

Protecting Children by Developing an Effective Sex and Relationship (SRE) Program in International Schools

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Introduction

Throughout the world, mainstream media messages containing sexualised images via television, web, mobile phones or pop videos are bombarding children and young people. At the same time, evidence of institutionalised sexual abuse and the growing sexualisation of children themselves has become a constant. In order to address this appalling trend, there has to be social change. We have a responsibility, as members of the international school community, to protect our children; to do this we require support from all stakeholders – schools, faculty, parents and, most importantly, our students.

There is a clear need to scale up a standards-driven, fully integrated, SRE programme which provides our students with relevant and up-to-date information to help them protect themselves in the modern world. This article discusses the challenges, the changes needed and how effective SRE should be delivered: at its best, a close partnership between parents, SRE professionals and a motivated, well-trained, faculty.

Important Terminology

Child Protection: a term used by policy-making and legislative bodies to address the way institutions set up and document procedures to minimise the risk of child abuse (UNICEF, 2006ⁱ). Part of this involves checking the credentials of, and educating, adults involved with children. It can also include taking children into protective care. In the context of this article, we refer to protecting the child through appropriate Sex and Relationship education (SRE).

Sex and Relationships Education (SRE): The World Health Organisation (WHO) prefers '*Sexuality education*' which, it states '*means learning about the cognitive, emotional, social, interactive and physical aspects of sexuality*' (WHO, 2010ⁱⁱ). Many experts within the field favour "Relationship and Sex Education" or RSE (RSE Hub, current web siteⁱⁱⁱ) as it places the emphasis firmly on relationships rather than sex. As SRE still seems to be the most widely understood term within international schools, this has been used throughout this document.

International schools: we should also be clear what kind of "international schools" we are referring to. These schools '*infuse their programmes and offerings with international and intercultural perspective*' (Council of International Schools, "About Us" current web site^{iv}), delivering to a multi-national, typically transient, student body. In some cases, the students are local nationals whose parents desire an international-style education. Many of these schools deliver SRE in some form or another, often within broader programmes such as ethics, relationship education or life skills education.

Global Organisation and National Influences

In their report to the UN in 2010, the WHO stated 'The right to education includes the right to sexual education, which is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realising other human rights, such as the right to health, the right to information and sexual and reproductive rights.'^v

According to the WHO, an integral part of a school's obligation within its Child Protection programme is sex and relationship education (SRE). International accreditation bodies, and other bodies engaged in the quality assurance of international education - for example, school inspection agencies - have a responsibility to set clear and detailed standards that are not open to misinterpretation.

In the 21st century, SRE also delivers vital information about how children can protect themselves from cyber bullying, online grooming or sexting, as well as covering sexual abuse by peers or those in a position of trust. This has become an increasingly impactful element of SRE: helping protect a child from modern day threats that were never considered or dealt with by any previous programmes. International Planned Parenthood considers '*They should also be able to protect themselves and feel protected by their environment.*'^{vi}

Certain international schools implement elements of an SRE programme with influences often derived from the school's culture or curriculum, for example, Canadian or British international schools, where certain aspects of SRE is embedded within the curriculum often as part of a wider integrated personal social health education (PSHE) programme. However, SRE provision can be variable in content and quality with some schools feeling pressure to 'tick-the-box' in order to meet requirements, sometimes delivering poorly planned, stand-alone sessions by teachers who lack confidence and feel inadequately prepared.

Common Challenges

Bias: There are many misconceptions about SRE. A widespread belief is that it will promote sexual activity among children and young people, encouraging a lapse in moral standards.^{vii} Yet if appropriate sexuality education begins at a relatively young age, it can help to guard against future misinformation. Additionally, it can make children and young people more aware of risks earlier, less vulnerable to possible abuse and improve their ability to react if it does occur.

Parental concerns: Another possible objection is that SRE is the responsibility of parents, discussed by the UK's Sex Education Forum.^{viii} Many parents feel unable to discuss such sensitive issues but, more critically, do not possess relevant knowledge about how to protect their child from modern day threats. Therefore, it is important to counter their concerns by stressing that work within schools can very effectively complement their own efforts. Given the right opportunity, children and young people will learn with their peer groups the skills to communicate sensitive issues, whilst being supported by a trained facilitator.

Faculty: Embarrassment or discomfort by teachers can hinder children and young people obtaining honest answers to their questions, perhaps leaving them with little understanding of how their bodies work, ignorant of potential abuse and under prepared for modern adult life.

Curriculum space: With the rigours of exams and academic targets, it is extremely difficult for international schools to find time to introduce new subjects, particularly if their benefit cannot be easily established. However, when SRE becomes an integral part of a school's curriculum, it has been shown to improve the atmosphere within a school, encouraging children to express themselves more confidently on many non-SRE topics, whether within a classroom or social setting.

Pornography and technology: Children absorb ideas, attitudes and beliefs about sex and relationships from their family, friends and community – even when no-one at home talks about it. New technologies are also having a massive impact on young people and their knowledge base. Sadly, this is also in the form of online pornography, which demonstrates personal values, physical feats and characteristics of a truly dystopian society. Effective SRE needs to address these misconceptions and misplaced values.

Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transsexual (LGBT): Many young people can feel excluded if SRE is seen as solely about heterosexual relationships, or if non-heterosexual identities are presented negatively. Inclusive SRE will foster good relations in schools to address all types of prejudice, including homophobia.

