

# Engaging Parents in Relationships and Sexuality Education in Northern Ireland

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# Overview

- My background and experience
- Why focus on engaging parents in RSE?
- Evidence on engaging parents from two NI Research studies: The JACK Trial and the Healthy Young Adult Relationships (HYAR) study
- Recommendations
- Questions for consideration

# My background and experience

- Social Psychologist, MSc, PhD.
- Specialist in the development and evaluation of RSE programmes.
- Trial manager and co-investigator JACK Trial (Lohan et al., 2013- 2018)
- Co-Principal investigator Thabo Trial South Africa & Lesotho (Skeen, Aventin et al., 2020-2023)
- Lead on parent component Health Young Adult Relationships (HYAR) Study (Lagdon et al., 2023-2024)

# Why focus on engaging parents in RSE?

- Successful school-based RSE take a multi-pronged approach involving young people, parents, and the wider community.
- Recognises the central role that parents play in their children's lives and their key influence on helping young people make healthy decisions about relationships and sexual behaviour.
- Research has shown that RSE programmes involving parents improve parent-child communication about relationships and sexuality and increase safer sex behaviours.
- Young people and parents want to communicate with each other about relationships, sex and sexuality.
- However, teenagers generally report rarely or never speaking to their parents about sex and many parents report feeling **ill-prepared** to initiate conversations with their children.

# Evidence on parent engagement: The JACK TRIAL (Lohan et al.,)

- Evaluation of a film-based RSE programme **co-designed with key stakeholders** and piloted in NI.
- **Culturally adapted** versions evaluated in 66 schools in GB and NI.
- Programme designed to reduce **unintended pregnancy** and **promote positive sexual health** for **young people aged 14-16**.
- Parent components included an optional **parent-child homework exercise** and educational materials for parents, including two **animated films** (all co-designed; all provided online).
- An embedded **process evaluation** enabled us to examine barriers and facilitators to parent engagement.

# Evidence on parent engagement: The JACK TRIAL

- Website analytics revealed that only 27% of parents engaged with the programme materials.
- Of those who responded to the parent survey (n=134), 50% had engaged with the JACK materials. Of those who did not engage, 68% said they did not engage with the materials because they **did not know about them**, 14% said they **forgot**, 11% said they did **not have time**, and 4% said it **did not interest them**.
- Only 38% of teachers implemented the **parent-child homework exercise**, mainly because they assumed young people would not do it, or that it might result in backlash from parents.
- While 34% of parent survey respondents said they had completed the homework exercise, only 13% of young people said they had done so (highest in NI at 17%). More girls (55%) than boys completed the homework exercise.
- Very little engagement from fathers (n=1 interview and n=2 survey responses).

# Barriers and facilitators: The JACK Trial

Findings from interviews and focus groups with parents (n=10), young people (n=58), teachers (n=31), and policy experts (n=10)

## Barriers to engaging parents:

- Lack of time or interest
- Fear about condoning sexual activity
- Religious beliefs and cultural norms not aligned with comprehensive RSE
- Lack of knowledge leading to lack of confidence
- Lack of awareness about the important role they play
- Lack of RSE training & support for teachers to engage parents

## Facilitators of engaging parents:

- Early, sustained, gradual RSE provision
- Provision of brief, accessible RSE for parents
- Promoting RSE as a joint parent-school responsibility

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## Engaging parents in digital sexual and reproductive health education: evidence from the JACK trial



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### Abstract

**Background:** Research evidence and international policy highlight the central role that parents play in promoting positive sexual behaviour and outcomes in their children, however they can be difficult to engage in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education programmes. Digital health promotion that uses online and mobile technologies (OMTs) to promote parent-child communication may offer an innovative solution to reach parents, however, few programmes have used OMTs to involve parents in SRH, and none have reported lessons learned in relation to optimising engagement. This study addresses this gap in the literature by reporting acceptability and feasibility of using OMTs to engage parents in SRH education. Findings will be relevant for those wishing to develop and implement digital SRH programmes with parents internationally.

**Methods:** The *Jack Trial* is a UK-wide cluster randomised controlled trial recruiting over 8000 adolescents from 66 socially and religiously diverse post-primary schools. An embedded mixed-methods process evaluation explored user engagement with parent components of the *If I Were Jack* SRH education programme, which include online animated films and a parent-teen homework exercise.

**Results:** A total of 109 adolescents, teachers, parents and SRH policy experts took part in semi-structured interviews and focus groups, 134 parents responded to an online survey, and 3179 adolescents completed a programme engagement and satisfaction questionnaire. Parents who accessed the materials were positive about them; 87% rated them as 'good or excellent' and 67% said they helped them have conversations with their child about SRH. Web analytics revealed that 27% of contacted parents accessed the digital materials, with 9% viewing the animated films. Only 38% of teachers implemented the homework exercise, mainly because they assumed that students would not complete it or it might result in backlash from parents.

**Conclusions:** While digital parental materials show promise for engaging parents in SRH education, this study suggests that in order to optimise engagement, parental components that give parents the necessary skills to have conversations with their children about sex should be coupled with efforts to increase school and teacher confidence to communicate with parents on sensitive topics.

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# Evidence on parent engagement in relationships education: The HYAR Study (Lagdon et al.)

- Intervention development study involving co-design of an educational intervention on healthy relationships for young adults aged 16-20
- Designed to be delivered in community settings (not schools)
- Involved young people as co-researchers
- Focus on healthy relationships, including Intimate Partner Violence and Coercive Control
- Final report published 14<sup>th</sup> November '24.

# Parent Views on Relationships Education: HYAR Study

- Most parents **did not clearly understand** the term ‘coercive control’ or the concept of ‘unhealthy relationships’
- While they expressed concern about these issues, many felt **uncomfortable or ill-equipped** to discuss healthy and unhealthy relationships with their children
- They felt ill-equipped to deal with the generational gap created by technology and social media
- They wanted education for young people, support from schools and the wider community, and education for parents and young people on these topics

# Barriers and facilitators: The HYAR Study

Findings from interviews with parents (n=8) and focus groups with young people (n=30)

## Barriers to engaging parents in relationships education:

- Lack of time/interest
- Perceptions that they do not need it
- Some parents are aware of the possibility that they have modelled unhealthy relationships at home

## Facilitators of engaging parents:

- Provision of brief relationships education for parents using different modalities and in different settings
- Back to basics to start: improving communication with young people, internet safety, consent etc.
- Promote public awareness of these issues – health professionals, schools, general public, media

# Recommendations

- Engage parents as co-educators at primary level
- Provide evidence-based RSE materials for parents that do not require a large time commitment from them
- Promote RSE as a joint parent-school responsibility
- Promote parent-child communication about their religious and cultural values and beliefs as they relate to RSE
- Provide adequate RSE training and support for teachers to support them to engage parents
- Promote public awareness of healthy and unhealthy relationships

# Questions for consideration

- Are we adequately supporting parents to engage in age-appropriate communication with their children about relationships and sexuality from an early age?
- How can we further support teachers to engage with parents on sensitive issues linked with RSE?
- Are we promoting RSE as a joint responsibility?
- Are we engaging parents in the development of RSE resources?
- If parents withdraw their children from school-based RSE, how can we ensure that these children are provided with adequate evidence-based RSE?
- Are there adequate evidence-based RSE resources to meet the needs of faith-based schools?
- Are there adequate culturally appropriate evidence-based RSE resources?

**Thank you!**

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