

Start Talking

relationships and
sex education –
a guide for foster care



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1. Introduction

This resource is designed to support foster carers to have positive conversations about relationships and sex education with the children they care for. It has been informed by a group of foster carers and care experienced young people, who took part in the ‘Start Talking’ project, which was a partnership between The Fostering Network and Sex Education Forum.

Seven focus groups were held with 15 foster carers and eight young people who shared their experiences of relationships and sex education. Additionally, foster carers were asked to undertake a survey around relationships and sex education and we received 60 responses to this.

This guide highlights what they told us, and what they hope will get others to Start Talking.

What is relationships and sex education?

Relationships and sex education (RSE) is learning about the emotional, social and physical aspects of growing up, relationships, sex, sexuality and sexual health, throughout childhood, adolescence and into adulthood and parenthood. It should equip children and young people with the information, skills and positive values to have safe, fulfilling relationships, to enjoy their sexuality and to take responsibility for their sexual health and well-being.

Why is relationships and sex education needed?

Good quality RSE fulfills children and young people’s right to information about their bodies and health. Research shows that RSE contributes to behaviour change, including reducing unprotected and unwanted sex, and reducing harmful behaviour, including assault and abuse. RSE promotes both the physical and mental health of children and young people.

Research has also found that RSE is more effective when both home and school are involved. However a survey of 1000 young people ([Sex Education Forum, 2022](#)) found that almost one in four (23 per cent) of young people received no relationships and sex education from their parents or carers.

What is good quality relationships and sex education in a foster care environment?

Foster carers involved in the ‘Start Talking’ project felt that **open and honest** discussion about relationships and sex was important to support children in their care. This would result in young people being more **informed and confident**, resulting in **better health and wellbeing**.

1. Introduction (continued)

Many of the care experienced young people involved in the project told us that they had received little or no relationships and sex education and had often relied on educating themselves or asking siblings to fill in the gaps. They felt that greater openness from foster carers would have made a big difference to them, and they pooled their ideas about how to reframe their negative experiences as more healthy approaches to relationships and sex education as captured in this guide.

Through 'Start Talking', a series of focus groups were held and allowed foster carers to talk to each other about everyday scenarios that relate to RSE. They found there were common issues that kept coming up and warranted more discussion. This resource addresses some, but not all, areas of RSE and is built around those conversations and the tips that foster carers shared, interwoven with advice from care experienced young people and links to useful resources.

In addition to the focus groups, an open survey was made available, with 60 responses from foster carers. It addresses some but not all areas of RSE, giving priority to the issues that foster carers and young people with care experience spoke about. The areas identified through the survey that foster carers most wanted support with included nudes, pornography, masturbation and LGBTQ+ and gender identities.

The need for training and comprehensive support for foster carers around RSE was a unanimous recommendation from the project participants. This resource is a start, not an end in meeting this need.

A collection of all the resources mentioned is provided at the end of each section.

2. Getting started – practical advice

It can be daunting for foster carers to know where to begin with conversations about relationships and sex. Here are some practical tips before you start.

Reflecting on your own values, learning and support needs

- Remember that many adults have had poor relationships and poor sex education, have gaps in knowledge and may feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. This can be a barrier for lots of people, but it is possible and necessary to overcome this.
- Reflect on your own thoughts and feelings before the subject is raised. Consider your own history and what your triggers may be.
- Ensure you have support to talk through your feelings about what young people are telling you and the situations you may be confronted with.

- Use your own supervision and peer supports to explore your thoughts and feelings and don't be afraid to ask for help or say if you don't understand – this is something we would want young people to do.
- We have our own views, beliefs and values about relationships and sex, but we shouldn't impose these on the children and young people in our care.
- There may be cultural and religious differences and it is important as foster carers you have support to understand the needs of children you care for.
- It is important that full attention is paid to the individual child's gender, faith, ethnic origin, cultural and linguistic background, sexual orientation and any disability they might have, as stated in fostering guidance.
- Learning about relationships and sex education is a life-long process. Look for training, reading and resources to support your own learning and development.

Working with the team around the child

- Be open with other professionals about how you are supporting young people with this topic and ensure timely and accurate recording of and sharing any issues/concerns.
- Be respectful of and mindful to maintain the privacy of the child where possible, sharing information on a 'need to know' basis.
- Find out what RSE is provided at the child's school. The school policy can provide a starting point. Are there resources to borrow or additional support available? Does school provide information in advance of topics being taught so that foster carers can be aware of what's coming up?
- What does your fostering service offer in terms of a policy and support?

Preparing for a child to arrive

- Plan the family ground rules from the start, for example: what is acceptable to wear around the house; bedroom rules; open and closed doors and entering bathroom and bedrooms, how do we show affection e.g., hugs and does the young person feel comfortable with this? Record these in the family 'safe care plan' and review it regularly.
- Include your approach to relationships and sex education in the 'safe care plan' so that you as the foster carer have confidence that you are tackling issues in the right way and to enable you to support children to feel safe in talking to you.
- Think about how to convey a message of openness when you welcome a child or young person to your home, for example having a basket of different menstrual products in the bathroom and showing them where to find laundry and personal hygiene products.
- Be aware that past trauma may mean that a child or young person displays inappropriate and sometimes sexualised behaviour. From the start, be clear with the whole family about what is acceptable and about the need for personal privacy, and revisit if needed.

"I believe that you should be very open and honest with school, both primary and secondary, as they can be a huge support with a wealth of contacts."

(foster carer)

"I can hesitate due to not knowing their past experiences so am mindful how to have that conversation bearing in mind their developmental age, their physical age and how their body is developing, and past traumas, experiences of what can seem quite normal with their birth family but is not acceptable."