Cultural influences: There are many countries where certain topics within SRE are compulsory in all schools, for example, the Netherlands, France and Germany. Advocates for Youth states *'Families have open, honest, consistent discussions with teens about sexuality and support the role of educators and health care providers in making sexual health information and services available to teens.'*^{ix}

Cultural impact on international schools is a great challenge. The approach by local providers can be culturally confrontational for a multi-national community. There is clearly a need for SRE-trained specialists within international schools, yet, within these schools the teaching staff themselves are also multi-national and transitory; this too could potentially impact the programme (Blake & Katrak, 2002^x).

Developing or Upgrading Your SRE Programme

Planning a quality and comprehensive SRE programme, teaching beyond the classic biological human reproductive system, need not be as daunting as perhaps first thought.

A good starting point would be the development of a clear **school SRE policy**, enabling the administration to consult with children, young people (Martinez and de Meza, 2008^{xi}), parents and carers, community members and relevant professionals, linking the policy with the ethos and values of the school. The policy should be reviewed regularly to respond to changing needs and new challenges; keeping the dialogue open, perhaps through Student Voice, classroom discussions, staff training, parent surveys and formal auditing.

A **curriculum framework** should begin in early childhood ensuring that children develop the language and skill to express themselves with regard to their emotions, relationships and bodies. SRE classes need to be protected within the timetable; with core concepts repeated regularly and built upon year on year.

There are many areas where SRE could be integrated into topics other than science based. For example, within the International Baccalaureate's Theory of Knowledge (TOK) module, essays and discussion are intended to help students explore real-life situations; correlating well with the delivery methods of SRE. Additionally, Information Technology (IT) classes complement perfectly the notion of safe use of the web. In all cases, there needs to be coordination to avoid duplication and contradictory messages.

Learning objectives should not only be defined in terms of what students should know, but also relate to values and attitudes, and to behavioural skills.

In accordance with the learning objectives, the subject matter should be age and developmentally appropriate (WHO, 2010^{xii}). Whilst younger children need gentle guidance, older students need explicit information, so a whole school approach, developed using a comprehensive spiralling curriculum for all students, enables them to develop basic life skills. Enquiry-based learning followed by reflection, results in the acquisition of knowledge and skills in the context of intimate relationships.

As well as involving **parents** in the initial policy-making process, keeping them informed of content, perhaps delivered through email and informational sessions, will help ensure parents are supportive and are able to take an active role at home.

The **teacher** should feel supported by the documented SRE policy which outlines an integrated and cohesive, developmentally appropriate, vertically aligned curriculum. Teachers should understand how their part fits into the whole in order to contribute to quality SRE delivery.

There needs to be a clear understanding for both faculty and contributing specialists of the school **confidentiality** policy (SEF, 2014^{xiii}) – for example, if a student discloses sexual abuse in any form, the school has a responsibility within child protection laws to act upon this. The protocol for handling at-risk behaviours or disclosure regarding harm must be clear and accessible. Students should be aware that SRE lessons are not a place to discuss their personal issues, this can be done by establishing agreed ground rules or a working agreement at the start of sessions.

By taking a well-planned and inclusive approach, some of the obvious **cultural** pitfalls can be avoided or, at the very least mitigated. This said, an international school will typically work within, and teach to, different cultures. The school's role is not to challenge cultural values, yet it should offer, as an intrinsic part of it school, an effective SRE programme based on internationally recommended leading practice.

Effective Delivery and Outcomes

Training: SRE classes have historically been the domain of faculty, and this needs to continue but with specialist training (SEF, 2010^{xiv}) through **Continuing Professional Development** (CPD). Teacher development and professional guidance should help teachers explore and reflect upon their own attitudes, behaviours and beliefs, before discussing these sensitive issues with students. Trained staff must have subject knowledge and awareness of support available from external specialists and local agencies. Perhaps most importantly, they require the skill and confidence to facilitate participative sessions using varied interactive learning methods, which will often challenge their own perceptions, prejudices and personal boundaries.

Partnership: Leading practice has been demonstrated when delivery is coordinated between experienced **SRE consultants** (SEF, 2010 xv) and well-trained faculty. This teaming allows both parties to be effective for the students within the realms of their daily role. For example, students often find personal issues easier to discuss with someone they do not interact with on a regular basis, so some topics may be best addressed by an SRE consultant. However, other less sensitive topics could be more efficiently handled by someone they see regularly, such as an SRE-trained home room teacher or school counsellor.

Summary

Sexual development and intimate relationships are basic but fundamental aspects of our lives, and worthy of proper curriculum attention. As part of a wider policy of child protection, delivery of effective programmes is a core responsibility for all schools, whether state, private or international.

According to Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) in 2013, “up-to-date and relevant SRE, delivered by trained confident staff, can help children and young people navigate the modern world and, without it, children and young people are left vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.”^{xvi}

It is very clear that any educational institution, without an effective protection programme, should be acting immediately to correct this shortfall. Yet, compared to their local counterparts, within countries where SRE is mandatory, many international schools are arriving late into the concept of providing protection through SRE.

With the SRE information, guidance, training courses and consultants available, every international school has the tools available today to promptly implement an effective and enforced policy. Its development should begin with a consultation process to assess what is needed to enable adequate budgeting for teacher training, curriculum development and external support as this is now a non-negotiable societal expectation to provide responsible and appropriate guidance for our students.

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