
CONSULTATION: CHANGES TO THE TEACHING OF RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION AND PSHE

Response of Humanists UK, February 2018

(A word limit of 250 words per answer applies)

1. Thinking about relationships education in primary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught for different age groups/key stages and why. Please include any considerations or evidence which informed your choices. (249 words)

'It is critical that children develop the language and capacity to talk about and understand their bodies, feelings and relationships from a young age.' ['International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education: an evidence-informed approach'](#), UNESCO, 2018:

Safeguarding

Relationships Education (RelEd) must contribute to safeguarding children from abuse, neglect, and sexual exploitation. Pupils must therefore learn that parts of their bodies are private, the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touching, where to get advice or report abuse, and how to stay safe online.

Healthy relationships

Primary pupils should be able to identify the differences between healthy relationships and abusive or imbalanced relationships. Crucially, RelEd must also introduce pupils to the variety of different relationships that will encounter during their lives. This includes learning to appreciate what it means to be a good friend, to recognise bullying, and to understand boundaries and expectations in relationships with people in authority. It also means that children must be introduced to the concept of sexual relationships in a safe, age-appropriate way before they encounter them.

Inclusion and diversity

Inclusive RelEd is not about 'promoting alternative lifestyles' to children (not least given that this wrongly implies that sexuality or gender identity are choices). Rather, being inclusive means using images of different kinds of family, ensuring children's own home circumstances are not stigmatised or ignored, explaining that all kinds of relationships should be equal and safe, and encouraging respect for everyone. As such, teaching must meet the needs of those with special educational needs and disabilities too.

2. Thinking about relationships and sex education in secondary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught for different age groups/key stages and why. Please include any considerations or evidence which informed your choices. (247)

Sexual Health

RSE in schools must be a source of medically-accurate, unbiased, non-judgmental, and legally-sound information. That means educating children about the variety of ways of engaging in safe sex, and rules out teaching an abstinence-only approach. It also means

providing information about the full range of options available to women during pregnancy, including abortion. Suggesting, as some Christian RSE providers are known to, that '[condoms are ineffective as a prevention technique](#) for diseases', or that [abortion can lead to 'suicidal tendencies'](#) and 'drug and alcohol abuse', is not acceptable.

Inclusion

RSE must be equally inclusive of and relevant to *all* children, irrespective of their own sexuality or gender identity, or that of their family. LGBT relationships and issues are not a distinct subject area, and teaching of them should not be confined to one or two lessons. The whole RSE curriculum must be LGBT-inclusive, and information that is relevant to LGBT people should be incorporated into every topic. The Government should make absolutely clear that this must be done without passing judgment on the various forms of family or sexual relationship conducive to individual and collective fulfilment.

Equality, respect, and consent

Various reports in recent years have detailed normalised [sexual harassment](#), pervasive [sexual bullying](#), damaging [gender stereotyping](#), and widespread [ignorance about consent](#). These are issues far too important for schools to be reacting to, after the event. Equality and respect must be reinforced in RSE, and attitudes that lead to abuse and violence must be challenged.

3. Are there important aspects of ensuring safe online relationships that would not otherwise be covered in wider Relationships Education and Relationships and Sex Education, or as part of the computing curriculum? (250 words)

The internet poses a number of challenges particular to ReEd and RSE:

- Girlguiding's [Girls' attitudes survey 2017](#) noted that 'being online puts pressure on [girls] to look and act in a certain way', revealing that 95% of girls aged 11-21 said that representations of girls and women online and in the media should be more positive.
- [Research by Plymouth University](#) in 2012 found that children are increasingly forming 'unrealistic expectations' about sex and relationships due to their depiction online.
- The [NSPCC](#), among others, has noted that exposure to 'body perfect' images online, on social media, and elsewhere is one of the key drivers behind the rise of body-confidence and self-esteem issues among young people.

These issues cannot be tackled in computing, but require careful consideration in ReEd and RSE, ideally within a wider PSHE curriculum that covers media literacy, the use of social media, and resilience more broadly.

It is also obvious that these issues must be covered early. Young people have their first sexual experience at a younger age than ever before, and prior to that they are introduced to sex by online pornography and sexting at younger ages. A [2013 LSE survey](#) of nearly 10,000 children aged 9-16 found that pornography tops children's online concerns, and in 2016 [it was revealed](#) that the police in England investigated 13 times as many reported cases of sexting among under-16 year olds in 2015 compared to 2013. Children must be aware of these specific online risks before they encounter them.

4. How should schools effectively consult parents so they can make informed decisions that meet the needs of their child, including on the right to withdraw? For example, how often, on what issues and by what means? (248)

Schools should continuously engage with parents and promote the benefits of ReEd/RSE. The Government, likewise, must play a role in 'selling' the subject to parents.

What schools must not do is abuse the parental right of withdrawal. In the past, some religious schools have used withdrawal to avoid teaching RSE/ReEd altogether. [In 2014](#), for example, Yesodey Hatorah Senior Girls School revealed that 'the school does not teach sex education because in practice all parents will exercise their statutory right to withdraw their children'. Similarly, religious schools have been known to omit the teaching of LGBT-relevant information in RSE on the grounds that parents would object to such teaching. Indeed, during [a 2017 interview covering RSE](#), CES chair Archbishop McMahon even went so far as to ask 'Why would same-sex parents want to send their children to a Catholic school?'

