Children and Families Bill

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) Click here to watch Sarah speak

I am proud to be a patron of Devon Rape Crisis, which, like all of us in this House, is deeply concerned about sexual violence against women and girls. All of us in this House are particularly concerned about the extent to which young people are accessing their information about sex from violent pornography. The influence of violent pornography is to normalise distorted relationships. It teaches some young men that it is normal for women to enjoy violent sex, and to have a total lack of understanding about what constitutes consent. Disturbingly, many young women are being pressured into accepting deeply abnormal and often very violent relationships.

I completely accept that many parents wish to take on the role of delivering sensitive teaching on relationships in a home environment, but let us be absolutely clear that that is not happening for many young girls. The recent outrages in Oxford and in too many of our towns show that young women are being predated on by violent and often much older men. Young women have had no training in how to say no, or an understanding that it is okay to say no. Too often, there is no one for them to confide in. I put it to the House, therefore, that we need to have sex and relationship education in our curriculum: if it is not there, it will not happen. Too often when we teach sex in schools, it is about plumbing and prevention.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough, Labour)

The hon. Lady’s words echo those of Ofsted, which pointed out that the secondary sex and relationship curriculum is not only too focused on plumbing but does not build on the skills that young people need to decide whether they want to enter a relationship—the skills to say no.

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

It is about teaching girls to say no, and teaching young men to understand that no is no. That needs to be delivered in an age-appropriate way. It is not about frightening young people or taking it out of the hands of parents. In fact, many parents feel relieved that other people are delivering it.

There are very competent peer educators out there, ready to deliver these programmes in schools, but I am afraid that if it cannot be counted, it often does not count. It is important, then, to establish the principle that these programmes should be happening; then, of course, we would need to discuss the matter further, because it would need to be delivered in an evidence-based way. I get the message from teachers that they often do not feel they have the skills to deliver these programmes. Let us make sure that this is delivered in an age-appropriate way and by the right professionals, then, but first let us make sure that it happens, because this is about reducing violence against women. We can send out the message that this is important and deliver it well.

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