



WE DISCOVER, WE GROW

**Girlguiding**

# Let's talk

**About sex and relationships: Advice for leaders**  
**Published 2019**

Forming and exploring relationships of all types is important to all girls as they grow up and learn more about themselves and the world around them. Becoming a teenager is also a crucial stage of development for girls and young women when it comes to developing their expectations of intimate relationships. As the biggest organisation for girls and young women in the UK it is important that we are equipped to respond to questions and issues that might arise in this area.

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## Introduction

In 2007 and 2008, Girlguiding carried out the Let's Talk consultation, asking girls, leaders, parents and carers whether there is a need to talk about sex and relationships within guiding. We found that two-thirds of 10- to 15-year-olds thought that sex was an issue which should be talked about in unit meetings.

Additionally, recent research by Girlguiding has highlighted the importance of talking about healthy relationships and equipping girls and young women with the skills to recognise unhealthy relationships. In our [Girls' Attitudes](#) survey 2013 among girls aged 13 and over, seven out of ten have experienced intrusive forms of sexual harassment, such as jokes and taunts and unwanted sexual attention. Girlguiding's [Care vs Control: Healthy Relationships report](#) found that many young women found it hard to recognise the low-level forms of control that may exist in a relationship. They also stated that any support and education they do receive at school focuses too much on the physical side of relationships and not enough on the quality of the relationships themselves. Girlguiding is a core member of the Sex Education Forum, a group of organisations and individuals committed to improving sex and relationships education (SRE) for children and young people, and supports the 'Sex and Relationships Education - it's my right' campaign.

From our research it would seem that young people are looking for a space where they can reflect on the complexities of relationships. Girls said they preferred to talk about relationships with others their own age and they want to do this in a girl-only environment. Coupled with this, when we asked leaders their views in our consultation on talking about sex and relationships, 65 per cent thought that Girlguiding should be addressing these issues in some way. Many said that they would feel more confident in dealing with these issues if they had support about how to respond to questions and a clearer idea of Girlguiding's stance. These guidelines have therefore been put together with the expert assistance of Brook, the nationwide sexual health advisory service for young people, and Stonewall, the national campaigning group for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) issues. We are grateful for their invaluable help.

## Girlguiding's stance on sex and relationships

(Executive Committee, reviewed July 2014)

Girlguiding believes that it has a responsibility to respond in a positive way to the sex and relationships education needs of our young membership.

Girlguiding provides a safe, girl-only space in which positive relationships with peers and adult leaders are fostered. Within this framework our programme actively engages girls on the issues of self-esteem, peer pressure, relationships and emotional health and well-being, in an age-appropriate manner. Through the activities they participate in, our members develop emotional resilience and skills for happy, healthy and safe relationships throughout life.

As part of this we seek to provide members with individually relevant information about sex and relationships, and to support leaders to both initiate and respond to discussions about sex and relationships in their own units. As with all our programme initiatives, we have consulted widely with our members on this issue to enable us to develop a programme that meets the requirements of our membership, both youth and adult.

We recognise that Girlguiding and our leaders are not experts on these issues. We therefore seek the assistance of expert partners to ensure the accuracy, quality and impartiality of any information provided and to enable leaders less comfortable with these issues to access third-party expertise to consistently ensure appropriate help for our young members.

## ***Aims of these guidelines***

This document aims to provide leaders with the following.

- Clarity about their role with respect to sex and relationships issues.
- Advice, guidance and support so that leaders have the confidence to respond to questions and concerns in various circumstances, and make decisions for their units and individual girls.

At the core of guiding we aim to provide a place within which girls can build up their confidence and where all activities are voluntary. We believe that it is important to focus on relationships and the relationship side of sex education, not just the biology. Every individual is different, and we aim to recognise and adapt to this in everything we do.

## **The law related to sex and young people**

- In England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the legal age for a young person to consent to have sex is 16, regardless of sexual orientation. Although the age of consent is 16, it is not intended that the law should be used to prosecute mutually agreed teenage sexual activity between two young people of a similar age, unless it involves abuse or exploitation.
- It is an absolute offence to have sex with a girl aged under 13 in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and under 12 in Jersey (this means there can be no defence that an offender believed the young person to be 16 or over).
- In England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, young people have the right to confidential advice on contraception, pregnancy and abortion even if they are under 16.
- In England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, contraceptive treatment may be given to young people aged under 16. (See 'Providing contraception', page 7.)