(foster carer)

Welcoming a child

- A child's individual 'safe care plan' and 'placement plan', together with the foster carer's delegated authority agreement will be completed when, or within a few days, of their arrival and are all documents that should recognise that RSE will be discussed.
- Don't assume that a child or young person has received RSE at school, or in previous home settings. There may well be gaps in their knowledge and they may be reluctant to expose these. See the child not the age.
- Use TV programmes, soaps, pop music and the news to generate talking points for relationships and sex education.
- Choose 'safe' times to talk especially with older young people such as working alongside each other, travelling in the car or walking the dog, so eye contact can be avoided, and the situation doesn't feel so intense.
- Talk in the 'third' person about behaviour and other aspects of RSE so that it creates safe distance and prevents blame being attributed – especially where parents/family are concerned.
- Use correct terms for body parts (e.g., vulva, vagina, penis, testicles) including with young children and those with additional needs. This is important for consistency and safeguarding. Learning about consent and boundaries starts from infancy.

- Give children time before bringing up conversations about RSE themes, but don't be afraid to start discussions proactively, as this signals you are happy to talk.
- Have information handy about accessing local health services including for condoms, contraception and other sexual health services.
- Be prepared to learn from young people about things like terms they use for LGBTQ+ and gender identities, and about online technology. Find out what the terms mean to them. If you don't have the answer offer to look for further information together.
- Regular short conversations are more useful than occasional big talks.
- Remember that your actions, how you behave with other people, how you react to different situations, your confidence to call out disrespectful behaviour, all serve as an important role-modelling to children and young people.

General tips for foster carers: what young people told us

- Show that you are open from the start. This can be done with things like showing us where to find a choice of menstrual product supplies.
- Create an environment where young people can ask questions.
- Don't force a discussion on a young person.
- It's about the foster carer being ready to have those conversations as and when the child is ready or wants to.
- Use picture books and visuals to explain things, not just talking.
- Normalise things like puberty and periods and talking about relationships and sex.
- Remove the sense of shame associated with having been abused.
- Privacy is important to us and should be maintained for conversations about personal things as much as possible.

3. Puberty and the changing adolescent body

Whilst puberty is often covered as part of the school curriculum it is still common for girls to say they hadn't learnt about periods before experiencing them and for boys to experience wet dreams before they had learnt about them.

Periods, wet dreams, body hair and body odour are all aspects of puberty and the changing adolescent body that have practical implications for daily life, and which care experienced young people say can be particularly challenging for them to navigate.

With a little preparation foster carers can help meet children and young people's practical and emotional needs with puberty.

This section is written by young people with care experience, to help reframe thinking for foster carers.

Puberty - reframed by care experienced young people

- Chats about puberty should start before puberty.
- Don't assume a young person knows about puberty even if they arrive in foster care and have started puberty already.

"The best conversation I ever had with my mum was just hearing her story - I had all the facts from school and friends. Hearing her personal experience helped normalise the idea that everyone is different."

(young person)

Body hair - reframed by care experienced young people

Support young people in foster care with

- More talk about our hair, what it does, how it's normal and healthy.
- Include body hair when discussing puberty.
- Shaving, waxing etc. is an option for all genders but it is a choice.
- Information about 'how to' and shame-free access to remove hair safely if that's the choice.

"We live in a society where it's 'expected' for young people to shave, wax, and remove body hair. You don't need to if you don't want to: "power to the pubes!" but support is needed if that's the choice young people make, and often that's not been easy to access in foster care."

(young person)

Periods – reframed by care experienced young people

“I remember when I first started my period, I didn’t know what was happening, I cried thinking I was dying, and I used toilet roll in my underwear for ages.”

(young person)

- Explain simple things like tampons and sanitary towels and the different ones depending on the flow of your period and how to actually use them.
- The fact that periods don’t always happen once a month either they can be irregular.
- Up-to-date information about menstrual products like period pants, washable pads and menstrual cups.
- Normalising periods can be done visually. Don’t hide away menstrual products.
- Remember other family members who could help – siblings, aunts and uncles and family friends etc.
- Things like ‘oh, I heard you started your period!’ – that doesn’t need to be shared and is private to me.

“I started my period during my second day in foster care. I wasn’t ready to talk about it with them but there should have been products in the house for me to use and there wasn’t.”

(young person)

Sexual and reproductive health – reframed by care experienced young people

- Include awareness about checking your breasts / armpits and testicles for unusual lumps.
- Cover all the different types of contraception available.
- Don’t pressure us to go on contraception out of fear that we’ll get pregnant. There should be information, discussion, about side effects, choices, alternatives.

Resources

An age and stage guide to the Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood curriculum for parents the Scottish Government Parentzone education.gov.scot/parentzone/learning-at-home/supporting-health-and-wellbeing/relationships-sexual-health-and-parenthood

‘Why we should all be talking about periods’ – videos from BBC Teach

bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z6rfp4j

‘Questions and answers about growing up’ – book published by Usborne

usborne.com/gb/lift-the-flap-questions-and-answers-about-growing-up-9781474940122?recommend=product-customers-also-viewed

‘Brilliant questions about growing up’ – book by Amy Forbes Robertson and Alex Fryer published by Penguin

penguin.co.uk/books/316/316559/brilliant-questions-about-growing-up/9780241447987.html

Stages of puberty – what happens to boys and girls

nhs.uk/live-well/sexual-health/stages-of-puberty-what-happens-to-boys-and-girls/

Brook – Information about vulvas, vagina, penises, testicles, contraception, pregnancy and more

brook.org.uk/topics/contraception/

4. Relationships, consent and sex

Learning about human relationships is something that starts in infancy by observing those around us by developing attachment, being part of a family, experiencing care and encountering friendship. Solid foundations in relationships education support children and young people with each developmental stage as friendships become more complex and prepare us for more intimate and sexual relationships.

Care experienced young people want foster carers to frame discussions about relationships and sex with greater openness and in ways which frame healthy relationships and sex as part of normal life.

“Consent should be a larger conversation, started from a really young age. Children need to learn they have the right to say no, including family members hugging you. Use everyday examples like asking if it’s okay to take your hand and put a plaster on a cut or take your arm to measure blood pressure.”

