

# Young women and their relationships – power and pleasure

Key issues for practitioners and policy-makers

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# Young women and their relationships – power and pleasure

## Key issues for practitioners and policy-makers

*'We spoke a lot about everything, spent loads of time together. We were just really comfortable around each other ... which was good. 'Cos sometimes you can have relationships I think, where people are sort of, 'Oh I've got to impress them' and you know ... I just could be completely myself' (Dot)*

Despite such positive comments by young people - adults and the media usually talk about young people's sexuality and intimate relationships in quite negative terms:

*'Too many young people are having sex too early'*

*'Young people are irresponsible and do not use contraception'*

*'Teenage pregnancy rates are too high'*

*'Sexually transmitted infections are on the increase among young people'*

Negative messages of this kind are particularly prevalent when discussing young women and sex. On the one hand, **young women** are portrayed as 'victims' – who are coerced into sex, unable to insist on the use of condoms or contraception with male partners, and for whom sex is not enjoyable. At the same time, however, young women are also often being criticised and blamed – seen as being too 'sexual' if they carry condoms, have more than one sexual partner and say they want sex.

Discussions about **young men** and sex are similarly confusing. It is sometimes assumed that young men are only interested in sex, and not in the emotional aspects of relationships. Young men who do not take an active role in initiating sex or seem uninterested in pursuing sex with several partners are often made fun of by their peers.

Many young people are aware of the **double standards** within society about gender and young people's sexuality:

*'Underage girls having sex is seen as far worse than boys having sex underage' (young person aged 16+ responding to a Sex Education Forum survey, 2008a)*

*'It's good to look like a tart, but not to act like one. Teenagers are [seen as being] all binge drinkers and slags; and if they have babies they're pikeys but if they have abortions they're sluts' (young person aged 16+ responding to a Sex Education Forum survey, 2008a)*

This discussion paper has been developed following the completion of a research study exploring understandings of power and experiences of pleasure in sexual and intimate relationships among a small group of heterosexual young women aged 16-18 years. The findings from this study have been used to think more broadly about how to engage with young people in sex and relationships education (SRE).

Before developing these ideas further, we will begin with a brief overview of some of the key research on young women and sexual and intimate relationships, as well as relevant policy developments in the field.

## What does research tell us about young women and sexual and intimate relationships?

### *Some research findings on age of first sex, attitudes to sex, and experiences of coercion*

*The average age at which young people have their first experience of sexual intercourse is 16 years in England (Wellings et al., 2001).*

*Young people report feeling pressure from peers to be sexually active (Corlyon and McGuire, 1999; Maxwell, 2006a; Hyde et al., 2008).*

*78% of young men and 53% of young women surveyed felt that women and girls are 'often' or 'sometimes' to blame for the violence perpetrated against them (Burton and Kitzinger, 1998; these findings were supported in a more recent study by Burman and Cartmel, 2005).*

*A significant minority of young people report experiencing violence in their sexual and intimate relationships (Barter et al., 2009):*

- *A quarter of young women and 18% of young men reported some form of physical partner violence*
- *Nearly three-quarters of young women and half of young men said they had experienced some form of emotional partner violence*
- *One in three young women and 16% of young men reported some form of sexual partner violence*

One of the most important concepts developed by researchers in past decades on young women and their sexual relationships is Janet Holland and colleagues' idea of the '**male in the head**' (1998). They argue that because of a 'male in the head' young women often define their own needs as being synonymous with those of young men's, which leads to a privileging of male needs and male sexual pleasure in heterosexual relationships. For instance, young women might see sex as something that should end in male orgasm (with little or no concern about themselves achieving pleasure), or young women justifying or excusing abusive behaviour by male partners to ensure a relationship continues.

At the same time, other researchers have argued that there is a '**missing discourse of desire**' concerning female sexuality in our society (Tolman and Szalacha, 1999). They suggest that young women do not identify with the concept of female desire. Researchers argue that young women should expect pleasure to be an important part of their experiences of sex – but that they currently do not have the language to talk about and discuss this.

