums, HeadsUp develops **young people's** political awareness and promotes active citizenship so they can play an effective part in the democratic processes that affect them.

HeadsUp enables **politicians** to consult with **young people**, to find out their ideas, experiences and opinions. There is ample background information to prepare **young people** for the debates, as well as **teachers'** notes and activities.

Sex Education- are you getting enough?

Forum Summary

There were 61 posts[∞] made in the forum from 17 student HeadsUp users - with 4,018 unique visits to the site over the course of the forum. The high number of website views but relatively low numbers of posts suggests that a large number of people were viewing the debate but fewer were motivated to post comments.

The discussions on the forum were broad but the general themes and directions of the debate are highlighted in the pages below, along with practical suggestions given by forum users. The debate was split into four different forum threads addressing some significant areas within the discussion about sex education and young people. These were:

- **Is society too sexualised?**
- **Teenage pregnancy** - Why do we have such high rates of teenage pregnancy in the UK?
- **Who do you want to teach you about sex?**
- **The age of consent** - Do we have it right?

The young people on the forum were very aware of how important it was to get the tone and information right when delivering informative and useful Sex and Relationship Education (SRE). The forum also looked at issues in wider society that might affect young people and their view of sexuality.[≈]

Sex in the media

There was a lot of discussion about body images and the sexualisation of bodies in the media. The young people on the forum noted the difference between the images being presented and the reality of what most people's bodies look like. However the effect of this disparity was a point of disagreement. Some posters argued that an environment of skewed images of people's bodies might put damaging pressure on young people to look a certain way. There was also concern that women in particular were being objectified and overly concerned about appearance above anything else.

[∞] Includes: young people, moderators, teachers and decision-makers.

[≈] The comments in italics are direct quotations from student users and have not been altered.

people nowadays aspire to an unrealistic image portrayed by the media, especially this can be seen as many people in our society are getting larger, whereas models and role models are becoming skinnier, and this is the idea of perfection that is put across to us....also, girls magazines like hello, ok and heat promote stereotypes like women should be gossipy and dependednt on their image and body in order to get men, who they should then be dependent on. its an unhealthy message.

the balance has to be made between revolving our lives around sex and making people into sexual objects

However not all posters expressed this point of view. Some saw this attitude as an exaggeration, with the media images of idealised or overtly sexualised bodies not reflecting the reality of sexual relations between individuals.

...I mean, i know girls that do want to be like these models in magazines. but not every girl feels as though they have to look like this to get a boyfriend. Boys will be boys .. with their hormones and all that , but its just a natural thing for anyone really ?

One poster also acknowledged that media images of idealised and sexualised bodies had the potential to shape young men's as well as young women's sense of self image and expectations of the opposite sex. However, this poster also downplayed the overall power of these images, particularly as people age and gain experience in relationships.

as far as im concerned, every guy who's has had more than one girlfriend realises pretty soon that not all girls look like that, and would really struggle if thats all they went for dont you think? sure theres an idealised 'perfect womans body' in the media but theres exactly the same for men as well.

The sexualisation of society

The media often highlights the notion that society has become more sexualised with advertising and pop music, in particular blamed for corrupting young people. However with the expansion of the internet and the number of sexually explicit magazines available pornography is far more accessible than it has been previously – but is it any more acceptable? The young people on the forum didn't seem to think that it was.

If males in our society are not prepared to respect women from their choice of reading sources, how can we expect violence to women to be eradicated?

The young people did not think that pornography was a good thing but there was little support for banning it – civil liberties and the responsibilities of the people selling it and making it were seen as more important.

Total censorship of all pornography and commercialised sex sounds a bit too much like totalitarianism. It's in the hands of the powerful people in the world, i.e. celebrities, popular role models, to make sure males realise the amount of respect and dignity that girls and women are due.

Freedom of speech is all well and good but a line does need to be drawn and some point, the matter is we need a party willing to do that.

The availability of sexually explicit material was regularly raised. The link was also highlighted between constant exposure to this material and to a skewing of sexual values amongst young people, who were not mature enough to deal with much of the content that is easily available.

kids have too much access to sexual images and stuff too young. my friend recently did work experience at a primary school and was shocked to hear the kids of 5 and 6 saying stuff like...'youre a bitch' to each other. So maybe society is becoming desensitised to sexual images as well, maybe due to the overwhelmingly easy access to graphic things that would in the past have been banned.

There is a lot of increasingly accessible sexual imagery out there for young people to see. Young people are very easily influenced and by exposing us to all of this now just makes boys think that all girls are good for is to be their sexual objects. it lowers girls self esteem by thinking they should look like page 3 girls and act like them to get boys. it also lowers girls aspirations.

However, there were some posters who argued that the increasing visibility of sex in society was an undamaging phenomenon for young people since sex is a part of life. Although sexually explicit material is becoming more prominent and accessible this did not always cause a problem for young people or their sexual development.

