



Why do we need feminist sex and relationship education?

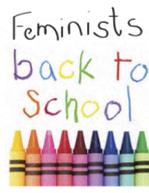
Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) is a compulsory component of the primary curriculum, but provision is patchy in quantity and quality. Feminist Fightback has chosen to compile this resource as we feel that our schools play a crucial role in building a society in which women are equal and SRE is an important part of this. Within the current culture, experiencing the learnt prejudices of children first hand, we feel that SRE must be explicitly feminist, and is in itself not entirely adequate. To make the lessons of a feminist SRE lesson meaningful, we need to think about the hidden curriculum we teach our children every moment they are in our care.

From a very young age children are taught to identify with their gender. By the time children enter the nursery or reception class, most will already have some ideas of what it means to be a boy or girl and a firm notion of which category they fit into. Few of these ideas are fluid or liberating; most serve to limit opportunities for children of both genders and prescribe appropriate forms of self-expression and ways of being. There is also a very strong sense of difference - polarity. Why do boys and girls automatically flock with those of their own gender? We see the primary classroom, most children's first social experience outside of the home, as playing a crucial role in breaking down these divisions by teaching children to respect difference and appreciate what we have in common.

Teaching SRE in primary schools has always been controversial. The idea of a 6 year old being taught how to have sex is a scary one and has nothing to do with the reality of primary SRE. Children today are bombarded with sexualised images and language more than ever before (much of which is sexist), and exercising parental control has never been so tough (a recent and innocent Google image search for diva lamps for our research on Divali produced a wealth of soft-porn). As educators we have a responsibility to respond to the experiences of the children we teach. We need to make sure they understand the impact and meaning of the language they hear in order that they can make choices about the language they use. We need to counter the subliminal messaging of the marketing machine which defines gender and sexuality in order to make profit, and most importantly perhaps, we need children to feel safe to ask questions of us, each other and themselves. SRE is not about force-feeding children information about sex, but about taking your lead from the child and actively engaging with their ideas and questions to facilitate a greater respect for themselves and others. Doing this well is not only a matter of what we teach, but how we teach it and what we say, do and expect at all times. We hope this resource provides some useful ideas and resources for teachers wanting to critically engage holistically with issues of gender and sexuality in their classrooms.

We do not wish to reinvent the wheel, but simply to add some thoughts to areas of SRE that may be less frequently addressed in schools. It is for this reason that we do not talk very much about puberty and the changes that take place for young people at this time, as we feel that this is commonly taught, though we think the issues that we do discuss contribute to making teaching and learning about puberty a more meaningful experience.

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What is gender?

'You got done by a girl.'

'You look like a girl.'

'Boys smell.'

'Urgh. I'm not having the pink one.'

'Boys are such idiots.'

'You're gay.' (Meaning you like things girls are meant to like)

'Low level' sexism amongst primary aged children is very common. From social segregation to strict codes of conduct, children from a young age are aware of the 'acceptable' way to perform their gender. Consciously and unconsciously, boys and girls flock most often with those of the same gender and hold in contempt those on the 'opposing' team. And in the 'battle of the sexes', girls seem to be the victors academically while boys hold a superior position in most other areas: they dominate the playground, they demand most attention through their behaviour and they use language that expresses the inferior status of women more often than girls denigrate boys. This is not to say that boys are the winners. In the battle of the sexes, there are no winners, only boys and girls who play the game and conform or run the risk being bullied, alienated or disrespected.

To be called a girl, is widely used and understood as an insult. To have mutually respectful and fond friendships with children of the opposite sex is not so common and to feel confident in and able to make free choices about what you want to wear, do and be, is hard. We need to teach children to recognise gender as a social construct and give them opportunities to think and act outside of this construction.

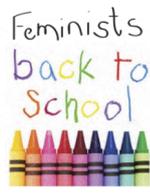
General Practice

- Ensure there are a variety of images of men and women that challenge stereotypes; e.g. female truck drivers, male dancers, female doctors, male nurses, men with long hair, women with short hair, tall women, short men, people with different forms of disability
- Facilitate boys and girls working together as a matter of course
- Mixed seating and lining up arrangements as a matter of routine
- Challenge sexist language by explaining why it's sexist and what that means
- Find time to discuss issues as they arise
- Use non-gender specific language, e.g. refer to child, not 'boy' or 'girl'
- Challenge assumptions – e.g. gender of animal characters in books, assuming the bigger is always the male
- Ask both boys and girls to move furniture and tidy up
- Read books that have strong female characters/boys dealing with emotions and friendships
- Draw attention to gender roles within a historical context as when they come up
- Acknowledge the absence of women in certain situations/historical contexts
- Have a dressing up box with lots of different garments and a full length mirror to admire yourself in!
- Ensure women are represented in curriculum learning and find opportunities to notice the changing place of women within society – for example female figures in history, science, literature etc
- Think about 'ordinary' people too – our mums and dads, male and female carers, what roles do they play in our lives, in our communities and how are they the same or different?