Alongside these influential, yet rather negative understandings of young women's attitudes to, and experiences of sex and intimacy in heterosexual relationships, more in-depth research with young women (and men) in recent years has suggested that things may be **less polarised**. Some

studies have found young women initiating sex, stating conditional terms for relationships with men and making efforts to ensure their own sexual pleasure (Allen, 2005; Maxwell, 2007). Similarly, research with young men suggests they are actually interested in romantic, emotionally involved relationships with young women and want to ensure their partners enjoy sex (Allen, 2005; Maxwell, 2007).

Another commonly held view about young women is that those who come from less privileged backgrounds (in terms of family income, have experience of being in public care and so forth) have more negative experiences of sexual and intimate relationships (Hughes, 1999). While there are some differences in attitudes noted by research (Corlyon and McGuire, 1999; Thomson, 2000), Maxwell (2006b) has suggested young women across the social spectrum have a number of **common experiences**, including experiences of possessiveness and sexual pressure by male partners, as well as actively taking on the role of emotionally supporting a partner and denying their own needs for the sake of a relationship.

## What is the current policy context in England?

### The school curriculum

Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in schools offers an ideal opportunity to discuss attitudes to sexual and intimate relationships with young people. Schools are legally required to have a policy on SRE. The teaching of **Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education (including SRE)** is a requirement for schools to achieve National Healthy Schools Status. The government has published plans to strengthen children and young people's entitlement to be at a Healthy School by establishing a 'pupil guarantee' that 'every pupil will go to a Healthy School' (DCSF, 2009: 16).

The government has also announced its intention to make PSHE education a statutory subject in primary and secondary schools. Statutory status will ensure that all children and young people receive their entitlement to SRE as part of PSHE education.

**The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCA)** non-statutory framework for PSHE education provides some scope for exploring gender, pleasure and power – within work on 'Relationships', which forms one of five key concepts underpinning the subject. At key stage 3, advice is given that: 'In discussing positive relationships, the negative aspects of some relationships, including use of violence and other forms of abuse, may arise and should be addressed' (QCA, 2007:249).

The QCA framework also promotes the development of skills for managing relationships such as negotiation, assertiveness and communication skills. However, the framework does not refer to the influence of gender in understanding the dynamics of power or pleasure across relationships.

There are also opportunities in the wider curriculum to address **gender equalities**, for example in history and citizenship, and to develop critical awareness of gender norms in the media and wider society, through work in English and drama for instance.

Primary and Secondary '**SEAL**' (**Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning**) programmes have been developed as part of the National Strategies to improve standards in education by DCSF. The programme has proved popular with schools and is used to promote social and emotional skills development throughout the curriculum and through a whole-school approach. Skills covered in SEAL include 'self-awareness', 'managing feelings', and 'empathy', which are all important building blocks for positive social and intimate relationships.

## The school environment in England

As institutions, schools have an important role in creating a culture of anti-discrimination and equality of opportunity, setting standards for behaviour and providing positive role models for young people.

Schools have a legal duty to promote pupil well-being (introduced in 2007), and both schools and colleges are inspected against the **five 'Every Child Matters' outcomes for children**; to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being (Education and Inspections Act 2006, section 38).

Schools are also subject to the **Gender Equalities Duty**, which came into force in 2007, and must publish a Gender Equalities Scheme. Guidance has been published by the Equal Opportunities Commission<sup>1</sup> for public authorities on the gender equality duty, which advises that schools should:

Explore sexism and sexist bullying in the curriculum

Create an environment where violence against women is unacceptable

Promote anti-sexist school cultures

Involve and educate parents

(EOC, 2007: 21)

It would be consistent with the Gender Equalities Duty for schools to give more attention to the promotion of positive male and female role models by inviting guest speakers, encouraging men to teach SRE and by ensuring that women are better represented on the school management team and the governing body. The gender equality duty also applies to other environments where children and young people spend time - such as youth groups and employers.

Young people report that **sexual bullying** in school is often not dealt with (Duncan, 1999). The government has announced plans to publish<sup>2</sup> non-statutory guidelines for schools on sexual bullying. Schools will already have policies on bullying and behaviour, which may or may not include specific reference to sexual bullying. Having a policy on bullying is also a requirement of National Healthy Schools Status.

## **School and beyond**

A cross-governmental consultation 'Together we can end violence against women and girls' was carried out during 2009 and will lead to the publication of a strategy aimed at ending **violence against women and girls**. This is expected to include preventive measures such as education for young people on issues of violence against women and girls, as well as initiatives to increase the reporting of violence and facilitate access to support for those affected by violence.

