

## **TEENAGE SEX: What Should Schools Teach Children?**

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Six writers from the US and UK offer different perspectives on sex education: Peter Hitchens, David J Landry, Simon Blake, Janine Jolly, Stuart Waiton and Peter Tatchell.

### **Essay Five**

#### **The ABC of Sexual Health and Happiness**

Peter Tatchell

Sex and love are two of the most important things in our lives. They can, and should, be sources of great personal fulfilment and happiness. Yet millions of people are sexually and emotionally dissatisfied. They endure disordered relationships, ranging from plain dull to outright abusive. It doesn't have to be this way - and it shouldn't.

The lack of adequate sex education is a major factor. Young people leave school sexually illiterate. They never get taught the ABC of sex. Schools teach about biology and reproduction, but not about actual sex and relationships. Where are the classroom guides to achieving sexual satisfaction, dealing with emotional problems, rebuffing unwanted sexual advances, and resolving relationship conflicts?

Sexual literacy is just as important as literacy in reading and writing. Education is, after all, supposed to prepare young people for later life. Sex and relationships are a very important part of adulthood. Why, then, are they neglected in schools?

ut sex is not the answer. They say kids are already taught enough - or too much!

These critics are, however, seriously misinformed. Young people complain that sex education is inadequate and does not begin early enough. They want the full facts, but they rarely get them in the classroom; which is why so many teenagers are left with a mixed bag of myths and half-truths picked up from playground gossip and tabloid newspapers.

Teaching about sex is inconsistent, varying widely in different parts of the country. Compared to the Netherlands, the quality ranges from mediocre to very poor, and it begins too late - often after young people have become sexually active and adopted bad habits, such as unsafe sex and intercourse without contraception.

Lessons tend to be vague and euphemistic. They focus on the biological facts of reproduction - frequently concerning rabbits and guinea pigs, rather than humans. In the better schools there is information about puberty, contraception, pregnancy and safer sex. But this usually lacks sufficient detail and explicitness to be of real practical benefit. There is no glamorisation of safer sex to make it an appealing option, and no positive promotion of safer alternatives to intercourse, such as fellatio and cunnilingus. Moreover, sex is portrayed overwhelmingly in a negative light, with far too much emphasis on the dangers rather than the pleasures - creating needless fears and anxieties.

Teachers rarely discuss sex itself, let alone how to have a satisfying sex life. They don't promote the idea that sexual rights are human rights, and never support the right of young people under the age of consent to make their own choice about when they are ready for sex. Education about emotions and relationships is almost entirely absent.

Homosexuality and bisexuality are likewise often neglected - leaving many lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils feeling isolated and confused, and without of any specific advice on HIV prevention for same-sex relations. Sexual prejudice, and the teasing and bullying of pupils who don't conform to gender stereotypes, passes unchallenged in many schools.

Given the widespread concern about sexual abuse, it is particularly disturbing that most young people never get taught sexual assertiveness and how to deal with unwelcome sexual attention

These failings point to the need for a radical overhaul of sex education to help resolve the many sexual and emotional problems experienced by young people - problems that often continue into adulthood, causing lifelong personal distress. This essay argues that schools should affirm the value and pleasure of human sexuality, empowering pupils with the knowledge, skills and confidence to make responsible choices that enable them to enjoy a happy, healthy sex life.

### Mutual Respect, Consent and Fulfilment

Schools cannot be moral-free zones where anything goes. There has to be some kind of moral framework for sex education, otherwise teachers would end up sanctioning all kinds of dangerous, destructive behaviour: coercive and unsafe sex, domineering and violent relationships. A moral framework is not, however, the same as a moralistic one. Both impart ethical values but they differ in one very significant respect: a moralistic framework excludes, whereas a truly moral one is inclusive of different people with diverse backgrounds and lifestyles.

Until very recent times, all sex education was overwhelmingly biased towards promoting heterosexuality, marriage, parenthood and traditional family life. Anything outside this exclusive framework was either ignored or condemned. Knowledge of the full range of consensual sex and love was systematically suppressed. Young people who did not abide by the prevailing sexual orthodoxy - such as gays and bisexuals - were marginalized and often ended up feeling inadequate, guilty, rejected and self-loathing.

This old-style monocultural sex moralism is now totally out of sync with our modern multicultural society where there is a great diversity of cultures and communities, lifestyles and love-lives.

Acknowledging these social changes is, however, no reason to lapse into anarchic moral

relativism. Instead, we need a new moral framework for teaching sex education that can encompass diversity while also giving young people guidance on how they are most likely to find erotic and emotional happiness.

