

Issue 15

December 2018

Queensmill School

Research and Development Board

Newsletter



Welcome to the Autumn edition of Queensmill's R&D Board newsletter. With the new academic year in full swing, several projects are drawing to a close, including, final assessments of the PACT-G research project and some exciting new projects have begun, such as, Artemis Chompi's project assessing how well children and adolescents with autism understand the emotions expressed by others in comparison to their typical developing peers.

We would like to welcome our new parent representative Linda Dolben who brings a fresh and much valued perspective to the work of the Research Board.

This issue we are focusing on the subject of sex and relationship education (SRE) and how we use SoSAFE! to support our pupils with developing safe relationships.



Eleonora Sher
R&D Board Co-ordinator

SoSAFE! Programme

In Spring Term 2016, Queensmill School launched the SoSAFE! programme. SoSAFE! is designed to help young people with autism understand and communicate social relationships. We know that young people with autism often find it difficult to understand the many people in their lives and the role that they play.

The programme's aim is to provide our pupils with a resource that tells them not only who the various people in their life are but the level of verbal and physical intimacy that is appropriate for that relationship. For example, we know that many of our pupils find it difficult to understand the concept of friendship or who they can, and should, communicate with if they are hurt or upset.

The SoSAFE! programme is designed to support this development. All our pupils in the Secondary and Post 16 department are provided with a 'My People and Relationship' book. This book has photos of the people that are in the young person's life, both at school, at home and other settings. The book helps to categorise these groups of people and help our pupils understand the appropriate physical or verbal intimacy.

Why our SoSAFE! programme matters

A recent news item* about the sexual encounters of a young woman with learning disabilities (LD) shows how hard it can be for young adults with LD, and the people who care for them (family or school staff), to make decisions about safety within their relationships. Children and young people with LD, including autism, are more likely than their peers to experience coercion and abuse in relationships.^{1,2}

Mencap reports that just 3% of adults with a learning disability (LD) live as a couple³, compared with 70% of all adults and yet a systematic review of 23 papers (2006-2016) of sexuality issues based on the voices of adults with LD showed repeatedly their desire for relationships whether they be friendships or more intimate relationships.⁴ Moreover, parents of children and young adults with LD report a lack of sex and relationship education (SRE) for their children which includes parents and professionals.⁵ To date, there has been very little research into identifying effective methods to support SRE for children and young adults with LD. The evidence available does highlight that SRE programmes can result in some improvements with knowledge, attitudes and skills.⁶ Nevertheless, there exists an even greater gap in our knowledge and understanding as to how this improved knowledge and skills can be generalised to real life situations and maintained and developed over time.

As part of our SRE curriculum at Queensmill we teach the SoSAFE! programme. SoSAFE! uses a standardised framework of symbols, visual teaching tools, scripts and concepts to teach students about different types of relationships, and the type/degree of physical intimacy appropriate for each one. It takes a student centred approach and can be adapted to the development stage of every student. One of the specific strengths of SoSAFE! as an approach is that it allows for 'in the moment' teaching and learning opportunities (e.g. in the classroom, playground, school trip, work experience) and therefore offers greater opportunities for generalisation to real life contexts and maintenance over time. It is an approach that can be used from late primary age into adulthood. More broadly, a recent synthesis of best practice in SRE for all young people identified six characteristics of 'good' SRE provision which were: adaptable; age-appropriate; spiral; of sufficient duration and intensity; interactive and engaging; safe and confidential⁷ - the SoSAFE! approach incorporates all of these characteristics. Parents are also able to contribute to and support the teaching of SoSAFE!.

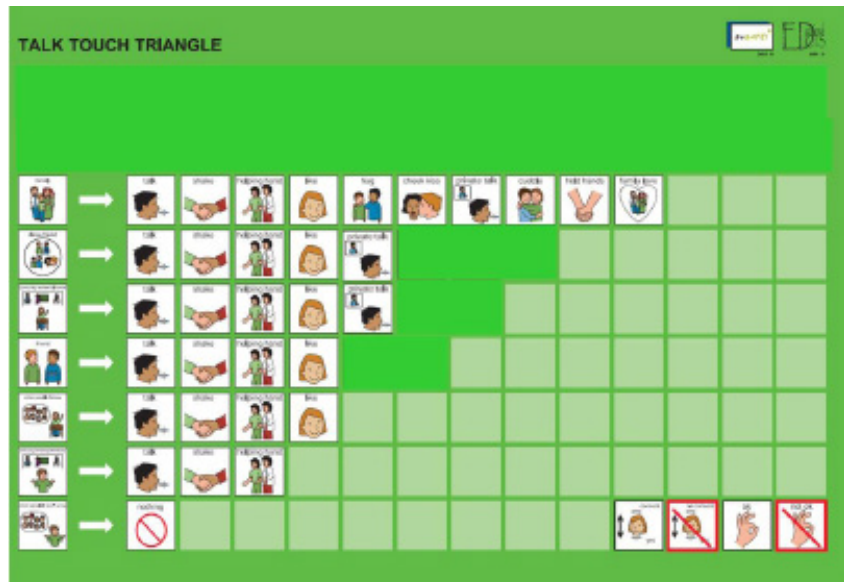
SoSAFE! is already used in some schools but has not been formally evaluated. Queensmill, with UCL Institute of Education have recently submitted a research proposal to investigate the impact of SoSAFE. We will keep you informed its progress.

* The full article can be viewed online at The Times:

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/157f6460-d2ee-11e8-a7e2-4943f60e65b3>



THE TIMES



The 'Talk Touch Triangle' shows the different types of relationships and what kinds of contact is acceptable for each one [www.sosafeprogram.com]

References

1. Baines, S., Emerson, E., Robertson, J., & Hatton, C. (2018). Sexual activity and sexual health among young adults with and without mild/moderate intellectual disability. *BMC public health*, 18(1), 667.
2. Schaafsma, D., Kok, G., Stoffelen, J. M. T., & Curfs, L. M. G. (2017). People with intellectual disabilities talk about sexuality: Implications for the development of sex education. *Sexuality and disability*, 35(1), 21-38.
3. Mencap (2018). <https://www.mencap.org.uk/about-us/what-we-think/relationships-and-sex-what-we-think>
4. Brown, M., & McCann, E. (2018). Sexuality issues and the voices of adults with intellectual disabilities: A systematic review of the literature. *Research in developmental disabilities*, 74, 124-138.
5. Stein, S., Kohut, T., & Dillenburger, K. (2018). The importance of sexuality education for children with and without intellectual disabilities: What parents think. *Sexuality and Disability*, 36(2), 141-148.
6. Schwartz, R. J., & Robertson, R. E. (2018). A Review of Research on Sexual Education for Adults With Intellectual Disabilities. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 2165143418756609.
7. Pound, P., Denford, S., Shucksmith, J., Tanton, C., Johnson, A. M., Owen, J., & Campbell, R. (2017). What is best practice in sex and relationship education? A synthesis of evidence, including stakeholders' views. *BMJ open*, 7(5), e014791.