The voluntary sector also runs campaigns and advocacy activities aimed at raising public awareness, promoting positive images of women and influencing policy. A selection of key organisations and resources are listed at the end of this briefing.

## **Views from teachers and young people on SRE teaching about relationships**

SRE is a key vehicle for promoting healthy relationships with young people, but the quality of education provided is variable and depends to a large extent on local commitment and the competence of teachers and other staff in schools – who often have little training for working with young people on these issues.

*'One random contraceptive session in twelve months, I do not consider this to be adequate ...' (young person, aged 16+ responding to a Sex Education Forum survey, 2008a)*

A recent survey carried out by the Sex Education Forum (2008b) asked teachers of SRE to compare how well different SRE topics were covered in their school. Teachers in primary (42%) and secondary schools (37%) felt that the topic 'Understanding what is good and bad in a relationship' was covered 'well' (from a choice of 'well', 'adequately' or 'poorly'). However there was much less confidence about the topic 'The enjoyable and good things about sex' which was reported as being covered 'well' by only 6% of primary teachers and 26% of secondary teachers. Compared to more biological topics such as body changes during puberty, teachers reported that they would like further support for teaching topics such as 'skills for coping with relationships'.

In a parallel survey carried out with young people (Sex Education Forum, 2008a), responses mirror those of teachers. In the survey with young people, respondents were asked to rate topics according to how well they had been covered in their school SRE. The majority of young people said that the biology of sex and reproduction, and body changes during puberty were well covered, but that skills for coping with relationships, and the good and enjoyable things about sex were less well covered.

While some schools provide very little SRE, others provide a planned programme within timetabled PSHE education, and may even offer targeted SRE for small groups of 'vulnerable' young people.

Youth work in out-of-school settings also provides an opportunity to work with young people in small groups, making it possible to take an informal approach and respond to the needs of individuals.

A consultation carried out by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) in 2009 asked young people to identify examples of good teaching about relationships. Out of the 153 young people consulted in focus groups, only two could think of a good example, and these had been part of a youth centre session.

## The study

The study which informed this discussion paper took place in one secondary school in southern England in 2008. All the young women in the 6th Form were invited to take part. The researcher who led the study emphasised at the start that young women did not have to have had sex in order to participate in the study. Fifty-four young women took part in five different focus group discussions, and 33 agreed to be interviewed (19 of whom had also taken part in a group discussion).

Focus group discussions began by discussing experiences of life as a young woman in their co-educational school. Then, through a series of quotations taken from previous studies with young women, participants' views on issues such as initiating sex, sexual pressure, sexual pleasure and masturbation were examined. Those young women who participated in one-to-one interviews described their relationship and sexual experiences so far, identifying moments and experiences they remembered as being particularly good and those which they viewed more negatively.

In this study, the young women only discussed sexual experiences and intimate relationships with young men and did not mention feelings of attraction for, or experiences of, sex and intimate relationships with the same sex.

All young women chose a pseudonym for themselves, which are used below when reporting back on the research.

## The findings

*The study found that young women have both negative and positive experiences within their sexual and intimate relationships with young men.*

*Experiences of feeling objectified by male peers at school, of being pressured or coerced within relationships and descriptions of ambivalence towards sex and lacking confidence in their bodies mirror the findings from many other research studies.*

*But young women also spoke about feeling powerful and in control within their relationships, and actively discussed sexual pleasure. Both 'sides' of their stories are shared here.*

### Being objectified by young men in and out of the classroom

All the young women involved in the study said they preferred to be in a mixed-sex rather than a single-sex school. However, they described a number of experiences which suggested that in daily interactions with their male peers they were made to feel uncomfortable and objectified. Many of the examples they gave were arguably incidents of **sexual bullying**.

Carmel, for instance, explained that she was one of a very few young women in one of her language classes:

*There's like a couple of guys like in particular...they're always like...every time like I say something...I don't notice if they do it to any other one...but any time I say something they always call me like a blond bimbo and stuff.*

Other young women said that having young men in the same class made them think twice before putting their hand up to answer a question because they feared being **made fun of**, as had happened in the past.