I don't believe that sex is talked about too much as long as it's in the right context and I don't believe society puts too much pressure on young people to think about sex too early because it's going to happen sometime

the sexualised society does nothing but give information wich is not made available any other way

The comments above did represent a minority view. Many posters articulated a link between media representations and images of sex with teenage sexual misunderstandings and practice.

[TV]Shows portray casual sex with no commitment and no consequences, we wonder why teenage pregnancy is so high!

Technology was identified as a contributing factor to the perception among young people that sexual material was too easy, and inappropriately, accessible.

i think society is to sexualised when you go on websites like facebook you get pop ups saying click here if you want a fun time.and young people can go on porn site with out anyone kowning

I do agree that technology making inappropriate sexual content too easy to access.

Sex and Relationship Education

There were few posters who were satisfied with the current state of content and delivery of SRE as it stands in the UK. Many posters thought that informal methods of SRE, such as peer dialogue or the media, were still the main forms of initial education for many young people. There was recognition that this was an ineffective and potentially dangerous way of transmitting vital knowledge about such an important element of young people's development.

At the minute, it seems that many of us learn about sex through adult films or porn, surely we should get some fact-based backing first, right?

since they are told by people in school or by big brothers and sisters about the embarrassing stuff, which I can assure you they do, then it saves the parents giving them embarrassing talk. in fact many parents think they're so embarrassing they refuse to talk about it which becomes unfair for the child over time.....then, if you look at it realistically, most kids are repulsed by the idea of having a girlfriend or boyfriend or maybe even interacting with them up until about year 5. and once your in high school, you will see it in older students anyway...

There was a repeated suggestion that open and honest communication between adults and children about sex and sexual health would be good starting place for SRE.

Not forbidding sex, because as we've seen with alcohol, if you forbid someone from access to something, theyll likely either develop a fear or intimidation from it, or theyll go out and discover it for themselves and become addicted to it, or take too much at once, and then get into difficulties.

Who should teach about sex?

The role of parents in their children's education about sex and sexual health matters was a point of disagreement on the forum.

Our parents should teach us because they are responsible for their childs actions

The parts parents should play in sex education is that they should get educated themselves first and then try and talk, they should keep the channels of communication open with their children, and encourage their children to talk to them every day about their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Parents need to understand that we are under more stress, both academically and socially also.

Other posters thought that the appropriate place for SRE to be taught was in schools rather than at home. The idea that a trained specialist, external to the school and not a teacher with whom young people had regular academic contact, could deliver SRE was a popular one. Regular members of staff from the school teaching SRE to students was seen to be deeply embarrassing - not knowing the person delivering the lessons, rather than the level of expertise that teachers have was the main driver for SRE from external teachers.

Who should teach us is definitely not teachers as it is embarrassing and awkward it should be somebody from outside the school so maybe somebody from Brooke or

other sexual health organizations that exist out there. Definitely in school though as it's a learning environment

An external teacher coming in could be a good thing, I'd also suggest a younger, attractive teacher, just because learning from your (no matter how nice) old, fat, form teacher, can put disturbing images in your head (ie, imagining them at it)

I would most certainly not want to learn from teachers and school, it would be embarrassing, it would be better to learn through friends and older school students, which most of us do...

What do young people need to know about sex?

Lots of suggestions were made on what content should be included, for what ages and how this information should be communicated. The strategies of how to deliver SRE varied but there were lots of suggestions about how it could be improved.

personally i believe that a system of simple, sex education at a young age, just teaching children of say 5 or 6 the basics about where babies come from, and things like that, would be more sensible

i think any sex ed. if not from school or an outside body should not take a moral stance and should take a purely factual one. as such, i feel that they shouldnt teach abstinence because it can easily come across as preachy and people shouldnt have moral decisions pushed on them in that way.

There were concerns that SRE should not come across as moralising or preaching and that more should be discussed about the consequences of sex and how to deal with things like unplanned pregnancy. This approach was seen as a potentially useful way of emphasising the seriousness of the decision to have sex.

What should be taught is everything basically especially safe sex and encourage using contraceptives, especially condoms, when having sex also pregnancy and infection, and if possible abstinence education, which will encourage delaying sexual activity. Also the aftermath and ensure that we understand the seriousness of the decision to have sex.

Other practical suggestions including a format of SRE similar to that of BBC Radio 1's youth-orientated, life advice show 'The Sunday Surgery'. This includes a different young celebrity or pop star every week, along with radio DJ's, giving advice and discussing their experiences of the problems or dilemmas the listeners are facing.

A field trip to a GUM clinic to demystify and remove any taboos surrounding discussing sexual health, and introducing young people to the sexual health services in their area.

I agree with Sherri about the Sunday Surgery, it pretty much has it right, sex ed should be more like that in general ie. relaxed, not stressed, not overly serious, maybe slightly humorous or tongue-in-cheek

Most posts were characterised by openness about discussing issues such as pornography and problems associated with it, such as its distribution, increasing

accessibility. The majority of posters on the forum generally agreed pornography to be demeaning to women.

updating the sex ed system to contain de-sexualisation of women and possibly (shock horror) references to pornography

Most young people had a liberal approach to sexuality, and universal SRE was seen as essential to ensure all young people received a high level of education about sex.