This new moral framework involves three very simple principles: mutual respect, consent and fulfilment. In others words, when it comes to lust and love, treat others the way you would like them to treat you. Don't have an egotistical, selfish, me-first attitude. Be thoughtful and caring towards the other person. Never coerce or pressure a partner into doing something they don't want to do. Make sure both of you get physical and psychological enjoyment. That's it! Simple, inclusive and moral - without being moralistic.

These three principles constitute the basis of ethical sex and relationships. Partners should respect each other, act with shared consent and give one another mutual fulfilment. This applies universally, regardless of whether people are heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual; regardless of whether they are married, cohabiting or living apart; regardless of whether they have one partner or many partners; regardless of whether they are into one-night stands or committed relationships: and regardless of whether they have sex for love or sex for pleasure. The idea that sex within marriage has a monopoly of morality is untrue and offensive, and not just to long-time cohabiting couples. Moral goodness can exist even in casual sex - providing that is what both partners want, they treat each other respect, and give one another other enjoyment.

Basing sex education on this new moral framework of sexual and emotional mutuality gives young people many options. Instead of straight-jacketing them within an old-style moralism revolving around wed-lock, each different individual is free to make their own choices based on their own particular feelings, needs and desires. That is how it should be in a pluralistic, multicultural sexual democracy, where the right to be different is a treasured human right.

### All Sexualities Equally Valid

Within this new moral framework, sexual orientation is no longer an issue, since all sexualities based on mutual consent, respect and fulfilment are equally moral and valid.

Until now, however, sex education has been always premised on the doctrine of straight supremacism and sexual apartheid. Heterosexuality has been presented as natural, superior and worthy of exclusive legal privileges, such as the right to marriage. Conversely, if mentioned at all, homosexuality and bisexuality have tended to be seen as inferior - if not downright immoral - and therefore denied full acceptance and validation in the classroom. The legacy of this heterosexist bias has been the negation of the desires and affections of queer pupils, leaving many with feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness that often contribute to depression, truancy, academic under-performance and even attempted suicide. Teaching about sex has an ethical responsibility to challenge the prejudice that wrecks the lives of lesbian, gay and bisexual teenagers. While schools should not promote any sexual orientation, they certainly should encourage understanding and acceptance of other people - heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual.

This means presenting the full facts about all three sexual orientations in a straightforward and sympathetic manner. It also involves challenging homophobic attitudes in the school

playground and beyond; and providing queer kids with supportive advice and counselling that validates their feelings. The aim must be to help create a caring, compassionate society that values and appreciates everyone; where young people don't grow up feeling fearful and ashamed of their sexual orientation.

### Options, Not Prescriptions

In the past, all education was prescriptive. Pupils had to learn 'the facts' and obey 'the rules'. They were taught by rote, and had knowledge and morality drummed into them. Every child was expected to share the same values and aspirations. Difference was bad and dangerous. There was no room for questioning or diversity.

Teaching has, thankfully, changed. Good schooling nowadays tends to be more critical and reflective, and offers a variety of options. It is not about imposing rules and knowledge, but empowering young people to consider the full range of facts and opinions, think for themselves, and then choose to make their own informed, responsible choices.

When it comes to sex education that is exactly the way it should be. Different people have different sexual and emotional needs. Our desires and temperaments are not all the same. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' when it comes to sex and love.

Some of us are straight, some are queer, and some are a bit of both. Sex before marriage is acceptable to most people, but not to everyone. Although monogamy is usually the favoured option, open relationships can also be rewarding. Toe-sucking may be the height of sensuality for one person, but a total turn off for another. There are lovers who prefer to live together and those who like the independence of living apart. Abstinence has its advantages, but so does promiscuity. Marriage is a must for many, but not for cohabiting couples who see love and commitment as more important than legal formality. While oral sex is the ultimate thrill for some, a majority get greatest satisfaction from intercourse - and a few get it from rubber and bondage.

The point is we are all diverse individuals. No two people are the same. What suits you may not suit me. There are diverse ways of finding carnal and emotional fulfilment. That reality should be acknowledged in the classroom. Moreover, the right to sexual difference is just as much a human right as the right to cultural and ethnic difference. That is why teachers have duty to validate the diversity of human sex and relationships that fall within the moral framework of respect, consent, fulfilment and mutuality.