For more information on the law related to sex and young people visit [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk) > Information > Sex and the law > Consent to sexual relationships.

## **Your role as a leader**

Participation in relationships and sex education (and related issues) or discussion is voluntary for girls, young women and their adult leaders.

You are not expected to actively deliver and incorporate sex education into your unit programmes, unless you would like to and/or are following the girls' lead. However, it is important that where a girl or young woman wishes to explore these issues within guiding, it should be made possible for her to do so, even if this is not with her own leader.

Just as it is good practice that you make provision for your girls to go on residential events (whether you take them or you arrange for other units or leaders to take your girls), you should make provision for girls to have the opportunity to pursue their sex and relationships questions within guiding. You may wish to invite others to help guide the girl or young woman through her questions. This could be another leader within your unit or district. You may also wish to refer her to an appropriate external agency for more specific information (see page 12 for contact information).

In addition to this, you may feel that your unit would benefit from a [peer-education](#) session on body confidence, gender stereotypes, safety, healthy relationships or youth health.

## ***Advice or information?***

Always give information, never advise a girl what to do. Never stray beyond your role as a leader, and don't make assumptions about why a question is being asked.

However, it is important to recognise that as a youth leader you are in a position of influence with girls you lead, and therefore you need to remain impartial. Be aware of your own personal choices, cultural and religious beliefs that underpin your approach to these issues, and try to keep them separate. Direct the girl or young woman to information as necessary and encourage her to think for herself; what does she think would be a good course of action for her? Try not to see these issues in isolation; Girlguiding encourages girls and young women to make their own decisions and take responsibility for their actions and this includes their decisions on sex and relationships.

Where appropriate, remember to follow up your discussion afterwards by having another chat and providing further sources of information or advice if required.

## **Giving medical advice or formal counselling**

If a girl asks you about a sex or relationships issue, informal discussion or giving out a leaflet or website address is fine - leaders are not trained to give medical advice or formal counselling. Even if you are a medical or counselling professional, keep it separate from your role as a Leader in guiding, other than in an emergency situation when, by not acting, you would breach your own professional code of conduct.

## **Do...**

- Provide age-appropriate sex and relationships education if you feel comfortable doing so (see 'Further information and support' on page 11).
- Be impartial.
- Make your response age appropriate.
- Encourage the girl or young woman to think for herself and make her own decisions.
- Challenge prejudice and myths.
- Acknowledge culture and faith and be sensitive to the individual's background and personal views.
- Give all the options or provide sources of information.
- Follow up provision of information.

## Don't...

- Panic - you may not have to answer straight away, get your facts straight first. Try not to appear shocked. It's OK to say, 'I don't know but I'll see if I can find out for you'.
- Think of sex and relationships in isolation - link it to building confidence, making free and informed choices and taking personal responsibility for your actions.
- Make assumptions about girls' sexual orientations.
- Give advice or your own opinion.
- Assume the worst.
- Assume that all girls have the same experiences or the same knowledge levels at the same ages.
- Belittle a girl's experience or suggest feelings or relationships are 'just a phase'.
- Do nothing if girls or young women raise an issue.

## Confidentiality and safeguarding

Information about a girl of any age, if told in confidence, should be kept confidential unless you have reason to believe she or another young person is at risk of harm, in which case the information must be passed on for her own safety. If this happens, it is important to keep the girl informed about your decision to pass on the information and the reasons behind this.

If a girl under 16 has disclosed to you that she is having consensual sex with a partner, or that she is exploring, discovering or struggling with her sexual identity, neither of these are necessarily safeguarding concerns and you need not break confidentiality unless you believe she or another young person is at risk of harm.

There are a number of considerations both before and after a discussion with a girl about sensitive issues, as follows.

