

HEALTH

Let's teach them sex can be fun

A new booklet encourages professionals to discuss sexual pleasure with young people. Ruth Smith asks whether it's a step too far

Publishing a booklet on how to talk about sexual pleasure with young people might seem like a good way of asking for trouble from the usual tabloid suspects. But the Centre for HIV and Sexual Health at NHS Sheffield has done just this, in response to growing demand from professionals for sensible advice on how to tackle the topic.

Roger Ingham, professor of health psychology at the University of Southampton's Centre for Sexual Health Research, wrote the booklet's introduction and advised on its content. "One of the things young people say a lot is that the sex education they get is virtually meaningless, it's too biological and doesn't relate to how they are feeling."

Positive approach

Ingham says evidence from research is clear – those countries that adopt a more open and positive approach to sex and relationships education have much better sexual health outcomes.

Simon Blake, chief executive of the young people's sexual health charity Brook, agrees: "All the evidence shows if you start early, before adolescence, young people are more likely to have sex later and if they do have sex, they'll have safe sex."

He welcomes the booklet, saying it addresses an incredibly important issue. "We need to do more to find out why people are so afraid to talk about sexual pleasure," he says.

"There are young women who have sex they don't like and they don't want. There are young men



Sexual health: the Pleasure booklet advises professionals on how to discuss the topic

who won't talk openly about it but will tell you privately they wish they had waited longer before having sex. The earlier it happens, the more likely they are to regret it."

He argues that when young people learn about sex it should be accompanied by a strong message that sex is positive. But, most importantly, young people should only have sex when they want it.

Natika Halil, director of information at sexual health organisation FPA, adds that sex and relationships education should not just give young people the biological facts about sex, but discuss relationships.

Some faith-based groups are notorious for their opposition to booklets that discuss sex and young people. But Rachel Gardner, a Christian youth worker who is also

creative director of the Romance Academy, an organisation that encourages young people to delay sex, says: "We welcome any publication that seeks to encourage open and honest discussion with young people and is both relationship positive as well as sex positive."

Consent crucial

"It is important that young people understand issues around consent, but a consenting act still might not be an enjoyable one," she adds.

The *Pleasure* booklet includes a quote from a parent who says he was sexually abused as a teenager. This, it argues, is a powerful reason to discuss sex and pleasure with young people. *Additional reporting by CYP Now team*

cypnow.co.uk/doc

Young people's views

"I am in two minds about the booklet – I feel that being too open about sex will make young people think that it's okay to go out and do what they want. However, being open might eradicate the stigma and mystery surrounding sex, so much so that young people will not want to take part in it until they are ready. Another advantage is that by opting for this new direct approach young people may no longer feel pressurised to have sex as they will know all there is to know about it. It also gets rid of the demonisation of sex, making it something young people can talk to their parents about."

Mata Cham, 18, Live magazine

"This is a brilliant way to handle sex ed. A young adult who's been talking openly about sex for years will be much more likely to communicate well with their partner later on. People who've been taught like this are more likely to have happy, safe and pleasurable sex. I might not go so far as telling people how many times a week they ought to masturbate, but I think the more direct the better. And I like this idea of listening to young people."

Sophie Manning, 22, user of TheSite.org

Pleasure What the booklet says

Masturbation

"Promote masturbation and its benefits to young women and men, such as it can feel really good and pleasurable and [it helps] to explore and find out about your own body"

Body parts

"Ensure that age-appropriate attention is paid to the role and functions of the different body parts, for example, mentioning the clitoris as opposed to just focusing on the vagina"

Experimentation

"Ensure discussions take place with young people that cover experimentation in sexual relationships to try to dispel the myth that there is only one way to have 'proper sex' (i.e. penetration)"

Condoms

"Promote discussion about how condoms/femidoms can be used to enhance sexual pleasure; talk about, show and demonstrate the variety of condoms available and link them to increased sensation and pleasure"



EDITORIAL

The joys of sex should be explained

Earlier this year, the government confirmed its intention to make sex education compulsory in schools as part of the introduction of personal, social and health education to the National Curriculum. This is because existing sex education often does not meet the needs of children and young people. Not only does the UK have one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe, but rates of sexually transmitted infections among young people are soaring.

A consultation on what the underlying principles of statutory sex education should be closes on 24 July.

But there is nothing like the subject of sex education to provoke sensationalist headlines in the tabloid press and the ire of some traditional faith groups – a reaction that can make it hard for professionals to discuss sex with young people.

The recently published *Pleasure* booklet is likely to add to the controversy (see p9). Produced by the Centre for HIV and Sexual

Health at NHS Sheffield, it encourages professionals to discuss sexual pleasure with young people. It is frank, and at times explicit.

But *Pleasure* is no *Kama Sutra* for kids. Rather, it is an attempt to start a discussion about how professionals think about young people's emerging sexuality. The authors rightly argue that not talking about pleasure severely restricts the potential health messages within sex and relationships education.

In fact, not teaching young people that sex should be fun can do more harm than good. In an increasingly sexualised society, young people often feel under pressure to have sex

before they are ready. They can lack the confidence to say no and wait. There are plenty of young people who will tell you that they wish they'd waited longer before having sex, or that they're having sex they don't really want.

Helping young people to see sex as a positive choice, something to do when they're ready and not because of peer pressure, helps develop their confidence. This, in turn, equips them to discuss and practise safe sex.

What's more, there's a strong child protection argument for discussing pleasure. If young people know that sex should be fun and consensual, they are more likely to be able to identify and report abuse, both by adults and other young people.

In short, the *Pleasure* booklet is a useful and important tool to help professionals think about why and how to teach young people that sex should be fun.

Ruth Smith, news editor, Children & Young People Now

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