



# THE BIRDS & BEES



Sex education is a minefield as schools and parents tackle an alien world of sex and the internet so, asks *School House* editor **Annabel Heseltine**, 'What's the buzz?'

**M**any children are approaching puberty and a question which vexes me is how much should I tell them and when? And, how much can I leave to school? Julie Johnson, a psychotherapist and PSHE consultant, who visits many London independent schools, believes that, as one in six girls now starts puberty as young as eight, parents should be responsible for most of the early sex education. 'It starts with naming parts of the body so that by five, six or seven they know them. Boys know they have testicles and a penis which they can see, but if girl's parts are not named, it can be a long time before they realise that they have sexual organs too.'

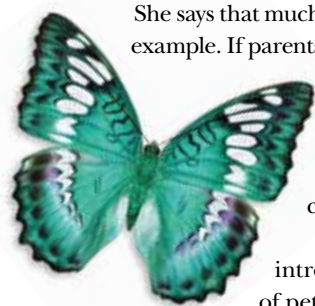


head of The Dominic, a small prep school in Battersea for ages 8–11, visited by Johnson in Years 5 and 6. 'Children don't have filtering skills and can become anxious if they are drenched in information.'

'We invite the parents in for a short talk and then they are shown the same video as their children will be shown a week later. It gives them time to prepare for the questions and Julie advises them on what to say.' Johnson returns two weeks later to see the children together for the first session and separately for a follow up session. This allows information to be given to both genders together, but it also allows boys and girls to ask more personal questions in single-sex groups.

'In a perfect world all this would be done by parents, but some worry that they will get it wrong. Some parents are wary and others will go too far, which can risk shutting the children down. "I am not talking about that, it's disgusting" is the kind of response to be avoided', says O'Doherty.

Julie advises parents not to worry about it and to trust their own intuition. 'If your child asks questions, answer them in a matter of fact and straight way. If they start losing interest, stop. Don't take



She says that much of the early stuff can be taught through example. If parents are comfortable with their own bodies, they should bathe with their children and let them come into their parents' bed as appropriate, and allow them to see them naked, then children will learn to be comfortable with their own bodies.

'There are lots of opportunities to introduce concepts naturally like the birth of pets or a new sibling, or friends' babies and stories in books, but, if they ask questions', she says, 'keep the answers simple, and make sure that you give the right answer. For example, if they ask, 'where do I come from? Find out if they want to know literally, or, perhaps they mean, which country? You can always repeat the question back to check. She suggests an answer could be, 'Mummy and Daddy made you and you came from a special place called the womb', without going into details. By six or seven, she says, 'it's vital that you have introduced the lifecycle so that you have covered conception and birth by eight and can prepare them for puberty.'

It is at about this age that good schools will start to support parents in different ways. 'Children need to be informed, but appropriately,' says Anne O'Doherty,





It is crucial to teach children the importance of love in relationships



it personally if they suddenly change the subject. They are telling you that they have heard enough for that day.'

It gets more complicated however when children reach puberty. 'Sexualisation occurs when they start to become aware,' says Johnson, and, with that, comes the issue of relationships and how to handle your own body. 'You can introduce different concepts gently. A prime one is respecting your body and others. Teaching them that it is fine to say no to granny's kiss if they don't want it, is the start of a path to being able to say 'NO' to unwelcome attentions when they are older'.

Philip Hoyland is Headmaster of Pinewood, a co-ed prep school which runs up to 13, in Wiltshire. He says that they are constantly revising their opinion on how they teach sex education especially as they see children hitting puberty earlier and earlier, but, when they are 12 and 13, he starts talking to them about relationships. He believes it is important that schools, as well as parents, start talking about this before they get stuck into their teens and parents, in particular, are being pushed away by their children with a, 'You are my mother, I am not listening to you' kind of attitude.

'I am pretty honest and open,' he says. I stress that there is nothing sinful in kissing a boy, and having a relationship, but I also tell them not to sell themselves cheaply and in no uncertain terms that underage sex is illegal. I talk to them about their reputation. I tell them that if they are pretty, willowy and tall, they will be wooed by boys older than them – who they will think of as God – but that if they throw that away early on, they will be called a slut or the school bike, especially by the other girls and they will regret it,'



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Tracy Aryee-Quao, 18,  
deputy head of school at Bede's

says Hoyland, who regularly discusses the problems with other heads, but feels parents need to be less naive. 'I mean 14-year-olds on sleepovers. Hullo. Wake-up. These kids are experimenting'.

Reputation is important and it was a huge relief to me as a parent to realise that I wasn't being a fuddy-duddy by talking about this to my 11-year-old daughter. It seems that the old values haven't changed, but what has changed is the ease with which a girl can get a reputation, largely due to the internet.

Porn is readily available; magazines smuggled in and hidden under the bed have been replaced by portable and easily accessible online images. 'There are some very overt sexual twerking on YouTube with its graphic images. These, along with Facebook, Twitter, and mobiles with cameras – enabling young girls to 'snapchat' naked photos to their boyfriends – have all contributed to a far more disturbing phenomena; the divorce of sex from love.

