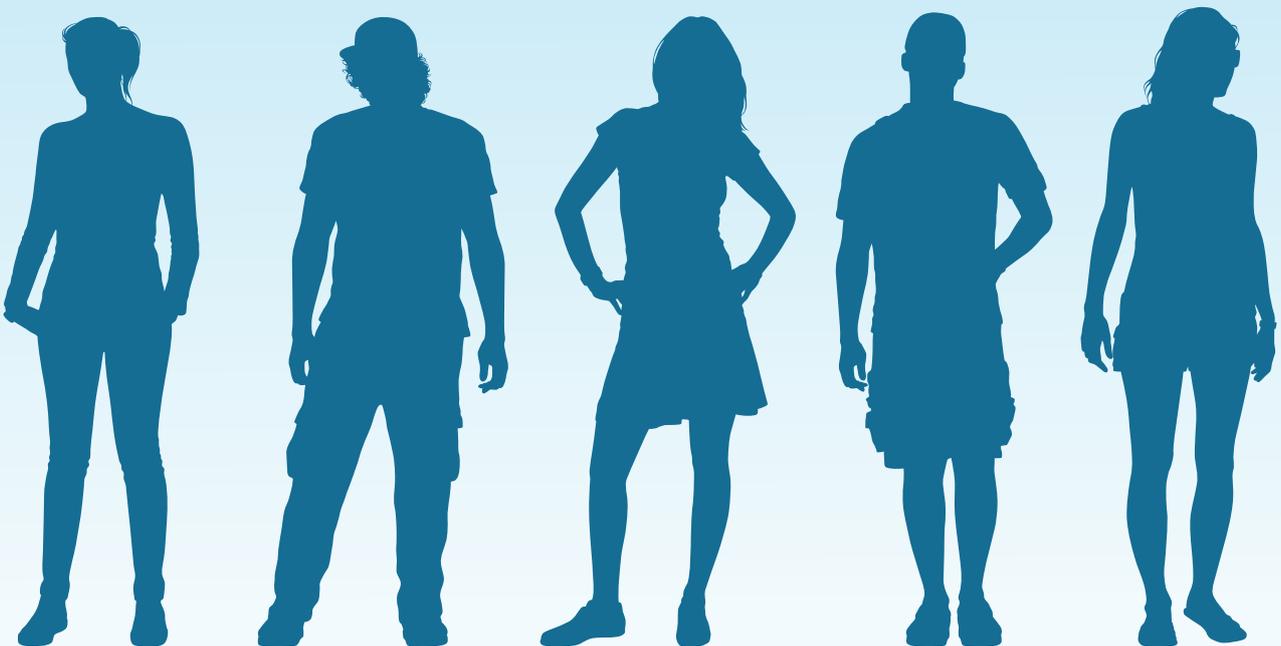

Ask Parents

A qualitative consultation to find out what information, help and support parents need to help their child/ children learn about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health.





Who was this work conducted with and for what reason?

In total 649 parents* from across NHS GGC, were consulted with to find out about parental experiences, perspectives and needs in 2014.

- **Group discussions:**
132 parents took part across
24 group discussions
- **One-to-one interviews:**
148 parents took part in
one-to-one interviews
- **Online surveys:**
371 parents completed
an online survey

649 parents

- **132 group discussions**
- **148 one-to-one interviews**
- **371 online survey**

*'Parents' is used here to mean parents and carers



What are the key findings of this report?

Parents of children under 5 years old

- Parents are confident when it comes to helping their child understand and learn about peer and family relationships.
- They are keen to help their child understand the idea that parts of their body are private. They sometimes struggle with the terms for private parts of the body and mostly favour the use of euphemisms. Parents are open to discussing this and would benefit from understanding why language matters.
- Engaging with parents early means providing them with a foundation on which to build confidence, skills and understanding in their role as educators.

Parents of Primary School aged children

- Parents want to help their child learn about how their bodies and emotions change with puberty, but they may not know how to talk about it confidently.
- Parents report that it can be hard to know when the right time is to talk about puberty — before the obvious signs of puberty or as it happens?
- Most parents use euphemisms to refer to genitals, rather than accurate language.
- Parents also worry that they might upset or trouble their child if they talk about topics like sexual abuse or harm but they are very committed to doing what they can to support their child to be safe. Parents would benefit from increased confidence, language and skills to broach such topics.
- When it comes to talking about body changes, reproduction, pregnancy or sexual abuse or domestic violence parents are worried that by doing so they are undermining a sense of childhood innocence. Most parents view these topics through an adult, sexualised lens. It seems that if parents are to reflect on their role as educators when their child is at primary school they might need support to shift the way they see some of the topics at hand
- Talking and learning would be supported by the provision of books, resources and opportunities to learn together, parent and child.



