

SEX, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE LAW: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



Northern
Ireland
Office

SOME IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER

On 2 February 2009 new laws were brought in by parliament to better protect young people from sexual abuse and exploitation.

This leaflet is written for young people to explain what these changes mean for you. The law is not always easy to understand so you might need to read this carefully, or ask a friend or someone you trust to help explain things.

What age can I have sex at?

The age of consent has changed from 17 to 16. This means that if you are 16 and say yes to sex, the law will accept that you gave your consent.

The change to the age of consent does not mean that the law is now saying that sex at an earlier age is fine. But, if you are 16, it is your responsibility to make sensible decisions about sex.

The easiest way to stay safe is to delay having sex until you are sure you are ready.

What happens if I have sex before I am 16?

If you are 15 or less, the person who you have sex with will be breaking the law.

If you have sex with someone else who is also under 16 then you too could be breaking the law.

If someone of any age has sex with a child under 13 they will be guilty of rape and could go to prison for a long time.

What about kissing and stuff?

The word 'sex' is used in this leaflet to mean any sexual activity – so if you are under 16 it is against the law for anyone even to kiss and touch you in a sexual way, but ...remember, the new law is about protecting you against abuse, not about stopping you growing up.

What about me and my boyfriend? Are we breaking the law?

In real life young people who are under 16 do have relationships with each other. If both young people are about the same age, and if neither of them is putting pressure on the other one to do something they do not want to do, the law is not intended to be used against them.

What if someone is abusing me?

It is against the law for anyone to have any sort of sexual activity with you if you are under 16.

If someone over 18 has any sexual activity with someone under 16 they could go to prison for up to 14 years.

If you are 16 or 17, the law also protects you in certain situations, for example, from the risk of abuse by family members or by other adults who might have a responsibility for you, such as a teacher or care worker. They are not allowed to have sex with you, even if you agree to it, until you are 18.

Where there is any reason to be concerned that you or another young person are being harmed, it may be necessary for you to talk to counselling or health professionals and/or the police.

What does the law say about people who pay for sex with young people?

Anyone who pays for sex with a person under 18 could be put in prison for a very long time.

It is also a crime for anyone to take rude pictures of someone under 18. This is to help stop adults abusing young people. However, you should also remember that it could be a criminal offence if, for example, you take rude pictures on your mobile phone of someone under 18.

Help and advice

If you need advice and help about issues to do with sex, there are agencies who can help you, and their phone numbers are listed below. Counselling, advice and health services will respect your privacy but will also tell you why, if and when they have concerns about you and your safety and need to give information to social services and/or the police.

Some useful phone numbers

Brook	028 9032 8866
FPA	0845 122 8687
Include Youth	028 9031 1007
Contact Youth	028 9032 0092
Childline	0800 11 11
Voice of young people in care (VOYPIC)	028 9024 4888
Children's Law Centre CHALKY helpline number (freephone)	0808 808 5678