

# The Guardian

## Jail fear for agony aunts as peers curb sex advice for teens

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Editors of teen magazines fear their agony aunts could be jailed for offering responsible sex advice to under-age girls, under a bill now passing through parliament. The sexual offences bill, designed to prosecute paedophiles for "grooming" offences, makes it illegal to "arrange or facilitate the commission of a child sex offence".

There are exemptions, covering advice on pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and avoiding physical harm. But attempts to give "emotional" advice the same dispensation have been thwarted in the Lords.

Celia Duncan, the editor of *Cosmo Girl*, a monthly magazine whose average reader is aged 15-16, said she feared the consequences. "This bill is unclear. Agony aunts could be prosecuted."

She said that for many teenage girls, magazines were their only sources of information on relationships. "We get about 500 texts, emails and letters a week. They ask things like, 'How do you know when you are ready for sex? Does it hurt? What does it feel like?'"

"We did a survey and 73% said they didn't feel comfortable talking to anyone about these issues. They write to us because it's anonymous. At the moment, we make clear that under-age sex is illegal, but we ask them if they are ready for it, and if they are aware of contraception. How will we answer these letters in future?"

She said teen magazines played a "vital role" in the sex education of teenagers, in the absence of an effective national programme at school. Levels of teenage pregnancy are lower in countries such as the Netherlands where attitudes are most open, she said, but highest in places like the US where discussion is most restricted.

The Periodical Publishers' Association wants to get the exemptions extended, but a proposed amendment to the bill was rejected on Tuesday by the Home Office minister Lord Falconer, who said the exemptions were sufficient. The association's solicitor, Clare Hoban, rejected Lord Falconer's claim. "What it fails to address is that advice and information about the emotional aspects of relationships is inextricably linked to important sexual health issues."

She said "militant" campaigners would seize the first opportunity to mount a private prosecution.

"People under the age of 16 are sexually active...There is a crying need for responsible information to counter playground misinformation."

In the past, teen magazines have been criticised for being too explicit. The industry was forced to introduce a code of conduct in response to a campaign led by the Tory MP Peter Luff, who

was appalled by the content of Sugar magazine. Now, say editors, the teenage magazine arbitration panel keeps them in line.

Other organisations fear they may also be affected by the bill. Ute Navidi, of Childline, said it was "a very worrying development", and feared that the helpline's counsellors would be prosecuted for advising the 16,000 children who called last year.

"Our work would be very circumscribed," she said. "We would have to say to children they can ring us about anything other than sexual matters. It is bizarre that ears are being closed to the real concerns of real children."

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