



**MEN AND BOYS
COALITION**

**REFORM OF SEX & RELATIONSHIPS
EDUCATION IN UK SCHOOLS**

BRIEFING NOTE

December 2016

The Men and Boys Coalition

The Men and Boys Coalition is a mutually supportive network of charities, campaign organisations, academics, writers, commentators and activists who are committed to taking action on gender-specific issues that affect men and boys in the UK.

Members of the Coalition share the aims of:

- Highlighting and tackling issues where the needs of men and boys are unmet
- Highlighting and tackling the circumstances where the victims of unfair discrimination are men and boys
- Helping create positive and constructive public discussion about men, manhood and masculinity

For more information please visit <http://www.menandboyscoalition.org.uk>

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Introduction

A 2015 report by the Education Select Committee highlighted a number of significant concerns regarding provision of Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in Englandⁱ. These pertain largely to lack of consistency and quality in the delivery of SRE across primary and secondary education, primarily related to the lack of statutory status for personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and sex and relationships education (SRE) within the curriculum.

The Men and Boys Coalition believes that a full, effective and gender-sensitive PSHE/SRE syllabus for all children in all schools is an educational necessity and access to such education should be considered a fundamental right for every child in the UK and elsewhere.

For many years now, political and media debates on PSHE/SRE have been heavily concentrated upon the circumstances and needs of girls and young womenⁱⁱ, most commonly the need to reduce and eliminate sexual violence and sexual harassment of girls by their male peers. We entirely share such concerns and add our voices to those calling for action on these issues.

In addition, we note with concern that a survey of 2,648 young people published by the Sex Education Forum in 2016 reported that more than one in five young people considered their own experience of SRE provision to be either bad or very bad.ⁱⁱⁱ The same report found around four percent of young people identifying as either transgender or non-binary. All of our comments and recommendations should be taken as inclusive of all young people who are either assigned or identifying as male.

We note also that a full and effective SRE syllabus is recognised as an invaluable tool in creating broader gender equality. In March 2016 the UN Population Fund's technical paper on Adolescent Boys And Young Men^{iv} highlighted two intertwined and complementary objectives: (1) the need to engage adolescent boys and young men in order to achieve gender equality, and (2) the importance of addressing the gender-specific health and social development needs of adolescent boys and young men themselves.

The Men and Boys Coalition supports both of these aims, but notes with concern that while the former has received significant media and political attention, the latter has been very largely absent from debate, discussion and policy development. This document is designed to outline issues with existing SRE provision in the UK, from a male gender perspective, before providing recommendations for future actions.

The Issues

Many of the issues highlighted by the 2015 Education Select Committee report are equally applicable to all children and young people, regardless of gender. We note with concern that:

- At present, there is no statutory requirement for the provision of Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) across primary and secondary schools in the UK^v
- Existing government guidance on the provision, delivery, formulation, and content of SRE varies between governmental bodies of the different nations of the UK.
- Existing government guidance relating to the provision, delivery, formulation, and content of SRE is vague and non-prescriptive
- Current SRE provision suffers from both regional and school-specific variations in quality^{vi}
- No current regulations exist to stipulate who should deliver SRE within schools, thus contributing to variation in quality of delivery^{vii}
- The delivery of SRE is often too late in the context of adolescent development^{viii}
- Important areas of understanding for young boys and girls, such as consent, are currently not included in government guidance for SRE provision

However, we further note that several issues raised by the committee relate specifically to the needs of boys and young men. There is a severe shortage of recent academic research into the specific needs, wishes, concerns, and vulnerabilities of boys and young men in an SRE context. This may be one reason why their needs and issues are frequently overlooked in the planning and provision of SRE.

Broader academic research does, however, demonstrate many grounds for concern about the wellbeing and needs of young males which a comprehensive SRE syllabus could and should address, these include:

- Sexual harassment. One US study found that 40 percent of boys in grades 7 – 12 had experienced sexual harassment as opposed to 56 percent of girls. Boys were less than half as likely to have reported harassment to school authorities^{ix}.

- Relationship violence. The English cohort of a 2015 cross-European study found that 12 percent of teenage boys had experienced physical violence or abuse and 14 percent of boys had experienced sexual violence or abuse from an intimate partner.^x Male accounts of such experiences are chronically under-represented in reports and discourse examining interpersonal violence and abuse (ITVA) in young people’s relationships.

- Sexual consent. Issues around consent are central to debates on SRE, however little attention has been paid to the pressures on young men to be sexually active and sexually available as early as possible and at all times. When a 2013 survey of teenagers’ attitudes in Scotland asked about the statement “When a boy says no to sex, he always means no” only 55% said it was definitely or probably true.^{xi}

- Sexual abuse and exploitation. A recent Crime Survey of England and Wales report found that 3 percent of boys are sexually abused by an adult in childhood^{xii}. Other estimates are considerably higher.

