

Relationships and sex education for young people

The status of relationships and sex education in schools

The legislative framework regarding relationships and sex education (RSE)¹ policies in schools, and the provision of relationships and sex education itself, is not straightforward, with maintained schools and academies having different obligations in this regard (PHSE Association, 2013).

Where schools are obliged to have a relationships and sex education policy (i.e. maintained schools), such a policy must include, as a minimum, information about HIV and AIDS and other sexuality transmitted diseases. While one of the main purposes of such a policy is to 'set out an agreed approach to SRE [sex and relationships education] in the curriculum', it is important to note that RSE/SRE is a subject area which, broadly speaking, sits within personal, social, health and economic education (PHSE), itself a non-statutory subject.

Despite PHSE's non-statutory status, the National Curriculum Framework advises that 'all schools should make provision for personal, social, health and economic education, drawing on good practice.' (DfE, 2014). In addition, Department for Education guidance on PSHE education states that 'schools should seek to use PSHE education to build, where appropriate, on the statutory content already outlined in the national curriculum, the basic school curriculum and in statutory guidance on: drug education, financial education, sex and relationship education and the

importance of physical activity and diet for a healthy lifestyle.' (DfE, 2013). The relevant guidance, in relation to RSE, was published by the Department for Education in 2000 (DfE, 2000).

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While parents have the right to withdraw their children from all or part of the sex and relationship education provided at school, they do not have the right to withdraw their children from lessons which cover the biological aspects of human growth and development (which schools are legally obliged to deliver as part of national curriculum science).

Current provision of RSE

Given PHSE's status as a non-statutory subject, and the absence therefore of any statutory requirement to provide relationships and sex education in schools, the quality, amount and nature of RSE has come under scrutiny in recent years.

For example, in their 2010 report on PHSE, Ofsted found that 'students in secondary schools said their sex and

relationships education was too late and too limited to be of much use' and that 'a sizeable minority of the pupils, including those going through puberty, lacked a good understanding of emotional changes and their impact on relationships' (Ofsted, 2010).

In addition, a survey by the young people's sexual health charity Brook (Brook, 2011) reported that 1 in 4 young people do not receive any RSE in school at all, while 26% of those that do receive it report that their SRE teacher is not able to teach it well. Similarly, a survey by the Sex Education Forum (SEF) found that 1 in 3 young people described their RSE as 'poor' or 'very poor' (Sex Education Forum, 2008).

Findings such as these sit at odds with the statement contained in 'The Importance of Teaching', a schools white paper, that 'children need high-quality sex and relationships education so they can make wise and informed choices' (DfE, 2010).

What should relationships and sex education encompass?

There is a wealth of evidence which suggests that the current situation is not sufficiently effective at providing young people with the knowledge around relationships and sex which will best equip them to enjoy and sustain healthy and positive personal relationships. Such evidence includes:

- an Ofsted review of PHSE which found that 'sex and relationships education required improvement

¹ In keeping with the findings of a report by the Office of The Children's commissioner, we believe that commonly used term 'Sex and Relationships Education' (SRE) should be renamed to 'Relationships and Sex Education' (RSE) 'to place emphasis on the importance of developing healthy, positive, respectful relationships' (Horvath et al., 2013, p.11). This position has also been recommended by the Education Committee's report into PHSE and SRE: 'We recommend that Sex and Relationships Education be renamed "Relationships and Sex Education" to reflect the (existing) focus on relationships and to emphasise the importance of this part of children and young people's education' (Education Committee, 2015).

in over a third of schools' (Ofsted, 2013)

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- in relation to primary school education, this Ofsted review found that ‘too much emphasis was placed on friendships and relationships, leaving pupils ill-prepared for physical and emotional changes during puberty, which many begin to experience before they reach secondary school’ (Ofsted, 2013)
- in relation to secondary school education, this Ofsted review found that ‘too much emphasis was placed on ‘the mechanics’ of reproduction and too little on relationships, sexuality, the influence of pornography on students’ understanding of healthy sexual relationships, dealing with emotions and staying safe’ (Ofsted, 2013)
- a report from the Office of the Children’s Commissioner which found that while young people generally understand what is meant by giving consent, they have a very limited understanding of what getting consent might involve (Coy et al., 2013)
- Women’s Aid research which shows 50% of 16-18 year olds wouldn’t know where to go to get support if affected by domestic abuse and 18% were unsure or didn’t believe slapping counted as domestic violence (Women’s Aid, 2013).
- A YouGov poll conducted on behalf of End Violence Against Women which found almost a third (29%) of 16-18-year-old girls say they have been subjected to unwanted sexual touching at school (End Violence Against

Women, 2010).

