

# Sex ed reboot

Jenny Rowe examines the evolution of sex education as new guidelines for schools give the subject a much-needed upgrade this year

According to Urban Dictionary ([urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com)), to be 'at it like rabbits' means to have lots of sex, which most likely stems from the fact that bunnies are rampant reproducers with a gestation period of just one month. It's what most parents dread is true of their own child. And perhaps what most pupils at some point in their school careers will imagine all of their friends are doing, with the exception of themselves.

It's therefore ironic that in the 1950s, anecdotal evidence suggests that the reproductive systems of rabbits were studied in a session that more or less constituted most pupils' entire sex education. In 1951, a sex ed video in the UK explained pregnancy to girls through the use of farm animals. Perhaps worse, pupils would have observed how plants were pollinated and as a result were expected to be sexually and emotionally mature, able to navigate the trials and tribulations of sex and relationships through puberty and into adulthood. This is, surely, the point of sex education.

Yet in many cases, sex education veers alarmingly off course. These stories might sound prehistoric, but my anxiety about the state of modern sex education in England really started keeping me up at the night when I began to ask my friends what their experiences of the subject at school had been. One response from someone who left school in 2012 stuck in my head: "I never had it. We did fertilisation in biology. But I never heard the word period, penis or



porn the whole time I was there." Even in the noughties, in some schools, sex education was a sub-category of biology. This makes the advent of compulsory sex education in England from September 2020 all the more pertinent. With youth mental health issues on the rise, to think that some students still leave secondary school without proper sex education is terrifying. School is a breeding ground for both sex and relationships, yet some of those very same institutions have, until this point, been blissfully irresponsible for the sexual welfare of the children they teach. The appetite for change, though, has been growing slowly but surely for decades.

If it had been allowed a look in, the 60s saw enough social revolution to have filled hours of lesson time – the birth control pill and other contraceptives were introduced and – when the law changed in 1974 allowing single women to be prescribed the pill – women could have babies when they wanted them, and careers, too. However, their liberation, and the practical issue of which contraception option to go for, were again confined to the science textbooks. Though there would have been mention of menstruation, we all know that studying sex organs from 2D diagrams doesn't do their complexity much justice. Sex education, back then, simply aimed at providing accurate information – even if it was totally inaccessible and out of context.

In the 1980s and 90s, second wave feminists were on the warpath and making headway. Marital rape was outlawed in 1991 and, as society became aware of its systematic sexism, the number of sex ed programmes that encouraged pupils to examine the roles played by women and men increased.

The AIDS epidemic also began in the 80s. Since the Second World War, the use of antibiotics had pushed the fear of STIs to the backs of peoples' minds. This changed in the mid-1980s when it was realised that a new sexually transmitted agent, HIV, was spreading

in many countries of the world. There was no treatment for the HIV infection or for AIDS itself (nowadays HIV can be managed, though there remains no cure.) Panic ensued, and it brought new preoccupations to the forefront of sex education. For the first time ever, condom use was paramount for sexual health protection, not just pregnancy. As a result, bananas and cucumbers made their laughter-inducing entrance to the classroom, which we think may be more difficult to grapple with than the real thing.

Just 35 years ago the 1985 Gillick case put the spotlight on how responsible young people were for their own medical treatment. The case involved a health departmental circular suggesting that the prescription of contraception was a matter for the doctor's discretion, meaning they could be prescribed to under 16s without parental consent. The House of Lords concluded that contraceptives could be issued to children under the age of 16 if they were mature enough to consent, and that a parent would be unable to veto a decision of this nature. Parental

power was loosening its once iron hold over the children in their care. On top of this high-profile case, the growing strength of the lesbian and gay movement – now LGBTQIA+ – led to a polarisation of views on sex education among politicians at a local and national level. Finally, as a result, the ethics of sex and relationships had found its place in education, though most of these elements were dissolved into Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE), lessons.