- The first duty of every leader is to safeguard and promote the welfare of the girl or young woman, and other children and young people. Ensure girls are aware of this; if a girl asks to tell you something in confidence you should warn her that you will have to pass on information if you are concerned she or another young person is in danger.
- Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. If you believe a girl to be at risk of harm you can and must break confidentiality in her best interests. For example, if you have reason to believe that a girl aged under 13 is having or being pressured into having sex, then you must pass this information on.
- Whether or not to breach confidentiality is a judgement to be made based on the facts of each situation. The girl's interests must be the overriding consideration in making any such decision.
- If you decide that the information needs to be taken further and you or the young person are not sure what to do next, refer to Girlguiding's [A Safe Space](#) guidelines.

## Considerations to take into account

Whatever a girl's background, Leaders should be aware that, as a girl-only space outside of the formal structure of school, a guiding meeting or event may be a place where girls feel comfortable asking questions around sex and relationships. Information you provide should be based on a range of perspectives: legal, health, faith and secular so that the girls can make their own decisions.

## Faith and culture

The religious and cultural views of girls must be considered when discussing any topics concerning sex and relationships. Leaders should be aware of the faith backgrounds, if any, of their unit members and ensure they respect those cultural understandings and expectations. However, it is important not to make any assumptions in regards to the views of girls or their parents or carers; individuals will make interpretations of faith and cultural values in a variety of ways, ranging from the very liberal to a strict, traditional stance. Girls may also welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues in an environment that is outside of their own background.

Particular issues that you may need to be sensitive to in terms of faith and cultural background could include sex before marriage, LGB relationships, contraception choices and abortion.

## Sexual identity

When talking about sex and relationships with girls ensure that you are not making any assumptions about sexual orientation in terms of your language and approach. For example, refer to girlfriends as well as boyfriends (or partners if you are unsure). Consider that some girls may have parents, relatives and friends in same-sex relationships, or may identify themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

### What should I do if a young person tells me she is gay?

Be aware that the young person may not have told many people this or anyone at all, and that it is a sign she trusts you as a leader. Reassure her that her sexual orientation is not a problem in guiding and you will continue to support her as you would any girl and if anyone is not supportive she can let you know. The conversation should be treated in confidence and you should do the following.

- Offer reassurance.
- Tell the young person her confidentiality will be respected.
- Listen and be supportive.
- Ask the young person how she would like to be supported or any information she would like or needs.
- Let her know she can come and talk to you again, or recommend someone else whom she can speak to.

## Girls with additional needs

Remember that girls with additional needs will have the same questions as other girls in your unit. You should take the same general approach as outlined in this guidance, consider her questions and concerns just as seriously as any other girl's, and respond in an age-appropriate way. Also be aware that some young people with disabilities can be more vulnerable to sexual exploitation; if you are concerned that the girl is at risk of harm, follow the guidance in [A Safe Space](#) as with all safeguarding concerns.

## Digital

Be aware that some girls will be having interactions around sex and relationships in a variety of forums, including through social media, which they may talk to you about. This could include sexting (sending sexually explicit photographs or messages via a mobile phone), sending photos of themselves, or looking at pornography. As with other sex and relationships issues, this is not necessarily a safeguarding concern but needs to be approached in the same empowering way as other issues. See [Digital safeguarding policy](#) for guidance on issues in this area, and if you are concerned a young person is at risk of harm, speak to your commissioner.

## When parental consent is needed or not

Success in empowering young members to make balanced and informed decisions through our programme, peer education and informal discussion, can be achieved only with the involvement and support of parents and carers. Our informal approach is designed to complement the information girls receive from parents and carers, as well as formal education.

### *For unplanned situations requiring an immediate response*

This is when a question or issue suddenly arises that you need to deal with straight away.

It is likely that in the safe guiding environment, girls will see their leader as a trusted person and a source of information and advice. If a young person comes to you spontaneously with a sex or relationships concern during a normal unit meeting or event, you do not need parental consent to talk to her and give reactive information. (Also see the 'Providing contraception' section below). However, bear in mind that if you feel the girl is at risk you must tell her that you will not be able to keep the conversation confidential (see 'Confidentiality and safeguarding', page 5).

### ***For proactive sessions or activities planned in advance***

This is when you and your unit decide to actively run sessions which are either about, or related to, sex and relationships issues.