Outside the classroom, in other parts of the school, young women described instances where they felt objectified by young men. During a group discussion, Plum said that when she sometimes walked into the canteen some of the young men had called out a '*number*' at her, which was meant to rank how attractive they found her. One of her friends replied, '*[the boys] just sit there, and they can see the door that they come in, and sit there...checking out your arse*'.

One young woman explained that large groups of boys could be very **intimidating** in the playground, '*when they're together, they're horrible, you don't want to walk past, because somebody is going to say something [about the way you look]*'.

Young women also described **feeling pressured** to look a certain way. Regina said that the young men at the school were '*bitchier*' than the girls. She said she heard boys discussing other girls, saying '*her skirt's too short, oh she thinks she's too cool, oh look at her wiggling her bum, oh god she's wearing high heels*'.

Young women clearly described feeling objectified by their male peers in terms of how they looked and the clothes they wore, but also described some instances of **unwanted and inappropriate physical touching** – such as Natalia who said that a young man from a lower year, who she did not know, had once come up to her and ‘*smacked my arse*’ while she was picking up her food tray in the canteen.

### **Being pressured and coerced in intimate and sexual relationships**

During one group discussion, three young women shared the following experiences of being abused and coerced by their partners:

Bella                    *When I wore a skirt he'd be like...he'd just like whisper to me, 'Slut', and like stuff like that...*

Stacey                    *Like on like Friday nights when I was really tired and stuff, and like he would like initiate [sex] and then I'd be like, 'No, I'm too tired'. And he would like start being like, 'So you don't like me' and stuff....*

Carmel                    *I had a boyfriend...[and] every day he'd be like...not just once a day, like six times every day he'd be wanting me to do something [sexual]...And it made me really despise him. And like now when I look back on him I just hate him, and I hate him for like making me do things that I didn't want to do so many times.*

In line with other research, **many young women justified such abuse and coercion** by portraying their boyfriends as being ‘*quite complex*’ (Summer), having ‘*a lot of problems*’ (Sarah) or being ‘*quite sensitive*’ (Chantelle).

Despite Bella’s boyfriend (and his friends) monitoring what she wore and who she spoke to when they were out in pubs and at parties, Bella excused this behaviour by saying:

*He's a very difficult person to read, he's confused all the time, he doesn't know what he wants...and I just have to be on the kind of receiving end of it all; but he's just my best friend.*

(Bella)

Taking responsibility for nurturing and supporting male partners within relationships, as well as tolerating and excusing coercive behaviour has been described in other research as women taking on ‘**emotion work**’ within relationships (Duncombe and Marsden, 1998).

## **Lack of confidence about bodies and ambivalence about sex**

A few young women described a lack of confidence in how they looked and feeling uncomfortable when they were naked.

*I wasn't comfortable enough with him to sort of [have sex]... because ... you know I can be quite self conscious about my body and things ... I'd be really worried about what he'd be thinking about me, like whether he'd be judging me. (Summer)*

And some young women explained they were relatively ambivalent about having sex, and did not feel terribly sexual.

*I don't think I'm a really really like sexually orientated person ... you get some people who ... its you know something which is always on their mind, or if they are going out on Saturday night they'd be like, Oooh I've got to get with someone' sort of thing. Which is never really my attitude towards it. (Chanelle)*

Geraldine *And also I've never had the desire ever to do it manually.*

Mercedes *Yeah me neither.*

Mercedes *I think I'm really strange as well because I don't even enjoy sex that much.*

Geraldine *No no, neither do I.*

(Group discussion)

Chardonnay drew a link between **intimacy and comfort** in relation to different sexual acts, explaining that she preferred giving oral sex which she considered to be a less intimate form of interaction than masturbating a boy.

*I prefer giving head [oral sex] than giving a hand job because I find giving a hand job a bit more ... it's probably more intimate in a way because you kind of give eye contact or whatever, that's what I wouldn't do. I prefer to give them [boys] head.*

*Given what much of the research, and popular perception, tells us about young women not having power in their sexual and intimate relationships, we think it is important to explore further the ways young women understood power within their relationships and to highlight moments where they seemed to be in control or feel powerful.*

*It may be through engaging young women (and men) in discussions of how power within relationships can be positively (as well as negatively) experienced, that we might find new ways of skilling up young people to have more equal, satisfying and healthy sexual and intimate relationships.*

## How do young women understand power within relationships?

When young women talked about their relationships they often used the word '**control**' – meaning who had more control of the relationship, or who had more power over the other person. A few young women said that particular young men seemed to have some sort of control over them – usually because they were particularly good looking or charming.

