

Study aims to improve sex education for deaf pupils

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British parents are to be quizzed about their children's sex education in a unique study that hopes to improve the way the subject is taught to deaf pupils. The University of Manchester's Audiology and Deafness team is recruiting parents of both deaf and hearing primary school children for its research on children's sex and relationship education (SRE).

The researchers hope their findings will make SRE more accessible for deaf children and, at a later stage, they plan to devise a fun, non-threatening computer game to explore how much deaf as well as hearing children know about issues related to growing up.

Study leader Sarah Suter, in the School of Psychological Sciences, said: "The way SRE is taught in the UK varies from school to school as only selected areas, like HIV and reproduction, are mandatory; other areas of the SRE curriculum, such as feelings and relationships, are guidance only.

"Teaching SRE to deaf children brings additional challenges, as deaf pupils don't 'overhear' and may miss comments and discussions that inform hearing children.

"In addition some deaf children have a very literal understanding of words and may have difficulty understanding the many terms in SRE that require subtle interpretation. They may understand the textbook terms but not the euphemisms that also arise in such discussions.

"It is important we address these issues as children who do not get a good SRE are more vulnerable to abuse because they may not recognise inappropriate behaviour or that their boundaries are being crossed."

Senior lecturer in education of the deaf, Wendy McCracken, added: "There is some evidence to suggest that deaf children are much more likely to face abuse. They may not have the language to be able to tell someone that it is happening and also may lack awareness that the behaviour is inappropriate.

"It is a human right to understand what is happening to your body and what you can expect from relationships. A good SRE keeps children safe."

The three-year study is the first to investigate the sexual and relationships knowledge of deaf children. Other studies have investigated the understanding of deaf college students and adults in the US, but none has ever explored the SRE of deaf youngsters.

"It is important that we know what children are learning at primary-school age before puberty and the effects of raging hormones kick in," added Wendy.

"The study reflects a Government push on social and emotional development of children. Let's not forget that the UK has the highest teen pregnancy rate in Europe, so the subject clearly needs to be addressed."

The team will ask parents in an informal discussion, or by means of an online or postal survey, about what they know of their child's SRE, whose responsibility they believe it is and if they give their children SRE at home. The questions are factual and address what their knowledge of their child's SRE is, rather than whether they believe SRE is right or

wrong.

The website also provides parents with the names and contact details of organisations that can help them with any problems, including the National Deaf Children's Society, the parent-support charity ParentlinePlus and the UK's leading sexual health charity, the Family Planning Association.

Sarah added: "We hope to encourage parents of both deaf and hearing children to take part – it will help them know what their children are learning about the world and there is a lot of useful information on the website. By taking part, parents will not only be helping their own families, they will be helping others.

"SRE is a challenging area for all children but especially for children who are deaf. It is important all children learn how to be safe. We hope that our work will inform those who teach our children to be safe and help the children become young, confident, independent people who can look after themselves."

Source: University of Manchester

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