

ONS figures on teenage conception rates in England and Wales are released in the shadow of three damning reports about the state of safeguarding the sexual health of children in England. Straight Talking, the leading UK teenage pregnancy and parenthood charity comment.

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February 2015 has already seen three damning reports come out about the state of safeguarding of children in England with regards to sexual wellbeing. Today's annual ONS figures release about the conception rates in England and Wales reveal that the downward trend in teenage conceptions is continuing, this is some much-needed good news. Disappointingly some London boroughs have gone up and are still in the national top ten areas nationally for conceptions for women under 18. Also, the rate of conceptions leading to abortions, for under 16's nationally has increased from 60 to 62%.

The report acknowledges that the positive results could be explained by Sex and Relationship education in schools as well as noting the importance of local authorities working with a range of partners in this area. The report also reiterates that teenage conception rates continue to be one of the three sexual health indicators in the governments Public Health Outcomes Framework (2013-16) This is where we find we are getting confusing mixed messages as it comes just one week after the House of Commons Education Committee reported that we are failing our young people with the sex and relationship education they receive in schools.

An NSPCC report released earlier this month reported results from a survey of 13-17 years olds in five European countries revealing some uncomfortable results. They found that 40% of girls in England reported being coerced into sex. Our country had the highest rate of all countries surveyed. Furthermore, one in five girls in England reported experiencing physical violence or intimidation from a boyfriend and 4 in 10 boys reported regularly viewing pornography.

Both coercion and sexual violence are strongly linked to teenage pregnancy. It is therefore not a surprise that we have both the highest rates of teenage pregnancy and the highest rates of sexual coercion. With the majority of the research being conducted in other countries such as America, this is an issue that needs far more attention here in Britain. Complex social issues require careful consideration of many nuances and translating research from other countries is not ideal.

We can no longer bury our heads in the sand about the need for compulsory Relationships and Sex Education in our schools. Protecting the innocence of childhood is important. Age appropriate sex education is required, whilst at the same time helping children to make the transition to adulthood and negotiate difficult situations. Safeguarding our young peoples' sexual health has to become an urgent priority, well above any adult considerations about the sensitivities of broaching these "difficult" issues in schools. These adult agendas are just not important to children; the children need the skills to negotiate a highly sexualised world, something that they tell us all the time and was highlighted in the Education Committee report released last week.

These ONS figures come out in the shadow of the Independent Enquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation

in Rotherham, that was released on the 4th of February. The need for safeguarding our children has never been more evident. Tightening controls to protect children from adult predators is non-negotiable but alongside this, so is the need to arm our young people with the right tools of their own. We know that adult sexual predators can fall through the net of our controls; how many more times must we see a Rotherham or Jimmy Saville scandal before we conclude that we must arm our children with forewarning, knowledge and the skills to protect themselves.

Add to this the need to manage young boys who's views of women and sexuality as it is becoming increasingly skewed by the prevalence of internet pornography and we realise we cannot keep all sexual coercion away from our young people. The NSPCC report suggests that grooming does not only happen when an adult is involved, it can occur young person to young person. We need a whole host of targeted interventions that recognise that threats can be external or within their own social groups. We need to protect our children without trying to lock them away from the world, something that we strongly believe is possible.

Straight Talking understands that these issues are hard to tackle effectively, this is why they should be getting more attention, and not less. Relationships and Sex Education in schools should not be an optional add-on subject. Its delivery must be by a dedicated teacher PSHE or external speaker, the common practice of utilising teachers from other subjects is ill advised. Relationship & Sex Education bare little similarity to the way that for example Maths or English are taught. Those subjects require a teacher to be in a position of authority to examine a pupil's level of performance. Relationships & Sex Education requires an open atmosphere where pupils can be assured that they will not be judged on what they contribute in what is, a very sensitive subject. It can be difficult for the same teachers to wear both of these hats in the pupil's eyes.

Straight Talking uses peer education where young people of a similar age or social status are trained to deliver an interactive programme to pupils in schools. At the 2014 annual Westminster Heath Forum on 'Improving Outcomes for Sexual Health', a member of the Brook Young People's Participation Group commented,

'...I think when it's young people to young people, you learn a lot more and you're a lot more open because there isn't such wide age gap, so I think peer to peer would be fantastic.'

Straight Talking sees the benefits of peer education on a day-to-day basis. Peer education is never a solution in isolation; health professionals have an indispensable role in a well-rounded curriculum. There is always a lot of discussion about partnership working, it is time we put serious effort into making this work. A carefully-designed peer education programme is an effective method for ensuring young people hear the important messages and a valuable way in which a bridge of trust can be built between pupils and adult support services. Surely it is time that those in charge of our young people's education consider alternative approaches and admit that the status quo is just not fulfilling our obligations to safeguard our children.

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