*He's still a bit of an arsehole [her previous boyfriend] but...there's always a bit of me [when] he turns on the charm and I still kind of fall for it. Because he is really good looking...(Ellie)*

But others explained that they often had power over their boyfriends because their boyfriends were more committed to the relationship or were more needy in some way.

*I think I'm not quite so bothered as he [her boyfriend] is. But I think that's been the same throughout our whole relationship. He like, when we started going out, he was always, I think...liked me a lot more than I liked him...definitely yeah he is slightly more committed to the relationship, more than me. (Sally)*

## How do young women 'take control back' in their relationships?

Young women provided examples where something had happened in their relationship or during a sexual experience which had led them to feel upset or hurt. Having these feelings often caused them to want to take control back of the situation or relationship.

Letita said that after having had a sexual experience with one of her brother's friends when she was drunk, she had '*felt really dirty*'. Afterwards,

*I kind of made a rule for myself to never do anything unless I actually like the person, because I just hate feeling bad about myself. (Letita)*

*We [my boyfriend and I] got in a fight and he hit a wall and put a hole in the wall. And so I thought, 'Right, you're getting aggressive around me, it's not on', so I broke up with him. (Mercedes)*

Mercedes got both cross and frightened when her boyfriend punched the wall during an argument. She made the decision to immediately end the relationship.

Feeling **upset or angry** (usually because they had experienced inequality within their relationships) often seemed to spur the young women into wanting to take control of (or back from) their partners within their sexual and intimate relationships.

*This was one way in which young women seemed to understand power within relationships – as something relational, a resource usually unequally distributed between partners. Yet, a number of the young women also described power and control as being a position they could simply occupy within their relationships, without resistance.*

## Powerful young women

Young women explained that often they made their own decisions about what to do in a relationship, that they **followed their own mind** and **listened to what they wanted** – even if their boyfriends asked them to do something else.

Chantelle described how her current relationship was going really well. Although her boyfriend said he wanted to stay faithful over the long summer holidays, she felt unable to return this promise as she had made a commitment to her cousin to 'go crazy this summer', and she did not want to give on up this plan simply because she was now going out with someone.

*He [her boyfriend] said to me he's not going to do anything [this summer], so that puts me in quite an awkward position because I'm going to be, I'll have so many opportunities to [get sexually intimate with someone]. And it was going to be, that was sort of my plan me and my cousin going out, we're going to go crazy this summer...I think it's just going to develop how it comes, I'm just going to see how it comes, how I feel, if I do it [have sex or get intimate with someone else], when it comes to situation - make decisions then. (Chantelle)*

Being in control in relationships, seemed linked to young women feeling that they should make decisions that fitted in with their **broader life plans**. Plans with friends or family should take as much priority as those made with boyfriends. **Confidence**, a belief that they had a **strong personality**, or feeling that they were **too young to be tied down** in a relationship, were also linked to feeling in control in relationships with boyfriends.

*I'm quite like a strong person and I can't cope with like weak people that agree with me and stuff like that I just get really really irritated...there needs to be some physical attraction and then just banter...like I was seeing this guy a few weeks ago and then, like...a bit, and he supposedly really likes me, but he kept agreeing with everything that I said and it was just all like...no, don't, take the piss out of me, I just couldn't really cope with it so I sort of stopped that. (Letita)*

*I hate being tied down to one person. I think I really like sort of I don't know, I'm a bit of a flirt. I like other people, liking me and stuff. That's the thing I hate about relationships, you can't do what you want....you have to be with one person...it's nice to have someone who, 'Yeah I've got a boyfriend', instead of being (laugh) single. But then it's more fun being single. (Barbara)*

## **Becoming more aware of inequalities and bringing about change**

One way of supporting young women to reflect on, and develop the skills and confidence to articulate what they are looking for in a sexual or intimate relationship is to support them in identifying moments where they **feel in control (or take control back)** during their experiences. However, arguably we also want young people to develop a broader awareness of power inequalities in relationships and find ways of **negotiating positions of equality**, feeling in control and sharing power with new partners.

