



Spotlight issue

What is age appropriate? When is a topic or focus right for my child?

The purpose of the spotlight issues series is to highlight themes or topics which have arisen across parental contributions. While these issues are reported across chapters, these short papers highlight key aspects for further reflection.

In our small group chats and via the national survey we have heard from parents on two related matters. Firstly, parents have considered when it is age-appropriate for children and young people to learn about the topics being explored in theChat. Then, in consideration of their child as an individual learner, for parents there is the question *when is learning right for my child?*

When considering the idea of age-appropriateness, external influences can impact when parents support their child to understand or learn about a topic.

I was 3rd year at secondary when I think we got something about this at school. My looking at my youngest at 12 I think its best they do it in primary. Because he's been involved in sexual stuff. We've had problems with pornography. It's frightening, so he needs to know.

(Group chat 31)

My child is 11 years old and is neurotypical. She is more than able to understand these wide concepts, as are the majority of her peers. I firmly believe that conversations about such subjects should form part of everyday learning, as they form part of everyday life. While I don't want to see information overload for younger children, as we get to a tween/teenage young person, these issues seem to come up long before parents anticipate them so without an educational input, many would be left unequipped therefore vulnerable.

(Survey response/parent of 9–11-year-old)

What is being pursued in schools now, and the way children are developing is very different. I don't think now that we can shield them from things like we might want to, TikTok, social media. Whether we like it or not chances are they are going to learn things sooner.

(Group chat 9)

Appropriate is what their level of understanding is at that time. But also, what they might be exposed to, and they might be exposed to things that are above their level of understanding. Age appropriate is the desirable time, but they can be exposed to stuff you need to talk about. You might need to explain what isn't appropriate, make something they are exposed to that is totally not age appropriate, understandable to them.

(Group chat 17)

It depends on the child. My children grew up in a small village, in a wee primary school. I'd say they were quite naive, and I had to prepare them for high school. although they were the same in chronological years, they weren't socially. They got their first smartphone. However, saying that, we did try to normalise conversations in the home. We always used current words for body parts, for example. And if they ask me a question, I will always answer it honestly. But in a way that would promote a healthy attitude. But even then, I feel they weren't prepared enough for high school and what that brought. We had to handle a whole lot of things then that weren't appropriate.

(Group chat 16)

Across theChat we have reported on learning at home being led by the child's questions. Parents have said that when a child shows they are curious, when they ask a question, this tells the parent they are ready for a conversation.

There is no right age. When they ask a question, I tend to answer it. If they ask for more details, then they are usually ready for those details. But also, I tend to tell them that not everyone will want to know, and whilst we can talk about anything and everything at home, it may not be something their friends want to talk about at school.

(Survey response/parent of 6–8-year-old)

You know if my daughter asks me something, I don't need to give too much, I need to answer the question, but it can be just a short answer. That's enough for her at 7. When she grows up, she will get more answers, for a fuller idea. If you give them too much, it just leads to too much depth.

(Group chat 6)

I'm okay with age and stage appropriate conversations about their bodies, about privacy. My son is autistic and so I have to be very literal with him. Through the mosque there is teaching about things like modesty, that's not just about how you dress it's about lots of things. But they are very age and stage appropriate. I kind of let them lead the conversation, and if they have any questions, I'm quite happy to answer them. It's not something I impose on them; you know sit them down and make them talk. Like, if my daughter comes to me with a question I'll look for something, some kind of literature or something, that's appropriate to her at 8 years old. Things she is emotionally mature enough to understand.

(Group chat 20)

In terms of school-based learning parental views on what is age-appropriate – and when their child is ready to learn - can be dependent on the topic.

I can give you an example of what's not age appropriate. In school they say there is learning about relationships, about being safe, that my body belongs to me, that's okay, no issues with that. But the bit for me, for a P5 boy to know about erections and wet dreams is a bit soon. I don't know the science behind it, but at this age I would definitely say that I don't want them knowing about what sex is, contraception or condoms. I would talk about this when my child is at high school, but at primary? That's not appropriate at all. When I brought this up at school, they said its better we tell them, so they don't google it. But to be honest I feel they'll want to go google it more now. But I know that if I don't let my son attend these classes, they will talk about it in the playground anyway, then its third hand. So, we talked to him, and he decided he didn't want to be part of it anyway. And a few parents have done this, not just Muslim parents. As I say, by S3 or so, I would be of a different view.