If you decide sex and relationships is going to be covered in your planned programme, parents and carers of girls aged under 16 should be informed of this as part of their introduction to the unit and the activities you do. Send parents and carers a letter outlining plans and proposed activities as part of the programme sent out at the start of each term. Knowing in advance that you are organising a session will give parents and carers notice that there could be some questions asked afterwards at home and also give parents and carers an opportunity to raise concerns or questions they may have in advance. If they are aware and have given their child permission to participate in your programme, there is no need to send an extra request for permission for a specific session.

Always make sure that your session is age-appropriate, girl-led and balanced. If parents and carers do not wish their daughter to take part in a session, make sure there is an alternative activity on offer, so she can still attend the meeting.

## **Providing contraception**

It is the policy of Girlguiding to make every effort to safeguard its members from physical, sexual and emotional harm while participating in guiding activities. We recognise that leaders have good knowledge of the girls in their units and are in the best position to judge whether or not it is appropriate to carry barrier contraception (for example condoms, female condoms) with them on residential events or keep them at the meeting place.

### ***For girls aged 13 and over***

If a unit leadership team decides that it is appropriate to carry barrier contraception with them on residential, or to keep them in the meeting place, this is their decision and Girlguiding supports this. Equally, if it is decided that it is not necessary or required, Girlguiding supports the decision not to store barrier contraception.

It is important for any unit, however, if they decide to store barrier contraception, to make this known to parents and carers and girls before the event. Before barrier contraception is given to a young member, Girlguiding requires that a leader should consider the Fraser Guidelines (see page 8).

Regularly check that stored barrier contraception are in date.

### ***For girls aged under 13***

Girls aged under 13 should not be given contraception as they are not legally deemed to be capable of consenting to sexual activity, and in the whole of the UK (except in Jersey), it is an absolute offence to have sex with a girl under 13 (see 'The law related to sex and young people', page 3). In this case, you cannot promise confidentiality, and you must pass on information if you have reason to believe a girl is having, or is being pressured to have sex.

## ***The Fraser Guidelines***

Although it is an offence for those under 16 to have sex, it is lawful for health professionals to provide contraceptive advice and treatment without parental consent. There is a list of criteria to help health professionals make this decision. Known as the Fraser Guidelines, they were laid down by Lord Fraser in a House of Lords case in 1985. Although they are aimed at health professionals, they are a useful checklist for youth workers too. The use of these guidelines by youth workers has never been tested in court, so it is not a set of laws. You may find them useful to assist your decision-making.

Remember, even if, according to these guidelines, the girl or young woman can be given contraception, there is no obligation whatsoever for you to provide it.

Before giving out barrier contraception (or 'giving treatment') without parental consent, the Fraser Guidelines state that you should be satisfied of the following.

- The young person will understand the range of information they have been given.
- The young person cannot be persuaded to inform her parents or carers that she is seeking contraception.
- The young person is likely to begin or to continue having sexual intercourse with or without contraceptive treatment.
- Unless the young person receives contraceptive treatment, their physical or mental health or both are likely to suffer.
- The young person's best interests require them to receive contraceptive advice or treatment or both with or without parental consent.

Remember, young people under the age of 16 have the same right to confidentiality as any other person. If someone under 16 is not judged mature enough to consent to treatment, the consultation itself can still remain confidential.

## ***Emergency contraception***

If you discover that a girl of any age requires emergency contraception (the morning-after pill), you should ensure that she is taken to a health professional (this may be a pharmacist). The professional has the expertise to decide on the course of action that is right for the young person.

By taking a young person to a health professional, you are simply providing the means for her to get there, and to be given all the options available - you are not responsible for the decision of the young person or the professional.

If the girl is under 13, the sex she has had should be considered exploitative and therefore the information should be passed on. Ideally, parents or carers should be informed, but only by the girl or with her permission. Try to persuade the girl to inform her parents or carers. There may be situations in which this is not practical, for example on a trip abroad, or a girl may insist that she does not wish to inform her parents or carers. If this is the case you are under no obligation to tell her parents or carers yourself. It is only absolutely necessary for you to pass on information to relevant agencies. Please follow the guidance in [A Safe Space](#).

