

Relationships and Sex Education: Briefing for Parliamentarians

Westminster Hall RSE debate, [e-petition 235053](#), 25th Feb 2019

This briefing is produced by the Sex Education Forum, which is a group of partners including local authorities and national charities working together to secure young people's entitlement to good quality RSE. The Sex Education Forum is hosted at the National Children's Bureau and has been shaping policy and practice on RSE for over 30 years. Sex Education Forum, Contact sexedforum@ncb.org.uk

E-petition title: Give parents the right to opt their child out of Relationship and Sex Education

E-petition 235053 states: "We believe it is the parent's fundamental right to teach their child RSE topics or to at least decide who teaches them and when and how they are taught. We want the right to opt our children out of RSE when it becomes mandatory in Sept 2020".

The Government response to the e-petition states:

"The draft guidance advises head teachers that parents **can request** that their child be withdrawn from **sex education** as part of RSE"

"These subjects represent a huge opportunity to help our children and young people develop, to treat each other with kindness, respect and integrity, in order to become successful and happy adults who make a meaningful contribution to our society"

Summary points

- **The majority of parents want schools to teach RSE (92% in a 2016 independent poll, PSHE Association). Effective RSE is a partnership between parents and schools.**
- **Education, not ignorance is the only way that children will be able to recognise abusive behaviour and know how to seek help. 1 in 20 children are sexually abused and 1 in 3 did not tell an adult (Radford, 2011). Sexual abuse can happen to any child, so the only way to safeguard children is to ensure Relationships Education has no opt out.**
- **Bullying and poor mental health affects LGBT young people at alarming rates. Nearly half of LGBT pupils (45 per cent) – are bullied for being LGBT at school (Stonewall, 2017). Schools are already required to teach in a way that does not discriminate on protected characteristics, so a LGBT inclusive approach to RSE is nothing new.**
- **Schools can choose the resources they use to teach RSE, and can choose to include faith perspectives alongside essential information about the law, legal rights and medical facts.**
- **Teachers need training in RSE so that schools can offer the high quality provision. 80% of parents want teachers to have training in RSE (Sex Education Forum, 2018).**

1. What is covered in Relationships Education?

Relationships education in primary schools will protect children. The proposals are to cover 'Families and people who care for me', 'Caring friendships', 'Respectful relationships', 'Online relationships', 'Being safe'. There is widespread agreement that children need to be able to recognise abusive behaviour and to know how to seek help if they are worried about abuse or experience it.

Relationships Education should promote equal, safe and enjoyable relationships and be taught in a way which fosters LGBT and gender equality, in line with the Equalities Act 2010.

2. What is covered in sex education?

The Government proposals are that schools determine the content of sex education at primary school. Sex education should be developmentally appropriate, responding to children's natural curiosity, for example about 'where babies come from?' and 'why girls and boys bodies are different'. This needs to include learning correct terms for genitalia so that children have words for the human body that are shared and recognised by adults they may seek help from.

Ofsted raised concerns about schools failing to teach correct terms for genitalia in 2013, and in 2015 the Education Select Committee specifically recommended that children learn correct terms for genitalia in order to protect them.

3. Why does RSE need to be updated?

Children and young people, Head teachers, Ofsted and MPs across all major parties have called for RSE to be updated because currently provision is very patchy:

- 45% of young people rate the quality of their RSE as 'good' or 'very good'
- 17% of all young people rate the quality of their RSE as 'bad' or 'very bad'
- 23% of young people had not learnt how to tell if a relationship is healthy

(Independent poll of 1000 young people aged 16 and 17, Sex Education Forum, 2018)

Concerns about access to unreliable information online has highlighted the urgency of providing education at school:

- 28% of 11-12 year olds report seeing pornography (NSPCC, 2017)
"porn really opened my eyes - I have never been taught sex ed. in school so it was kind of up to me to find out all about it." (Male, age 15, in NSPCC, 2017)

Young people say that school is their preferred main source of information about sex, followed by parents, then health professionals. Media and pornography are not preferred sources of information for very many young people at all (Tanton 2015).

4. Do parents want schools to teach RSE?

Most parents are very supportive of schools providing relationships and sex education, and also want to play a part in educating their children at home.

