

# Sex education: what do today's children really need to know?

## Condoms and consent, yes ... but what about where to go for contraception?

From 2019, children will be taught about healthy adult relationships from the age of four, and sex education will be compulsory in secondaries. But there are caveats. Schools will have flexibility in how they teach the subjects and can develop an approach that is "sensitive to the needs of the local community" - and, crucially, to religious beliefs. Parents are expected to retain the right to withdraw their children from lessons. What details do children these days need to know? And how much freedom should headteachers have to decide?

one of the main reasons we do have sex is because of pleasure.

**Stephen Tierney**  
CEO, Blessed Edward Bamber Catholic multi-academy trust, Blackpool



For me, there would always be a desire to have a degree of flexibility within the teaching of SRE. Respect for others is crucial so it seems odd to insist all these elements are taught even where a particular community would say "that's not our way". I can't think of a school that wouldn't want to engage with the human relationships element of it, or with the sex education, in terms of the biological element to it, which is just part of science. There's very little that as a Catholic school we'd say "we're not comfortable with that". We would teach about the different types of contraceptives, what the church's perspective would be. We've been doing that for decades. [If we started giving information on how to access contraception] we would get into difficulties because our parents have expectations of how we will behave.

**Fiona Johnston**

Education worker, Brook sexual health charity, in Coleraine, Northern Ireland



Although sex education is already compulsory in Northern Ireland, our education system is run by religion, and lessons have to fall into line with the ethos of the school.

Most of the time, the information young people have is completely wrong because they're getting it either from each other or from pornography. One of the main things they ask about is things that they've heard about from porn - things such as fisting, or other sexual acts.

The worry is that young people believe everybody is doing these things and that it's normal - when the truth is, it's not. Things like fisting are physically damaging, and they're not for pleasure. But pleasure is one of those things that people don't like talking about because they don't like to think that young people enjoy it, and that



**Goedele Liekens, left**  
Sexologist, goodwill ambassador for sexual health and broadcaster best known for presenting Channel 4's Sex in Class

I have seen biology books in the UK without the word clitoris in them. But you cannot talk about sex education without talking about the clitoris or without talking about masturbation. Young people need to know that they don't need to be ashamed of masturbation - and that girls do it as well.



Teaching pupils about sex is to become a requirement for all secondary schools Photograph: Paul McErlane for the Guardian

It's a good thing that SRE is going to be compulsory, but you need travelling teams of specialists that come to schools to train teachers and because it can't just be a one-off lesson you need two or three teachers to continue this.

The other thing young people need preparation for is that sexual experiences come with stress, confusion and the huge emotions that come with the heat of the moment.

**Andrew Moffat**  
Assistant headteacher, Parkfield school, Birmingham



We need to talk about relationships and different families. Children need to know from a very early age that all families are different. Some have a mum and dad, some have just a mum or just a dad, some have two mums or two dads, some live with their nan, some live with foster parents. Work on LGBT issues has to be a whole-school initiative and not just in sex education.

**Evelyn Greeves**  
Girlguiding advocate and student, Durham



The overall impression I had from sex education was that sex was something you should put off doing for as long as possible. But, if I was going to do it, I should make sure my boyfriend really loved me

and that we used a condom. As a lesbian that wasn't much use to me.

A lot of people assume that you can't catch an STI through lesbian sex or gay sex, which obviously isn't true. The use of things like dental dams, and condoms in sex between gay men often isn't discussed, which is a really poor show.

**Cindi Pride**  
Deputy headteacher, Stroud high school, Gloucestershire



One of the things that we're working on is empowering young women to feel they can say no to requests for images, or anything that makes them feel uncomfortable. Girls are being bombarded with images sent from boys - very often completely unrequested - and they are being pressed to send images of themselves, which they clearly don't want to do, but they come in for a lot of abuse and ridicule if they say no.

Rebecca Ratcliffe

# Ideological shakeup will create a 'squeezed middle' of universities

Peter Scott



The higher education and research bill is now slouching through parliament to the inevitable royal assent. Its main provisions are to open the door wide to "challenger" - mainly for-profit - providers, and impose the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which claims to measure the quality of teaching, but won't and can't.

The bill also replaces the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce), a buffer body designed to keep politicians' grubby fingers off the universities, with the Office for Students (OfS), a regulator designed to champion consumers, ie students. Finally it will establish a conglomerate, UK Research and Innovation, that will swallow up the independent research councils.

This new regime offers the worst of both worlds - a higher education market deliberately designed to be disruptive, but also an irreversible shift to greater political control. To parody the title of the white paper that triggered the whole thing, it puts "the state at the heart of higher education". A pile of bureaucratic regulations is being heaped up of which Dickens's Circumlocution Office, from Little Dorrit, could be proud.

The effects of the new market are fairly easy to predict. Russell Group and other favoured universities will recruit more students, even if they become less selective in the process, because it looks good - and, frankly, pays - in spite of their complaints that the fees do not cover their costs.

Mostly this will be opportunistic expansion rather than strategic. The

envious quality of research in these universities may suffer if student numbers rise too quickly. More students will now be enrolled in universities with a strong bias towards conventional academic education, and fewer in universities with a tradition of providing professional and vocational higher education - just when arguably we should be moving in the opposite direction.

At the other end greedy challenger providers will pile in to offer cheap-and-cheerful courses and recruit students who can afford to pay but cannot get into mainstream universities. Of course, a few exemplary Potemkin-village providers with impeccable standards and motives will be paraded. But don't be deceived: this will not be an arena for altruists but profit maximisers.

The squeezed middle will be many of the big urban post-1992 universities that have done most to reach out to new kinds of students. The more resourceful of them will fight fire with fire by creating low-cost HE-lite subsidiaries to compete with the challenger providers.



Greedy challenger providers will recruit students who can afford to pay but can't get into mainstream institutions



A new-look academic gig economy that cuts costs to the bone will emerge.

But the accretion of state power over universities is just as worrying. Ministers hotly deny such intentions. They have even agreed to accept a Lords amendment that the OfS must have due regard to "institutional autonomy". But experience suggests that it is when such undertakings have to be spelled out they are most likely to be abused. Ask Claudio Ranieri at Leicester City - two weeks from "full confidence" to the sack.

Hefce, and soon the OfS, can - indeed, must - refuse to fund universities that do not toe the line on (newly revised) grant regulations. Universities can also be stripped of the right to award degrees. The TEF with its gold-silver-bronze awards will feed the insatiable appetite for grading and rankings, leaving little room for improving teaching.

In principle there is nothing wrong in a democracy with the state calling the shots on higher education. But it needs to be the sensible state, grounded in evidence-led public administration, not the silly state, blinkered by ideology and mesmerised by low-grade thinktankers.

A simple example. The minister, Jo Johnson, believes students are "crying out" for greater flexibility. Who can disagree? So he is backing two-year accelerated degrees, which will enrol a few hundred students at best. Who would have thought he was part of a government that has already decimated the most flexible form of all: part-time higher education, involving tens of thousands of students.

Peter Scott is professor of higher education studies, UCL Institute of Education

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