(Group chat 20)

They aren't emotionally ready to process lots of information. I also think a lot of this, or concern, is about who is teaching it. My daughter came home having been told in P5 about wet dreams. And she thought it was going to happen to her, so she was worried about going to sleep. She can't process this information, she's simply not understanding, so it's just distressing. She thinks this is going to happen to her. It's really confusing for her. So, we need to think about the level of information we given them, she shouldn't be worried about something like this at 9.

(Group chat 11)

The national resource for teaching and learning about the topics explored in theChat is found at www.rshp.scot It is organised by what nursery or schools would think of as the levels at which children and young people learn – a level would cover about 3 years of the child's learning. Parents have expressed concerns that providing schools with teaching materials that could be used across a wide age range does not adequately consider the difference, say be between a 9- and 11/12-year-old in upper primary (learning at what schools would call Second Level).

There are differences between a 9 and an 11-year-old within this age group. And if they have slightly older friends, they will also hear and talk about things, and those questions can come back. And if your child is the youngest, they are hearing lots.

(Group chat 13)

I don't believe P2, P3 & P4 should be grouped together. Some of the things are more appropriate to discuss at P4 than P3 or P2.

(Survey response/parent of 6–8-year-old)

12-18 is emotionally a large age range. I think kids are being taught societal ideals they have difficulty grasping at the earlier age range, 14-16 I would be happier about. There are some weird topics here that I would expect people to learn at home from their family, school shouldn't be a safety net that parents/carers use to absolve their responsibility.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

Doing this learning at the end of the school year does give children time to mature. My older son had this lesson in P7, the younger in P5, this was a huge difference.

(Group chat 8)

There shouldn't just be a bottom line that every child needs the same thing. It's a balancing act, respecting the age of the child – so P5 is different from P7 – and also the culture, religion and beliefs of families.

(Group chat 20)

Parents have also highlighted that even within a class there can be a range of ages and readiness. Parents have also shared concerns about the age difference and maturity in a composite class.

There is a quite an age range between kids in a class. Kids who started in P1 later can be a year older than some of their classmates. Some can be further along that experience of puberty than others.

(Group chat 28)

Teaching and learning in a composite class can be challenging when there could be an 18-month age gap potentially within a class. Maybe they need to pay attention to this and do some separate learning with the P6's and the P7's. Or also consider that the older children shouldn't miss out because of worries about doing it too early for younger ones.

(Group chat 13)

I suppose my only concern would be around how to manage this in a multi-composite class. P4 children are at a different stage than P1s in terms of their understanding, so making sure it's age appropriate would be important to me.

(Survey response/parent of 6–8-year-old)

Parents have talked about the need to understand that learning would benefit from being more individualised, and not necessarily taught in a whole-class environment. Parents have questioned whether school-based learning can do this and meet the needs of individuals.

We can tailor for our child, but can school do that for individuals?

(Group chat 5)

Every other topic or subject they study in school is done at a level that a teacher has picked because the level is right for that child. Whereas to stand and speak to a whole room of children collectively on these subjects. I think surely that teacher would know that there will be some children in the room who are not going to 'get it' at all or for who it's just too much. So, what happens when they need more information, or really want to ask a question but don't feel comfortable doing that in front of the whole class.

(Group chat 11)

A lot of these depend on the maturity of the child. Personally, I know that my 15-year-old is not aware of and not ready for some of these topics, although of course other 15-year-olds will be. Statements like "this is age and stage appropriate" is ludicrous to me because every single person is different and matures at different rates. These topics should be self-led (i.e. when the child is ready, interested, and asks about them) otherwise some will be exposed to topics that they are not interested in or ready for. I also don't think these topics should be taught by class teachers. Something like a drop-in RSHP service would be more appropriate as it could be more personal and tailored to the individual, instead of trying to enforce a one size fits all approach which risks some children being exposed to topics they aren't ready for/are appropriate to them (for example learning about contraception when they're possibly years away from even needing to know about them)

(Survey response/parent of 12-18 year old)

I am just reaching this stage with my daughter, and I feel this is an area that is my responsibility as a parent, not something that should be addressed in the first instance at this early stage by a teacher with a whole class. In my daughter's class there are very different levels of readiness around this and therefore I would not be happy with my daughter having a broad general chat with 30 other children, it needs to be tailored to suit her stage of development, it's not like teaching a new phonics block or a new times table.