There was no one-size-fits-all approach to sex education (pun intended) and some flexibility to allow for differences in communities will remain. Yet, since academies and free schools are not under local authority control, they haven't been obliged to teach Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) at all, and, if they did, they didn't have to follow the national curriculum. One friend remembers how a sex ed lesson left her feeling very small: "I vividly remember the nurse who came in to show us how to put a condom on a model penis. She assumed we'd all had sex, but I don't think any of us in that room had. >



Most of us hadn't even had our first kiss yet!" Visits from nurses in my all girls' school somehow never quite hit the spot either. We were, on one occasion, traumatised by a PowerPoint presentation of sinister cartoons of bacteria: gonorrhoea with googly eyes or chlamydia with creepy limbs. Another time we were asked to fill in a quiz entitled 'How to know if your boyfriend loves you', which was supposed to encourage us only to have sexual intercourse with someone who really cared about us. Yet this only served to put our feelings second to that of the other sex (did it not matter what we thought about them?), as if we had no agency in this new, disorientating smoke-and-mirrors world of gender.

More recently than I have been in a sex ed class, the #MeToo movement has prompted conversations about consent around the world, with two thirds of universities in 2019 running consent workshops, particularly in fresher's weeks. Since 2016, 80 per cent of universities have actually updated their disciplinary policies regarding accusations – too little too late for many, but definitely a step in the right direction.

The ramifications of our increasingly digital world, including the easy availability of porn online, is also a pressing issue. According to a Middlesex University study, about 53 per cent of 11 to 16 year olds have seen explicit material online. The research, commissioned by the NSPCC and the children's commissioner for England, said many teenagers were at risk of becoming desensitised to porn. More than three quarters of the children surveyed understood that pornography failed to help them understand consent, but worryingly most of the boys (53 per cent) and 39 per cent of girls saw it as a realistic depiction of sex. Without proper education to teach otherwise, porn only serves to distort expectations of sex and undermine safe and healthy relationships, sexual or otherwise.

The fact is, a new sex ed programme has been a long time coming. A survey of 16 to 24 year olds carried out by the Terence Higgins Trust ([tht.org.uk](http://tht.org.uk)) in July 2016 showed that 99 per cent of young people thought RSE should be mandatory in all schools; and one in seven had not received it. It's no surprise then that the announcement of the changes in 2017 was welcomed by charities that have been campaigning for years. Sarah Green, co-director of the End Violence Against Women Coalition ([endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk](http://endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk)) explained that "This is a real step forward in ending violence against women and girls [...] It opens the door to high-quality RSE that will let young people have the essential conversations about consent,

respect and LGBT equality." Barnardo's ([barnardos.org.uk](http://barnardos.org.uk)) chief executive, Jawed Khan, mirroring her words, stated that the new age-appropriate lessons would "give children the knowledge and skills they need to help prevent them being groomed and sexually exploited."

The amendments to the Children and Social Work Bill makes RSE a statutory requirement in all schools (both primary and secondary school, starting from the age of four). The new guidelines, which began to be adopted by new schools in September 2019, also bring the current advice on RSE up to date for the first time since 2000, including age-appropriate topics related to children's relationships online, such as sexting and cyber-bullying. Parents will still have the right to withdraw children from sex education: schools will be required to publish a clear statement of their policy and what will be taught, so that parents can make informed decisions.

The point is, the modern world demands that RSE lessons continue to swim bravely past the boundaries of traditional sex education. With the 'outside' world cottoning on fast to the newly liberated but also digitally – wild sexual landscape, schools need to keep up. Now in its second series, *Sex Education*, the hugely popular Netflix drama starring Gillian Anderson as sex therapist Jean Milburn, is a case in point. Topics such as sexual pleasure and UTIs need to be addressed in schools, just as they are in popular culture. Why should girls be unable to recognise the symptoms of their first UTI because of glaring holes in the curriculum? Why is masturbation still a taboo in 2020?

According to Netflix, season one of *Sex Education* was among its most popular originals at the time, garnering 40 million member views worldwide within the first four weeks of its release. And I'll bet most of them are the six in seven young people who didn't receive the right guidance in the first place. As Jean says to her son Otis: "Apologising isn't just social etiquette, it's a hugely important human ritual that brings relationships together and helps people to move forward." For those that missed out, we're sorry (but can recommend *Sex Education*). And if England's schools can't have Jean Milburn, then at least we now have new guidelines, ensuring every child hears the words period, porn and penis before they leave school. This is what will keep them safe and sexually responsible, not rabbit reproductive systems and mass orders of bananas. ■

For more from Jenny, find her on social media @mycountryself