### Give All the Facts - Tell the Whole Truth

If education is about dispelling ignorance and imparting knowledge, then sex education has an obligation to give all the facts and tell the whole truth about every kind of sex and relationship. This includes sexual practices that some people may find distasteful, such as anal intercourse and sadomasochism, and harmful behaviour like unprotected sex and child abuse. Nothing must be off limits. The purpose of talking frankly about these discomforting issues is not in order to encourage them, but to help pupils cope if they encounter them in

later life.

After explaining the full range of sex and relationships, and discussing how they relate to the principles of mutual respect, consent and fulfilment, young people should be trusted to make their own choice. Most will respond to such candour by making sensible, responsible decisions. Those who do not would be reckless anyway, regardless of what they were taught or not taught.

Human sexuality embraces a glorious diversity of feelings, emotions, desires and attractions. We are all unique, with our own unique erotic tastes. People get sexually aroused and fulfilled in a huge variety of different ways. Many of these ways are familiar and accepted. Others, such as anilingus, may seem strange and unpleasant to some people. But difference is the spice of life. One person's sexual nightmare is another person's sexual nirvana. Providing behaviour is consensual, no one is harmed and the enjoyment is reciprocal, schools should adopt a 'live and let live' non-judgemental attitude

Those who oppose frank sex education protest that young people's innocence must be protected. But it is already too late. Even very young children are aware of sexual issues and erotic exotica. They pick up this information from tabloid newspapers, Hollywood blockbusters, teen magazines, TV soaps and classroom banter. Much of this information is, however, half-baked and sensationalist. It can leave kids feeling sexually confused, inadequate, fearful and guilty - which is not conducive to their well being. Honest, explicit sex education has a vital role to play in correcting misinformation and reassuring them with the truth. Young people who know the full facts are more likely to grow up feeling at ease with their sexuality, relate well to their partner and have a contented relationship

Pupils have a right to know everything about sex, in order to prepare them for desires they may have themselves or may experience with others. Teenagers who are ignorant of cunnilingus, for example, may be shocked when a partner first suggests it. But if they know about oral sex beforehand, they are less likely to be fazed and better able to make an informed judgement about whether it is something they want to do.

education, to be effective, needs to start at a very early age, beginning gently in the first year of primary school and gradually becoming more detailed and explicit at secondary level. The reason for starting so young is obvious. Children now reach puberty between the ages of eight and 12. Long beforehand, they need to know about the physical changes they will undergo.

The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes & Lifestyles (K Wellings et al, Sexual Behaviour in Britain, 1994) was the world's biggest and most comprehensive sex survey, interviewing over 18,000 people in Britain in 1990. It found that the median age of first sexual experience among 16-24 year olds was 14 for girls and 13 for boys (sexual experience includes everything from touching to kissing, mutual masturbation, oral sex and intercourse). For sexual intercourse, the median age was 17. The research reported that the age of first sex and first intercourse is dropping every decade. A more recent survey, conducted for the Channel 4 television programme, 'Sex from 8 to 18', broadcast on 5 July 2000, found that the

average age of first intercourse is 15.

If the median age of first sexual experience was 13-14 in 1990 (now probably even lower), and if the average age of first intercourse now 15, this means a high proportion of young people are sexually active below these ages. That is why sex education has to begin much earlier. It makes no sense to inform young people after they've started having sex. By then it is too late - hence the high incidence of teen pregnancies, abortions and sexually-transmitted diseases. Long before their first experience, young people need to be forearmed with the knowledge, skills and confidence to make wise, responsible sexual decisions - including, of course, the option of not having sex.

Fears that early, explicit sex education will encourage premature and irresponsible sexual experimentation are misplaced. Research by the Alan Guttmacher Institute in the US (E F Jones et al, Teenage Pregnancy in Industrialized Countries, 1986; Pregnancy, Contraception and Family Planning Services in Industrialised Countries, 1989) found that the lowest rates of teenage pregnancies and abortions are found in countries with the most liberal sexual attitudes, the frankest sex lessons in schools, and the most widely available family planning services.

## Sex is Good for You

Sex education is mostly anti-sex. It focuses on the potential negative consequences, such as unwanted pregnancies and HIV infection. There are endless warnings about the risks and pitfalls. Moralism is rife: don't do this, don't do that. The nasty consequences of the more sensational sexual diseases get plenty of coverage. Impotence! Infertility! Insanity! This erotophobic bias sends out the message that sex is bad and dangerous. It fuels the sex psychosis that makes young people fearful and anxious about a human activity that ought to be a source of great pleasure and joy.