EVEN IN RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS, because no-one can help what way they are born. A gay guy or a lesbian girl or someone who is transgender, is not Born being a Catholic or a Muslim. So why treat them like there's something wrong with them?

Teenage Parents

Teenage pregnancy was seen by the young people on the forum as something often exaggerated by the media and something that encouraged negative stereotyping of young people. Teenage parenthood was not seen as being a conscious or positive choice, but something that there should be more information about and support for teenagers in this situation. Most participants were frustrated with adults and the media being judgemental about the right age to have children.

Teenage pregnancies in my eyes are not a problem at all in society although they are over-empathised in the media giving negative stereotypes and labels

Even though the rate of teen pregnancies is falling the attitude towards those teen parents that are still around is not improving. Fair enough it may not coincide with everyone's beliefs but there is so much going around at the moment in an attempt to open people's eyes so why isn't the same thing happening for teen parents.

the problem is not the young mothers themselves but the support system... I think work needs to be done on the governments part to support teenage mothers in getting into paid work and into a position to support their child. Work also needs to be done to improve the image of these young mothers so that society is more supportive.

The reason many of the young people thought teenage pregnancy was a bad idea was because it may jeopardise the opportunities for work and education of the teenage mothers and may also harm outcomes for the children.

I think that teenagers should not become pregnant but if they do become pregnant they should go for abortion because of their GCSE's and all that stuff. If they kept the baby they would be giving up everything

three girls of 16 who used to go to my school last year...are currently in various stages of pregnancy as theyve been taught from a young age that abortion is murder, theyre going to have babies that are going to have a really hard life and maybe end up the same way as their mothers. These girls have no jobs, husbands, boyfriends, or qualifications. What chance can they give their children to have a good life when they arent ready

The potential for teenage pregnancy to be a class issue, that is an issue of snobbery rather than about outcomes for the mother or child, was highlighted on the forum.

simply put, middle class pompous society looks down on teenage pregnancy as a stereotyped, neglecting section of society. in fact, i have seen far more great teenage parents than i have adult..

More support and continued education for young mothers was seen as important to ensure the chances for them and their child were improved as much as possible.

Age of consent

The principle of the age of consent was seen as the most pragmatic way of deciding when young people were mature enough to become sexually active.

I don't think there is a better way to decide responsibility of having sex than age.

Although in some ways I do think our age of consent is a little stupid, considering that at age 16 you can have sex, which means you can have a child, so you can technically be in charge of another life before you can even have a beer! This just doesn't seem to add up to me.

However, the practicalities of the age of consent brought out more debate with a variety of arguments made for different ages of consent.

I do believe that 16 years of age is right for the UK because we are not totally autonomous and competent in our decisions on one hand on the other hand it can be put down to sexual freedom and expression. I don't think there is a better way to decide responsibility of having sex than age.

I thin their should be adefinite limit of 14 or 15 but oother then that it should be up to the parents as to whether they are mature enough, or advanced enough for it. As some people are pressurized to do oit when there not ready even though their legal, and some ned up having to wait

I don't think the age of consent should be changed. I don't it should be lowered because I honestly just don't think 14 for example is mature enough to make that kind of decision; I also don't think we should make it higher because I think people would most likely ignore it or rebel against it and just go ahead anyway.

Political Context

The forum was initiated at a point when the role of Personal Health and Social Education as part of the curriculum was coming under scrutiny - by March 8 the Children Schools and Families Bill 2009-10 was at its second reading in the House of Lords. One of the provisions of the bill "Puts Personal, Social and Health Education (PHSE) on a statutory footing and ensures that all young people receive at least one year of sex and relationship education". There was some debate in the media about whether the bill allowed an opt out clause for faith schools but the bill does state that parents would lose the right to withdraw their children from compulsory sex education after the age of 15 (ensuring that all children should have one mandatory

year of SRE before the minimum school leaving age). The DCSF are also carrying out a consultation on these new SRE provisions at the time of writing. There also were instances where politicians and civil society groups got involved in the debate about the increasing sexualisation of children. David Cameron spoke out about the inappropriate marketing of sexualised products to children, such as pre-teen padded bras, and why he thinks Lily Allen is not suitable for his 6 year old daughter. Another reaction to sexualised marketing aimed at young people was the campaign organised by internet parent forum Mumsnet 'Let Girls be Girls'. This campaign was aimed at advertisers and manufacturers of children products asking them to reconsider how they market their products to young children.

HeadsUp makes sure that young people's views on the sex education are sent to the appropriate policy-makers, journalists and politicians so they can take into account young people's views on the issues.

The HeadsUp team would like to convey our thanks and appreciation to the decision-makers, young people and teachers that got involved in this important debate. We would also like to extend an invitation to interested parties, particularly legislators and government, interested NGOs, academics and journalists to respond to the findings. Responses and requests for further information should be directed to:

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