

Sex lessons fail 'pregnancy test'

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Evening Mail

The Government sees sex education as the key to reducing teenage pregnancies. But what do teenagers really think of the lessons they receive? Here, a team of young reporters from Children's Express in Birmingham find out.

For most young people, sex education lessons offer little more than a chance to muck around and giggle at the back of the class while their teacher shows them a video about reproduction. There was a bunch of boys who used to sit at the back of our science class and think they were ever so funny.

At least, that's what a group of secondary school students from Birmingham told us. As one teenage girl, recalling her own experience of sex education, put it: "There was a tendency for the immature people to laugh."

"It's a bit of a waste of time because all everyone does is mess around in them. You learn more in the playground." That's the view of 13-year-old Alison.

"In year 7, everyone was being stupid because we watched a video that showed the privates and things. There was a bunch of boys who used to sit at the back of our science class and think they were ever so funny," adds Hannah, aged 15.

When it's not funny, it can be painful - or just plain dull. Teachers may be embarrassed, and sometimes the students are too.

According to the group we interviewed, sex education barely touches on the health and social issues surrounding sex. There's little mention of sexually transmitted diseases other than HIV, and messages about contraception are left to a visitor from the local health clinic.

As Hannah says: "They don't tell you what to do if you don't use contraceptives. They just say 'Come to this clinic.' It's like an advertisement. They don't tell you how it feels or anything."

One of the problems is that sex education is taught as part of the science curriculum. But sex is about relationships and decisions - not just the physical facts.

Michael, 15, adds: "The way they teach it is like: 'This is sex, this is what you do, this is what that's called. They don't talk about relationships."

Most of the people we spoke to preferred the sex education they were given in primary school. Teachers were more relaxed and the approach to the subject stressed the emotional side more.

Underage sex isn't just a case of kids not listening to lessons at school. Teenagers cite many different reasons having sex - some for what they call 'love', some because they are depressed, and some because it seems like the 'in' thing to do.

"Sex is everywhere isn't it? You become more aware of it as you grow older. It's not a big deal. You are exposed to a great deal," adds Alison.

Is it down to parents to teach their kids?

"My mother had my brother when I was 13 and I asked her all about it. That was when I knew," says Amanda, now 15.

Suresh, also 15, adds: "If you've grown up in a sensible family which teaches you, you don't treat women like sex objects."

Others said they would rather ask their parents than sit in a classroom with their friends drawing diagrams and reading books.

But most young people say it's embarrassing to have to ask their parents questions about sex.

Amanda, 16, said: "My dad asked me if I wanted to go on the pill and I said no, but he still thinks I should. That makes me feel that he thinks I'm a slag and he doesn't trust me. He says that sex is about love and that has made me decide to wait until my wedding night."

So what are the alternatives? "I reckon that girls who have become pregnant and stuff should actually go in and talk about it," Hannah told us. "The baby - and the stress."

Some schools bring in specialist theatre groups to present the issues surrounding sex in an engaging, dramatic way.

Flora Johnston from the national touring Loudmouth Theatre group told us: "It's very difficult for your normal teachers to teach you about sex education because of the relationships they have to have with their students. In some ways it's good that outsiders can come in. It's a more open environment. But it needs to be improved in schools as well."

"I'd make it more open, more thorough and interactive, so that young people are more leading and telling the teachers what they know rather than the other way around."

There's no doubt that kids have started to ask questions which could ultimately reduce the rates of pregnancy and spread of sexually transmitted diseases among UK teenagers. But this depends on effective sex education in the classroom.

In the meantime the playground remains the place where most teenagers learn about sex - including perspectives that schools should be challenging.

"I think homophobia is an example of what happens if it's not taught in schools, because the playground builds up prejudices," Suresh adds. "What you've got now is a lot of people who are very anti-homosexual. Learning things from the playground breeds prejudices, homophobia and things like that. That's why I

think it should be taught in a controlled environment."

Names used in this article have been changed.

About the team

This article was produced by Sam Hunt and Katy Atkinson, 15, and Mathew Dent, 14. A shorter version of this story was published in the [Birmingham Evening Mail](#).

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