(foster carer)

They told us:

- Our views might differ because of religion or values, but it’s important to be open and not to judge.
- It helps us to see healthy relationships modelled.
- Focus on how to do it right; how to build healthy, positive relationships.
- It shouldn’t be taboo to talk about rape, date rape and sexual assault. Explain consent and that if it’s not consensual, its rape or assault.
- Sexual assault happens in the LGBTQ+ community too, so it’s important to speak about this and make consent conversations inclusive.
- Sexual assault and rape also happens to boys and men too, and it can be harder to talk about it.
- Consent should be taught before the age of consent to sex.
- Remember that peer pressure, alcohol and drugs are all relevant – keep them in the frame.

“We should all feel able to talk about consent, no matter our gender or sexuality.”

(young person)

“Consent has been an important awareness for our children. Particularly our child who was not born in the UK. We were mindful that courtship maybe be different in other cultures. It was important for us that he is aware of how to keep himself safe not only from unplanned pregnancy, STI but with the law too.”

(foster carer)

“My foster carers had a really loving relationship and a healthy and happy marriage and I had never seen what that looked like before. It gave me something to aspire to.”

(young person)

Sex – reframed by care experienced young people

- Speak about sex in foster homes, and in a positive way.
- Help us to know that sex is a normal part of life, not dirty or unclean.
- Give the message that sex isn't pornography.
- Masturbation is normal. It's okay for young people to explore their bodies.
- Explain what consent is, what safe sex is and be LGBTQ+ inclusive.
- Guide us not to do things sexually just to please someone and that it's good to know what you like in sex and not everyone will be the same.
- Teach us that it's important to have conversations with your sexual partner about what you like. Then if you don't like something, say you don't like it. Sometimes it's not what you expected, and you need to be able to say that.

“Healthy sex lives are for life – not just a focus on reducing teenage pregnancy.”

(young person)

“It's okay to be vanilla, not everyone will be the same.”

(young person)

“Consent is prioritized in the kink community... this message should be there in sex ed for everyone.”

(young person)

Resources

Outspoken Sex Education – browse a wide range of resources from this dedicated parent RSE website that cover relationships, sex and consent

outspokeneducation.com/sex-and-relationships

Brook – information for young people about relationships and sex
brook.org.uk/topics/relationships/

The Mix – information for young people about relationships and sex

themix.org.uk/sex-and-relationships

Children's Legal Centre Wales – How does the law affect you – health and well being?

childrenslegalcentre.wales/how-the-law-affects-me/health/

NHS Wales – Welcome to Sexual Health Wales

friskywales.org/

Relationships, sexual health and parenthood
education.gov.scot/parentzone/learning-at-home/supporting-health-and-wellbeing/relationships-sexual-health-and-parenthood

Consent to Health Care

childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Consent-in-Health-Care_lowres_E.pdf

Parenting Across Scotland

parentingacrossscotland.org/search/?keywords=sex

RSHP – relationships, sexual health and parenthood resources, developed in line with Curriculum for Excellence levels

rshp.scot/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/RSHP-School-Powerpoint-to-be-adapted-by-settings.pptx

5. Appropriate and inappropriate behaviour

Learning the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour is something that all children need to do, and they will move through many developmental steps as they grow and become more socially aware. All children need support from adults to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and some children, for example children with additional support or special educational needs and disabilities may need further support to learn about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.

Inappropriate behaviour from a child may take the form of over-familiarity, for example hugging or kissing people they've only just met, or with other physical contact such as seeking to sit on an adult's lap, touching a person, or it could take the form of asking very personal questions to adults or wanting to show or talk about personal aspects of themselves. It can also include behaviour with a more overt sexual association or nature such as masturbating or touching genitals in public.

Inappropriate behaviour may be linked to a history of abuse which may or may not be known by foster carers. It can be difficult for foster carers to manage because it can happen so spontaneously, it raises uncomfortable feelings for others that witness it, including

other household members. It can be difficult for some children to move past learned behaviour and the patterns of feelings they may have experienced repeatedly in the past. Whilst you may know some of their history you may not know it all. The child may not be able to explain their behaviour, so it doesn't always help to ask 'why' they are behaving a certain way.

Tips for foster carers from foster carers

- Work with other professionals as part of the team around the child to agree a plan of how you should respond and help in relation to inappropriate behaviour, including sexualised behaviour.
- Ensure that RSE is discussed in the delegated authority plan, where available, so you know there is agreement for your approach to support the young person with healthy relationships and appropriate behaviour.
- Ask for help or a placement support meeting if you are feeling uncomfortable or overwhelmed about RSE as this is quite a natural feeling.
- Talk to the other professionals for advice and ensure everyone understands the issues whilst maintaining privacy.

- Make use of the child in care nurse and school nurse for advice and resources.
- Ensure timely and accurate recording and raise any serious concerns immediately.
- Make sure you understand the policy and procedures of your local authority or agency.
- Establish terminology for talking about appropriate / inappropriate behaviour, including for body parts such as genitalia. Ask the child or young person what terminology they use. Explain the terms used in your household, where possible using the correct terminology, and reasons for this as repetition is important.
- Use resources to explain terminology relating to the body and play materials for them to express their feelings e.g., books, drawing, modeling materials and play people.
- Each child will be different and may not present as their chronological age because of past experiences or additional needs – therefore language and resources may need to be tailored to suit the needs presented.
- Never assume the child or young person has had RSE. There may well be gaps in their knowledge or they may have developed a misunderstanding.

- Have a good family safe care plan and ensure everyone in the household knows the boundaries in the house and feels safe.
- Reinforce 'norms' of appropriate behaviour to try to counter past experiences and reinforce safe, acceptable treatment of children by adults, for example norms around how to greet and interact with a visitor to the house.
- Talk with your own children and other household members who may be fearful of certain behaviours being displayed and not sure how to respond – give them 'permission' to talk with you about their feelings.
- Talk with children about relationships and the different types, reinforcing that its okay to be different. Check their understanding of the difference between friendships, romantic and sexual relationships.
- Talk in the 'third' person about behaviour and other aspects of RSE so that it creates safe distance and prevents blame being attributed – especially where parents/family concerned, while remembering that the child also needs to hear that that certain behaviours from others are wrong.

