

# Sex education in primary schools: dispelling the myths

There is considerable confusion surrounding sex and relationships education and many myths are in circulation. In this short leaflet, we attempt to dispel some of the most common myths in order to make parents aware of the facts.

Some of the confusion has arisen because it was the intention of the previous Labour government to make sex and relationships education a statutory part of the national curriculum in primary schools from September 2011. However, this part of the Children, Schools and Families Bill failed to receive parliamentary approval and so the law remains unchanged.

## ***Myth 1 – Primary schools are legally required to teach sex and relationships education***

**THE TRUTH...** Primary school governing bodies are required to consider whether sex education should be taught as part of the school curriculum, but they are free to decide not to teach it.

- If the governing body decides *not* to teach sex education, a written note of that decision has to be made and kept on file.<sup>1</sup>
- If the governors *do* decide to provide sex education lessons, the law requires them to keep a written statement of their policy, and to 'make copies of the statement available for inspection (at all reasonable times) by parents of registered pupils at the school and provide a copy of the statement free of charge to any such parent who asks for one'.<sup>2</sup>

Where sex education is provided, the law states that it must be given 'in such a manner as to encourage those pupils to have due regard to moral considerations and the value of family life'. It also stresses the need to teach pupils about 'the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and the bringing up of children' and to ensure that they are 'protected from teaching and materials which are inappropriate having regard to the age and the religious and cultural background of the pupils concerned'.<sup>3</sup>

## ***Myth 2 – The primary science curriculum places schools under an obligation to provide sex education***

**THE TRUTH...** At Key Stage 1 (5-7 years), the national curriculum for science states that children should learn that ‘animals, including humans, move, feed, grow, use their senses and reproduce’ and should be taught ‘to recognise and compare the main external parts of the bodies of humans and animals’.

At Key Stage 2 (7-11 years), national curriculum science merely requires schools to teach that ‘the life processes common to humans and other animals include nutrition, movement, growth and reproduction’ and ‘about the main stages of the human life cycle’.

There is no requirement in national curriculum science at either Key Stage 1 or Key Stage 2 to teach children about the sexual organs, sexual intercourse, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, or same-sex relationships.

## ***Myth 3 – Primary school governing bodies are required to follow the advice of their local authority with regard to sex education***

**THE TRUTH...** It is the responsibility of the governing body to determine whether or not sex education is given in a primary school and, together with the headteacher, to have regard to guidance issued by the Department for Education (DfE) where it is decided to provide sex education.<sup>4</sup> There is no reference in the relevant legislation to the local authority having any role in this process.

The DfE guidance on sex and relationships education contains no less than 91 references to parents, but only a single passing reference to local authorities. While there is a strong emphasis in the guidance on the need for schools to consult with parents in order to ensure that sex education policies reflect their wishes, nothing is said about any need for schools to consult the local authority.

According to the guidance, headteachers and governing bodies are accountable to the parents of their registered pupils and have a duty to work in partnership with them in relation to the provision of sex and relationships education, not the local authority.<sup>5</sup>

#### ***Myth 4 – Sex education in primary schools is needed to reduce rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections***

**THE TRUTH...** The past 30 years have seen a substantial increase in the provision of sex education in secondary schools, yet the UK still has the highest rate of teenage conceptions in Western Europe, and sexually transmitted infection rates have continued to rise. There is no evidence that starting sex education in primary school would produce results that secondary school sex education has failed to deliver.

It is unconvincing to say the least to advance the view that young people are placed at risk of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections for want of knowing the proper names for two or three parts of their anatomy from the age of five.

Introducing sex education at an early age runs the risk of breaking down children's natural sense of reserve. Far from being a hindrance, children's natural inhibitions and sense of modesty in talking about sexual matters are healthy and provide a necessary safeguard against both sexual abuse and casual attitudes towards sexual intimacy later on.

#### ***Myth 5 – The reason that teenage pregnancy rates are lower in the Netherlands is because Dutch schools provide sex education from the age of five***

**THE TRUTH...** There is no government-mandated curriculum or uniform approach to how sex education is taught in the Netherlands. Not all Dutch primary schools provide sex education by any means, and in practice sex education lessons vary considerably from school to school, just as they do in the UK.

There is no evidence to suggest that sex education explains why teenage pregnancy rates in the Netherlands are lower than in Britain. A more convincing explanation is to be found in the far more traditional patterns of family life found in the Netherlands. Compared with the UK, the Netherlands has a far lower proportion of lone parent families, out-of-wedlock births, divorces, and mothers in full-time employment. It also provides teenage mothers with lower welfare benefits, and a stigma continues to be attached to teenage pregnancy.<sup>6</sup>

***Myth 6 – Sex education should be left to the professionals.  
Parents are not the best people to judge what their children  
need to learn and when***

**THE TRUTH...** When it comes to providing information on sensitive and controversial areas such as sex and relationships, parents are the experts.

Education law in the UK is clear that parents bear the legal responsibility for the education of their children and that children must be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents.<sup>7</sup> The government's guidance on sex and relationships education states that: '*Governors and head teachers should discuss with parents and take on board concerns raised, both on materials which are offered to schools and on sensitive material to be used in the classroom.*'<sup>8</sup>

No 'sex education professional', should be allowed to determine the character of sex education lessons against the wishes of parents.

***References:***

1. Education (No. 2) Act 1986, section 18(2).
2. Education Act 1996, section 404.
3. Education Act 1996, section 403, as amended by Learning and Skills Act 2000, section 148(4).
4. *Ibid.*
5. Sex and Relationship Education Guidance, DfEE 0116/2000, July 2000.
6. Joost van Loon, *Deconstructing the Dutch Utopia*, Family Education Trust, 2003, <http://www.famyouth.org.uk/pdfs/DDU.pdf> and *Lessons in Dutch Mythology*, Family Education Trust 2003, <http://www.famyouth.org.uk/pdfs/LDM.pdf>
7. Education Act 1996, sections 7 and 9.
8. Sex and Relationship Education Guidance, *op. cit.*, para 1.8.

***Further reading:***

Valerie Riches, *Sex Education or Indoctrination?* Family Education Trust, 2004.  
Norman Wells, *Too Much, Too Soon*, Family Education Trust, 2009.

Both of these books are available from Family Education Trust (details below).

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