## **Questions that may arise**

**There have been lots of questions from girls in my unit about sex and relationships recently. I am uncomfortable answering them but feel I should, so what could I do?**

Why not ask another leader in your unit or area who feels more confident to run a session (ask your local county or country/region office for contact details)? You could also consider asking a GP or someone from a sexual health charity or clinic to hold a session at one of your meetings.



**There have been an increased number of questions around relationships and lots of my girls are struggling around these issues and expressed interest in looking at them more deeply. Are there resources or programmes on offer that can support my unit to build this into our programme?**

Please see Girlguiding's section-specific guidance on sex and relationships (see page 11), which signposts age-appropriate section programme resources and activities you might like to run with your unit. For Brownies, Guides and Rangers, you might also consider arranging a session through the 4 (peer-education) programme around these issues.

**I have a Peer Educator coming to run a session with my unit on issues around relationships. Do I need parental consent?**

If parents and carers have already been made aware that sex and relationships subjects may be covered in your programme, you do not need to ask for specific permission. It is often useful, however, to tell parents and carers your plans as part of the programme for that term, so they can be prepared for any questions that arise after the session.

**A girl has come to me and asked whether she should go on the pill as she wants to start sleeping with her boyfriend. What should I do?**

Discuss with her the various people or organisations she could talk to for professional advice - this could be a GP, family planning clinic, sexual health clinic or a Brook centre. You could also give her the website addresses suggested in these guidelines on page 12.

**I have a girl in my unit whose religious beliefs do not accept contraception or abortion. What can I tell her?**

This should not change the information you give her; remember, you are not in a position to give her advice. Be sensitive to her needs and encourage her to seek information from someone from within her faith community, as well as directing her to impartial organisations; make sure she is given the chance to explore all her options.

**What should I do if the same girl asks for advice on having sex or on pregnancy?**

Encourage her to think for herself and what would be the best decision for her. Make sure she is given information about all her options, and given the chance to talk to a professional, in a formal or an informal way. Do not try to force or sway a decision in any way.

**What should I do if a parent or carer asks me what I know about their child?**

If the girl has asked you to keep information confidential and you do not think she is at risk, you should not break her confidence to anyone.

**I have followed the guidelines and a girl's parents have complained about how I've handled a discussion with their daughter. What should I do?**

Tell your commissioner first of all. Your commissioner will be able to seek further help and advice as necessary.

### **What should I do if a girl aged under 13 tells me she has had sex?**

Under the Government's [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#) guidance 'there should be a presumption of reporting'.

A child aged under 13 (12 in Jersey) is not legally capable of consenting to sexual activity, so she is at risk of abuse or exploitation. The information needs to be passed on. Please follow the guidance from [A Safe Space](#).

If appropriate, support the girl to access medical attention with regards to emergency contraception and/or STI information or treatment.

### **What should I do if a girl aged 13 or over tells me she has had sex?**

You can ask if she would like to be directed to contraception and STI (sexually transmitted infections) information. There is no compulsion for an adult to pass on information about the girl unless the adult has reason to believe that the girl is at risk of abuse or exploitation and refuses to pass on the information herself.

### **What should I do if I find out or am told that a girl has been a victim of domestic abuse or sexual assault?**

The girl is at risk so you must pass on the information, making sure you tell the girl that you plan to do so and why. Follow the advice in [A Safe Space](#).

### **Do I need parental consent to give out barrier contraception at camps and residential events?**

If you feel it is appropriate for barrier contraception to be taken to the event you are attending then these can be given to anyone over the age of 13 (12 in Jersey) without specific parental consent. Parents and carers should, however, be aware that your unit's policy is to carry barrier contraception, and Leaders should consider the Fraser Guidelines (see page 8) to help decide whether giving out barrier contraception is appropriate. Regularly check that contraception is in date. This does not need to be documented on the General Health form (but bear in mind that some people have latex allergies).

### **What should I do if, at a camp or on a residential event, I find out a girl has been masturbating?**

Do not treat it as an unusual occurrence. Explain that it is a normal thing to do, but something that is personal and should take place in private.