Resources

An age and stage guide to the Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood curriculum for parents the Scottish Government Parentzone

[education.gov.scot/parentzone/learning-at-home/supporting-health-and-wellbeing/relationships-sexual-health-and-parenthood](https://www.education.gov.scot/parentzone/learning-at-home/supporting-health-and-wellbeing/relationships-sexual-health-and-parenthood)

NSPCC – Sexual behaviour and development in children

[learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-health-development/sexual-behaviour](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/child-health-development/sexual-behaviour)

Stop it now - How to tell if a child's sexual behaviour is age appropriate

[stopitnow.org.uk/concerned-about-a-child-or-young-persons-sexual-behaviour/how-to-tell-if-a-childs-sexual-behaviour-is-age-appropriate/?utm_source=bing&utm_medium=ad&utm_campaign=stop-trafficlight](https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/concerned-about-a-child-or-young-persons-sexual-behaviour/how-to-tell-if-a-childs-sexual-behaviour-is-age-appropriate/?utm_source=bing&utm_medium=ad&utm_campaign=stop-trafficlight)

Parents Protect: Advice on harmful sexual behaviour in children and young people

[parentsprotect.co.uk/harmful-behaviour-in-young-people-and-children.htm](https://www.parentsprotect.co.uk/harmful-behaviour-in-young-people-and-children.htm)

Väestöliitto, the Family Federation of Finland, 'Promoting child development; age-appropriate, child-centred sexuality education'

[vaestoliitto.fi/uploads/2020/11/41964220-vaestoliitto_a1_juliste_en_pieni.pdf](https://www.vaestoliitto.fi/uploads/2020/11/41964220-vaestoliitto_a1_juliste_en_pieni.pdf)

Brook 'traffic light' tool – sexual behaviours (focused on teenagers)

[brook.org.uk/training/wider-professional-training/sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool/](https://www.brook.org.uk/training/wider-professional-training/sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool/)

NSPCC Pants resources

[nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/pants-underwear-rule/](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/pants-underwear-rule/)

INEQU Northern Ireland

[ineqe.com/](https://www.ineqe.com/)

6. Touching own genitals, self-soothing and masturbation

It is a normal part of a child's development to touch their own genitals and to find that it feels nice. As children get a little older (generally around 5-9 years old) they tend to become more aware of privacy and social rules. It is unusual for a child to touch their genitals for 'self-soothing' or 'self-stimulating' in public. The term 'masturbating' is generally used to describe adolescent and adult sexual behaviour. Masturbating in private is a normal part of adolescent and adult sexual behaviour.

Talking about and explaining the feelings and rules to do with touching genitals, self-soothing and masturbation is something that many adults find uncomfortable or taboo. It can also prompt worries about sexualised behaviour and if there is a link with sexual abuse.

"Sometimes other professionals working with the child struggle with the behaviour and the word masturbation, and I can see them squirming in meetings which is difficult when you want the best support and advice for the child."

(foster carer)

"Some people describe masturbating as something that's dirty or embarrassing - this needs to be changed."

(foster carer)

Tips from foster carers, for foster carers

- Consider what your own values, feelings and concerns may be. Embarrassment can sometimes get in the way of finding a healthy way to talk about masturbation and how to manage when it becomes inappropriate behaviour.
- Start talking about bodies and privacy with children from a young age, using very straight forward language.
- Acknowledge to the child or young person that touching their own genitals makes them feel nice but gently put boundaries around this such as where to explore this e.g., not in a public place but when alone in their own private space.
- Say it's okay to have these feelings, we all have them, it's a natural part of growing up.
- Remind them that their bodies are private to them, and other people's bodies are private too.
- Talk about consent and that it's okay to say

no if others want to touch them and for younger children it is never okay for others to touch them. It is important to tell a trusted adult if something happens that makes them uncomfortable. Use surprises rather than the word 'secrets' and encourage young children to tell you if people ask them to keep secrets.

- Social stories are often used to help children to understand what okay behaviour is and what is not okay.
- Understanding a child's history, for example whether they have been sexually abused will help with understanding any presenting behaviours, but remain mindful that this may not yet be known.
- It can be hard to separate 'normal' child development from the impact of abuse a child may have experienced. Seek help from experts for those children who have experienced abuse.
- Be honest with yourself and how this makes you feel. It's okay to feel out of your depth. Talk to your supervising social worker, child's social worker and other carers.

"It is a normal part of life, everybody does it, but it's not really talked about."

(foster carer)

"Sometimes young people will need support with the boundaries and what is happening to their bodies. For example, a teenager with autism used to have an erection when he got excited playing video games and he had to be reminded that this was happening and to take himself to his room for a while."

(foster carer)

"I had a 6-year-old who when you read them a bedtime story she used to masturbate. Initially I had to think about how to respond. I understood it was self-soothing behaviour. I acknowledged to her that it made her feel nice and that was normal behaviour but that she would not be able to do it in the living room in front of anybody. We've introduced other self-soothe strategies and I'm hoping that she will grow out of it."

(foster carer)

"I have older children living in my house and friends and family who visit so I have to be open with everybody in the home about specific inappropriate behaviour that might happen. It's important they are aware and know how to respond so we can all help to keep the child safe and reinforce the same messages."

(foster carer)

"I talk to all children from early on about their bodies being private."

(foster carer)

"Consistently role-modelling appropriate behaviour, attire around the house and our greetings and interactions is an important way of reinforcing any conversations and house rules."

(foster carer)

Resources

Stop it now: healthy sexual development behaviours – includes a number of scenarios with practical advice

stopitnow.org/advice-column-sub-topic/healthy-sexual-development-behaviors

Stop it now: age appropriate sexual behaviour
stopitnow.org/ohc-content/age-appropriate-sexual-behavior

NSPCC – Sexual behaviour and development in children

learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-health-development/sexual-behaviour

NSPCC – Talk Pants resources

nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/pants-underwear-rule/

NSPCC – Safeguarding children and child protection

learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection

Big Talk Education – 'Growing up safe' card sets for primary, early years foundation stage, primary year 1, 2 and 3, with accompanying notes to support their use to teach about a range of topics including body confidence and awareness of body privacy; our bodies and consent; respect for other and their personal space.

bigtalkeducation.co.uk/products/primary-early-years-foundation-and-year-1-growing-up-safe-cards-set-1/

7. Nudes, sexting, chat rooms online

Chatting and sharing messages and images online is part of many young people's lives, and for many young people this is a positive experience, part of friendship and linking to a social community.

