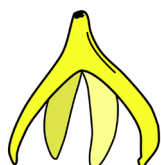


OUR RESPONSE

Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education: draft statutory guidance, Feb 2019



School of
Sexuality
Education

INTRODUCTION

School of Sexuality Education would first like to acknowledge the enormous improvement this draft represents from the previous guidance, published in 2000 - notably, pre-dating the repeal of section 28 and the mandatory non-promotion of homosexuality. We welcome the commitment to updating this guidance every 3 years, preventing a gap of this length in future.

School of Sexuality Education strives for a comprehensive, inclusive, 21st Century RSE for all. In this document we firstly aim to lay out the ways in which this guidance lends itself to an *intersectional feminist, evidence-based, sex-positive, LGBTQIA+ inclusive RSE*.

Secondly, we detail the ways in which this guidance could be built upon, developed or how sections could be interpreted in a way that aligns with our aforementioned approach.

We are largely focusing on the secondary school guidance, though some observations are also made regarding the primary sections.

'Jessica Ringrose, a professor of sociology of gender and education at University College London, called the curriculum promising, saying in an interview, "It will be really great if they will be able to tackle all these issues."'

Professor Jessica Ringrose, UCL IoE and Advisor to School of Sexuality Education, in an interview for The New York Times, 26 Feb 19

How does this guidance bring Sex and Relationships Education into the 21st Century?

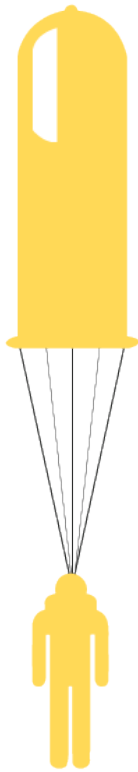
It is more inclusive

There is explicit acknowledgement that a loving family doesn't have to consist of parents who are a man/woman couple, or biological parents, and that students should be encouraged to be respectful of diversity from primary school age (paragraph 59). There is a clear expectation that all pupils should be taught 'LGBT content at a timely point' (paragraph 37).

It gives the digital context

The guidance highlights the essential fact that 'for many young people the distinction between the online world and other aspects of life is less marked than for some adults' (paragraph 8, page 9). This is referenced throughout, in the context of healthy relationships, respectful behaviour and consent, and the importance of digital literacy skills is emphasised for both primary and secondary (see paragraphs 58, 62 and 'Online and Media' section of secondary table, p28).





Advocates for improved menstrual literacy

Following the consultation, 'menstrual wellbeing' has been added as a concept 'pupils should know' by the end of primary (p35). The guidance also suggests the importance of all students learning about periods, in the statement:

'Puberty including menstruation should be covered in Health Education and should, as far as possible, be addressed before onset. This should ensure male and female pupils are prepared for changes they and their peers will experience' (paragraph 88).

It is framed within the legal context and through a whole-school, rights-based approach

The guidance makes regular reference to both anti-bullying policies and the Equality Act 2010, describing how teaching and whole-school practise should align within a rights-based framework. Paragraph 31 emphasises the importance of recognising and having a zero-tolerance policy towards sexism and sexual violence, whilst paragraph 32 explains the need for an awareness of gender-specific risks and harms. It is made very explicit that schools are expected to actively manage problems via a whole-school approach.

Limitations on the right to withdraw

Relationship education will be mandatory in primary schools and there are some bars to withdrawing children from secondary RSE, with a stated age limit at which the child can decide to opt in (see paragraphs 45, 50 and 68).

Better promotes self-care and well-being

From primary age, the draft guidance promotes 'simple self-care techniques, including the importance of rest, time spent with friends and family and the benefits of hobbies and interests' (paragraph 92). The secondary guidance also advocates supporting young people's well-being through

empowering students to know 'how to talk about their emotions accurately and sensitively, using appropriate vocabulary' (page 36).

FGM is now included

The secondary 'should know' guidance now explicitly states that FGM should be covered at this stage; this follows the consultation on the previous draft (paragraph 79).

Empowering young people to take charge of their health

Regular self-examination, facts about STI testing and reducing STI risk through condom use are all explicitly stated and broadly framed with non-shaming language (page 29 and 27).

Promotes busting myths and widespread misconceptions

Knowledge about miscarriage, abortion and HIV are stated learning points (pages 29 and 37). This is vitally important in tackling the enormous amount of misconception surrounding the areas.



How can this guidance be built on to ensure a modern, comprehensive sex ed?

By being truly LGBTQIA+ inclusive

Whilst the guidance rightly states that “this content is fully integrated into their programmes of study for this area of the curriculum rather than delivered as a standalone unit or lesson”, there is a contradiction in that it also states, “At the point at which schools consider it appropriate to teach their pupils about LGBT...” and “Sexual orientation and gender identity should be explored at a timely point” (paragraph 37).

Being truly inclusive of all genders and sexualities involves this message being integrated across the board and from the outset; to introduce this information “at a point” would be inherently not inclusive.

For School of Sex Ed, educating outside of cis and heteronormativity means being inclusive of all genders and sexualities from the very start - primary age - and consistently throughout RSE. Without this explicit and thorough integration of different genders and sexualities, policy makers risk tokenising certain identities and young people.

Similarly, the importance of representing and talking about all types of relationships and family units at primary level in the guidance is lacking. There are only vague allusions such as “that others’ families, either in school or in the wider world, sometimes look different from their family” (page 20).

It is vital that all articulations of family, relationships and identity are presented from the start in order to foster true inclusivity.