- **78%** of parents want primary schools to teach their children about the difference between safe and unwanted touch and how to speak up if someone treats them inappropriately, 11% did not want primary schools to teach this and 11% 'did not know' (Independent poll of 1000 parents, Sex Education Forum, 2014).
- **72%** of parents think primary schools should teach children about what to do if they find pictures showing private parts of the body online or are asked to send them. (Independent poll of 1000 parents, Sex Education Forum, 2014).
- **92%** of parents support the teaching of PSHE education (which includes lessons about staying safe from abuse) in all schools (YouGov poll, PSHE Association, 2016)

Young people say that school is their preferred first choice for RSE, followed by their parents, but currently many parents are falling short in providing RSE at home:

- For boys, the main source of sex education while growing up is school (39%), followed by friends (24%), with fathers accounting for 3% and mothers 4%.

Effective RSE is a partnership between parents and schools. Parents need to be given adequate information about what is taught and when. School-home communication about RSE should start early so that parents can anticipate topics covered at school and make their own timely input or follow up at home. And parents have just as much right to expect good quality teaching in RSE as in other subjects.

80% of parents think RSE teachers should be trained to teach it (Independent poll of 1000 parents, Sex Education Forum, 2018).

5. What RSE resources are being used in schools?

Schools have the flexibility to choose what resources they use. When teachers have adequate subject knowledge in RSE they are able to recognise factually, and medically correct information, and to use a range of resources skilfully to support discussion and challenge discrimination.

There are many ways to teach children about topics such as sexual abuse, which are neither frightening nor graphic. It is important that children have the words to describe the human body and the knowledge that certain behaviour, such as inappropriate touching, is wrong.

There is choice about the resources that can be used to support this learning. For example:

- Story books that teach that 'some secrets should never be kept',
- NPSCC's 'Pants' resource for parents, early years settings and primary schools
- Activities such as drawing body outlines for children to label and learn correct terms for genitalia, and that they are private.

6. Does RSE damage children?

No, the reverse is true:

- A large study in United States found young people who had received RSE were less likely to describe first sex as unwanted, and female respondents who had received RSE were less likely to have a partner with a big age difference (Lindberg, 2012).
- Young people citing school as their main source of information about sex are less likely to contract an STI or (for young women) to be pregnant by 18 or experience an unplanned pregnancy in later life (Tanton 2015)
- Young people who have had high quality RSE are more likely to start having sex at an older age and more likely to use condoms and contraception if they do have sex (Kirby 2007 and UNESCO 2018)

7. What about LGBT issues and RSE?

It is a requirement of the Equality Act 2010 that the curriculum is taught in an inclusive way that does not discriminate. An increasing number of schools are teaching about LGBT issues (Stonewall, 2017). However, the poor mental health of LGBT people remains alarmingly high:

- Nearly half of lesbian, gay, bi and trans pupils (45 per cent) – are bullied for being LGBT at school. This compares with 65 per cent in 2007 (Stonewall, 2017)
- Nearly one in ten trans pupils (nine per cent) are subjected to death threats at school (Stonewall, 2017)
- One in eight LGBT people aged 18-24 (13 per cent) said they've attempted to take their own life in the last year (Stonewall / YouGov 2018)

LGBT inclusion in RSE helps tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying. It does not encourage any particular lifestyle. In primary school, when learning about families and 'how they care for us', children learn about the diverse range of families, so it is easy to include families with same-sex parents. Challenging gender stereotypes is important throughout primary and secondary school, and contributes to tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools and in society.

There are lots of resources that schools can choose from to ensure their teaching about relationships is inclusive and clear about equality.

8. Are faith perspectives included in RSE?

Faith perspectives can be included in RSE alongside information about the law and medical facts. It is important that different types of information are identified as such. There are lots of faith schools already providing high quality and inclusive RSE.

- The Catholic Education Service [model RSE programme for primary school](#) includes factual information about the human body, e.g. **'The names of the main parts of the body, including identifying and correctly naming genitalia (e.g. penis and vagina)'** and clearly identifies a separate section: 'Religious understanding of human relationships'

- **Cardinal Newman Catholic Secondary School, Luton** – teachers have been trained on gender and sexual orientation in order to tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying, and so that teachers are equipped to respond to students’ questions in the PSHE curriculum. A school ethos group supported this initiative and the school is proud to be welcoming to all in their community.
<https://vimeo.com/313182508>

A schools’ RSE policy is a good place to explain how their RSE programme contributes to the ethos and values of the school. The importance of respectful behaviour and positive, caring relationships is integral to the ethos and values of perhaps every school in the country.

