



Spotlight issue

Learning in single sex groups

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 small group chats and via the national survey parents have raised questions and made suggestions as to the need to facilitate some school-based RSHP learning in single sex groups. While different RSHP topics were raised, of particular interest for parents is how children and young people learn about puberty and particularly learning about menstruation.

For parents who suggested the use of single sex lessons these were viewed as more likely to be a safe and more productive environment for learning.

For some of the topics like abortion and masturbation I would want the teacher to make sure the class was a safe space particularly for girls or quieter kids.

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

My main concerns are around mixed sex classes during teaching these subjects. It becomes a laugh and a bit embarrassing so not sure they would pay attention as they should during the lesson.

(Survey response/parent of 9–12-year-old)

Well, it needs to be honest, straight, especially about the law and consent. Straightforward. It needs to be in an open discussion, so they are free to ask questions. They will if they feel comfortable and safe enough. But at school I'd think it's better to talk about these things in small groups, maybe boys and girls separately.

(Group chat 15)

Single sex lessons were also described as more likely to protect the dignity and rights of girls and young women.

There's something about dignity as well. I understand the rationale about not segregating girls and boys, that boys need to understand menstruation as well, but for girls' dignity I feel something has been lost in the rush to educate boys about periods.

(Group chat 8)

Parents have asked: have we consulted girls and young women on what they would prefer when it comes to mixed or single sex groups for learning?

I think that girls would like some of this learning to be just girls, my daughter who is at high school commented that it was embarrassing learning with boys there. Do girls ever get asked what they want? If we are teaching consent and respect and whatever, yet children are being sat in a class, potentially, and not being comfortable. Shouldn't girls have their say? Where's their consent?

(Group chat 9)

Where parents have suggested that single sex groups should be considered as an option for some topics there remains a view that some classes could be shared, and that children do need to learn about children of the opposite sex.

But just a thought, I think some lessons should be mixed on things like menstruation, so boys need a helicopter view of what is happening to girls, but girls might also be more comfortable in some opportunities to talk. So of course, it's good boys understand women's physiology, but just think as well about what girls might need.

(Group chat 10)

Parents talked about their own positive experiences of single sex learning.

I remember that my school split us, boys and girls. I think that was really good. We all go through things, a lot of giggling, but then I had the information.

(Group chat 26)

Alongside the proposal that boys and girls might benefit from learning separately, this was also thought to benefit everyone if learning groups were then smaller.

More needs to be done in smaller groups, not always in a full class or big group. There needs to be space and time for a child to ask questions, especially if they are a child that doesn't have the opportunity to talk through things at home.

(Group chat 32)

Faith and culture can play a part in the view that there are some topics that should be taught in single sex groups.

When we grew up a lot of these kinds of discussion were taboo in our families, even biological changes. But that has shifted a lot. I'm grateful that I had that kind of session in school when I was growing up because I didn't get it anywhere else.

However, now I feel it's gone too far. Schools need to realise we have these conversations at home, we have our mosque structure where we push for our kids to know all this stuff from an Islamic perspective but also the biological side. But within school I'm a bit concerned about what is being taught, and that is about the age-appropriate thing but also what's gender appropriate as well. Like my son, in primary 5, I'm sure there's lots of changes and I'm okay with my daughter being taught certain things, but my son came home quite traumatised that he was having to learn about a girl's changes that he didn't have much interest in. Of course, he'll know more about it as he grows older, but I think that is a bit disturbing for me. But I am not opposed to schools teaching, in fact I think that's important. It's about finding a middle ground.

(Group chat 20)