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Deputy Holly Cairns
Dail Eireann
Leinster House
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30th November 2020

PQ ref: 37099/20

Question: To ask the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the ERSI/HSE report Talking about Sex and Sexual Behaviour of Young People in Ireland finding that a significant group of young persons that are not receiving information or advice from their parents on relationships and sex and its suggestion that initiatives to target quality sex education via internet platforms and television should be considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Cairns,

Thank you for your question to the Minister for Health, which was forwarded to my office to respond to you directly.

The HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme (SHCPP), HSE Health and Wellbeing, provided funding for and oversight over the research report '*Talking about Sex and Sexual Behaviour of Young People in Ireland*' as part of an ESRI/HSE research programme on Health and Wellbeing in Childhood and Adolescence. The objective of the research programme is to undertake and disseminate research on issues of policy relevance to children and young people using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Children, Growing up in Ireland (GUI). On November 10th, Minister Frank Feighan, Minister for Public Health and Wellbeing and the National Drugs Strategy, launched the research report and the accompanying resources to support parents.

The SHCPP is engaged in a wide range of initiatives to support the development of healthy sexuality and its expression in children and young people. To respond to your specific question in relation to the online space, the SHCPP is currently reviewing and updating its <https://b4udecide.ie/> website for 14-16 years olds and will be making this available in 2021 and promoting it through a range of social media platforms. The SHCPP also provides information for parents on its comprehensive website

www.sexualwellbeing.ie and regularly uses social media to promote the availability of this support to parents.

More broadly, the SHCPP recognises that information-giving is only one aspect of relationships and sexuality education. Young people also need safe spaces, mediated by trustworthy adults, in which they can discuss issues and develop the knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and skills that will enable them to form healthy, happy relationships. This includes healthy, happy sexual relationships, if that is their choice in adult life. To this end, the SHCPP supports a range of RSE initiatives in the home, school and community settings. While all of these settings play a vital part in the education of children, the home, as the first and most immersive setting, is of crucial importance.

HSE supports in the home setting

The home is the first place where children and young people learn about relationships and sexuality. From birth they get messages about a range of things including: their body, their gender and expected gender roles, and about relationships. The SHCPP aims to raise parents' awareness of the impact of these messages, and to support them in consciously attending to their child's healthy, holistic sexuality development, just as they attend to all other aspects of development.

As parents begin their parenting journey, the HSE National Healthy Childhood Programme includes information on healthy sexual development within their overall treatment of healthy childhood development. They offer this support in their booklets *My Child 0-2*, and *My Child 2-5*, and on the website *mychild.ie*.

HSE SHCPP then offers a series of booklets for parents under the overall title, *'Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks'*. These booklets seek to normalise and support parent/child conversations about relationships, sexuality and growing up; encouraging the habit of ongoing communication about these issues from very early childhood through to young adulthood.

The booklets currently available are:

- **Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: 4-7 years.** A rebranded resource, originally published in 2018 as *'Talking to your young child about relationships, sexuality and growing up'*. The resource includes a small story **'Tom's Flower Power'** which gives a simple explanation of where babies come from.
<https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/for-parents/mtbtmst-4-7-plus-tom-s-power-flower.pdf>
<https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/for-parents/tom-power-flower.pdf>
- **Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: 8-12 years.** A booklet addressing the issues of puberty and early adolescence. This can help parents to expand on the themes covered in the recently updated **Busy Bodies** booklet for children which address the same developmental stage. Busy Bodies booklet was originally developed by the HSE in 2007 and has been widely used in homes and schools across Ireland in the intervening years.
<https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/for-parents/making-the-big-talk-many-small-talks-for-parents-of-8-12-year-olds.pdf>
<https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/for-parents/busy-bodies-english-language.pdf>

- **Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: Healthy Ireland Library Collection.** A brochure listing the range of commercial and HSE resources on the topic of relationships and sexuality that have been made available in all 330 branch libraries through the 'HI at your library' programme.
<https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/for-parents/making-the-big-talk-many-small-talks-healthy-ireland-library-catalogue.pdf>

The next book in the series, **Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: 13-18 years** is due for publication in late 2021. The HSE intends to partner with our statutory and NGO partners to use this opportunity to further promote the overall importance of parent/child communication on relationships and sexuality.

In addition to the production of resources, the SHCPP funds:

- The National Parents Council Primary to deliver the course 'Parenting: Supporting your child to build healthy friendships and relationships'.
- The Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) to deliver the 'Speakeasy' programme to parents and the specialised 'Speakeasy Plus' programme to parents and to professionals to enable them support the sexuality development of children and young people with a disability.

HSE supports in care and foster care settings

In recognition that children in care and foster care need additional support, the SHCPP is working closely with Tusla to act on recommendations arising from the *Sexual Health and Sexual Education Needs Assessment of Young People in Care* (SENYPIC) study.

This collaboration has resulted in the development of a digital toolkit for foster carers and professionals, which will enable them to better support the sexual health and wellbeing of the children and young people in their care. The toolkit will be made available in early 2021.

HSE supports in the school setting

The SHCPP has a long history of collaboration with the Department of Education and its agencies to support the delivery of Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in the context of Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE). The HSE's **Busy Bodies** video and booklet are widely used in Primary schools to address issues of puberty and early adolescence. In addition the HSE co-produced the **Trust** and the **Growing up LGBT** resources for use in the Post Primary sector.

At present, the HSE is working closely with the NCCA on its review and redevelopment of the RSE curriculum. It is also engaged in the production of a teaching resource in support of the new Junior Cycle SPHE Short Course. This will include three RSE units. The first units of this resource will be available in the coming weeks.

HSE supports in the community setting

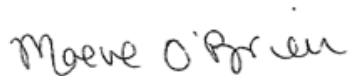
The SHCPP also funds the development and delivery of RSE related training to youth workers to enable them to promote the relationship and sexuality wellbeing of the young people who use their services. Specifically it:

- Funds Foroige to deliver training in the **Real U Programme** to youth workers
- Funds the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) to deliver training courses on a range of topics addressing: sexual health policy development, pornography, consent, and decision-making with regard to sexual activity (B4udecide)
- Funds and is working with BeLonG To Youth Services and the Sexual Health Centre Cork on the manualisation of the **In the Know** programme for young gay men and MSM, and the development of the associated e- training programme for youth workers. The manual and training will be available in 2021.

All of the SHCPP's educational resources can be found at <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/for-parents/resources/> or ordered from healthpromotion.ie

All of this work is delivered under the National Sexual Health Strategy 2015 – 2020, which the SHCPP has overall responsibility for implementing: <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/about/corporate-publications/national-sexual-health-strategy/national-sexual-health-strategy.pdf>

Yours Sincerely



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Interim Programme Lead
Sexual Health & Crisis Pregnancy Programme