

Researchers to debate the call for sexual abstinence education in schools

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Introducing abstinence education into UK schools could be a less effective substitute for comprehensive Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) aimed at children and young adults, say a research team led by Sheffield Hallam University.

As part of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Festival of Social Science 2012, Sheffield Hallam and partners will host a one day event to debate the issues surrounding abstinence education.

Dr Julia Hirst, from the Public Health Hub at Sheffield Hallam, says "We hope to bring together politicians, teachers, youth workers, young people and their parents to discuss the re-emergence in our society of views promoting abstinence education in schools and youth settings."

Research shows that existing evidence fails to support the view that teaching abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid unintended pregnancy, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and HIV.

"Extensive research undertaken in the US points to negative outcomes associated with abstinence education including increased risks of unprotected sex and a more reluctance to seek advice or treatment related to sexual health and relationship matters," says Steve Slack, Director of the Centre for Sexual Health and HIV in Sheffield.

There is [clear evidence](#) that access to comprehensive SRE can have positive effects in terms of increasing the age of a first sexual encounter.

"By widening understanding of safer [sexual practices](#) and equipping young people with the skills and confidence to protect their sexual and [emotional health](#) reduces the risk of unprotected sex, unwanted sex, [unwanted pregnancies](#), and STI's. Comprehensive SRE also includes strategies for young people who want support in abstaining from sexual activity." Dr Hirst points out.

Research shows that comprehensive [sex education](#) should include a greater focus on the issue of relationships, as well as sexuality, include more discussion of safer [sexual activity](#) and further debate regarding values and up-bringing in shaping attitudes to sex.

Steve Slack agrees: "Our discussions with young people consistently suggest that while there are pockets of good practice in terms of SRE in the UK, sex education overall is too little and too late and often fails to address young people's expressed needs for across-the-board sex and relationships education."

"If we look to countries with the lowest rates of unwanted pregnancy and STIs, the least relationship abuse and more attention paid to relationships, for example, the Netherlands or Sweden; these are the countries which have age-appropriate SRE embedded in their curriculum and it is supported by youth friendly [sexual health](#) services and well-informed parents. This is what we would like to see for young people in this country." Dr Hirst concludes.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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