

# HEADLINERS

## We need to know

**Ignorance has not been bliss for a long time - secondary school pupils want full and frank sex education, and not from their usual teachers either.**

*Children explain what they want from sex education, many suggesting that teachers are not the most suitable people to disseminate information.*

But a teacher actually said to us: "I don't think you're mature enough to watch this sex education video, even though other boys did."

a problem with sex. Specifically, we have a problem with sex education. It's supposed to teach kids about reproduction, safe sex and stable relationships. But it's not working.

Our rates of teenage pregnancy are the highest in Europe and sexually transmitted infections are on the rise. Young people are having sex at an earlier age, and newspapers revel in stories of teenagers with a stunning ignorance of the most basic information about sex - except how to do it, of course.

But we shouldn't be surprised when our sex education is ruined by embarrassment, indifference and lack of specialist knowledge. As our interviews show, what we like to think happens in the classroom and what actually happens there are worlds apart. Too often it's blasé, a case of "This is sex education, read the sheet."

Adults may think we should be protected from sexual knowledge, but they need to face the facts. Advertisements, films and TV programmes - all made by adults - bombard us with images of sex from an early age. Then other adults complain that we know too much, too young.

As Olivia says: "The way TV programmes and films portray sex, they don't show the pregnancy or the diseases. In most films they just have sex and then they're all right. So you think 'Oh, you know, I'll do it then as well, I'll copy my favourite actor or actress'."

The least you can do is give us the knowledge we need to protect ourselves.

### **Most things I learned off the TV**

by Tom, 16, Hull

"The sex education lessons were pretty useless. A lot of it is learned in biology and the only things that were useful were the infection and protection information.

"Most things I learned I picked up off TV, other people and magazines. School did teach me bits, though, like going into more detail. I didn't find it particularly helpful. Most of my information was learned on the streets. Most of it turned out to be right, but some wasn't.

"The stuff about sexually transmitted infections was most useful - stuff that people just don't talk about. Some children have no idea, so it might make them think twice about unprotected sex.

"Because of the amount of teenage pregnancies you can see a lot of kids are not properly educated, so any advice they are given is a bonus. It might make them think before jumping into anything.

"But I don't think there is much that can be done about it. Whatever happens, you always get the people that don't listen or think it won't happen to them. There were at least six pregnancies in my last year at school and they had the exact same sex education as everyone else.

"Nothing can really prepare you for what happens in the real world - it all depends on a person's individual situation. But I suppose it does help you little bits along the way."

## I learned most from the school nurse

by Marie, 11, Sheffield

"Boys are less mature than girls and should be taught about sex later, about year 8. Girls should be taught in year 6.

"I've seen videos about how babies were born and about diseases. I know about Aids. I think most people have ideas already, because at my school people talked about sex even before the videos and stuff. But we learned some things that we didn't already know - more facts.

"I don't find it easy to talk to my teachers about sex issues. Maybe the school nurse, but not the normal teachers. I learned most about sexual health from the school nurse. My friends don't teach me anything, they just laugh all the time. I feel most comfortable talking about personal things with my mum and my cousins."

## They should start from the age of seven

by Olivia, 16, Sheffield

"At my primary school we watched one video and it was just a little cartoon of a man and woman moving about in a bed and then they shut the curtains and that was it. So I don't think we were told enough. It was very limited. I mean, in primary school I learned more on the street than I did from what school told me.

"They should start it from the age of seven and primary schools and secondary schools should have a set package of what they're going to do throughout their school years. In secondary school we had a pack that we had to get through, but it was a booklet and you just did it and the teachers didn't really help you. It was, like 'work through this booklet and you've done it'." Everyone should learn at the same age and learn exactly the same things.

"For stuff on infections it was one lesson with a work sheet and you could read it if you wanted and if you didn't nobody forced you. We had special talks on periods, but what happens if the teachers aren't really comfortable with saying it? They're not going to tell you everything they know if they don't feel comfortable with it, so they should get a specialist, who knows how to deal with telling kids.

"Each school should have a Connexions adviser on sex and sexual matters especially in secondary school.

"Sex education has prepared us a fraction - maybe a quarter, maybe a half - but not fully, not at all. You need to put the same information that teenage girls' magazines put in as well. They actually do put a lot of information in it and you'd have to give helpline numbers on a piece of paper or something, all wallet-size ones. That would be handy."

## I wouldn't feel comfortable talking to a teacher

by Saurice, 16, Sheffield

"I don't think we learned enough in secondary school. Our teacher actually said to us: 'I don't think you're mature enough to watch this sex education video, so I'm not going to let you watch it,' even though other forms did get to.

"We covered sexually transmitted infections with our form teacher, but I think she was a bit shy to talk about it a lot to be honest. And you're not going to want to go up to a teacher and ask him a question are you? Because you're going to feel embarrassed because they don't actually deal with that, they deal with school matters really. I wouldn't feel comfortable talking to a teacher.

"In a way it's not as useful to name parts as it is to tell you how to use it all, what it does and things like that. OK, you know the names, but in the end it's not going to stop you from getting pregnant. It's not going to stop you from getting infections, so you need to know also what could happen in different situations.

"If you're not taught about infections and Aids and stuff then you're not going to know, so you're not going to think that anything can come of sex.

"A lack of knowledge stops people from saying no. But if they don't know enough information then they're not going to know that they're missing out on information.

### Tips from CE for improving Sex Ed.

Schools should employ sexual health specialists whose role is to deliver sex and relationship education only.

Teach sex education at an earlier age and follow a proper syllabus that is the same for all schools.

Integrate the primary and secondary sex education syllabuses.

Make sure all the information is up-to-date, relevant and interesting.

Give us more detail about actual sexual practices, such as oral sex and masturbation.

Teach girls and boys exactly the same things, so they understand each other's problems better.

Give more detailed information on family planning clinics and the services they can offer.

Give free condoms to kids in sex education. You may not like the thought of your kids having sex but if they do, surely it's better that they're protected?

Give out information cards with numbers young people can call if they have any personal queries and problems.

Find out what young people actually want to know and adapt the syllabus accordingly.

"People need to be aware of all the main issues that sex involves, that's the type of lessons we need. Of course, it needs to be more interactive lessons than putting them in front of a video for an hour and saying 'Did you get that? See you later'."

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## About the team

This story was produced by Natalie Ansell, 16, Wei-Jun Chang, 15, and Lucas Davidson, 13. It was published in [0-19 magazine](#).

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