This is not an acceptable approach, and schools must neither make assumptions about the beliefs of parents, nor encourage them to take a negative view of RSE and ReEd in order to provoke withdrawal. The Government must be clear about that in the guidance it produces.

Lastly, it should not be possible for parents to withdraw their children from receiving information intended to safeguard them from abuse (which includes basic information about their bodies and relationships with family/people in authority). Given the high proportion of abused children who are abused by a parent or family member, this is of paramount importance to the safety of children.

5. Thinking about PSHE in primary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught and why? Please include your reasons for choosing each subject area or evidence to support your suggestions. (244)

Relationships Education and Relationships and Sex Education

ReEd and RSE is best delivered as part of a wider curriculum promoting health, resilience, confidence, respect, and personal safety, both online and offline. For example, there is undoubtedly a need for specific information relating to respect within sexual relationships. But inculcating children with respect more broadly, too, will clearly lead to better outcomes in their sexual relationships specifically. The same applies to confidence, safety, and other issues covered by both RSE and wider PSHE. For this reason PSHE must be made compulsory.

Mental health

Childhood is a period of rapid change and development, as well as unfamiliar challenges and the various pressures associated with growing up. While some will feel comfortable talking to their family about their feelings, others will not. Either way, charities like [Mind](#) and [Young Minds](#) have stressed that schools have a key role to play in making children and young people resilient to these pressures, educating them about the various mental health problems that people face, providing a space to talk through their anxieties and worries, and de-stigmatising mental health problems generally.

Living in the wider world

We endorse the PSHE Association view that PSHE be used to prepare children and young people for '[living in the wider world](#)'. If children are to be so prepared, they must be taught to respect diversity, value equality, acknowledge the rule of law, understand their rights, appreciate the environment, and manage money, among other things.

6. Thinking about PSHE in secondary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught and why? Please also include your reasons for choosing each subject or evidence to support your suggestions. (249)

We believe that the same subject areas listed above are also the most important at secondary level, albeit adapted to be applicable to an older age-range. Whilst PSHE is different to other subjects in some ways, the process of development and reinforcement by which learning is most effective still applies. Just because a topic is covered in primary PSHE does not mean it should not also be covered in secondary.

All we have to add is that, as with other subjects, the need for regular timetabling and trained teachers is fundamental to the experience of the learner. On the former, the [PSHE Association recommends](#) that PSHE 'be treated in the same way as any other subject', with one hour per week during key stages 1 - 4. Given already squeezed curriculum time, the Government must consider how best to facilitate this.

On the latter, various reports in recent years have noted the problems associated with insufficient staff training, and the insufficient funding of staff training, not least Ofsted's 2012 report into PSHE [Not yet good enough](#). The report noted that many of the 'deficiencies' in the subject's outcomes 'result in part from inadequacies in subject-specific training and support for PSHE education teachers, particularly in the teaching of sensitive and controversial issues.'

If the Government fails to ensure that statutory PSHE, including RSE, is accompanied by funding for the training of teachers or sufficient curriculum time, it is difficult to see how the benefits of the subject can be fully realised.

7. How much flexibility do you think schools should have to meet the needs of individual pupils and to reflect the diversity of local communities and wider society in the content of PSHE lessons in schools? (247)

Schools already have the flexibility to meet the individual needs of their pupils and the communities they are from, as they should. This includes the freedom to highlight religious and humanist perspectives in their teaching, of course, but must not extend to a freedom to exclude certain topics or promote discriminatory attitudes as part of PSHE, ReEd, or RSE.

A child's access to accurate, evidence-based information about relationships and sex should not be determined by their religious or non-religious background, nor by the type of school to which they happen to have been sent. If all children have a right to PSHE and RSE, as the Government maintains they do, then all children must have access to it in full. To allow certain types of school to opt out of this teaching is either to declare that no such right exists, or to endorse the widespread violation of that right.

Crucially, the Department must be resilient to any religious leaders and organisations claiming to represent the views of parents when arguing for the freedom to withhold certain information from children. The idea that there is a considerable number of parents in this country desperate to prevent their children from receiving information designed to keep them safe, healthy, and happy, whatever their gender identity, or sexuality, is counter-intuitive and [unsupported by evidence](#). PSHE, including RelEd and RSE, should focus on meeting the needs of *all* children, not accommodating the harmful bigotries of a minority of unrepresentative religious leaders.

ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted by over 65,000 members and supporters to promote humanism.

Humanists UK is an active member of many organisations working in education, including the Religious Education Council for England and Wales (REC), National Children's Bureau Sex Education Forum (SEF), the PSHE Association, the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) and Rights of the Child UK (ROCK).

We have representative status in our own right at the UN Human Rights Council, where we make regular interventions in support of freedom of speech, thought, conscience, and religion or belief globally, as well as in support of LGBT rights, children's rights, sexual and reproductive health, and more.

Our primary interests in education pertain to issues related to state-funded religious schools (faith schools), curriculum issues (in particular RE/RS, PSHE/SRE, citizenship and science), and collective worship/school assemblies.

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