Sex lessons should tell the truth: sex is good for us. It is natural, wholesome, fun and healthy. Good sex can have a very positive, beneficial effect on our mental and physical well-being; lifting our spirits and creating new-found energy and optimism. The exhilarating rush and release of a powerful orgasm can have profound psychic reverberations: creating feelings of elation, cleansing, inner peace and sublime contentment. It is no accident that surveys of human happiness have often found a high correlation between being happy and being sexually fulfilled. The two tend to go together.

Research by Dr Merryn Gott of Sheffield University ('Long Live Loving', Daily Mail, 10 September 2001) found that having an enjoyable sex life boosts a person's self-esteem, confidence and sense of well-being. It also discovered that good sex helps sustain a good relationship; easing tensions and strengthening feelings of togetherness and commitment. Young people have a right to know that while sex is not essential for health and happiness (some mystics get by without it), most people find that regular, quality sex enhances their lives.

## Overcoming Guilt and Shame

Sex is not dirty. The naked human body is not obscene. Homosexuality is not immoral. Why, then, do schools do so little to challenge the Victorian-style sexphobia that still wrecks the lives of so many people?

Lots of adults feel ill-at-ease undressing and being naked in front of their partner. Some can only have sex in the dark, in a bed, and in the conventional way. Many are so fearful of sexual pleasure that they barely make a sound when they climax. Some cannot cope with anything other than quick, furtive liaisons. Others suffer from post-sex guilt and depression. Plenty feel anxious about same-sex desires.

Sexual shame causes immense human misery: not just frustrated, unhappy sex lives, but actual psychological and physical ill-health. Phobias, neuroses, panic attacks and eating disorders can sometimes originate from guilt about sex. Ignoring or tolerating the internalised puritanism that causes sexual and emotional dysfunction is incompatible with the ethos of a responsible education system, which is to care for the present and future welfare of children. There is, therefore, a moral obligation on schools to challenge sex-shame pathology.

Youngsters should be encouraged to feel relaxed and comfortable with their bodies and sexuality. The best way to achieve this is by talking openly and frankly about any and every sexual issue that concerns them. Sexual pleasure ought to be normalised and legitimated by treating it like any other form of pleasure: it is something to enjoy and feel good about. There is another very important reason why teachers should challenge anxieties about sex. Sexual shame helps sustain child abuse. Adults who sexually exploit youngsters often get away with it because the victims feel embarrassed or guilty about sex and are therefore reluctant to complain. This reluctance is reinforced by strait-laced cultural attitudes, which tend to still regard sex as something sordid that should be kept hidden and private. These attitudes are a godsend to abusers, who depend on guilt and secrecy to carry out their molestation undetected.

To combat the sexual shame that inhibits the exposure of abusers, sex education lessons need to encourage young people to have more open and positive attitudes towards sexual matters. Teenagers who feel at ease talking about sex are more likely to disclose abuse.

## How to Have Good, Safe Sex

Most pupils leave school with little idea of how to have good sex. They sometimes can't please themselves, let alone their partners. The end result is bad sex and mutual dissatisfaction.

Senior level sex education should include advice on how to achieve mutually-fulfilling, high quality sex - the emotional and erotic value of foreplay, the multitude of erogenous zones and how to excite them, and the importance of deep breathing and strong, rhythmic muscle contractions to the achievement of good orgasms.

Men and women understand very little about each other's bodies and how they work sexually. This ignorance results in frequent disappointment, especially for women. Boys need to be taught that intercourse is not the be-all-and-end-all of sex. Finger stimulation of the clitoris can produce stronger orgasms than penile penetration. There should also be frank advice on remedies for sexual problems such as impotence, frigidity, erotic phobias, inability to achieve orgasm and premature ejaculation.

When it comes to good sex, many people see safer sex as second best. It is therefore important that teachers promote safer sex as a different, not inferior, way of achieving sexual enjoyment.

Successful HIV prevention campaigns have shown that the most effective way to encourage the adoption of safer sex is by using sexy images that make playing safe look desirable and glamorous. Giving sex appeal to risk-reduction works. Preaching at young people doesn't. Schools should learn from this experience. Instead of presenting safer sex exclusively as a duty and responsibility, teachers should also promote it as an attractive, sexy alternative. Clinical, medical explanations of non-risky behaviour need to be ditched in favour sexually-explicit 'how to' guides that eroticise condom use and non-penetrative sex as fun and fulfilling. This means presenting arousing images that create a mental connection between getting turned on and playing safe.

To help combat the view that condoms are a bore and sacrifice, lessons should highlight their positive advantages: they enable men to keep going stronger and longer. Many guys suffer from premature ejaculation. By reducing sensitivity, a condom can prolong staying power and intensify orgasm; giving enhanced pleasure to both partners.

