

## Relationships and Sex Education

### Briefing for Parliamentarians

July 2018

This briefing provides evidence-based information in answer to some common questions about Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). It 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.

### Statutory RSE legislation – where are we now?

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 introduced new legislation with a planned start of September 2019. This includes:

- Relationships and sex education (RSE) required in all secondary schools
- Relationships education required in all primary schools
- All schools – i.e. academies, free schools, independent schools, maintained schools, special schools.

A Government 'call for evidence' on RSE closed in February 2018, and draft Government guidance and regulations on RSE are now expected to follow imminently. There will be a period of consultation on the draft materials before they are laid before the House.

#### Key points about RSE

- Relationships education in primary schools will protect children. It needs to cover friendship, families, appropriate behaviour, basic understanding of our bodies (with correct terms for genitalia). Children can then recognise abuse and get help early.
- RSE in secondary schools needs to prepare young people for positive relationships and provide sexual and reproductive health information so that young people feel in control of their sexual behaviour and decisions.
- RSE and Relationships Education should promote equal, safe and enjoyable relationships and be taught in a way which fosters LGBT and gender equality.
- Parents are very supportive. They want RSE to be high quality: 80% believe those teaching it should have training in RSE.

#### 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)*

## Frequently asked questions about RSE

### 1. When should relationships and sex education start?

Informal learning about relationships and sex starts in infancy even if no-one talks to children about it. Children are finding out about families and how people behave in relationships well before starting school and are naturally curious about ‘where babies come from?’ and ‘why girls and boys bodies are different’.

School RSE programmes need to start early in primary school and then cover all age groups. Typically, a school programme will begin with teaching children about appropriate behaviour, safety and basic understanding of their bodies and how families care for them. These are the foundations and the themes can be revisited and built on. Five year olds are not taught about how people have sex.

It’s vital that families and schools are involved from the start in providing accurate information and helping children to make sense of the world around them. This is especially important given the easy access to unreliable and harmful online content.

### 2. Do parents support RSE?

The majority of parents are very supportive of schools providing relationships and sex education, and also want to play a part in educating their children at home. Young people say that school is their first choice for RSE, followed by their parents, but in reality many parents are falling short in providing RSE at home.

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 and be continuous 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 (SEF, 2014).

### 3. How can children learn safely about what constitutes sexual abuse?

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. 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.

There are many ways to teach children about 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.

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.

#### **4. What is 'LGBT-inclusive' RSE?**

Good quality relationships education is about promoting safe, equal, caring and enjoyable relationships. At primary school the foundations are laid by understanding what makes a good friend, and how families love and care for each other. Children might explore how their family is similar or different to other families and create pictures of their family to display. At secondary school students are entitled to comprehensive sexual health information which is relevant to LGBT people and does not make assumptions about the sexual orientation or gender of pupils.

It is a requirement of the Equality Act that the curriculum is taught in an inclusive way that does not discriminate. Failure to provide factual and LGBT-inclusive information about a topic like STIs leaves young people at risk of serious ill health. It is damaging for young LGBT people if there is no visibility of LGBT people in relationships education. RSE does not encourage any particular lifestyle other than promoting health and well-being for all.

Exploring and challenging gender stereotypes is also vital throughout school life 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.

#### **5. If young people learn about contraception and condoms aren't they more likely to have sex and to take risks?**

No. Evidence from around the world clearly shows that when young people have a comprehensive programme of RSE, which includes learning about contraception and condoms they are more likely to start having sex at an older age and more likely to use condoms or contraception if they do have sex. 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). Research also shows that RSE is linked to young people having fewer sexual partners.

In a large study carried out in the United States, female respondents who had received comprehensive RSE were less likely to have a partner with a big age difference at first sex and more likely to describe first sex as wanted, compared to those receiving abstinence-only or no RSE. This study also found that young people who had received comprehensive RSE were less likely to describe first sex as unwanted (Lindberg, 2012).

#### **6. How do faith schools approach RSE?**

There are lots of faith schools that already provide high quality RSE, and which include faith perspectives alongside factual information. It is important that faith perspectives are identified as such and that all pupils are provided with information about the law and legal rights throughout RSE.

There is an opportunity in a schools' RSE policy for faith and non-faith schools alike 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.

All children and young people have an entitlement to a comprehensive programme of RSE. Therefore, guidance and regulations must make clear it is not appropriate for schools to exclude particular topics or information because of the faith of parents or religious status of the school. Instead, teaching should be

responsive to the lived experiences of pupils, and so can reflect the religious and cultural background of pupils, for example in the choices of resources and tailoring the curriculum to meet pupil needs.

### **7. Don't young people have enough information online without learning more at school?**

Young people say that school is their preferred main source of information about sex, followed by parents, with health professionals coming in third place, and the internet. In reality boys are more likely to learn about sex from the internet and pornography than from their fathers. Girls are more likely to learn from their friends than from their mothers.

Young people have been at the forefront of the campaign for statutory RSE. The need for reform is clear from our 2016 survey findings from over 2000 young people:

- Half (50%) of those surveyed had not learnt from their primary school about how to get help if you experience unwanted touching or sexual abuse
- 44% had not learnt about 'how to tell when a relationship is abusive'
- Only a quarter (24%) of young people said they learnt about FGM,

Reliable information online can play an important part in learning. However, it is difficult for young people to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information. While online media can offer a lot of information, it does not offer the space for young people to discuss, reflect and debate the issues, nor to develop relationship skills.

### **8. What training do school staff need to teach RSE?**

Evidence shows that RSE is more effective if taught by trained educators. Training needs to cover subject knowledge and the techniques for making learning safe and inclusive of all pupils. Currently teachers report feeling ill equipped to teach high quality RSE. There are many teachers who would like to develop their knowledge so that they can teach RSE and PSHE really well.

It is very important that teachers and support staff access the training they need so that they can meet the needs of all pupils including those with disabilities and special educational needs.

Government need to commit a quantifiable resource to training so that every primary, secondary and special school in England can access basic training in good practice RSE and PSHE. A viable career pathway for specialist PSHE teachers will be best supported by both RSE and PSHE being statutory.

### **9. Does RSE need to be taught as part of PSHE education?**

RSE is an essential component of personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, and should be an identifiable part of planned, timetabled PSHE education. RSE is best delivered as part of a wider curriculum promoting health, resilience, confidence, respect, and personal safety – which are part of the full package of PSHE. To make this work in practice, PSHE must be made statutory. The placing of RSE as part of PSHE also mitigates the risk that RSE will be delivered by some schools purely through 'drop-down' or occasional off-timetable days, which Ofsted has highlighted as problematic.

## References

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Tanton, C et al (2015) Patterns and trends in sources of information about sex among young people in Britain: evidence from three National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, *BMJ Open*; 5:e007834 doi:10.1136/ bmjopen-2015- 007834

Ofsted (2013) PSHE: Not yet good enough: PSHE education in schools <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/not-yet-good-enough-personal-social-health-and-economic-education>

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<http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/resources/evidence/heads-or-tails-what-young-people-are-telling-us-about-sre>

House of Commons Education Committee (2015) Life Lessons: PSHE and SRE in schools

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmeduc/145/145.pdf>

Children and Social Work Act 2017, [Chapter 4, Section 34](#)

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



**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 be essential and self-referencing. The law requires that, from September 2016, 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, it is a statutory National Curriculum 'subject' (which is taught in maintained schools) includes some elements of sex education.