Natalia gave an example of how she took control in her relationships, after she decided she did not like giving oral sex. She decided that no boyfriend was ever going to pressure her into giving oral sex. If he did – she would end the relationship.

*Er...no I hate...going down on the guy [giving oral sex], I don't like that at all, I don't think that's very nice....I just cannot stand doing something to him. It just makes me sick...[and] X [her ex-boyfriend] was really up for me doing it, and that's why I didn't like go out with him anymore, I was just like, 'No thanks'. (Natalia)*

Natalia suggested in her interview that her decision not to perform oral sex on a boyfriend had been sustained across a number of relationships.

Ellie offered another example of how her anger at her boyfriend's repeated jealous behaviour ('it always starts when he gets drunk') led her to set out conditions for their relationship to continue. Ellie explained how they were out at a night club with some of her school friends,

*He was drunk and like really drunk, and it always starts when he gets drunk. It really annoys me...he was just an absolute arsehole, and he was trying to like dance with me. And I was like, 'I want to stay with my friends' kind of thing, and he was like, 'Oh you like your friends more than me', oh for God's sake!...[he said], 'Oh fuck, I'm going to go and try it on with X [one of her friends] then'. And I H-I-T the roof, I was fuming. I mean we had this big thing [fight] and he was just being so, so irritating...he got so angry and he threw his phone on the floor and it smashed, it still worked. But then he put it [the phone back] together and did it again [smashed the phone on the floor] and then we were outside the club afterwards and I was like, 'Get in the taxi with us and we'll go home, I'll drop you home'. And X [her male best friend] was staying at my house that night and he [her boyfriend] was like, 'Can't you stay at my house', and I was like, 'No, I'm not going to stay at your house'...I was just so angry with him. And so I made him stop drinking for two months (laughs). (Ellie)*

In the examples above, young women recognised certain conditions or experiences they were unwilling to have repeated, and incorporated the lessons learned into their future relationship interactions.

## **Sex-positive statements by young women, and articulating feelings of desire**

Despite some young women in the study explaining that they did not always enjoy sex, or preferred foreplay to actual sexual intercourse, overall most young women described very **positive attitudes** to sex. Young women wanted their men to be *'fit'* (Letita) or *'good looking'* (Barbara). It was important to feel attracted to someone if you were going to have sex with them. And many young women talked about themselves as sexual people.

*We were both quite sexual people....I think I enjoy healthy sex. (Iona)*

*There's a whole new sort of side of me that came out...'cos I've never had myself down as [passionate or sexual] and I think I have changed quite a lot since I've been with him [her current boyfriend]. (Ellie)*

When young women were asked to describe how it felt to be sexually attracted to someone, or what sexual pleasure felt like, these were some of the things they said:

*Initially [you think], 'Oh I [want] to get a bit close to them' and then...I mean you get get heated up in the moment don't you and then one thing leads to another...it's that urge of wanting just a little bit more. (Iona)*

*Basically, I have never had an orgasm from sex itself...what I've found with most guys is that they don't really understand the whole foreplay thing and they don't really enjoy doing it as much. They kind of just want to kiss a bit and fool about a little bit and then have sex, but they don't really understand the concept. (Mercedes)*

*[Sex] is about intimacy, but then of course its about the fun and just trying to do things and different sorts of feelings, [positions, situations]. (Ellie)*

Young women used a **range of words to describe sex**, including: intimate, passionate, fun, impulsive, exciting, [create] a bond, [be] physical, natural, a thrill.

*While many of the young women who described being in, or taking control of, their intimate relationships and/or sexual experiences also described the importance of sexual pleasure; a significant minority of young women who appeared to feel less powerful within their relationships, did emphasize and report experiencing sexual pleasure and desire.*

*A focus on the importance of pleasure during sex could therefore be a key way of supporting young women to reflect more broadly on wanting to, and how to, feel more in control and powerful in other parts of their intimate relationships.*

## Recommendations for practice and policy

Much current research advises us that young people want sex and relationships education (SRE) to be **more relevant to real-life** and more closely tied to their own experiences. Young people have also indicated that they want to learn about and discuss **sexual pleasure**, and that SRE should not only focus on the negative outcomes of sexual activity (Hirst, 2004; Allen, 2005; Maxwell, 2006b).