Teachers need to challenge the idea that sex equals intercourse. That is what most people think. Everything else tends to be dismissed as kid's stuff and mere foreplay. Screwing is the 'real thing'. This is a very narrow, limiting view of sex, which the education system does nothing to debunk.

If schools are serious about cutting the incidence of teenage pregnancies, abortions and HIV infections, they should actively encourage safer, healthier alternatives to intercourse. Oral sex and mutual masturbation carry no risk of conception and a low risk of HIV. Promoting these alternatives therefore makes good sense.

The best way to persuade teenagers to adopt oral sex and mutual masturbation is by making them look and sound sexy, and by emphasizing their advantages over intercourse: no worries about unwanted conceptions, no need to use the pill or condoms, and no dependence on a man's ability to get and stay erect.

Good sex tends to involve emotional input. Yet emotional issues are almost entirely ignored in the classroom. If they were discussed, lots of teenagers might be spared great distress. Schools advise students that sex within a relationship is best but, astonishingly, they never teach them how to sustain a good relationship: the importance of honesty, negotiation, compatibility, trust, reciprocity, give-and-take and spontaneity. There is no practical advice on



how to deal with disagreements and difficulties. What do you do if your boyfriend refuses to use a condom? What is the best way to respond when a partner takes you for granted? Breaking up can be a very traumatic experience, yet pupils get no guidance on how to cope with splitting up, and how to deal with the pain of rejection.

## Sexual Rights are Human Rights

The right to love a person of either sex, to engage in any mutually consensual sexual act, and to enjoy a happy, healthy sex life, is a fundamental human right. This right to sexual self-determination should be promoted in every school, to create a culture of sexual rights where every young person understands and asserts their right to determine what they, and others, do with their body. This ethos of 'it's my body, I'm in charge' is the best possible protection against people who try to manipulate and pressure youngsters into having sex.

The Dutch have proved the positive benefits of actively promoting the right of young people to make their own decision about when they are ready for a sexual relationship. Far from being licence for reckless sex, this freedom is generally exercised with care and wisdom. Teenagers in the Netherlands are more likely than their British counterparts to resist peer pressure to experiment sexually at an early age. On average, they have their first sexual intercourse when they are older, and they have rates of teenage pregnancies and abortions seven times less than in the UK.

One of the most important sexual human rights is the right not be abused. For a society that professes such concern about sexual abuse, it is curious the way the issue is rarely, if ever, mentioned in the classroom. When it is raised, kids are mostly warned about 'stranger danger', which is simplistic and inadequate. Most abuse is perpetrated by carers and family members. It usually involves seduction, not abduction. Coercion and violence are rare. Psychological pressure and manipulation is common. Yet few pupils receive assertiveness training on how to say no to sex pests or advice on what to do if a parent, teacher or care worker is molesting them. Telling kids to phone Childline is not enough. They need to be taught the ability and assuredness to reject and report unwelcome sexual attention. Bizarrely, the law places no obligation on schools to provide young people with the knowledge, skills and confidence that would help them stand up to abusers.

Education in abuse issues should be key component of sex education. As the Dutch have long realised, the best protection against sexual abuse is earlier, better quality sex education. Young people need to be educated and empowered to stick up for their sexual rights, which include both the right to say 'yes' to sex and the right to say 'no'. Teenagers who are knowledgeable and confident about sexual matters - and who are aware that they have the right to control their own body - are much more likely to reject undesired sexual overtures and, if abuse occurs, to speak out.

## Conclusion

These ideas for the reform of sex education are plain common sense, which is why they are

commonplace in many north European schools. The results speak for themselves: wiser, more responsible sexual behaviour.

Keeping young people in a state of sexual ignorance, disempowerment, ineptitude and dissatisfaction is a form of child abuse. It disfigures lives, creating untold erotic and emotional misery.

The right to sexual health and happiness is a fundamental human right. It is time the school system prioritised sexual literacy, alongside literacy in words and numbers, to ensure that future generations live erotically and emotionally fulfilled lives in a mature, enlightened sexual democracy.

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#### Biographical Note:

Peter Tatchell is a human rights activist, specializing in sexual human rights. For over 30 years, he has championed the cause of queer emancipation with non-violent direct action to challenge homophobia, confronting Presidents and Archbishops who support discrimination. Articulating a queer agenda that promotes universal sexual freedom, he campaigns for earlier, better quality sex education and for an age of consent of 14 - for everyone: gay, straight and bisexual.