However, a report by Ofsted in 2021 shows that many young people experience receiving unsolicited nude pictures on their phones and other devices, and pressure to share nude pictures of themselves. This is known as 'image-based sexual harassment'. Research (ASCL 2021) has found that adolescent girls frequently experience receiving unwanted pictures of male genitals from unknown adult men and known and unknown boys of their age.

"You need to be level-headed about it, you need an open dialogue so they will talk to you."

(foster carer)

Sexting is the sending of a sexual message, photo or video to someone else. It includes talking about sexual things you're doing or want to do, doing sexual things on a live stream and sending 'nudes' or 'dick pics'. To some extent the terms sexting, and nudes are used interchangeably. There are specific laws relating to images. It is illegal to produce, possess or share explicit images of anyone under 18, even if this is done consensually, or if a child makes an explicit image of themselves. Young people rarely report image-based sexual harassment and abuse.

Foster carers may be concerned about these pressures and also the risk of young people chatting on websites or apps which may be used by perpetrators of abuse or sexual exploitation. It can feel overwhelming to stay up to date with new websites and apps and the risks associated with them, whilst also wanting to afford young people some privacy. Managing use of internet-enabled devices in the home tends to feel easier than navigating young people's access outside the home.

Tips from foster carers to foster carers

- Technology can create a divide between adults and young people, but it's also an opportunity for carers to learn from children and young people for example, "could you explain Tik Tok to me?" and "what does that mean to you?"
- Remember the positive side of chat rooms, it can be a good social community. Children may do online gaming and have positive interactions with their friends. New friendships may be made online.
- Make sure that you have appropriate parental controls in place on the internet and any TV or streaming services, including laptops and webcams.
- Encourage the use of phones and devices in the communal areas of the home and take an interest in what young people are doing online.
- Make it clear that receiving images you haven't asked for is unacceptable and that pressuring others to send images is unacceptable.

“I say to my young person - would you go into the middle of town and take your clothes off? And then use this to explain to the young person how this could have the same result as sharing images though the internet.”

(foster carer)

- Think of a scenario, as this can give a bit of distance from the immediate situation.
- Use stories in the news or on TV soaps to start conversations. The aim is not to scare young people but to see what the conversation shows about their levels of awareness and gaps in knowledge.
- Help young people to be aware of the long-term consequences of posting images as they often cannot be removed or retrieved, whereas relationships change.
- Drip feed conversations about what personal information is shared in chat rooms and apps and give tips on how to keep themselves safe – try to keep conversations open, easy and frequent.

- Encourage young people to talk to you about anything they are sent and worried about as well as sharing the positive images.
- Establish routines with young people, for example if you do random checks with their devices, ensure you have their permission and this needs to be part of ongoing conversations about safety and risks and encouraging young people to initiate conversations with their carers, not just respond to questions.

“Whenever we talk about staying safe online, I’m regularly ‘educated’ by my young people that an image or post shared can be temporary, e.g., Snapchat images only for two views for few seconds, or 24 hours for an Instagram story. They often need to be reminded that these posts are easily downloaded, or a screenshot taken, and saved or reshared outside of their control.”

(foster carer)

Resources

Fostering in a Digital World

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/looking-after-fostered-child/fostering-in-digital-world

Internet Matters: – Connecting and Sharing online – Supporting children & young people with care experience:

internetmatters.org/inclusive-digital-safety/advice-for-parents-and-carers/supporting-children-in-care/connecting-and-sharing-online/

Internet matters: Social networking and messaging apps:

internetmatters.org/resources/apps-guide/social-networking-and-messaging-apps/

Childnet: Parents and carers toolkit

www.childnet.com/parents-and-carers/parent-and-carer-toolkit

Childnet: Family agreement ‘template’

childnet.com/parents-and-carers/have-a-conversation

ParentZone: website providing advice for parents

parents.parentzone.org.uk/

CEOP: Guide to getting help with online safety issues

ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/

NSPCC: Advice for parents and carers about online safety including free online webinar

nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/

Office of the Children’s Commissioner: Talking to your child about online sexual harassment – a guide for parents

childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/talking-to-your-child-about-online-sexual-harassment-a-guide-for-parents/

8. Pornography

Pornography is the depiction of sexual behaviour that is intended to arouse sexual excitement in its audience. It is illegal to purchase pornography under the age of 18. Extreme pornography is illegal for all ages.

Surveys have found that children are stumbling across pornography from age seven years old or younger, often encountering aggressive and violent pornography via smartphones or other internet enabled devices. The majority of young people's first-time watching pornography was accidental and many children support the use of locks for websites that are for adults ([British Board of Film Classification, 2019](#)).

It is normal for children and young people to be curious about sex. However, young people sometimes turn to pornography for information about sex, often in the absence of relationships and sex education.

"We fostered a young woman with additional needs. We found out that she was watching pornography and then role playing and also videoing what she had seen and heard with her boyfriend."

(foster carer)

Tips for foster carers from foster carers

- Be aware that pornography including extreme or violent content is very accessible via the internet.
- Take care not to shame or blame children and young people for having viewed pornography.
- Ensure that basic understanding is in place about the privacy of genitalia. Use resources like the NSPCC 'Pants' resources, taking care that the choice of resources and conversations meet the needs of children, for example the resource could be triggering for a child who has experienced sexual abuse, and the resource may need adapting if a child has additional needs.
- Keep an open dialogue so that children know they can tell you if they stumble across pornography by accident, and explain how easy it is to accidentally view disturbing types of pornography, some of which may be illegal.
- Reinforce that it is okay to say no to viewing pornography with friends or a partner.
- Ensure that there is access to appropriate resources about healthy relationships and sex and take opportunities to explain what a healthy relationship involves and what the steps are along the way to developing a healthy intimate or sexual relationship.
- Talk about different feelings such as sexual attraction, arousal and sexual desire, and use appropriate age-related language to help them understand.
- Try to talk about the fact pornography does not reflect real sex and relationships. It often shows distorted and unrealistic bodily appearance and gives a false impression of how people have sex. This helps children develop critical thinking about pornography and other sexualised imagery.
- Discuss the risks of mimicing porn, that it is okay to say no to copying porn, and the lasting damage that pornography can have for people – it may help to refer to well-known people who have spoken about this, for example Billie Eilish (see resources on next page).
- Be aware of your own values and beliefs regarding pornography.