(Survey response/parent of 6–8-year-old)

I don't think school is a place for this and not a place to discuss any of these topics under sex Ed. And particularly with an adult and a large group of peers. These are sensitive issues that need to be handled with care and at the child's pace and when they are ready, not just a blanket 'it's time for this topic in sex Ed today' that doesn't take into consideration their emotional maturity.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

For some families, children have specific needs or experiences that define not just what is age-appropriate, but also when these conversations and learning need to happen, and how they are contextualised within wider needs.

When you have a neurodivergent child, or you are neurodivergent yourself, it feels like it might be easier just to withdraw them from this learning, otherwise you are just facing this series of landmines, you don't know when something is going to explode at you, when they are going to be upset.

(Group chat 24)

I think as foster carers, probably most of our foster children are always managing a couple of years behind, so my 15-year-old is probably seeing things like a 13-year-old, so it's getting the age-appropriate answer for them that's the challenge.

(Group chat 33)

Our children might be a certain age, but they're not at that age in terms of understanding. And most of our children are visual learners, they watch things online. But we know that so much can pop up, I do worry what they can see without understanding. I check what my son is looking at online, but I do feel the need to check with him what other children at school are sharing. He's in mainstream, he does find this learning, well he says it's disgusting. He's genuinely concerned about this learning, he feels it's wrong, I'm sure the school is using material that is appropriate but for him there is this disconnect between the world as we know it relative to his experience of being 13. I think much of this learning or what he might be exposed to is quite a shock.

(Group chat 24)

So, what is age-appropriate? Parental views help us to come to a clearer idea on this. This parent put it like this:

*So, age appropriate I think it's something like what you think is honest, not lying.
(Group chat 5)*

In one small group chat the parents talked about what they understood when they talked about age-appropriateness, and as a group wrote and agreed this:

Age appropriate is this:

- You need to give them the knowledge to be prepared but not overwhelm them with knowledge they don't need. You don't want to scare them with worries about the world, but you want to gently prepare them.
- There is something to be said for doing things at a young age, you can be factual, then move on. So, like learning about body changes to come from a very factual point of view, before anything feels silly or embarrassing.
- It's hard to define, every child will have a different sense of what is age appropriate. Maybe its age and stage appropriate.
- You need to assess how emotionally mature or aware the child is. So, your daughter might read like a 16-year-old, but at 11 it doesn't mean she has emotional understanding.
- At school this must be the same for any subject, literacy or whatever. It's about putting together a curriculum from P1 through to P7 that makes sense for all children, with each bit building on the next bit. There must be some averaging out when you are teaching to a whole class, with a teacher having the skill to look after each child.

In addition to the bullet points above, the parents we quote below have helpfully summarised much of what we have heard across theChat, clarifying the complexity of this idea of age-appropriateness or readiness to learn, and emphasising the need for home/school communication to build awareness and a shared, agreed approach to learning at the right time.

Age appropriateness operates on two fronts – cognitively and emotionally. In parenting there's a huge amount of judgement involved, its imperfect. But they are exposed to things whether we want them to be or not – it's my responsibility to guide and limit the risks factors of the exposure, but they are going to see things I don't want to even see.

So, I try to assess both those things.

(Group chat 17)

I feel like we need to be an alternative voice for them, considering all the things they are exposed to that feels out of our control. There is an onus on us to be prepared to have conversations. But this is the dilemma, children will see it, therefore even though we feel the subject is too much too young, in a way its age appropriate because this is the age when they see or hear something. It's the moment that's appropriate. We have to live where we are, so our views might have to change.

(Group chat 17)

You don't want your child to be under exposed or underexposed to the world. You want your child to be a child. I've looked through school material to see what they will be teaching. Some kids are mature, some are immature for their age, But I think some of the themes are above the understanding of the kids.

(Group chat 20)

Parents want to protect their children, like understand what is age and stage appropriate. You don't want to worry your kids about things before they need to know. So, we kind of need to know what is in line with their age, and if the school knows that then tell us and we can do our thing. So, if the school has a plan, tell us, that could be our baseline.

(Group chat 21)

To conclude, our reporting on theChat has shown that most parents are mostly happy with the nursery or school-based learning their child does regarding our topics of interest. We have also sought to respect and report on parents who feel differently, but for the most part, where there are concerns about age-appropriateness of learning at nursey or school, this is expressed in broad agreement that learning has value – it just needs to be more considered in terms of when learning is right for each child.

I'm happy for my child to learn about all of these topics in a way that is age and developmentally appropriate. I think it would be reassuring to know that other kids are getting this education too so that there's shared understanding (e.g. friendships, that people and families are different, respecting privacy and bodily autonomy).

(Survey response/parent of 3–5-year-old)