



Conclusion





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The aim of this research has been to engage with parents (the term parent is used to mean parent or carer) about their role in educating their children on growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health. In doing so the intention was to find out about parental experiences, perspectives and needs.

649 parents took part in the research:

- 278 through face-to-face engagement (in groups or one-to-one interviews).
- 371 by completing a comprehensive online survey.

This conclusion presents a summary of findings and identifies important issues and implications of the Ask Parents consultation process. It is intended that the Ask Parents consultation, published in full online at www.sandyford.org will help NHS GGC to set a programme of work that best meets the needs of parents as their child's primary educator about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health.

Summary of findings

1 - Parents of children under 5 years old

- Parents are confident when it comes to helping their child understand and learn about peer and family relationships.
- They are keen to help their child understand the idea that parts of their body are private. They sometimes struggle with the terms for private parts of the body and mostly favour the use of euphemisms. Parents are open to discussing this and would benefit from understanding why language matters.
- Engaging with parents early means providing them with a foundation on which to build confidence, skills and understanding in their role as educators.

2 - Parents of primary school aged children

- Parents want to help their child learn about how their bodies and emotions change with puberty, but they may not know how to talk about it confidently.
- Parents report that it can be hard to know when the right time is to talk about puberty – before the obvious signs of puberty or as it happens?
- Most parents use euphemisms to refer to genitals, rather than accurate language.
- Parents also worry that they might upset or trouble their child if they talk about topics like sexual abuse or harm but they are very committed to doing what they can to support their child to be safe. Parents would benefit from increased confidence, language and skills to broach such topics.
- When it comes to talking about body changes, reproduction, pregnancy or sexual abuse or domestic violence parents are worried that by doing so they are undermining a sense of childhood innocence.
- Talking and learning would be supported by the provision of books, resources and opportunities to learn together, parent and child.



3 - Parents of secondary school aged children

- For parents with a child at secondary school, talking and learning about some of the growing up, relationships and sexual health topics can be quite awkward or embarrassing; and parents recognise this might be so for their child too.
- Dads lack confidence about discussing most of the topics related to growing up and puberty.
- Parents were more likely to talk about sexual abuse and harm at this stage than parents of Primary school age.
- Very few parents had discussed sexual health services.

4 - Learning at school

- Parents of children and young people of all ages are happy for schools to provide learning across the topics that are part of learning about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health.
- Parents are happy for school to lead learning but many lack knowledge about what is actually taught in school (or not) and how. Specifically, they would like to know about the timing, content, style and emphasis of lessons being taught.

5 - Gender

- Across all three age groups there were gendered patterns of parenting in terms of supporting a child to learn. Most two-parent, mixed sex, households reported a demarcation of responsibility for leading discussion with children: that Mums would talk with daughters and Dads would talk with sons.
- Many parents differentiate the topics they cover with their children based on gender. For example, parents (mostly mums) are more likely to talk with girls about pressure around behaviour and looks and about physical changes at puberty, while condoms are mainly discussed with boys.
- Mums involved in the research identified that Dads can be anxious about boys straying from what might be perceived of as acceptable gender roles when it comes to play or toys.

6 - Digital Lives

- Parents characterise their children's digital lives as positive when they see their child learning and having fun. But being online can also be a worry when technology or the fast developing world of social media feels difficult to understand or to manage.
- Parents have concerns about inappropriate content, bullying and predatory adults.
- Some parents worry about their child accessing pornography on purpose or by accident. Some parents feel that accessing pornography is inevitable. Others do not talk about it because they feel ill-informed, uncomfortable or lack confidence to do so.
- Parents have concerns about the impact of stereotypical and offensive representations of women, men and sex; they would also like to do more to support their child to be safe and think critically about what they see.



7 - The experiences, perspectives and needs of particular groups of parents

The consultation also set out to engage with specific groups of parents who might be excluded from research or consultation processes and from the uptake of services.

Lone parents

A lone parent is by definition the parent responsible for supporting their child's learning, regardless of their or their child's gender. Lone parents report a lack of confidence to talk and support learning and a need for more information and support across all of the growing up and puberty, relationships and sexual health topics.

Dads

Dads can be less confident (than Mums) on some growing up and puberty issues in the primary school years and this lack of confidence grows so that they are less confident than Mums across most puberty, relationships and sexual health topics when their child is of secondary school age. Dads recognise this and say they would like more support and information. Dads often do not feel recognised or included in services for parents or the provision of information or support. This starts when the child is young and continues as their child grows.

Parents of children with disabilities and Additional Support for Learning Needs

Parents can feel isolated and concerned when understanding and managing the physical and sexual maturity of their child. They can worry that their child may be vulnerable to abuse and harm as they grow older and have a more autonomous teenage/adult life. Parents identify the need for support and forward planning but this seems unavailable. Parents whose child attends a mainstream school have concerns that their learning needs about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health may not be adequately met

Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) parents

Parents recognise that their childhood experiences of talking and learning about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health may be different from the opportunities for learning that their child needs. Talking and learning about some topics can be difficult; particularly sex before marriage and pornography. Some parents have concerns that talking and learning about some topics happens too early; that perhaps learning should wait until adolescence. Learning at school is important and valued.