Resources

Top tips for managing your child's first phone

bbfc.co.uk/about-classification/top-tips-for-managing-your-childs-first-phone?previewid=cjev7nk

British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) (2019)

bbfc.co.uk/about-us/news/children-see-pornography-as-young-as-seven-new-report-finds

Billie Eilish says porn exposure while young caused nightmares

bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-59658663

NSPCC – Talk Pants resources

nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/pants-underwear-rule/

Big Talk Education – ‘Growing up safe’ card sets for primary, early years foundation stage, primary year 1, 2 and 3, with notes to support their use to teach about a range of relationships and sex education topics.

bigtalkeducation.co.uk/products/primary-early-years-foundation-and-year-1-growing-up-safe-cards-set-1/

Internet Matters – making the internet safer for your child

www.internetmatters.org/parental-controls/

ThinkUKnow – making the most of the internet

thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/articles/Parental-controls/

Childnet – making the internet a great and safe place for children and young people

childnet.com/help-and-advice/parental-controls/

9. LGBTQ+ and gender identities

The term LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term. It refers to aspects of sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or questioning), which is about who people are sexually attracted to. It also refers to aspects of gender identity (the 'T' stands for trans).

Gender identity is how someone describes how they feel about their gender. For some, it may be as a boy, a girl, neither or 'gender fluid' and may change over time.

There are lots of other terms in use in addition to these, and terms people use to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity are always changing. A person's preference for the pronouns used to describe and refer to them, are also important factors to consider (e.g., he/his and she/her, or they/their).

Care experienced young people say that the older generation are often out of touch with the terms they use, and that they have sometimes experienced hostility and prejudice from their families, including foster families, because of their LGBTQ+ identities. Sexual orientation and gender reassignment (when someone reassigns from their birth sex to their preferred sex) are legally defined as 'protected characteristics'.

Under the Equalities Act 2010 it is against the law to discriminate against someone based on their protected characteristics.

Discrimination, prejudice and bullying impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. For example, homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying can result in children and young people experiencing poor mental health and also having poor attendance at school.

In England, the Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011 state that children should be supported to have positive views of their identity and heritage. Foster carers and fostering services should ensure that attention is paid to all aspects of their identity, and address their needs regarding gender, faith, ethnic origin, language, culture, sexuality and disability. (*standard 2*).

Tips from foster carers for foster carers

- Avoid assumptions about the sexual orientation or gender identity of the young people you are caring for. Show openness – for example talking about friends or a future partner as either gender 'e.g., 'you might meet someone special'.

- Learn about the terms that young people use. If a young person uses a phrase that's unfamiliar to you ask them to explain it to you.
- Be non-judgmental. It's better to show surprise and willingness to understand rather than shock or disapproval.
- Establish with the young person how they would like to be referred to, and who else can know about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Make sure that you offer support and reassurance to build trust.
- Your own family may need support to understand more about LGBTQ+ identities and how to be inclusive.
- Take opportunities to challenge stereotypes about gender roles, as norms about masculinity and femininity can be limiting and can perpetuate homophobia.
- If children or young people use terms like 'gay' in a negative way, or derogatory terms like 'slut' it is important to explain to them why it is offensive to do so.
- Take opportunities for example through training and supervision, to learn and reflect on your own thoughts and values in relation to relationships, sex and gender identity.

“A young person had come into foster care from a family that had made him do masculine things that he didn’t want to do. He didn’t want to talk about his sexuality. Later he became a rent boy. When I learnt this, I didn’t show shock or disgust. He came back to visit me a number of times after his care placement had finished. I think it was really important that I didn’t express a negative response. It left the door open for him.”

(foster carer)

LGBTQ+ and gender identities re-framed by care experienced young people

- Be willing to grow in your understanding about LGBTQ+ and gender identities.
- Understand that there are a wide range of sexualities and gender identities.
- Learn about terms.
- Be aware of pronouns (like he, she, they, them, theirs) and that they can change over time. Ask ‘what would you like me to refer to you as?’
- Talk about LGBTQ+ and gender identities, it helps give us visibility.
- We might be ‘out’ with some people, not others. Take care not to ‘out’ us by mistake or without permission, so ask ‘Can I refer to you as X in front of others?’
- Share examples of being LGBTQ+ with a religious faith so we know it’s possible and it’s okay.
- Get support from LGBTQ+ friendly organisations.
- Communicate a message of welcome, that it’s normal – it’s okay to be what we are.

Resources

Mencap: ‘You being you – your gender and sexuality’ video and Easy Read guides
[mencap.org.uk/advice-and-support/relationships-and-sex/relationships-and-sex-resources](https://www.mencap.org.uk/advice-and-support/relationships-and-sex/relationships-and-sex-resources)

Brook – ‘Gender - a few definitions’
[brook.org.uk/your-life/gender-a-few-definitions/](https://www.brook.org.uk/your-life/gender-a-few-definitions/)

NSPCC – Information about gender identity
[nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/sex-relationships/gender-identity/](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/sex-relationships/gender-identity/)

The Proud Trust – Information to support young people and adults covering issues such as coming out, faith and religion, and staying safe
[theproudtrust.org/](https://www.theproudtrust.org/)

LGBT Youth Scotland – Includes an interactive map to find local LGBT youth groups
[lgbtyouth.org.uk/](https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/)

FFLAG – Resources and support for families including Parent groups across the UK
[fflag.org.uk/](https://www.fflag.org.uk/)