9. Do teachers have adequate training to teach high-quality RSE?

A survey of teachers of RSE in 2018 found that:

- 29% had never had any training in RSE
- 76% said it would be ‘very useful’ or to have further practical advice on how to deliver RSE to students with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
- 70% said it would ‘very useful’ to have guidance on how to choose and use reliable resources
- 64% said it would be ‘very useful’ to have information on how to involve parents when developing your RSE curriculum

Parents and pupils alike should expect RSE to be taught to a high standard, just like any other subject on the curriculum. This is backed up by UNESCO (2018) international guidelines that teachers responsible for the delivery of RSE require training on the specific skills needed to address sexuality accurately and clearly.

Government must commit to a quantifiable investment in training teachers on RSE, and is yet to do so. Implementation of high quality RSE is heavily dependent on this.

10. Does every child need RSE at school?

Yes, absolutely. Sexual abuse can happen to any child. Statistics show that abusers are usually known to a child and often within their family. This is one reason why it’s of fundamental importance that every child receives relationships education.

What if we fail to teach RSE.....?

“I was sexually abused and no one told me what was done to me was wrong. We got stranger danger and how to cross the road and that was it. He was my granddad. I didn’t like it but didn’t know it was wrong but thought I should be embarrassed as I thought it was my fault. If I had known it was wrong and that I could say something and someone had listened, it might have stopped earlier than it did if I had known more or I might have told before I did.” (Female, 16 years old, respondent to Sex Education Forum ‘Heads or Tails’ survey, 2016)

““We weren’t taught about what sex is so how would we know if we were assaulted or raped” (Young person aged 16 or 17, respondent to Independent poll, 2018, Sex Education Forum)

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See also (below) [12 principles for RSE](#), supported by NSPCC, Barnardo's, The Children's Society and NCB

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We are committed to relationships and sex education, which:

- 1.** Is an identifiable part of a personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education curriculum, which has planned, timetabled lessons across all the Key Stages
- 2.** Is taught by staff regularly trained in RSE and PSHE (with expert visitors invited in to enhance and supplement the programme where appropriate)
- 3.** Works in partnership with parents and carers, informing them about what their children will be learning and about how they can contribute at home
- 4.** Delivers lessons where pupils feel safe and encourages participation by using a variety of teaching approaches with opportunities to develop critical thinking and relationship skills
- 5.** Is based on reliable sources of information, including about the law and legal rights, and distinguishes between fact and opinion
- 6.** Promotes safe, equal, caring and enjoyable relationships and discusses real-life issues appropriate to the age and stage of pupils, including friendships, families, consent, relationship abuse, sexual exploitation and safe relationships online
- 7.** Gives a positive view of human sexuality, with honest and medically accurate information, so that pupils can learn about their bodies and sexual and reproductive health in ways that are appropriate to their age and maturity
- 8.** Gives pupils opportunities to reflect on values and influences (such as from peers, media, faith and culture) that may shape their attitudes to relationships and sex, and nurtures respect for different views
- 9.** Includes learning about how to get help and treatment from sources such as the school nurse and other health and advice services, including reliable information online
- 10.** Fosters gender equality and LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) equality and challenges all forms of discrimination in RSE lessons and in every-day school life
- 11.** Meets the needs of all pupils with their diverse experiences - including those with special educational needs and disabilities
- 12.** Seeks pupils' views about RSE so that teaching can be made relevant to their real lives and assessed and adapted as their needs change

Notes
These 12 points explain what is needed for good quality RSE. This is based on research evidence and is supported by a wide range of organisations. The purpose of RSE is to help children and young people to be safe, healthy and happy as they grow up and in their future lives. RSE must always be appropriate to pupils' age and stage of development and is an essential part of safeguarding. The law requires that, from September 2019, relationships and sex education (RSE) is taught in all secondary schools in England, and that relationships education is taught in all primary schools in England. In addition, National Curriculum Science* (which is taught in maintained schools) includes some elements of sex education.