### **What should I do if, at a camp or on a residential event, I discover a girl has had unprotected sex? Should I take her to find out about emergency contraception (morning-after pill) if needed, and STI information or treatment without parental consent?**

It is important that all girls know the expected behaviour on a camp or at a residential event, and discuss that sexual activity is personal and should take place in private, so a communal Girlguiding residential event is not an appropriate place.

You should take the girl to a medical practitioner (this may be a pharmacist) for emergency contraception and STI treatment or information as appropriate. You should encourage the girl to tell her parents or carers, especially if she is under 16. There may be some circumstances, for example on a holiday abroad, where it is not possible to get hold of parents or carers.

You are acting in the girl's best interests by providing her with access to a health professional who has the ultimate responsibility of prescribing emergency contraception and STI treatment. This is covered by the emergency treatment clause of the General Health form.

**What should I do if I find a girl is being bullied for issues around sex or relationships, such as homophobic bullying (bullying due to a person's actual or perceived same-sex orientation) or nasty rumours about her sex life?**

This should be treated as you would any bullying incident within a unit, but may need some specific focus on sex and relationships. Contact Stonewall (see page 13) for guidance on how to combat homophobic bullying in particular.

**What should I do if I find a girl is engaging in online sexual activity such as sending photos of herself to others online?**

Follow our [Digital safeguarding policy](#) and consider planning a session around being safe online into your programme.

## Further information and support

### *Within guiding*

If you have been approached by a member of the press in relation to any of the issues in these guidelines, please contact the Girlguiding Press Office at on 020 7592 1733 or 07990 553940 (out of hours).

If you receive a complaint from a parent or carer about anything connected with this subject, pass it on to your commissioner.

Participation in sex and relationships discussion sessions is voluntary for everyone. There may be another leader in your unit or local area who will cover the subject with your group if you feel unable to - ask your commissioner to put you in touch with someone.

For Brownies, Guides and members of Rangers you may also feel that a peer-education session around these issues will support girls in your unit to make decisions around relationships in an empowering environment; you can ask your commissioner about peer educators available in your area.

## Outside guiding

There may be occasions when a young woman or even another adult comes to you with a sex and relationships-related problem or question which you need external information to answer. In this case you must be able to point her in the direction of reliable sources of information including health centres, websites, up-to-date leaflets or reputable organisations such as Brook. Also ensure you signpost a young woman to age-appropriate resources; listed below are some resources that may be more appropriate for you to reference than for a girl to access directly.

See also the 'Confidentiality and safeguarding' section on page 5 for more guidance.

This information was correct at publication.

## General information and organisations appropriate for young people

- Brook [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

Brook provides free and confidential sexual health advice and contraception to young people up to the age of 25. For helpful information on the law related to sex and young people go to [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk) > Information > Sex and the law > Consent to sexual relationships.

- Get connected [www.getconnected.org.uk](http://www.getconnected.org.uk) 0808 808 4994

Provides free, confidential help for young people on a variety of issues.

- Teenage Health Freak [www.teenagehealthfreak.org](http://www.teenagehealthfreak.org)

Provides information for teenagers on issues such as bullying, body changes, alcohol, drugs, accidents, moods, sex and more.

- The Site [www.thesite.org](http://www.thesite.org)

A guide for young people that includes information on sex and relationships.

## Specific support organisations

- Stonewall [www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk)

Provides information, guidance and support on lesbian, gay and bisexual issues for young people, parents, youth workers, including guidance on young people coming out and how to deal with homophobic bullying.

- This is Abuse [www.thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk](http://www.thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk)

Site for young people providing information and support on abuse within young people's relationships.

- Contact a Family [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)

Information and support on young people with disabilities, including guidance on talking about sex and relationships for young people, parents and youth leaders.

- Sex Education Forum [www.sexeducationforum.org.uk](http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk)

Information on the SRE It's my right campaign.

- AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) [www.avaproject.org.uk](http://www.avaproject.org.uk)

Information and campaigning about Violence Against Women, including the Change the Story Girlguiding resource.

- *Working Together to Safeguard Children* [www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children)

Statutory guidance on working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.