Stonewall – Help and support for LGBT communities and their allies, including links to local support
[stonewall.org.uk/supporting-lgbtq-children-and-young-people](https://www.stonewall.org.uk/supporting-lgbtq-children-and-young-people)

For parents/carers of LGBTQ+ young people
[parentsenquiryscotland.org/](https://www.parentsenquiryscotland.org/)

Northern Ireland Rainbow project – Home
[rainbow-project.org/](https://www.rainbow-project.org/)

Cara Friend in Northern Ireland
[cara-friend.org.uk/](https://www.cara-friend.org.uk/)

The Genderbread Person
[genderbread.org/](https://www.genderbread.org/)

Mermaids – supports transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse children and young people until their 20th birthday, as well as their families and professionals involved in their care
[mermaidsuk.org.uk/about-us/](https://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/about-us/)

10. Addressing attitudes: respect and equality

Stereotypical ideas about what is 'masculine' and what is 'feminine', such as 'boys are strong', 'boys don't cry' and 'women are better care givers' are formed from a young age and are informed by experiences in families, communities and wider society. When these ideas are narrow it can limit the range of emotions, activities and behaviour a child feels it is okay for them to express or participate in and also impacts on attitudes and behaviour towards other people.

Foster carers will be aware of incidents at home and out and about, where disrespectful attitudes towards people based on their gender are expressed by others. These could be examples of 'everyday sexism' to do with gendered roles in the home and in society, right through to attitudes towards sexual violence.

Sexual harassment and sexual abuse, including online, is more widespread than many adults may be aware. A report by **Ofsted** found that disrespectful language and behaviour is often unchallenged in schools and that harassment and abuse is a particularly common experience for girls.

"We went out to a café and the boy I was caring for, who was 6 years old, looked the waitress up and down. She was offended and made a complaint about it. I know that his father had brought him up with a very macho approach. I asked the boy what he thought he was doing. He said he thought she was hot. We had a conversation about why it was not okay to look at the waitress in that way."

(foster carer)

Tips from foster carers for foster carers

- Regardless of gender, encourage children and young people to consider what treatment is acceptable for other people.
- Notice if children are being disrespectful when in a group, perhaps directed to a single child, and help children to see how peer pressure may be influencing them.
- Encourage girls to consider what treatment they consider to be acceptable and support them with self respect, self esteem and valuing themselves.
- Disrespectful behaviour may be a norm for some children, it could have been learnt from observation at home before coming into care. Foster carers can consistently challenge this 'in the moment' and start to 'de-normalise' it.
- Talk with children about differences and that there is no typical gender stereotype. It's okay to be who you are. We all have feelings and emotions which are important to show.
- Friendships can be a useful place to start - young people don't want to be labelled a bully but may not realise they have fallen into bullying behaviour. When this is pointed out they don't like it.
- 'Replaying', or describing to them their behaviour and words can help young people to confront their attitudes.
- Role-modelling non-stereotypical gender roles in the household is helpful. Carers can show that no matter what gender they are they participate in all household tasks.

- Think about how play equipment is presented. Make it clear that toys, hobbies, a choice of films or activities (and even clothing) are not exclusive to just one gender.
- Think about how you are praising your children and young people to address gendered attitudes. Celebrate and encourage them as an individual. All children can be brave, strong, outspoken, kind and helpful among many other traits, regardless of their gender identity.

“I replayed the things that he said about girls and women. I’ve found that boys felt ashamed about their attitudes when they were confronted with what their attitudes are.”

(foster carer)

“We need to be aware of our family norms and perhaps challenge some of these. We also need to remember that some of children and young people’s attitudes have been given to them by their parents.”

(foster carer)

“At home, we don’t follow the traditional roles for the household duties. My husband does the majority of the cooking and cleaning, and we don’t allocate jobs based on our gender.”

(foster carer)

Resources

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council’s Foster Carers Handbook – provides a useful guide on relationships and sex, including a chapter on child sexual exploitation

fosteringhandbook.com/rotherham/relationships.html

Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England (2021) Parent’s guide: talking to your child about online sexual harassment

childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/talking-to-your-child-about-online-sexual-harassment-a-guide-for-parents/

National Education Union (NEU) ‘Breaking the mould’ – resources and story book suggestions

neu.org.uk/breaking-mould

Let Toys be Toys – advice on challenging gender stereotypes with toys and play

lettoysbetoys.org.uk/resources/ten-ways-to-challenge-gender-stereotypes-in-the-classroom/

Letterbox library – inclusive and themed book packs

letterboxlibrary.com/index.html

‘Don’t be that guy’ campaign from Police Scotland – Includes a short video and blogs on ‘Better ways to be a man

that-guy.co.uk/

The Scottish Government – Parent Club

parentclub.scot/search-results#stq=sex&stp=1

11. Relationships and sex – children and young people with a learning disability

Many people with a learning disability say that relationships are important to them. But only three per cent of people with a learning disability live as a couple, compared to 70 per cent of the general adult population.

All children and young people are entitled to relationships and sex education. Supporting a young person with a learning disability around relationships and sex may feel challenging if their cognitive age doesn't match their chronological age. The need for clear, sometimes explicit information and the need to avoid euphemisms can also create discomfort for carers. There may be concerns about capacity to consent and vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

It can be helpful to think about four interconnected areas of learning and support that are particularly relevant for children and young people with a learning disability:

- 1) Personal care and hygiene
- 2) Relationships and sex education
- 3) Appropriate behaviour, including addressing sexualised behaviour
- 4) Safeguarding.

“Caring for a young man with additional needs who struggled to wash himself we created instructional cards and put them up around the shower as prompts. It was still proving difficult to wash hair, so we agreed that he would say when he was ready for help, and he'd put on underpants in the shower for when we came in to assist with hair washing. He was able to maintain privacy and consent.”

(foster carer)

Tips from foster carers for foster carers

- It is quite natural to have feelings of attraction, love and the need for companionship, all are part of a young person with additional needs' normal development and foster carers have an important role in helping children express their feelings appropriately and safely.
- Respond to questions and situations using accessible language, according to the child or young person's level of understanding.