The findings from this study raise questions about whether the content of SRE and one-to-one discussions with young people adequately explore concepts of **equality, control and pleasure**. Learning about the more biological aspects of sex, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and using contraception are clearly vital, but there is a need to place this information in the context of how young people experience and view sexual and intimate relationships.

Young men and women, no matter what their background, will always have some (even if it is limited) access to resources that enable them to try and position themselves more powerfully within situations (Allard, 2005). To facilitate this, they need to become more aware of power dynamics in their relationships, and develop strategies for **building more equal and enjoyable relationships**.

The findings about young women's experiences of relationships reported on here may be useful material to use in discussions with young people both in one-to-one situations and in SRE sessions.

Young people may disclose sexual and intimate relationship experiences **in a one-to-one situation with a professional**, for example in a youth-work context, counselling or health-care setting. The experience of interviewing young women on a one-to-one basis for this study suggests that this is an opportunity for the young person to be encouraged to reflect on their experiences and to explore what they might find acceptable and not acceptable in a future relationship. This could also involve exploring why sexual and relationship experiences may or may not have been pleasurable or positive.

Discussions with young people as part of **SRE in a class (or more informal group) setting** have a different dynamic and it is important to establish shared boundaries about confidentiality so that unintended and inappropriate disclosures are minimised. SRE should be developmental, building on earlier learning and always responsive to the age and maturity of children and young people. Less than a third of young people become sexually active before the age of 16, but school SRE has an important role in preparing young people for sexual and intimate relationships. There are further opportunities to provide SRE in post-16 learning, and again provision should respond to the needs of young people.

The following advice for teachers of SRE have been developed by the Sex Education Forum and aims to help teachers consider how they can build an awareness of gender equality and pleasure into SRE.

### **Some ideas for SRE teachers**

- Support children and young people to build up and practice a vocabulary to talk about feelings and emotions, desire, pleasure and love, and the power dynamics of relationships. A focus on language can be used to make cross-curricular links with English.
- Reflecting on friendships and every-day social interactions can provide a comfortable starting point for looking at the qualities of healthy relationships and to develop an awareness of the dynamics of power and gender.
- Ensure that learning about relationships addresses both same-sex and heterosexual relationships.
- Give children and young people the role of ‘agony aunt/uncle’ or ‘advisors’ using stories and problem pages so that they can reflect on relationship scenarios and the choices and strategies available to them. Use real-life examples about relationships (taking care to protect confidentiality), for example some of the quotes from this study can be used to stimulate discussion.
- Provide opportunities for young people to identify different forms and sources of power in relationships (including financial and emotional power), as well as power that comes with age and gender. Look at the positive characteristics of relationships where power is balanced and shared.
- Develop strategies and practice skills for coping with relationships through role play, drama and activities in pairs and small groups.
- Balance learning about the risks of sexual relationships with learning about the good and pleasurable things about sexual and intimate relationships – and make it clear that both men and women can, and do, enjoy sex.
- Underpin all teaching with a clear values framework that promotes mutual respect and consent.
- Provide some activities in single-sex groups as young men and women may feel freer to talk openly about some topics without the opposite sex. Bring the whole group back together after single-sex work and help children and young people to safely share some of their learning from the single-sex sessions, facilitating communication between boys and girls.
- Be aware that learning about violence against women and girls has a risk of alienating young men by making them feel to blame. Focus on building awareness of gender norms, addressing stereotypes and presenting alternative positive role models.

- Check that resources used in teaching SRE offer positive role models for young men and women.
- Teachers of SRE are role models too. Schools should encourage both men and women to teach SRE.
- Signpost young people to services in school and the community where they can get help one-to-one including counselling and sexual health services.

### **Messages for policy makers**

- Show leadership and consistency in promoting the message that sexual bullying, coercion and violence are unacceptable and must be challenged.
- Invest in identifying, documenting and disseminating examples of good practice in teaching about sexual and intimate relationships.
- Ensure adequate investment in teacher training so that teachers of SRE are competent to address gender, power and relationships issues in their work.
- Deliver on the commitment to make PSHE education a statutory subject and realise young people's entitlement to good quality sex and relationships education.
- Build the competence of the wider youth work-force through core work-force development modules so that professionals such as youth workers, learning mentors and school nurses can effectively address gender, power, sex and relationships with young people.