Parents of children attending a denominational or non-denominational school

Parents whose children attend a non-denominational primary school are more likely to talk and support learning on many of the themes and topics highlighted. Parents whose children attend a denominational secondary school are more likely to have concerns about their child when they are online and more likely to express a wish to help and support their child. Parents whose children attend a denominational primary school or secondary school were more likely to identify a need for information and support across themes and topics.



8 - Parental preferences for information and support

- Across all age groups parents preferred formats for information and support were a booklet/ leaflet and online information (written, film clips, e learning packages).
- Parents of children under 5 years old and primary school aged children would also use an App for phone/tablet and library books.
- The option of 'going to a group' was not popular but of more interest to parents of under 5s than parents of older children.
- Universal and social marketing was suggested as a way of communicating messages and information. Some parents highlighted the NSPCC 'Underwear rule/PANTS' campaign as an example.
- Across formats, it was important to parents that the information was accurate and from trusted sources such as their child's school or the NHS.

Findings are described in full in each Ask Parents chapter at www.sandyford.org

In conclusion

The Ask Parents consultation has taken place in the context of a long standing interest and commitment by Scottish Government and NHS GGC to supporting parental participation and engagement in educating children about growing up, relationships, puberty and sexual health (GRPSH).

Nationally, Respect and Responsibility (2005) and Outcomes and Framework for Sexual Health and Bloodborne Viruses (2011-2015) both outline a role for public services in providing support to parents and carers to fulfil this role.

Within NHS GGC, and in partnership with Local Authorities, the Board has conducted consultations with parents and carers between 2005 and 2007 that engaged with over 4000 parents. With some of the previous parent consultation findings now nine years old and a changing cultural context - around the impact of new technologies and contemporary media culture on children's learning, as well as how adults themselves access information and support - NHS GGC recognised the need for a re-refresh of knowledge to ensure that future work is informed by the most useful and up-to-date information; the Ask Parents consultation emerged in response.

Findings have evidenced that parents are interested in engaging in a dialogue about how they talk to their child and support learning across the broad themes of growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health. As previous NHS GGC parental engagement has also shown, parents understand that they are their child's most important teacher and they want their child to grow up happy and safe.

Ask Parents also reminds us that every parent is different and things like confidence or needs can and will change over time. For example, in the early years a challenge for parents is language and the tendency to use euphemisms to refer to genitals, rather than accurate language. Parents of younger and primary school age children also worry that learning about growing up, relationships, puberty and sexual health can undermine a sense of childhood innocence. This means parents need support to help them move from seeing learning topics through an adult lens (that this is about sex) to a child's perspective that talking and learning together is about where living things comes from, loving relationships, how to look after ourselves and knowing when to speak to an adult to share worries or ask questions. For parents of teenage children there can be a sense of awkwardness or embarrassment that must be overcome.

Having affirmed their interest in supporting their child's learning, parents have recognised that talking and learning together would be fostered and supported by the provision of learning materials for under 5s and primary school age children that parents could use at home.



Parents are also keen that learning at home reflects and builds on learning at school, which they are generally very supportive of. Improvements in communication and the provision of resources that work across home and school will help children learn, and parents to fulfil their role as educators.

When it comes to parenting a teenager parents would like information they know they can trust that they can share or give to their child. The Ask Parents consultation has also identified that parents themselves would benefit from improving their knowledge about sexual health services so that they can in turn inform their teenage children about where they are and how to access them.

Two strong themes have emerged from the Ask Parents process – one is the importance of gender, the other the significant impact of the digital world in children and young people's lives. When it comes to gender, as the summary of findings earlier has shown, the roles that male and female parents/carers take can differ, and the topics discussed with boys and girls can differ too. It seems that parents would benefit from opportunities to reflect on how their gender, or their child's gender, influences how they help their child to learn, keeping in mind that both boys and girls need to learn across the growing up, relationships, puberty and sexual health themes and topics. When it comes to their child's digital life it seems that parents do not always understand technology or the fast developing world of social media. Ask Parents has highlighted that parents of children of all ages would benefit from information, training and support to help their child to be safe and behave appropriately online.

Of course as educators in the realm of growing up, relationships, puberty and sexual health all parents have information and support needs. From the Ask Parents consultation participants have told us that when their child is under 5 years old they are more likely to access information and support; this points to the importance and value of engaging parents and supporting them as educators as early as possible. From these early days through to parenting a teenager, parental preferences for information remain fairly traditional in terms of liking written information in the form of booklets and leaflets. However, a significant number of parents would also access information and support online, reflecting their own increasing engagement with digital mediums. Finally, when reflecting on how to best support parents, the consultation has identified and reflected on the importance of understanding that there are groups of parents who require a more nuanced approach. This means consideration of the needs of lone parents, Dads, parents of children with disabilities and ASL needs, and Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) parents.

The team at TASC (Scotland) would like to thank all those who contributed to the Ask Parents process. Further information about how NHS GGC supports parents in their role as educators on the themes of growing up growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health is available from the Health Improvement Sexual Health Team at GG-UHB.HealthImprovementSH@nhs.net