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Activities

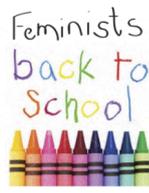
Learning outcome: To understand that the gender associations that are ordinarily ascribed to particular objects are not fixed and can be challenged.

Gather a variety of clothes, toys, household objects, posters, music, tools etc
Use hoops to make a Venn diagram: boy, girl, both

Go around the circle asking children to place one object in the diagram, explaining why they put it where they did.

Discuss the choices children have made, asking for agreement/disagreement from the group and asking questions such as why is that for a girl/boy? What would happen if a boy/girl wore/used that?

Throughout the conversation children can move objects. Notice the change in the diagram, and therefore attitude/ideas of the children, at the end of the session.



Every part has a proper name!

Children acquire the language they use for describing the human body in a piecemeal and maybe distorted way. For example they may use but only partially understand, adult slang words for body parts. Or they may not have (or want to use) any language at all for their own genitals (e.g. “down there”).

Talking to older children honestly about adult slang language, euphemistic language and their own invented and childish language for sexual body parts gives them the opportunity to explore their feelings and thoughts about social attitudes and taboos.

We felt it was important to provide activities which drew out the differences between slang for male body parts and female body parts. This might prompt a discussion about inequalities between genders.

Activities which also give children the correct names for genitals gives children a sense of control over these body parts and by extension their whole body. Once the so-called sexual parts (which includes bottoms and breasts) are given names they lose their specialness, silliness, ability to embarrass etc.

Activity

1. Explain at the start of the exercise that students can be open and honest about the language they know and hear.
2. Ask children to say the words they know for penis and write up for all to see as you go. Make sure it is comprehensive.
Do the same in turn for vagina, breasts and bottom.
Draw attention to higher volume of language we have for the penis in comparison to vagina.

3. Develop a discussion in the class.

Pointing to particular examples ask:

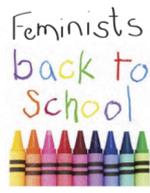
- where do you hear these words (at home, playground, on TV)
- when would you use these words (among your friends, just same sex friends)?
- How do they make you feel? giggly, worried, embarrassed?

Round off the discussion by pointing out how some of these words are used aggressively against people, and especially girls and women. That is why we need a vocabulary that we can all use a vocabulary which we all understand and all feel comfortable with.

4. Introduce the correct terminology

Show large size pictures of a man and a woman with all body parts with lines drawn to different parts.

Get children to stick various labels on the man and then the woman. You can go into as much



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or a little detail as you feel appropriate.
Mix “private” parts with non-private parts.

Alternative activity for this part of session: worksheets

Ask children to label worksheets showing a man and woman using a pre-provided list of body parts.

Another alternative activity: Body part bingo

Provide half the class with laminated pictures of a body part

And half the class with the labels that match these body parts

Children find their partner, match the picture with the name and as a class compile their cards to make a human correctly labelled human body.



Introducing difference in sexualities and relationship lifestyles

We felt there were many ways primary school teachers could introduce, represent, and talk about sexualities outside of discreet lessons and activities (although these resources and ideas could be used to develop activities).

We felt that creating a learning environment where different sexualities are more “casually” introduced was a great way to “subvert” norms about sexuality and the family. Similarly we also felt that just by choosing to use language which reflects diversity in schools and classrooms we were also being proactive in challenging norms re. families and relationships. When we talk/give explanations/tell stories etc we can make sure we do not assume heteronormative/binary couplings or families.

Read up on this: Undoing Homophobia in Primary Schools by: No Outsiders Project Team
Sites: www.gaystheword.co.uk, www.schools-out.org.uk

Ideas

Here are some ideas of ways to integrate issues of sexuality into lessons/activities/projects. Having a range of literature and books available which address issues of sexuality, diverse families and just “difference” and/or referencing sexuality:

Literature

Donuthead, by Sue Stauffacher (artificial insemination/single parent family).