## Resources for further work

### Organisation

The Government Equalities Office have produced a series of fact sheets which can be downloaded from their web-site.

<http://www.equalities.gov.uk>

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### Resources

Factsheet: **Women in power: milestones**

Factsheet: **Women in business**

Factsheet: **Domestic violence**

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**Brook** is the only national voluntary sector provider of free and confidential sexual health advice and services specifically for young people under 25.

[www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

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Brook have developed web resources and a variety of information and teaching materials about sexual health and contraception.

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The **Centre for HIV and Sexual Health** is a Sheffield based service that acknowledges the political, social and cultural factors and health inequalities which affect and determine people's sexual health, as well as issues relating to individual experience, emotions, sexuality, sensuality and spirituality. They run training courses and have a range of publications including a new booklet on pleasure.

[www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk](http://www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk)

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'**PLEASURE**' (2009) a booklet which explores why and how to raise the issue of sexual pleasure in sexual health work with young people. It also gives tips and ideas on how to raise the issue with groups of young people and individuals.

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**Womankind** aim to raise awareness and transform attitudes to stop violence against women. They have produced a range of materials for use in schools to promote healthy relationships and stop sexual bullying.

[www.womankind.org.uk](http://www.womankind.org.uk)

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**Challenging Violence, Changing Lives** (2008) is a CD for teachers with lesson plans on violence against women for Years 9 and 10. The Year 9 lessons look at healthy relationships. The Year 10 materials encourage young people to run a White Ribbon Campaign.

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**Tender** promotes healthy relationships based on equality and respect and use drama and education to prevent domestic abuse and sexual violence.

<http://www.tender.org.uk/trust>

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**Card game** (2005) pack of cards that can be used with young people in discussions about relationships. Each card depicts a different character with a different opinion about relationships, equality and respect.

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**fpa** is a national sexual health charity and runs professional training courses on a range of relevant topics and produces leaflets and resources, some of which can be freely downloaded from their site.

<http://www.fpa.org.uk/Homepage>

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**Love Sex Relationships** (2008) & **Is This Love** (2007)

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**Womensaid** is a national charity working to end violence against women and children.

[www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

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**Expect Respect** (2008) includes a series of lesson plans that can be used from reception to Year 13 on topics such as managing conflict and domestic abuse. Available as a web download.

**Barnardo's** provides a range of services to give children and young people the chance of a future free from sexual exploitation, and produces educational resources.

[www.barnardo's.org.uk/resources](http://www.barnardo's.org.uk/resources)

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**Working With Men** implement and support work that benefits the development of men and boys. They also seek to raise awareness of issues impacting upon boys and men, through projects, training, consultancy, research and the development of resources and publications.

[www.workingwithmen.org](http://www.workingwithmen.org)

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The **Sex Education Forum** is a unique collaboration of 50 member organisations and the leading authority on sex and relationships education in England. The Forum website hosts free downloadable fact sheets and lists of teaching resources at primary and secondary level and for special schools.

[www.ncb.org.uk/sef](http://www.ncb.org.uk/sef)

**Protecting Self - loving and abusive Relationships and Intimacy Photo Pack** (1999) &

**The Relationship Game** (1998)relationships (2006)

**Addressing healthy relationships and sexual exploitation in school PSHE** (2006)

**Boys and young men: developing effective sex and relationships education in schools** (2006)

**Young People's Charter for Sex and Relationships Education** (2009)

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*For a more in-depth discussion of the study, see:  
Claire Maxwell and Peter Aggleton (in press) 'Agency in action – young women and their sexual relationships in a private school', Gender and Education.*

*Young people-friendly copies of the study findings are also available from Claire Maxwell, TCRU, Institute of Education, University of London: [c.maxwell@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:c.maxwell@ioe.ac.uk) or to download from: [www.ioe.ac.uk/tcru](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/tcru).*



The Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) is a multi-disciplinary research unit within the Institute of Education, University of London. Founded in 1973 by Professor Jack Tizard, its principal function is to carry out research of relevance to the health and wellbeing of children, young people and families.

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