

GUIDANCE FOR STAFF AND CARERS – SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION (SRE)

Introduction:

1. The Children Act 1989 and related guidance places a duty on workers to talk about sex and relationships with children and young people in order to help them acquire information about their bodies, sex and sexual health, and to develop relevant skills. This duty has been further emphasised through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Quality Protects initiative, Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and National Sexual Health and HIV / Aids Strategy.
2. This guidance is intended to assist all Children's Services staff and carers to meet the above duties by providing a consistent, good quality approach to sex education and relationships work. It has largely been informed by guidance issued by the Teenage Pregnancy Unit and in particular the publication "Enabling young people to access contraceptive and sexual health information and advice: Legal and Policy Framework for Social Workers, Residential Social Workers, Foster Carers and other Social Care Practitioners" and the work of departmental and corporate groups

Rationale:

3. Sex and relationships education work is about helping young people to gain knowledge and awareness of sex, sexuality and sexual health, and to enable them to have access to advice, guidance and support in dealing with this area of their personal and social development. Providing young people with such knowledge offers protection and can help avoid confusion and unhappiness. It also can play a key role in addressing sexual health issues, such as teenage pregnancy, HIV, and sexually transmitted infections.

Looked After Young People:

4. Young people in public care often have particular needs. They may have experienced traumatic events in their lives – i.e. neglect, sexual, physical and emotional abuse. This may distort their understanding of sex, sexuality and personal relationships, and result in low self-esteem and a range of inappropriate behaviours. Similarly young people often have also had many placements and changes in schools or have attendance problems. They may therefore have missed school based SRE work, may have been denied the opportunity to build long term relationships with peers or benefit from accurate, objective information from their parents.

Confidentiality

5. Confidentiality is an issue which causes great anxiety for young people, staff, and carers and needs to be clearly understood by all. Staff and carers do not have a duty to inform parents of evidence or suspicion of sexual activity, though the Children Act makes it clear that they should work in partnership whenever possible and appropriate (see attached Teenage Pregnancy Unit publication). The best interests of the young person are paramount and generally confidentiality boundaries should be agreed which ensure the young person feels safe and confident about asking for support.

Personal information regarding sex, sexuality and person relationships should not be shared by staff or carers without the prior knowledge and preferably the consent of the young person concerned. Thus if a young person feels unable to talk to their parents or carers about their sexuality and sexual health, their confidentiality should be respected unless the worker believes them to be at risk of significant harm, or of harming someone else.

Staff and carers have a duty to follow child protection policy and procedures in such circumstances, though the young person should still be informed of why and how their confidentiality is to be broken and be supported through the process.

Framework for Sex and Relationships Education:

6. Sex and relationships education should: -
 - Be an integral part of the lifelong learning process, beginning early childhood and continuing into adult life.
 - Be an entitlement for all children, young people and adults.
 - Meet the needs of boys as well as girls, those who are heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual, those with physical, learning or emotional difficulties; and those with a religious or faith tradition.
 - Encourage personal and social development, self-esteem and self-awareness.
 - Encourage a sense of moral responsibility.
 - Encourage confidence and the ability to resist abuse and unwanted Sexual experiences.

7. Learning about sex, sexuality, emotions, relationships and sexual health should support children and young people in managing adolescence and help to prepare them for an adult life in which they can: -
 - Be aware of and enjoy their sexuality.
 - Develop positive values and a moral framework that will guide their decisions, judgements and behaviour.
 - Have the confidence and self-esteem to value themselves and others.
 - Behave responsibly within sexual and personal relationships.
 - Communicate effectively.
 - Have sufficient information and skills to protect themselves and their partner from unintended / unwanted conceptions or sexually transmitted infections including HIV.
 - Neither exploit nor be exploited.
 - Access confidential advice and support.

8. The elements of sex and relationships education are interdependent. Knowledge alone will not promote sexual, emotional health and well being. A proper consideration of attitudes, values, and beliefs is closely related to the development of personal and social skills.

Values and Attitudes

9. Children and young people want opportunities to clarify attitudes and values and to consider how they are affected by them. They want to develop a moral code in which they are clear about what they believe, why they believe it and have a respect for and interest in the beliefs of others. A worked out sense of Values and attitudes will help young people to have
 - Negotiating skills with friends and partners.
 - Practical skills, caring for self and others, accessing support and advice.
 - Decision making skills - making sensible choices in the light of relevant information; making moral judgements about what to do and acting on those judgements in particular situations.
 - Acting responsibly as an individual and with others.
 - Problem-solving skills; managing and resolving conflict.
10. Values also influence decision making. Consideration of their own and other's values systems will include: -
 - An acceptance and exploration of difference. Young people have different social, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds with correspondingly different moral and cultural frameworks. It is important that diversity is valued and moral choices are considered, including the choice not to be sexually active.
 - An understanding of wider value systems such as those represented by the law and by religion.
 - Developing a critical awareness of the value systems and messages of others such as those represented in the media and within a young person's own peer group.
 - Understanding that sexual intimacy involves strong emotional feelings and should involve a sense of respect for one's own and others' feelings, decisions, rights and bodies.

- The placing of sexual relationships in context alongside other types of human relationships such as friendship, parenthood and other family relationships

Skills

11. Children and young people want to learn and practise personal and social skills which will help them to develop and maintain relationships, to take responsibility for their own and other's sexual health. They want to access support and help and to make informed choices and decisions regarding their sexual health and emotional well being. These life skills include: -
 - Personal skills; managing emotions and relationships confidently and effectively whilst developing empathy for others.
 - Developing independence in thought and action and defending values.
 - Communication skills: listening to others, asking questions, expressing emotions, giving opinions, listening to others' opinions and being assertive.

Knowledge

12. Knowledge - Children and young people want simple, easy to understand, age-appropriate information on how bodies develop and work, sexuality, the law, sexual reproduction, sexual behaviour, sexual health, emotions and relationships, the range of sexual health services available and related issues for example, their right to confidentiality.

The knowledge content of sex and relationships education will address: -

- What children and young people know already and have experienced.
- What children and young people say they need.
- Social, emotional, cultural, legal and biological aspects of sex, sexual development, sexuality and sexual health.
- Potential consequences of unprotected sex for example, unplanned and unintended pregnancy, young mother and fatherhood, sexually transmitted infections including HIV and AIDS.
- Positive and negative consequences of sexual behaviour.

- Information which aims to educate against prejudice and discrimination.
- Access to help and support.

Teenage Pregnancy Unit has written the publication "Enabling young people to access contraceptive and sexual health information and advice: Legal and Policy framework for Social Workers, Residential Social Workers, Foster Carers and other Social Care Practitioners"

The Guidance provides invaluable practical "question and answer" information to staff and about SRE issues likely to arise when working with young people. A copy of this booklet can be obtained from your fostering social worker.