Parents of Secondary School aged children

- For parents with a child at secondary school, talking and learning about some of the growing up, relationships and sexual health topics can be quite awkward or embarrassing; and parents recognise this might be so for their child too.
- Dads lack confidence about discussing most of the topics related to growing up and puberty.
- Parents were more likely to talk about sexual abuse and harm at this stage than parents of Primary school age.
- Very few parents had discussed sexual health services.

Learning at School

- Parents of children and young people of all ages are happy for schools to provide learning across the topics that are part of learning about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health.
- Parents are happy for school to lead learning but many lack knowledge about what is actually taught in school (or not) and how. Specifically, they would like to know about the timing, content, style and emphasis of lessons being taught.
- Improvements in communication and the provision of resources that work across home and school will help children learn, and parents to fulfil their role as educators.

Gender

- Across all three age groups there were gendered patterns of parenting in terms of supporting a child to learn. Most two-parent, mixed sex, households reported a demarcation of responsibility for leading discussion with children: that Mums would talk with daughters and Dads would talk with sons.
- Many parents differentiate the topics they cover with their children based on gender. For example, parents (mostly mums) are more likely to talk with girls about pressure around behaviour and looks and about physical changes at puberty, while condoms are mainly discussed with boys.
- Mums involved in the research identified that Dads can be anxious about boys straying from what might be perceived of as acceptable gender roles when it comes to play or toys.



Digital Lives

- Parents characterise their children's digital lives as positive when they see their child learning and having fun. But being online can also be a worry when technology or the fast developing world of social media feels difficult to understand or to manage.
- Parents have concerns about inappropriate content, bullying and predatory adults.
- Some parents worry about their child accessing pornography on purpose or by accident. Some parents feel that accessing pornography is inevitable. Others do not talk about it because they feel ill-informed, uncomfortable or lack confidence to do so.
- Parents have concerns about the impact of stereotypical and offensive representations of women, men and sex; they would also like to do more to support their child be safe and think critically about what they see.
- Whatever the age of the child, training and support for parents would help them understand and play a role in supporting their child to be safe and behave appropriately online.

The Needs of Particular Groups of Parents

All parents have information and support needs but there are groups of parents who require a more nuanced approach. This means that in the development of approaches that support parents the needs of some parents should be given a particular focus.

Lone parents

A lone parent is by definition the parent responsible for supporting their child's learning, regardless of their or their child's gender. Lone parents report a lack of confidence to talk and support learning and a need for more information and support across all of the growing up and puberty, relationships and sexual health topics.

Parents of children with disabilities

Parents can feel isolated and concerned when understanding and managing the physical and sexual maturity of their child. They can worry that their child may be vulnerable to abuse and harm as they grow older and have a more autonomous teenage/adult life. Parents identify the need for support and forward planning but this seems unavailable. Parents whose child attends a mainstream school have concerns that their learning needs about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health may not be adequately met

Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) parents

Parents recognise that their childhood experiences of talking and learning about growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health may be different from the opportunities for learning that their child needs. Talking and learning about some topics can be difficult; particularly sex before marriage and pornography. Some parents have concerns that talking and learning about some topics happens too early; that perhaps learning should wait until adolescence. Learning at school is important and valued.



Dads

Dads can be less confident (than Mums) on some growing up and puberty issues in the primary school years and this lack of confidence grows so that they are less confident than Mums across most puberty, relationships and sexual health topics when their child is of secondary school age. Dads recognise this and say they would like more support and information. Dads often do not feel recognised or included in services for parents or the provision of information or support. This starts when the child is young and continues as their child grows.

Parents of children attending a denominational or non-denominational school

Parents whose children attend a non-denominational primary school are more likely to talk and support learning on many of the themes and topics highlighted. Parents whose children attend a denominational secondary school are more likely to have concerns about their child when they are online and more likely to express a wish to help and support their child. Parents whose children attend a denominational primary school or secondary school were more likely to identify a need for information and support across themes and topics.

Parental preferences for information and support

- Across all age groups parents preferred formats for information and support were a booklet/ leaflet and online information (written, film clips, e learning packages).
- Parents of children under 5 years old and primary school aged children would also use an App for phone/tablet and library books.
- The option of 'going to a group' was not popular but of more interest to parents of under 5s than parents of older children.
- Universal and social marketing was suggested as a way of communicating messages and information. Some parents highlighted the NSPCC 'Underwear rule/PANTS' campaign as an example.
- Across formats, it was important to parents that the information was accurate and from trusted sources such as their child's school or the NHS.