- Research undertaken by NSPCC which found that a third of girls in relationships aged 13-17 have experienced sexual violence in relationships, while one in 16 of this group reported experiencing rape (Barter et al., 2009).

The Relationships Alliance believes that good quality RSE should:

- help children and young people set and maintain boundaries in friendships and relationships
- build young people’s self-confidence and self-esteem, particularly during transition years
- teach young people about consent and negotiation, as well as sexual and relational exploitation and abuse
- teach children and young people about respect for themselves and others
- help children and young people learn about the different kinds of communications, relationships and friendships we encounter
- promote to children and young people the idea that being able to develop strong and stable couple, family, social and professional relationships will contribute towards their well-being and happiness throughout their lives.

We also believe that high quality RSE should encompass issues such as sexting and the use of pornography (delivered in an age-appropriate manner), and recommend the PHSE Supplementary advice to the Sex and Relationship Education Guidance DfEE (0116/2000) (PHSE, 2014), which discusses these and other important areas in detail.

Should the teaching of RSE be made a statutory requirement?

The Relationships Alliance believes that the answer to this question is firmly ‘yes’.

The current position – whereby, for example, it is compulsory for schools to provide citizenship classes, but not relationships and sex education –

does not, in our view, properly reflect the seriousness and importance of this subject area to the well-being and future life chances of young people. Indeed, we believe that the current Government’s reluctance to make RSE a statutory part of the national curriculum sits at odds with the Prime Minister’s assertion in August 2014 that ‘to strengthen and improve society, there is no better way than strengthening families and strengthening the relationships on which families are built’.

Our view that the teaching of RSE should be made a statutory requirement enjoys support from parents and professionals alike:

- ‘Relationships’ was the most cited element of PSHE that should be made statutory in responses to the Department for Education’s consultation on PSHE education (DfE, 2013). 30% respondents to the question felt relationships should be a statutory element of PSHE; ‘sex education’ was the second most cited element (24%).

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- In a survey carried out on behalf of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT, 2013), 88% of parents said sex education and lessons on adult and peer relationships should be mandatory in school.
- A YouGov poll in May 2013 found that 86% of UK adults believe that RSE “which addresses sexual consent and respectful relationships” should be compulsory in secondary schools (End Violence Against Women, 2010)
- 98% of parents who responded to a Mumsnet survey said that they

- accessed relationship support felt that discussion about relationship problems and help with addressing them should begin in schools (Spielhofer et al., 2014).

Recommendations

In light of the evidence summarised during this briefing, the Relationships Alliance believes that the following recommendations should be implemented:

- RSE should be put into context for young people by making it part of compulsory PSHE.
- SRE should be renamed RSE to underline the focus which this aspect of children's education should place on the importance of developing healthy relationships
- Young people should be placed at the centre of SRE content development, and consulted about local and national policy
- The Department for Education should develop key standards and competencies for those delivering RSE and an expectation should be set that schools embed a culture which recognises that developing relational capability is an important function of education.

- The Relationships Alliance believes that strong and stable couple, family and social relationships are the basis of a thriving society.
- Relationship health is an essential part of the UK's economic recovery – relationship breakdown will cost the UK £46 billion this year alone, an unsustainable figure.
- Good quality personal and social relationships are central to our health and well-being.
- The quality of people's relationships is an important 'social asset', yet one that is often ignored or undermined by public policy.

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This briefing was produced by the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships on behalf of the Relationships Alliance. The Relationships Alliance, a consortium comprising of Relate, Marriage Care, One Plus One and the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships, exists to ensure that good quality personal and social relationships are more widely acknowledged as central to our health and wellbeing.