The use of language such as “others’ families... sometimes look different from their family” could be interpreted as overtly othering certain groups and perpetuating an assumed norm.

Avoiding giving problematic credence to long-term relationships and marriage

There are several references to promoting the benefits of marriage, “committed, stable relationships” and “healthy one-to-one intimate relationships”, and a recommendation that marriage and its special legal place is taught from primary age (page 21).

The guidance both explicitly and implicitly places monogamous, long-term relationships and marriage above other forms of relationships. For example, stating a link between “committed, stable relationships” and “how these relationships might contribute to human happiness and their importance for bringing up children” (page 27).

We see this presentation of a hierarchy of relationship types to be highly outdated, not to mention unrepresentative of a large proportion of modern day lives. For those who are personally in or whose family consists of ‘non-conventional’ relationships, such as co-parenting arrangements or polyamorous relationships, this would be extremely alienating and contribute to a culture of judgement and shame.

Being sex-positive

On a similar note, the guidance appears to suggest that sex is best had within relationships, and therefore, casual sex or multiple partner sexual relationships as implicitly negative or wrong. One could argue that this sentiment could be echoed in the switching of SRE -> RSE. Significantly, the word pleasure is not mentioned once in the guidance.

This stance would undermine an integral part of our approach to Sex Education: sex-positivity. It also sits as out-of-touch with the Tinder generation, therefore, also not adequately preparing some for the realities of the way in which they will choose to live their life.

Under a sex-positive approach, all safe, informed and consensual sex is embraced as part of human sexuality and freedom of sexual expression. It should not be shamed or stigmatised. For there to be true consent it must be understood within the context of sexual pleasure, i.e. that sex should be good and fun for everyone involved.

Avoid framing that could encourage victim-blaming

Whilst consent as an ongoing conversation and actively seeking consent is described in the guidance, certain phrases could lend themselves to victim-blaming, in which a person who has experienced abuse, harassment, a violation or any form of mistreatment is held wholly or partially responsible for the event.

For example, the guidance suggests teaching “that there are a range of strategies for identifying and managing sexual pressure, including understanding peer pressure, resisting pressure and not pressurising others” (page 29). This foregrounds the responsibility of the victim of sexual pressure, rather than communicating the essential message of respecting others and not being coercive. Terms such as “self-respect” (page 21) can also create a similar tone.

Similarly, with regards to sexting, the guidance outlines “not to provide material to others that they would not want shared further”, with “not to share personal material which is sent to them” (page 28) coming second. The latter describes not only an unethical act without which the issue of sexting would be dramatically reduced; but also a criminal offence, image-based abuse, a matter that is not mentioned.

It is essential that with all discussions of consent, both online and offline, the onus is placed on the individual to get consent, be respectful and be kind. It is particularly important to speak about this overtly, in the context of rape culture, rather than making comments which allude to the issue. School of Sex Ed’s approach values candour when discussing consent; young people must be given the space to have open conversations about sex, sexuality and power in a safe environment which acknowledges the contexts and experiences of their lives.

To support schools with issues of Online Sexual Harassment, we have developed a series of guidance documents in partnership with experts from UCL IoE, University of Leicester, teachers and safeguarding specialists. These lay out the various forms that online harassment can take, and how schools can mitigate against, and best support young people to deal with, these risks and harms. Visit our website to access these documents (freely available).

Ensure teaching foregrounds young people’s digital and sexual rights

There is very little information in the guidance regarding teaching about pornography; the main mention is that pupils should know “that specifically sexually explicit material e.g. pornography presents a distorted picture of sexual behaviours, can damage the way people see themselves in relation to others and negatively affect how they behave towards sexual partners.” (p28).

We would suggest that addressing porn from this angle would be simplistic, and could cast judgements about young people resulting in feelings of shame. We recommend that teachers should be measured, rather than value-laden, when addressing pornography. There are many different forms of porn and it’s not helpful or accurate to treat it as one single ‘thing’, which is inherently bad or good.

Discussing pornography in terms of exposure and effects, or as a health issue, also doesn’t help with understanding its significance and meaning in young people’s lives. Research (e.g. Monique Mulholland, Clarissa Smith) suggests that young people’s early motivations in encounters with porn are extremely varied. We therefore encourage educators to avoid making any assumptions about whether young people have encountered porn, any ‘effects’ this has had on them, and, as always, avoiding any language that could appear judgemental.

Overall, focusing efforts on helping young people to develop thorough understanding of consent, power in society, pleasure, positive relationships, communication - is much more useful than simply opting for the ‘porn = harm’, and/or abstinence-based approach. If facilitating conversations about porn, we recommend creating a safe space for discussion which is distanced from young people’s personal experiences.

Teach correct names for part of the body

For primary students, despite the guidance explaining that “The national curriculum for science also includes subject content in related areas, such as the main external body parts” (page 23), the fact remains that School of Sex Ed rarely meets a class where one student knows the word ‘vulva’. Understanding the whole external genitalia as a vagina is not only scientifically inaccurate and carries problematic social/historical connotations, but knowing the correct names for parts of the genitalia is also widely accepted to be an important component of safeguarding children. This is supported by medical professionals as it promotes better sexual and general physical health (easier / effective medical care).

Finally - what about the right to withdraw?

Ultimately, the guidance currently states that secondary school age children can still be withdrawn from SRE by their parents. It is important to consider how this prioritises the parent's perspective, and begs the question: but what about the sexual rights and health of the child? Under a rights-based perspective, and [as advocated by the World Health organisation](#), all children would have access to fundamental information about their health and well being.