The division between sex and making love is a growing problem, says Johnson, who finds it disturbing that as a society we are still protective of our daughters, but not so much of our sons and their feelings. 'Casual sex diminishes empathy. Making love is about making an intimate connection – which we as human beings need – but casual sex turns making love into an activity, commodifying it and depriving us of this experience.'

'It's desperately worrying,' says Hoyland, who hears a lot from his own children at co-ed independent senior schools. 'Boys have an unrealistic idea of sex from the internet. I don't think sex is special anymore; girls are giving blow-jobs at the drop of a hat.'

Tracy Aryee-Quao, 18, a deputy head of school at Bede's – a co-ed senior school in Sussex, which has a very strict no-tolerance policy within the school campus – is equally concerned. 'It's often alcohol-related and tends to happen at parties,' explains Aryee-quao. 'I hear of girls having sex, doing things with more than one boy in a night and then the boys are sending pictures around and talking about it on Twitter. I don't want it to happen to Bede's girls.'

'It's so easy for them to get hold of alcohol, then they do silly things and the next morning they have to do a "walk of shame" and are mocked. Rumours are escalated by texting, boys brag and the girl is labelled a slut.'

Aryee-Quao and her fellow prefects felt so strongly about the naivety of younger girls and their use of the internet, that she and her

fellow prefects have organised an assembly to talk to the lower school. 'I wanted to warn the younger ones about the internet's dangers and how it can tarnish their reputation,' she says, 'It raised eyebrows when we broached the subject, but there are things associated with sex which are happening too early.'

'We do have people who come to talk to us about STDs and safer sex, but the younger ones zone out and dismiss it, so we thought if it was the sixth-form talking, they might pay more attention to the message; that anything stupid you do now will come back to haunt you. It's mainly to do with social media and issues of trust. After bad break-ups, things tend to come out. Rumours start and not just here, it's a recurring pattern.'

'Parents are not old-fashioned in worrying about their children's reputations,' says Tracy, 'but, telling them not to do it, doesn't work. They need to set boundaries otherwise the girls think it's okay to be casual, but you have to come down to their level and just tell them the consequences and to be careful.'

'As always, it's the girl who is labelled and the boy is just a bit of a lad. So our message to them is not to feel pressured to do something they don't want to just to fit in. If it doesn't feel right, don't do it. We have been through it and it's not pretty. They don't know how easily they can get into trouble, but we do.'

'Tracy feels very passionately about this,' says deputy headmaster Jeremy Lewis, who was a senior housemaster at Rugby. 'I don't think Bede's is different from any other school and we are probably talking about less than five per cent of girls who might behave like this. Tracy is a great communicator and we felt that the message would come better from her than another PSHE lecturer. The risks are greater but if it works, it is a much more effective way of getting the message through to these girls.'

'Communication is key,' says Janey Downshire, author of *Teenagers Translated*, out in May. 'I wish I could say it's a small problem, but it's not. The boundaries have changed. Porn has had a massive impact on what boys expect and what girls feel they have to do,' says the mother of four, who raises an unexpected side effect of



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## SEX EDUCATION IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Bede's teaches a culture of mutual respect from an early age

### ● PERSONAL, SOCIAL, HEALTH AND ECONOMIC (PSHE)

education is a non-statutory subject which schools plan and design themselves. In practice most independent schools teach the birds and bees in junior school and SRE (sex and relationship education), and SEAL (social and emotional aspects of learning) in Years 7 and upwards bringing in more explicit information on contraception and STDs as they get older.

### ● LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

schools must teach human biology, including the mechanisms of the reproductive system in science. Parents have the right to be informed of what is happening and what is being taught and can withdraw their children from all but the science if they wish.

● **CONTRACEPTION** is dealt with in detail at secondary level, where girls are also offered inoculation against cervical cancer at the age of 14.

### ● JULIE JOHNSON

recommends a cross-curriculum approach with sexual education being introduced in SRE, PSHE, SEAL and Science. [julie.johnson@virgin.net](mailto:julie.johnson@virgin.net); 020 8672 0311

● **BOOKS** Miriam Stoppard's *Questions Children Ask*, for younger children and Steve Chalke's *The Parentalk Guides* are available from Amazon. Janey Downshire and Naella Grew's *Teenagers Translated* is out in May.

● **WEBSITES:** NSPCC and NHS choices: for advice on how to talk about sex to older children.

impotence amongst young men who have been over-stimulated by watching porn on the internet.

'What is woefully missing,' says Downshire, 'is that parents are not talking to their children enough from an early age, especially boys. Teenagers need to talk to someone – not just their parents – to tell them what's going on so that they feel empowered to make the right choices.'

Most schools focus on the positive aspects of good, respectful relationships and provide comprehensive information to parents about online issues. They also welcome feedback from the parents about how much information they would like included, but, ultimately, says Downshire, 'children don't need a lecture, but the opportunity to ask questions from somebody who is not embarrassed to give them the answers. It's about building their values, helping them to develop a sense of self and to decide what is ok and what is not'. ■



Teenagers need to talk to responsible adults other than their parents