- Ensure that content is age-appropriate to the child or young person's chronological age, respecting their physical development and experiences. This is particularly important in respect of puberty, attraction, sexual touch and privacy.
- Be consistent in using correct terminology no matter what the actual or cognitive age. Repetition is important in learning and understanding language.
- Encourage children and young people to have sensory experiences and to develop understanding of touch, e.g. talking about preferences of flavours / textures, engaging with pets or animals, and choosing music.
- Support children and young people to develop their understanding of different types of relationships, and expectations of the types of behaviours in different relationships by initiating conversations about those around them, including in television, books, imaginative play, and in real life.
- Check that the young person understands the slang terms they may use or have heard, for example 'slut' and explain why their use can be offensive or inappropriate.

- Don't overreact: some children have learned that using certain words or phrases can shock – turn this around by asking if they want support or further information about what they are talking about.
- Model consent-seeking at all opportunities, for example before helping remove clothing, by knocking and waiting for an answer before entering a bedroom or bathroom, and by establishing routines for personal care or washing.
- Seek support from the child or young person's teacher and social worker to discuss shared strategies and resources to reinforce messages that are being learnt at school, for example about privacy and appropriate behaviour.

“I bought a tub of questions about relationships and sex and then added more myself, then made a game where we pick questions from the tub and use them to start conversations. Lots of the questions were scenarios, for example ‘what would you do if a friend asked you to send them a picture of yourself naked?’”

(foster carer)

Resources

Publications list for learners with additional support needs from ‘Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood Resource’, Scotland

rshp.scot/learners-with-additional-support-needs-asn/publications/

Sex Education Forum (2020) RSE for pupils with SEND – short guide

sexeducationforum.org.uk/resources/advice-guidance/rse-pupils-send-short-guide

Bodysense – produce a range of specialist resources including 3D models

bodysense.org.uk/wordpress/

NSPCC – Love life

learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/schools/love-life

Autism UK

autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/family-life-and-relationships/sex-education/parents-and-carers

Books beyond words – includes books about puberty, making friends and more intimate relationships

booksbeyondwords.co.uk/stories-for-schools

Sex Ed on the Cards – a game designed for young people aged 14+ and may need some adaptation to meet the needs of a young person with SEND

routledge.com/Sex-Ed-on-the-Cards-Changing-the-Conversation-around-Sex-Bodies-Consent/Manning-Jewett/p/book/9780367563240

Able2Learn social stories – free to download social stories on a range of RSE topical themes, including menstruation, public and private, touch etc

able2learn.com/

Resources – Wellbeing in Sexual Health and HIV – NHS Health Scotland

healthscotland.com/topics/health/wish/resources.aspx

12. Calls to action from care experienced young people



Fostering services, social workers and people supporting foster carers should:

1. Support all members of the foster family to be ready to have conversations.
2. Reassure foster carers that they don't have to know everything. Asking questions and being unsure is allowed. The important thing is to be open.
3. Make sure no-one is 'outed' with their chosen trusted relationships.
4. Reinforce the importance of up-to-date and accurate sex education for young people in their care.
5. Provide free menstrual products for young people in care.

13. Calls to action from foster carers



Fostering services, social workers and people supporting foster carers should:

1. Raise awareness of the importance of the use of the correct terminology e.g., anatomical terms and LGBTQ+ identities.
2. Support regular conversations around RSE throughout the child's life, and develop approaches to ensure this happens.
3. Provide a consistent approach to RSE, with a live policy document that is shared with foster carers.
4. Ensure RSE is written into delegated authority plans and reviewed at each child's review.
5. Services to provide a list of relevant, reliable resources to signpost carers and young people to; and identify carers who can be approached specifically for advice around RSE.
6. Looked after children's nurses to be involved early on in supporting and guiding carers and young people in RSE.
7. The Virtual School and designated teachers for children in care to be included with RSE conversations to ensure continuity.
8. Pre-approval training to include conversations around RSE.
9. Ensure all foster carers are trained in RSE.
10. Training to be available for all professionals regarding RSE and understanding the carers' role to break down barriers and promote open conversations.

14. RSE Vision for children and young people in foster care

We want all our children and young people to:

- Be empowered and confident around the subject of RSE.
- Be respected and safe.
- Feel comfortable to ask any question without judgement.
- Have knowledge about their rights and responsibilities.
- Be better informed and know where they can go for help.
- Feel supported in their decisions about healthy relationships.

Foster carers can promote the RSE vision by:

- Feeling confident in being honest and open.
- Answering questions using the correct terminology.
- Being aware of a child or young person's experience and who / where else they can go for support.
- Asking children and young people about their views and what they know and want to know.
- Being available for conversations when the young person needs these.
- Accessing support from other foster carers, fostering services, social workers, friends and family so that we can guide young people with RSE the best we can.

15. Feedback



We hope you found this digital guide and podcasts useful. We would really like to evaluate the impact of this resource and to identify areas of further development needed in relationships and sex education.

We would be grateful if you could please complete our short evaluation survey:
forms.office.com/r/e8hqvHCK8c

The logo for The Fostering Network, featuring the text "The Fostering Network" in white on an orange square background.

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in foster care.

We support foster carers to help transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice. We work to ensure all children and young people in foster care experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be.

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working together for quality
relationships and sex education

Sex Education Forum

The Sex Education Forum is the voice of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in England. As a national charity, we promote and protect the physical and mental health of children and young people by improving their access to RSE.

We do this by:

Bringing together our partners and wider stakeholders to share best practice and research and monitor the provision of RSE in England.

Working alongside policy makers and engaging with Parliamentarians to raise the profile of RSE and ensure effective delivery.

Supporting educators with high quality training, resources and a membership scheme, so they can be competent and confident providers of RSE, in partnership with parents, carers, children and young people.

Gathering and utilising the international evidence for effective RSE to inform policy and practice and advance understanding of the benefits of RSE.

Working together is central to everything we do.

To find out more and join our RSE community visit:

www.sexeducationforum.org.uk