Who's in a Family by Robert Skutch (diverse families)

Totally Joe by James Howe (gay 13 year old)

There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom by Louis Sachar (not fitting in)

Kiss by Jacqueline Wilson

Families by Susan Kuklin

Integrating LGBT people into lessons or delivering lessons with LGBT themes

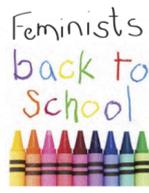
World War Two/Maths: tell the story of Alan Turing (centenary of his birth). Turing was an exceptional mathematician who helped crack the Enigma code, he was gay, was imprisoned for this, committed suicide, was finally pardoned

Use materials available for LGBT history month <http://lgbthistorymonth.org.uk/>

Marriage – highlight the news about civil partnerships and gay marriages using articles from newspapers.

Do a writing activity about being a little sister or brother who has the experience and understanding of an older sibling coming out.

Use/create posters with images of different families



Putting the R back in to SRE

Good quality SRE helps young people develop foundations on which to build positive relationships. It can help children explore ways of communicating their feelings towards people in their life, identify the different feelings present in different types of relationships, consider issues of trust and respect, feel confident in their ability to make choices and consider other people's feelings and the need to deal sensitively with them.

All the learning concerning gender and sexuality helps to break down barriers between children and give them opportunities to build diverse and respectful friendships. The classroom community in the primary school is one important place where children will hopefully get the experience of learning how to form, negotiate and manage a range of relationships every day.

In many schools there are good and frequent opportunities for children to think about the relationships they have with their friends and family, what these look like, how they make them feel, what they need.

But in the teaching of SRE we need to feel confident in discussing relationships in the context of teaching about sex and sexuality. By the time children are in getting ready to leave primary school, many will have ideas about fancying people, about boyfriends and girlfriends and need support in navigating these relationships and feelings in a way that is safe for themselves and those around them.

A really good way of making sure you are meeting the children you are teaching at their own level, is to use an anonymous question box as your basis for discussion. This allows adults to provide honest answers to children's questions without feeling worried about introducing information or ideas they are not yet ready for.

One way of introducing these ideas is by presenting children with a wide range of images depicting different types of relationships: child and carer, siblings, extended families, couples – young and old, gay and straight, friendship groups etc and invite the children to discuss what they see. Using pictures of people of a variety ages, races, (dis)abilities will help children to highlight and challenge 'norms' as well as drawing out the overlaps and distinctions of different types of relationships.

Talking about sex as an aspect of certain types of relationships

Mostly for pleasure, occasionally for procreation

When sex is taught as a life process as part of the science curriculum, the personal, emotional, relational aspects of sex are missing. A really common misconception, sometimes wilfully taught to children, is that people only have sex when they want to make a baby. This is confusing and dishonest and can result in many children wondering why on earth anyone would do it. Explaining that most people have sex because they enjoy it is ok, and a good starting point for talking about what a relationship needs in order for sex to be enjoyable and safe.

We feel that being positive about sex is not encouraging young people to do it. Rather it is about helping young people be able to make positive decisions for themselves, throughout their lives. Helping them have a sense of empowerment, entitlement and expectation within their relationships that will hopefully keep themselves safe and happy.

Not just one way

Teaching sex as reproduction does not allow for any discussion of the different ways pleasure can be given and experienced, and is obviously exclusively heterosexual. Helping children

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understand that sex is one way of being close or loving with somebody else through kissing and touching and does not necessarily involve penetration and helps answer children's questions about how gay people might have sex.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T find out what it means to me!

Often we teach children that sex happens when two people are in love, and most often, married. While this is the case for many people, it's not the whole story. We feel that it is important to recognise that while love is important in many cases, trust, respect and communication also need to be present. Highlighting these qualities of good relationships can help children begin to understand when you might choose to have a sexual relationship. Self-respect is another key teaching point, enabling young people to make conscious decisions about what they want and need.

Knowing when

Teaching sex as an emotional as well as physical experience explains why it is important to wait until you feel ready. Teaching children that sex involves trust, respect and communication emphasises the importance of emotional maturity. It is important that primary aged children have the information they need, but know that being in a sexual relationship is a big responsibility that requires maturity – this is one way of explaining why we have a legal age of consent. We feel it is important that they are taught to have high expectations of their own behaviour and experiences, and to know that impact of engaging in such an intimate act is significant, not only in terms of the physical risk of getting pregnant or catching a STI, but is potentially emotionally scarring. It is important that young people feel able to wait, have a notion of knowing when they are ready, are confident in their abilities to make good and choices and know where they can go for help. Discussing what needs to be in place for a sexual relationship is part of this.

- respect
- trust
- feeling safe
- communication - talking and listening to one another – deciding together
- contraception

Obviously this content is aimed for Year 6 children, and will not be appropriate for all of those, however there are some for whom it may be relevant. As other countries, such as Holland, show, the earlier we meet children's questions with honest information and create open and safe spaces for questions to be posed, the happier and healthier our children will be as they develop into adolescence.