

Let's talk about sex



While the personal, social and biological issues surrounding the human reproductive process might cause awkward moments for parents, for primary school teachers they can seem a veritable minefield. Kevin Harcombe offers advice on dealing with this most sensitive of subjects...

'Sex education' – if ever two words had the capacity to stir up controversy, these are they. "Five-year-olds to be taught contraception!" the headlines scream. In fact, currently, contraception is not even taught to 11-year-olds (hence, perhaps, the high rate of teenage pregnancies in this country). Tied up in these shrill attitudes are a whole range of hobby horses – an understandable reluctance to invade innocent childhood with adult concerns, a moral or religious objection to sex per se, never mind educating people about it, and another chance to demonise schools in general and teachers in particular.

At a meeting prior to their children's sex education lessons, where parents can view the video material, I emphasise that giving children the knowledge to help them make informed choices about sex is more important than ever before. HIV / AIDS remains a killer, STIs are on the rise and unwanted pregnancies can cause misery. Girls are starting their periods earlier, boys and girls get unsuitable messages about body image from the media, and peer pressure to experiment with sex is prevalent. Sex education is vital, though I agree that some children seem very young still. Leaving aside the (entirely valid) argument about whether sex education is best done in the home or in the school, let's look at the practicalities of how to do it well – 'it' meaning education and not... 'it' (a very British euphemism). Technique is not on the curriculum: this is not the *Kama Sutra*. What is on the curriculum are things designed to give our children the knowledge they need to keep safe.

Things to remember

The lessons about the mechanics of intercourse take place in Y6, following previous years' input into relationships, having a positive self-image, keeping yourself clean and puberty. While the context is always loving relationships, steer clear of advocating marriage as the only form of relationship, not least because many of your children will be from homes where marriage is not the norm.

Take care, also, with questions about personal experience. For example, one girl (with her classmates present) raised her mother's termination of a pregnancy. The teacher sensibly decided to talk to her about that issue on a one to one basis. I've found, also, that the gender of the teacher is not important (important to the teacher, certainly, but not to the success of the lessons). The key is to have a teacher who is confident and embarrassment proof and whom the children trust.

It can be useful to set up a post box, where children can drop in notes asking questions they are too shy to ask in person. Then the teacher can study them in advance and weed out the unsuitable ones – "I can't wait to get a great big willy," one boy had written, "You and me both, love," muttered the female teacher to herself, wistfully – and then give considered responses to the whole class. Anonymity is preserved, all children get to hear the questions and answers and more knowledge and understanding is gained.

You should also always keep in mind issues of child protection, as there may be a child in the class who is being sexually abused. Issues may arise in the course of sex education as children do not always

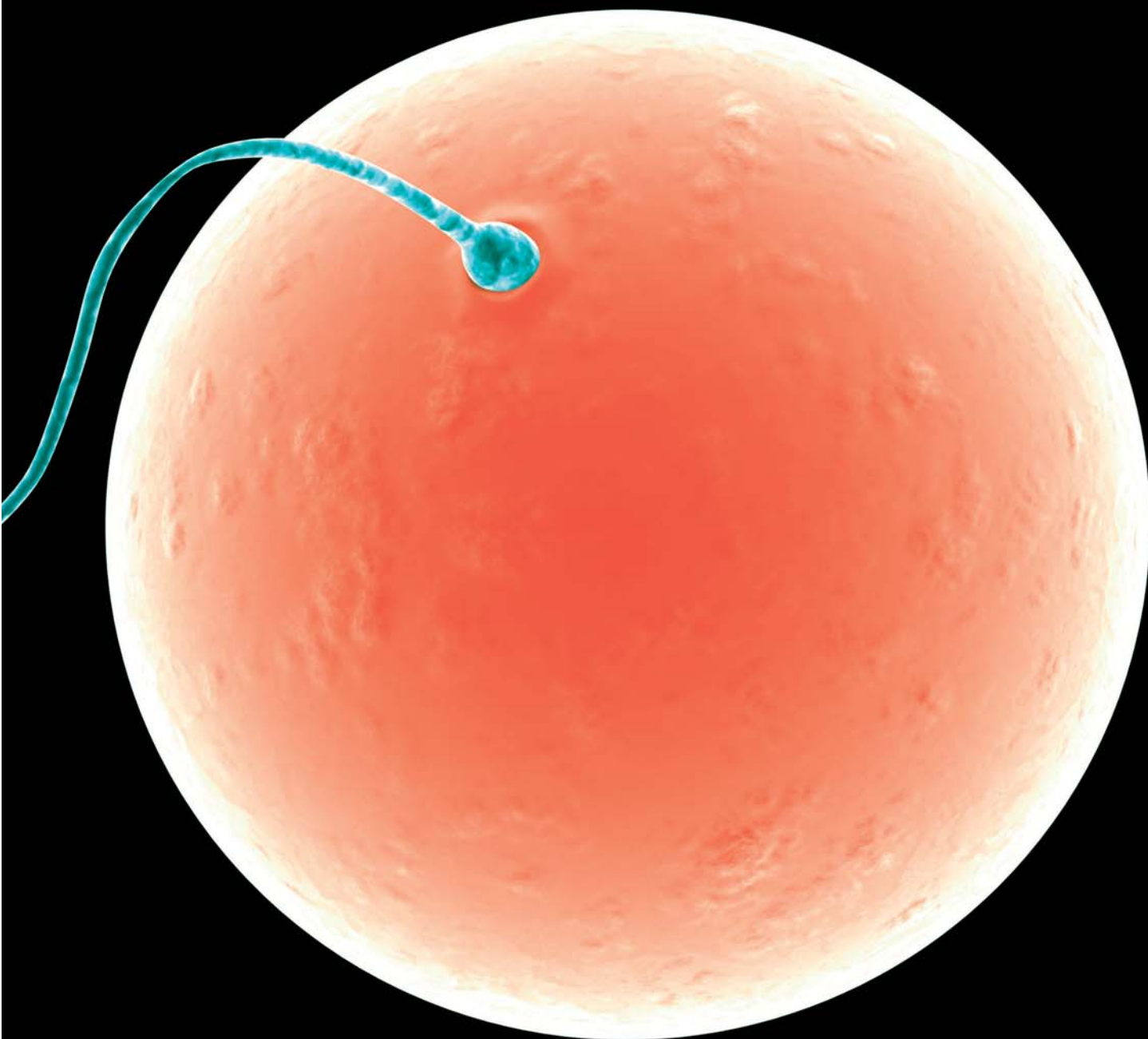
realise sexual relationships are abusive/wrong. The teacher needs to be aware of this and both note children's questions and watch their reactions carefully. When you know there are children who have suffered abuse, the utmost sensitivity is required and advice from the school nurse or Relate should be sought.

