

Evidence briefing: Young people's views on sexuality and relationships education (SRE) in schools

Introduction

Young people are sending a clear message that they want and expect teachers to provide comprehensive SRE in the school environment. But they complain it is not often done well. Young people often report dissatisfaction with the timing, quantity and quality of SRE as well as the lack of focus in SRE on subject matters they consider relevant and of value (Blake & Muttock, 2004; Blake, 2005; Lokanc-Diluzo, Cobb, Harrison, & Nelson, 2007).

Key points

Research in Australia and overseas consistently shows that young people:

- 1. Want to learn about sexuality and relationships in schools**
- 2. Expect and rely upon teachers to be credible, key sources of information in SRE**

1. Young people want to learn about sexuality and relationships in schools

Young people want to start learning about SRE earlier with a majority wanting to start in primary school. Results from a 2008 survey in the UK indicate that young people felt their SRE had not begun early enough and they would have benefited from a SRE program that started in primary school and continued throughout their schooling career (Martinez & Emmerson, 2008). Both male and female primary and secondary students expressed the need for an earlier start to SRE (UK Youth Parliament, 2007; Emmerson, 2010) This sentiment has been echoed by young people through the YMCA Queensland Youth Parliament in 2009 when both sides of the house called for comprehensive SRE in Queensland schools.

From my experience at my school, a short course in sex education done for a term in year 11 was simply too late for a significant proportion of students. Students need to have a broad introduction in upper primary and complete a comprehensive education...in early high school – in year 8. This simply reflects the reality...that by year 10 over a quarter of students have already engaged in sexual intercourse. Leaving the bulk of education about contraception, consent, choice and diseases to years 10, 11 and 12 is simply reckless and it is in direct conflict with the best interests of the students (YMCA Queensland Youth Parliament member, 2009).

Young people want to learn about a variety of topics not just the biological aspects of puberty, reproduction, contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Young people talk of their SRE as being too little, too late and too biological+(Blake, 2010). They express the need for SRE to address emotions, values, norms, relationships, safety, and their world and experiences more effectively in order to be helpful.

...more about things that are important in our lives and learn information that I could use in the future (Student cited in Gabhainn, O'Higgins & Barry, 2010).

Comprehensive SRE aims to provide young people with information, skills and values they need to have safe, fulfilling and enjoyable relationships and take responsibility for their sexual health (Emmerson, 2010). Young people call for SRE in schools to help them do this (Martinez & Emmerson, 2008; Blake, 2010; Gabhainn et al., 2010).

Young people want to be involved in the planning of SRE and believe they should be considered key stakeholders alongside their parents and carers. They want to be listened to, communicated with and not just talked at (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin & Sinclair, 2003; Blake, 2005).

This is sex. This is what is out there. This is what can happen. This is what most often happens ... when it comes to sex you need to be able to ask ... Every child has the right to a myth-free choice. They need to make an educated decision. That, I believe, is integral (YMCA Queensland Youth Parliament member, 2009).

I think it is completely unfair that you decide what we need to know (Young woman cited in Blake, 2010).

Young people stress the importance of their participation in development of SRE to contribute to focus areas, to help programs reflect the reality of their lives and to remind professionals of the importance of involving them (in all of their diversity). Young people do request the inclusion of their parents/carers in the development of SRE and emphasise the importance of linking access to youth friendly health services to education initiatives. They also ask decision makers to really think about what it feels like and is like to be young+ (Blake, 2005).

Young people also call for more participatory and interactive teaching and learning methods including more discussion time, more debates on topics and more activities as well as less repetition and worksheets (UK Youth Parliament, 2007; Emmerson, 2010; Gabhainn et al., 2010)

2. Young people expect and rely upon teachers to be credible, key sources of information in the area of SRE

Teachers are seen by young people to be trustworthy sources of information; in many cases, other than parents, teachers are the main adults to provide SRE (Smith, Aigus, Barrett, Mitchell, & Pitts, 2009). Young people consider school to be a good environment to learn about SRE. Young people acknowledge that they draw on many sources for their sexuality and relationships education and yet report that teachers are high on their preferred list of sources.

Not everyone has a family member or someone they can talk to but everyone is more than entitled to be informed properly (YMCA Queensland Youth Parliament member, 2009).

Young people have reported that SRE is best when teachers are confident, unembarrassed and able to teach correct biological facts and also explore relationships issues (Emmerson, 2010). They want their teachers to be trained and competent and expect that they will be able to teach SRE as they are able to teach other subjects.

The teachers also were embarrassed... They could have done with some sort of training so they knew how to tackle and explain things better (Young person cited in Martinez & Emmerson, 2008).

Students report a range of positive outcomes from receiving SRE from confident teachers in a school environment. Students valued the opportunity to safely express views and ask questions as well as having the opportunity to learn about key issues affecting themselves and peers in both their present and future lives. Other reported outcomes included improved relationships with others and improved attitudes towards health (Formby et al., 2011).

Resources available to support schools to enhance the learning opportunities for and effectively engage young people in sexuality and relationships education:

FPQ Teacher Resource Centre www.fpq.com.au/teachers/index.php

FPQ Working with young people www.fpq.com.au/youthproject/index.html

YMCA Queensland Youth Parliament, full text of Hansard available at www.ymcaqyp.org/attachments/088_Youth%20Parl%20-%201%20October%202009.pdf

Brook: UK youth sexual health service. For information on young people being directly involved in creating positive education for young people in schools go to www.brook.org.uk/professionals/home

FPQ works to support schools and educators to develop and implement SRE programs to suit the specific needs of their students and school communities. www.fpq.com.au

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