- Sexuality. Concerns or confusion about sexual orientation are common in adolescent children, however there may be particularly strong social expectations on boys to perform a traditional gender identity and heterosexual orientation. An analysis of callers to Childline found that boys were six times as likely as girls to call with issues about their sexuality.^{xiii}

- Communication. There are extensive social pressures on boys and young men to appear emotionally independent and resilient, and social disincentives against talking to friends and family about their emotional, relational and sexual needs.^{xiv} Boys also report being more reliant on sexual partners and pornography for information on sex than girls, who rely on predominantly on friends and family.^{xv}

- Exposure to pornography. Boys have high and early exposure to pornographic content that may affect their understanding of sex and relationships.^{xvi}

Recommendations

The Men and Boys Coalition support most recommendations proposed by the recent Education Select Committee's report on personal, social, health and economic education, and sex and relationships education.^{xvii}

Strong support for particular recommendations is outlined in more detail below, as are the MBC's responses to the replies made by (then) Education Secretary Nicky Morgan.^{xviii} The coalition also proposes a number of additional recommendations for the provision of SRE across the United Kingdom.

Support for Education Select Committee Recommendations

- We support recommendation 2 regarding the necessity to incentivise schools to raise the quality of PSHE and SRE in schools. In addition, we welcome the government's response outlining a new PHSE quality mark, and recommend that the introduction of such a measure is as swift as possible.

- We support recommendation 5 requesting the government ensures that PSHE and SRE is taught by confident and capable teachers, and agree that this is crucial to a high quality experience by pupils. In addition, we recommend that the government go further than outlined in their current response to this recommendation by providing financial support for the training of specialist PSHE and SRE practitioners.

- We support recommendation 8 suggesting a regular consultation with parents regarding the provision of PSHE and SRE in schools. The MBC believe that parents have a crucial role to play in educating children about sex and relationships, and welcome the government's response outlining that schools are required to display their PSHE/SRE curriculum online, and to involve parents in the development of provision.

- We strongly support recommendation 14 suggesting that age-appropriate PSHE and SRE be made statutory subjects in primary and secondary education, including provision for specialist practitioners to deliver this curriculum, minimal prescription of content, and policy guidelines regarding engagement with parents and their complementary role of teaching SRE within the home.

Additional Recommendations

1. We recommend an immediate response from the academic community in producing supporting research exploring the specific needs, wishes, concerns, and vulnerabilities of boys and young men in relation to SRE. This must be supported by funding bodies, including statutory providers and governmental departments.
2. Training of specialist PSHE and SRE practitioners must highlight the specific needs of boys in this area, recognising that boys may feel more uncomfortable talking to their existing teachers about sex and relationships and have different learning styles.
3. We recommend that parents be supported to pay particular attention to how they engage in discussion about sex and relationships with boys, specifically not to leave discussion exclusively to same-sex parents.
4. We recommend greater mixed-sex dialogue on sex and relationships, so that both boys and girls gain greater understanding of themselves and each other, rather than engaging in an us-vs-them mentality.
5. We recommend greater acknowledgement of boys' and young men's desires to discuss issues relating to sex and relationships, and to encourage the creation of safe and supportive spaces in which to engage in these discussions.
6. Finally, we strongly recommend greater efforts to involve boys and young men in positive and open discussion about the important and valued role boys can play in relationships, both sexual and romantic.

References

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- ^{iv} UNFPA, Adolescent Boys and Young Men. (2016)
- ^v Education Select Committee Report. (2015). Life lessons: PSHE and SRE in schools. HC 145
- ^{vi} Education Select Committee Report. (2015). Life lessons: PSHE and SRE in schools. HC 145
- ^{vii} Education Select Committee Report. (2015). Life lessons: PSHE and SRE in schools. HC 145
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- ^{ix} AAUW, *Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment at School*, (2011)
- ^x Barter et al, (2015) *Safeguarding Teenage Intimate Relationships*, Stiritip.eu.
- ^{xi} The Scotsman, November 3rd 2013, *Scottish Teenagers' Disturbing Views on Sex*.
- ^{xii} Office of National Statistics, Abuse during childhood: Findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, 2015
- ^{xiii} ChildLine Casenotes: A series of reports on issue facing children today (2009). What boys talk about to childline
- ^{xiv} Student Opinion Survey, National Union of Students, November 2014.
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- ^{xvii} Education Select Committee Report. (2015). Life lessons: PSHE and SRE in schools. HC 145
- ^{xviii} Government Response: Life lessons: PSHE and SRE in schools. (2015). CM 9121