SHORT REPORT

Changing rooms: time for a makeover

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This study explores the concerns expressed by primary school children and their parents about changing arrangements for PE at school. In 39% of schools pupils had expressed anxieties. Are traditional arrangements where children get changed for PE in mixed sex classrooms still appropriate in view of the younger age at which children are now starting puberty?

Traditionally girls and boys in primary schools in the UK have changed together for physical education lessons (PE) in their classroom. Anecdotal reports from children seen in outpatients, principally girls, suggested difficulties and embarrassment in getting changed for PE at school. Children in the UK are reaching physical and sexual maturity at a younger age.¹ Children's comments raised the question as to whether these traditional changing arrangements remain appropriate.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

We sent a questionnaire to the head teachers of 116 primary schools in Sheffield between November 2004 and January 2005. Ethical approval was not required. The questionnaire inquired as to what changing facilities were available to primary school years 3, 4, 5, and 6. Children in year 3 are aged 8–9 years; year 4, 9–10 years; year 5, 10–11 years, and year 6, 11–12 years. We asked if children got changed together, if there was any provision for separate changing facilities, the nature of any changing facilities, and the year groups to which they were available. We also inquired as to whether any children or parents had expressed concern or requested separate changing facilities over the past year.

RESULTS

We received 102 replies (88%). Of those schools that responded, 39% (40/102) had received requests from children for sex specific changing facilities within the past year. Approximately 21% (21/102) of schools had received specific requests from parents for separate changing facilities.

Twenty per cent of schools did not offer children any segregated changing facilities. Approximately 80% (82/102) offered separate changing facilities for year 6, 62% (63/102) for year 5, 26% (27/102) for year 4, and approximately 13% (13/102) for year 3. Where separate changing was offered, only 12% (10/82) of schools had changing rooms. In 67% of schools (55/82) children were given the option of changing in the school toilets, 40% (33/82) were offered the option of changing in an empty classroom, and 11% (9/82) used the cloakroom as a changing area. Other options offered to children included the staff room, the quiet area of the classroom, and the school corridor. One school offered separate changing facilities consisting of the other children standing around individuals to provide a screen.

DISCUSSION

The issue of separate changing facilities for younger age groups is now more pressing with evidence that puberty starts at an earlier age.¹ Based on the pubertal staging centiles drawn on the 1996 growth charts by the end of year 6, approximately 75% of girls would have some breast development, 50% breast stage 3, and 25% breast stage 4.² Similarly one would expect 50% to have stage 2 pubic hair and 25% to have stage 3 pubic hair. Almost 10% of year 6 girls will have attained menarche. Of boys in year 6, approximately 75% will have testicular enlargement (volume 4 ml+), 25% pubic hair stage 2, and almost 50% penile stage 2. Even in the youngest children (year 3), 10% of girls would have breast development (stage 2).²

Almost 39% of schools had received specific requests from children for separate changing facilities. In many cases where alternative options for changing were offered, these would require a specific request from an individual, which in itself could potentially single them out and cause embarrassment. Many schools commented that they would have difficulty in offering separate sex changing facilities because of constraints on their available space, or because there are not enough staff to adequately supervise two groups. Toilets are often used as a changing facility. However, children often find school toilets dirty and smelly and they can be an area in which bullying may occur.^{3,4}

Given that children are reaching physical maturity at an earlier age, do we need to consider whether historical changing arrangements are still appropriate?

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