



## **Chapter 4**

### **Learning at school**



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## Chapter 4: Learning at school

The aim of this research has been to engage with parents about their role in educating their child on growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health. In doing so the intention was to find out about parental experiences, perspectives and needs.

This chapter of the report reflects the contributions of parents about the role played by school in terms of their child learning about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health.

Findings are summarised below, followed by a set of reflective questions for practitioners who have an interest in supporting parents considering the interface between learning at school and at home.

### Learning at school: key point summary

- Parents are generally happy with the role that school plays in supporting their child to learn about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health.
- Parents feel that school-based learning provides a foundation for home learning or prompts and helps support talking and learning at home.
- For some parents learning about these topics is best left to school, particularly so in the secondary school years.
- While parents know in general terms that learning about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health is happening at school they may not know in any detail what school-based learning actually addresses (or not) and how.

### Reflective questions for practitioners

After reading the detail of findings practitioners are asked to reflect on important questions which relate to how the role of parents as educators can be enhanced. With this in mind we pose these reflective questions:

- What is my role in facilitating communication between school and parents about the school-based learning that takes place on growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health?
- While parents may be happy that learning takes place at school, how do I encourage and support them to educate their child at home?



## Introduction

This chapter of the report reflects the contributions of parents about the role played by school in terms of their child learning about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health. The research did not ask parents specifically what they know about school-based learning, but in the context of the discussions about their child the idea of learning as a partnership between home and school emerged as something worthy of further consideration when thinking about parents as educators.

## Learning at school

### Learning as a partnership

All parents are aware that learning about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health takes place at school, in this context it is understood as a shared responsibility, or a partnership with school.

**“I am happy the school cover it but his Dad and I want to make sure we teach him.”**  
(Parent/Primary/Online/boy)<sup>1</sup>

**“I found discussion prompt sheets that we got from school helpful to discuss peer pressure, I would like more sheets like that.”** (Parent/Primary/Online/boy)

**“The school has been doing sex education classes in P7 for my son. If he has any questions about what he has learned we discuss it then.”** (Parent/Primary/Online/boy)

**“As a parent I feel we have to be honest with our children in an age appropriate way so that our children know that whatever they ask they know that they can trust that you are giving them the right information. I believe that if the child is able to ask the questions then they are able to have them answered in an age appropriate way. I also try to link in with what the schools are doing around the topics.”** (Parent/Primary/Online/boy)

Parents can also be happy for school to take the lead, with them in support, particularly when young people get to secondary school.

**“My son gets embarrassed. No-one has told us what to say and we feel that he will learn in school.”** (Parent/Secondary/Online/boy)

**“He said he’d learned it in school. Thinks he’s clued up. I just told him to ask.”**  
(Parent/Secondary/Group)

**“Through SHRE at school - this was very helpful as there were ‘homework’ tasks which made starting the conversation much easier.”** (Parent/Secondary/Online/girl)

Understood in this way school-based learning (at primary and secondary school) provides a foundation or prompt for talking and learning at home.

**“School was doing it all as a topic and child brought home questionnaire about what we (parents) were taught at school - we discussed the differences and this helped my daughter to ask me questions.”** (Parent/Primary/Online/girl)

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<sup>1</sup> - Parents are quoted throughout the report. For more on how these are referenced please refer to the Introduction: Ask Parents chapter.



**“The school sends good information. I know that he’ll come home with questions, this is important so I can raise questions, so you don’t jump in from nowhere... I like that they talk about relationships at school too. It’s the foundation.”** (Mum/Primary/interview/boy)

**“Have used some good books and have just had discussions leading on from some stuff discussed at school.”** (Parent/Secondary/Online/girl)

**“I’ve started now talking about this because I got a text message from school saying they would be doing the topic on sex. I thought it was good they ask. I think it’s good to learn but then again what you don’t know might be better, but today maybe they need to know earlier. I spoke to her and she’d rather hear it from school and she said if I don’t understand I’ll come and ask you. Thought that was best, less embarrassing, and she’ll listen at school, take it in.”** (Mum/Secondary/interview/girl)

**“I discuss things openly with him. I listen to him and I ask him about what he is taught in school re growing up and puberty and this informs further discussion.”** (Parent/Secondary/Online/boy)

**“Bring up subject around physical changes and build upon the knowledge from school curriculum.”** (Parent/Secondary/Online/girl)

Two contributors talked specifically about how they believed school-based learning would address matters with which they as parents were uncomfortable.

**“There aren’t any that I don’t feel confident about but we probably wouldn’t talk about some of the physical aspects unless he brought it up - he would find it embarrassing. He gets sex education at school and we cover a lot of the emotional stuff just.”** (Parent/Secondary/Online/boy)

**“Haven’t spoken to my son about erections...well not yet and also because they get taught about it in school...I do talk to him about most other things.”** (Parent/Secondary/Online/boy)

### **Depth of knowledge about school-based learning**

While parents know in general terms that learning about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health is happening at school there is little sense from parental contributions to this research that parents know in any detail what school-based learning actually addresses and how; rather parents depend on what their child reports to them. This may happen when a child brings home a home activity task which some non-denominational schools use as part of the school-based SHRE curriculum. This suggests that greater clarity, rather than assumptions, about what the school is delivering by way of this curriculum would assist a parent to build on or support the school’s input, or indeed highlight whether they need to lead more actively themselves in areas which the school does not address.

**“Would be helpful if the Education Department relayed what is taught to children during PSE classes. Then parents would know what was missing.”** (Parent/Secondary/Online/girl)



## **Different approaches in non-denominational and denominational schools**

An aspect of parental views on school-based learning that remains somewhat unclear at the end of this process is whether parents are aware of the different approaches which are taken to learning about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health in non-denominational and denominational schools. Only a handful of parents (whose children attend non-denominational schools) made contributions which addressed or questioned what difference there might be in terms of SHRE learning at school.

**“They are in a catholic school which does not broach these subjects.”** (Parent/Primary/Online/Boy)

**“She sees stuff on TV like kissing. Or she’ll ask how do you get pregnant? I said God puts the baby in mummy’s tummy. She doesn’t need to know yet. I need some advice on what to say, and the best age. Is 6 too young? The school says nothing, other schools have started.”** (Mum/Primary/Interview/girl)

**“I don’t know if it’s the same? Maybe it depends on the teacher’s confidence? Or if they are young?”** (Parent/Primary/Group)

**“I don’t want to talk to her about it but I have to as no-one else will tell her. Especially at a Catholic school. She’s at a curious age.”** (Dad/Secondary/interview/girl)

In chapter 7 of the report the needs of specific groups of parents are addressed. In that chapter differences between the needs of parents whose child attends a denominational or non-denominational school are summarised.