

# Real World Relationships

## Explore; Straight Talking

### Introduction

The national school curriculum is sorely lacking when it comes to teaching young people about both healthy relationships and the effects of teenage pregnancy. Teenagers raising children of their own face additional health challenges; these can often be exacerbated in single-parent families. Children born into an environment where their young parents are ill-equipped to deal with parenting challenges are more likely to have worse health outcomes in the future.

But support and guidance can counteract some of the short and longer term issues. In encouraging young people to consider both healthy relationships and the real implications of becoming a parent at a young age, advice and knowledge should be imparted in a way that is authentic, realistic and non-patronising – and crucially, offered by their peers.

How can the real-life experiences of young parents be effectively used as a positive, genuine resource to educate teens about the realities of parenting, whilst also empowering the parents as educators?

How can realistic, supportive relationships be effectively illustrated in the classroom? And what impact can this have on health outcomes for two generations?

### Explore

Explore is a charity which educates students aged 15 and over about the reality, value and possibility of long-term relationships. Explore was established in 2000 and comprises 10 staff and a team of 60 volunteers. Funding is through charitable trusts and private donations. Schools make a contribution to the cost of sessions, typically just £2 per pupil to cover travel costs. The charity operates in schools across England, serving more than 70 schools and 6,000 young people each year.

Explore recognises the benefits of good relationship on emotional health, and conversely sees relationship breakdown as a source of disruption and emotional stress. The charity aims to provide a counter-point to the relationships shown in the media and popular culture, which are often simply portrayed as romantic, sexual, dramatic and short-lived. These stereotypes are compounded when a young person's only experience of relationships within the home is negative, without any role models. The project illustrates the values and benefits of stability and commitment.

The Explore approach complements the conventional curriculum. Classes of young people aged 15 to 18 meet and question married couples who provide authentic examples of lasting relationships. The encounter helps young people explore how character and values inform behaviours that impact on relationship and wellbeing.

The volunteer couples, usually over 50, are honest and upfront during sessions, with no pre-determined message or script. The half-day sessions encourage students to discuss issues around relationships, such as choosing a partner, sex, ill-health, infidelity, disagreements and infertility. Students reflect on the couples' behaviours, values and treatment of each other.

Key to this approach is that sessions are collegiate, with the topics, pace and depth of discussion determined by students. The authenticity of the questions and responses, encouraged by near-anonymity, fosters a strong sense of openness and curiosity.

Explore's volunteers also highlight the links between good relationships and health. They explain how a partner offers someone to talk with about health worries, normalise fears and prevent hypochondria – and how a good partner motivates healthy habits, taking care of yourself, eating well and exercise.

Explore's experience of reaching over 50,000 young people on the subject of long-term relationships has created an unparalleled insight into the lack of relationship understanding. Student feedback reveals good awareness of the issues that can damage relationships. They also reveal significant areas of ignorance about positive aspects of relationships and the resilience brought about by forgiveness, adaptation and tolerance.

Typically eight in 10 students speak of a session in transformative terms, lessons learned that they intend to apply, of reassurance and a more hopeful view of the future. Nine out of 10 students in the session observed rated the session good or very good. Eight out of 10 said it had achieved all of its aims (to find out about the importance of lasting relationships, to learn about the importance of being married, and to pick up new ideas or thoughts about what makes lasting relationships). All said it had achieved at least one of these.

No cost benefit analysis has been conducted, largely as a consequence of the diffuse and long-term nature of any benefits. However, a closely related precursor to the approach, adopted by Marriage Care, and evaluated by the Department of Education demonstrated a social value of up to £11 for every £1 spent.

## **Straight Talking**

Straight Talking is a small organisation which uses the powerful real-world experience of teenage parents to communicate messages about sex and relationships. CEO Hilary Pannack launched Straight Talking 16 years ago to counter-act the additional health difficulties that young people face when they have children. "Teenage mothers are three times more likely than older women to develop postnatal depression, they are more likely to die in childbirth and their babies more likely to have neonatal illness," she says.

The organisation is funded by the Nationwide Foundation and the Lottery, and educates thousands of pupils in London, Birmingham, Surrey and Trafford. Straight Talking collaborates with local councils and community groups, and has a strong relationship with the Teenage Pregnancy Team in Barking and Dagenham.

Straight Talking offers classroom sessions for teenagers on the realities of parenting, as told by teenage mums and dads. Straight Talking gives a unique and authentic platform for honest conversation about sex and relationships – and open communication is key to the approach.

The central message is not that these parents regret having their children but that most would have preferred to have greater relationship stability and financial security beforehand. The intention is ultimately to reduce rates of teenage pregnancy through encouraging young people to truly understand the challenges of parenting.

Rather than traditional approaches of dictating to young people not to have sex or risk pregnancy, Straight Talking removes the taboo, gives the facts of what life as a teenage

parent is like and empowers young people to make their own decisions.

Straight Talking's work in schools typically includes five weekly lessons with young people aged between 13 and 17. Sessions include a variety of activities: visualising telling their parents about a pregnancy, imagining accompanying emotions, the practicalities of being responsible for a baby, and a shopping activity with the budget of income support.

The voluntary peer educators delivering the sessions are aged between 16 and 25 – and one of the crucial aspects of Straight Talking is how it supports both pupils and parents.

In 2009, outcome measures suggested the course gave pupils greater awareness of parenting challenges. Following the course many pupils suggested the ideal age to become a parent as older than the age they had originally indicated.

Straight Talking may have contributed to a reduction in teenage pregnancy rates in a number of areas. Rates of teenage pregnancy in Kingston have reduced by 29% over the lifetime of the organisation. In Barking and Dagenham, rates have reduced by over 12%. This improves health outcomes for prospective parents – and the implication is their children will be healthier if they become a parent later in life.

## **Conclusion**

Explore uses a simple, cost-effective but impactful approach to modelling supportive and loving relationships. Through open and honest discussion, students are empowered to make healthy choices in their own relationships, impacting on their health and wellbeing.

Pannack says participating young people are often undervalued by society, they typically live in poor conditions, are under considerable stress when raising a baby, and experience stigmatisation. Participation in Straight Talking offers an alternative: an environment in which they can build up their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Their long-term health outcomes are improved as a result.