Parents and sex

It is important to persuade reluctant parents as to the benefits of the programme and warn them that the other children will talk about the lessons on the playground anyway. Far better that they get accurate information straight from the teacher.

When previewing the video material, often they are as embarrassed as their children and react in a similar way. In one animated sequence about a cartoon couple making love, the bedroom was shown from the outside of the house with a cat sat on the roof, causing one mum to say to her male partner, "We've never tried it on the roof!" to everyone's mild amusement / embarrassment. Another sequence compared the sensation of an orgasm to "a nice sneeze". There followed, inevitably, lots of mock sneezing amongst the parents.

The BBC video shows a family getting ready for work, with mum and dad walking round naked. For some reason the BBC chose an actor who was, well, a larger gentleman. The dads in the group folded their arms defensively while the mums ostentatiously showed renewed interest in the film.



Be prepared **SIMPLE RULES FOR DELIVERING SUCCESSFUL SRE...**

- Set clear parameters – let them know you will answer any questions except ones about your own life.
- In the introductory session, when you're explaining what the unit will comprise, give them permission to laugh and get it out of the way. There's bound to be initial embarrassment and tittering. This is Britain, after all.
- Seeing a video of a birth is not for the faint-hearted. Give children the option of seeing it or not. The downside, if they choose not to see it, is that the playground tales will exaggerate its content.
- What is a suitable level of content one year might be too much / not enough the following year. Tailor content to the maturity of the particular group.
- Be prepared for slightly strange questions and never make children feel silly for asking.
- Consider separate sessions for boys and girls. On their own, boys tend to ask about girls' stuff; interestingly, girls very seldom raise questions about boys.

Did you know...

- parents have the right to withdraw their child from sex education?
- sexually transmitted infections amongst 15-year-olds reached a record high in 2010? (Clearly we're doing something wrong...)
- a quarter of teachers reported being embarrassed or lacking the knowledge to provide good sex education lessons?
- you can still get pregnant even if you do it standing up?

Being skilled in relationships can't be taught in a handful of lessons in any single year; it's the product of a planned PSHE education programme located in a healthy school working in partnership with parents and carers. The reality is that by the time the school provides specific learning on human reproduction, many young people either already know or 'almost know', holding a collection of concepts drawn from the media, overheard conversations at home or the playground that just need drawing together or a little more information. Young people are far more knowledgeable than most of us think, even if that knowledge is a little inaccurate or incomplete.

If we change 'sex and relationships education' to 'relationships and sex education', the imperative for a planned progressive programme of learning that builds children's skills to understand their growth and to manage the changes they experience, and the gradual independence and responsibilities this brings, becomes obvious. Relationships and sex education is a natural part of PSHE education, once described as being like 'filo pastry': you build it gently, layer by layer.

Perhaps a good example draws from mathematics. To discuss credit cards in KS1 might be inappropriate, but it would be a good idea to start laying down numeracy skills and the understanding that actions have consequences! To discuss contraception in KS1 would be inappropriate, but building an understanding of fairness and turn-taking that leads to skilled negotiation that will one day enable a young adult to confidently manage their relationships certainly isn't.

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RELATIONSHIP

READY

A planned, progressive programme of SRE is vital to children's wellbeing, counsels the PSHE Association...

What do we need to be 'sexually well-educated' as young adults, able to make, manage and if necessary end relationships? The answer is not a huge amount of biology, vital as this is. Just think about how much science contributes to decisions within our own relationships. To be skilled at relationships, at

the very least we need great communication skills, we need to learn respect others, we need to understand that relationships require give and take, we need to understand and manage our feelings, have a rich vocabulary to express our feelings, to have confidence in ourselves and understand that negotiation is underpinned by fairness.