What are the implications of the findings?

Parents, across age groups, want to discuss growing up, puberty, relationships and sexual health but lack confidence, knowledge and skills in some areas.

While this is similar to the findings of the 2005 and 2007 parental consultations, there have been two significant culture changes in the intervening period which influence parents' experiences and their support and information needs:

1. All local authorities in the NHS GGC area now have Relationships and Sexual Health (RSH) programmes in place in Primary and Secondary schools
2. The prominence of new technologies and digital media in children and young people's lives

The majority of parents in this consultation spoke about school programmes as an expected part of the package of learning provided by their child's school. They are happy for school to provide learning in this area and many are happy to follow the lead from school. Parents have raised concerns about knowing the right age/stage to start talking with their children about different aspects of this topic area, for example puberty changes. The positive view of school based learning has the potential to help alleviate some of these parental concerns but is undermined by the need to improve school to home communication about the specific timing and content of lessons. A more consistent approach to this would help parents to back up the learning at home.



While Early Years services do not have RSH programmes, they do work to the Curriculum for Excellence early level and communicate the key messages within it (which are covered in early Primary school as lessons).

Parents of children under 5 yrs are interested in supporting their child to learn about relationships, growing up and 'my body' topics but lack confidence and would like support with some aspects of this, specifically: teaching children about parts of the body that are private, accurate names for genitals, rules about touch and gender roles and stereotypes.

Early Years services usually have strong links with parents, through day to day contact, and are well placed to provide a lead around the topics parents feel less confident about. **As with school, parents regard Early Years services as a trusted source of information.**

Parents of Primary school aged children also lack confidence and would welcome support around these topics. Both groups of parents struggle particularly with what language to use to talk about genitals and most use euphemisms instead of accurate words. This is particularly the case in reference to female genitals, with many parents saying they were not familiar with the word 'vulva' or are not comfortable using it.

If parents are to be comfortable and confident in their role as educators they need support to shift the way they see some topics, and understand that learning can be supported in ways that are age appropriate when they are viewed through the lens of childhood, rather than adult sexuality and sexual lives.

Gender based pressures and stereotypes are a concern for parents across the different age groups. These themes are not new, and were also identified by parents in the 2005 and 2007 consultations.

The increased prominence of new technologies and digital media in contemporary culture has, though, amplified the messages children receive about gender.

Parents want to help children think critically about this but many parents also describe gendered patterns of talking with their children about this topic generally.

As described in the summary points, mums are more likely to talk with daughters and dads are expected to talk with sons. However, dads report much lower levels of confidence about discussing most of the topics in this area and are less likely to access existing support services; consequently, boys may be missing out on learning from parents to a greater degree than girls.

Parents across the three age groups recognise the benefits of new technologies and digital media for their children but also have concerns. Parents regard safeguarding their children from inappropriate content and abuse as a priority, though varying levels of confidence and competence were reported. Parental supervision of screen based leisure time decreases as children get older.



Across all age groups parents have concerns about sexualisation of mainstream imagery /messages and gender stereotypes and would welcome support to help their child to think critically about this.

The majority of parents of children under 5yrs and of Primary school age are concerned about their child accessing pornography online. Just over half of parents of secondary school aged children talk with their child about pornography. This is the stage at which their child is likely to experience a high level of screen based leisure time — particularly gaming and social media platforms — and be exposed to commercial and peer generated pornography and would benefit from parental support to navigate their way through this exposure critically.

The barriers parents cite to talking about pornography include feeling ill informed, feeling uncomfortable, lacking confidence and feeling that accessing pornography is inevitable. **In parents' discussion of pornography there was an absence of recognition that sexual violence and misogyny are commonplace in contemporary pornography.**

To address some of the concerns about age appropriate learning, support for parents of pre-5 and Primary school aged children could re-frame this learning as life-skills, which needs to start in early childhood to prepare children for young adulthood. Parents shared good examples of recognising and using teachable moments in daily life.

This reactive teaching should be encouraged alongside examples of, and encouragement to, plan teaching around forthcoming stages of development.

Across all age groups, parents would like easily accessible, age-appropriate resources they can use with their child that come from a trusted source. These resources should put an emphasis on the topic areas parents feel less confident or competent about discussing.

The majority of parents would use resources like this if they are online and/or provided as a booklet and are most likely to access support and information on mid-week evenings. The marketing and design of information and support should take a nuanced approach to ensure the inclusion of a diverse range of parents.