

Evidence briefing: Parents' views on sexuality and relationships education (SRE)

Introduction

The fear of parental backlash is often the most significant barrier to children and young people's access to SRE in their school environment. When parents' actual views are researched however, the overwhelming majority expect schools to provide sexuality and relationships education (SRE), support the role of teachers, and value the opportunity to be informed and involved. Teachers can be confident that parents and carers are in favour of delivery of SRE by teachers.

Key points

Research in Australia and overseas consistently shows that the overwhelming majority of parents and carers:

- 1. Recognise the importance of SRE**
- 2. Expect SRE to be an integral part of schooling**
- 3. Support the expertise of teachers in providing SRE**

1. Parents and carers think that the SRE provided in schools is important

SRE enables parents and carers to talk with their children. Research shows that SRE programs can result in increased parent-child communication about sexuality (Latrobe University, 2008; Footprints, 2011). Most parents (90%) feel that receiving information about sexuality and relationships would encourage them to discuss the topic with their school-age children and 72% of parents said this would make it easier for them to talk to their child (Footprints, 2011).

SRE provides students with a better understanding of how to negotiate a healthy and safe sexual relationship. 87% of parents and carers surveyed believe that SRE can increase the likelihood of having healthy relationships (Galaxy, 2008) and 83% of parents agree that children who are provided with SRE at school are more likely to practice safe sex when they are older (Footprints, 2011).

SRE helps children make informed choices. Children and young people who have received comprehensive sexuality and relationships education have been shown to delay the onset of sexual activity and increase the adoption of safer sex practices (Senderowitz & Kirby, 2006).

SRE makes children feel positive about themselves and protect them from abuse. Comprehensive SRE has been shown to help children and young people to understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviours and be less vulnerable to exploitation and sexual abuse (Briggs, 1991; Finkelhor, Asdigian, & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995; Queensland Crime Commission & Queensland Police Service, 2000; Finkelhor, 2007).

2. Parents and carers expect schools to teach SRE

Parents and carers are looking to schools to complement what they are teaching their children at home and want to be involved and have input into the SRE curriculum. They are also seeking teachers' support to enhance communication about sexuality and relationships with their children. Parents also want to create alliances with schools where they can provide input to the school curriculum (Weaver, Byers, Sears, Cohen, & Randall, 2001; Macbeth, Weerakoon, & Sitharthan, 2009; Kesterton, & Coleman, 2010; Footprints, 2011). They report to want to know and be involved in whatever the school is doing.

Very important life skills. It needs to be reinforced at home and at school, in a school environment with qualified teachers [so] that they are getting the clear message through. It's the responsibility of school and parents. Cairns parent of child in Grade 7 (Footprints, 2011).

Parents and carers believe that some aspects of sexuality and relationships education should be taught even before children start primary school (Galaxy, 2008) and a majority believe SRE should begin from kindergarten onwards, with the majority of subjects covered in the middle years (Weaver et al., 2001; Eisenberg, Bernat, Bearinger, & Resnick, 2008; Alton, Valois, Oldendick, & Drane, 2009; Macbeth et al., 2009; Footprints, 2011). Parents support SRE which is age appropriate and comprehensive.

Parents and carers think that preventing sexual abuse is the most important component of sexuality and relationships education followed by sexual development (Footprints, 2011). Macbeth, Weerakoon and Sitharthan (2009) also reported that parents want topics such as preventing sexual abuse, sexual development, relationships and reproductive health, puberty, gender roles, safe sex and contraceptive information.

3. Parents and carers support the role of teachers to teach SRE

Parents in the UK, USA and Canada support their teachers to provide comprehensive SRE in the classroom. The majority of parents surveyed approved of schools providing young people with information on a wide range of topics including puberty, reproduction, healthy relationships, STI/HIV prevention, birth control, sexual orientation and sexual abuse. (Lindley et al., 1998; Weaver et al., 2001; NFER/HEA (1994) cited in Blake, 2002; SEICUS, 2004; SIECCAN, 2009; Eisenberg et al., 2008; Alton et al., 2009; Kesterton & Coleman, 2010).

Parents and carers across Australia also strongly support SRE taught in schools. Macbeth, Weerakoon and Sitharthan (2009) found that 97.4% of Australian parents surveyed showed overall agreement with the provision of SRE in school curriculum. Parents in Western Australia (Dyson, 2008) also want their children to be well informed about sex, sexual health and relationships as do parents surveyed in New South Wales who say they would be grateful to teachers for introducing SRE (Milton, 2000).

Research indicates Queensland parents and carers support teachers providing SRE in classrooms (Footprints, 2011; Galaxy, 2008). Parents also expect to be involved and informed about what schools and teachers are doing, as with any program area, and most parents (79%) report they would be concerned if SRE was not taught at their school (Footprints, 2011). In Brisbane, an Anglican High School also reported that the parents were supportive of the school's sexuality and relationships education programs, with strong expectations that most topics would be introduced before the end of year 8 (Edwards, Read, & Lee, 2002).

In a new Queensland study, nearly all parents and carers (91%) surveyed in Cairns and the Sunshine Coast said they were in favour of teachers providing sexuality and relationships education in schools and an overwhelming majority of parents (98%) also agree that young people need to be provided with information about decision making before they engage in sexual relationships (Footprints, 2011). Support was strong from mothers and fathers, residents in metropolitan and regional areas and of people with different religious beliefs. Parents and carers had the following to say about their support of teachers providing SRE at school:

I think the kids shouldn't just get it from home. They need a general and neutral view. Different approach than from parents. Children can maybe ask more questions of teachers than their parents -- some kids' parents might not want to talk to it -- my kids go to a Catholic school. Teachers with a background on the subject might be able to give better responses. Cairns parent of child in Grade 7 (Footprints, 2011).

Because teachers have a good relationship with children and can role model what is required. As long as the teacher has been trained and has a background in the area. Sunshine Coast parent of child in Grade 7 (Footprints, 2011).

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