

# Changes to the teaching of Sex and Relationship Education and PSHE

## Rape Crisis South London (RASASC) response to a call for evidence

February 2018



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.**

The Women and Equalities Committee's inquiry in 2016, evidenced both the scale and gendered nature of children and young people's experiences of sexual violence and harassment in schools. Combined with the increasing awareness of prevalence of child sexual abuse and exploitation within the UK and around the world, primary school children have the right to access a spiralling curriculum which explores the following themes;

**My body and my rights:** bodily integrity, personal boundaries, accurate naming of body parts with no shame, right to privacy and to be safe, keeping 'secrets'. This acts as a foundation to introduce and explore key concepts of consent and gives children a voice to make disclosures which could relate to all forms of sexual violence and abuse.

**Respectful interpersonal relationships:** developing equal and respectful friendships and family relationships, understanding the concept giving and getting consent, respecting others personal boundaries, naming of sexual harassment behaviours with sensitive discussion and challenging as unacceptable social norms.

**Equality & Respect:** understanding and challenging of gender stereotypes and social norms; equality of everyone regardless of protected characteristics (Equality Act); exploring and challenging attitudes which blame survivors and are used to justify abuse and violence.

Any effective approach to RE should be informed by a gendered analysis and located within a framework of VAWG, and whole school approach supported by clear and robust safeguarding, bullying and equality policies, specialist VAWG teacher training, school readiness to respond to disclosures and prevent violence and abuse. Key messages around preventing abuse must come from a position of challenging abusive behaviour, rather than teaching children how to 'stay safe' and stop themselves being abused as individuals.

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.**

An RSE curriculum for secondary school pupils should again be informed by a gendered analysis and located within a framework of VAWG, and whole school approach as described in question one. Key messages around preventing abuse must come from a position of challenging abusive behaviour, clearly placing responsibility on each person not to behave abusively in the first place, rather than messages around how young people (which are often aimed at girls) can 'keep themselves safe' and stop themselves being abused as individuals. This contributes to a culture of victim-blaming which silences survivors, excuses the person who perpetrated and reduces space and freedom for young people to disclose experiences of abuse and seek help.

Core themes should include;

**Respectful relationships and sexual consent:** developing equal, mutual and respectful friendships, family and intimate relationships, right to privacy and to be safe, equality and freedom. Coercive, grooming and controlling behaviours should be explored as harmful and unacceptable in all relationships. An understanding of seeking and also giving consent in both law, and also practice (verbal and nonverbal communication), with a focus on sexual ethics and mutual sexual pleasure and agency, particularly for girls, which is woefully absent from current RSE.

**Equality, bodies and empowerment:** bodily autonomy, personal boundaries, agency and respect, access to feminist self-defence for young women and gender diverse young people in recognition of the disproportionality of sexual violence against these groups, space for young men to explore the impacts of gender stereotypes and inequality and explore empathy and emotional expression.

**Media literacy:** representations of sex, race and gender, conflicting media and cultural messages about equality and consent, with a focus on how both reproduce inequalities, including within pornography, abuse perpetrated in online contexts, including sexual harassment and the public and private sharing and exposing of sexual explicit material online.

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?**

Young people report experiencing a continuum of sexual violence that overlaps between the online and offline spaces they occupy. Similar to offline spaces, this abuse is experienced and perpetrated within a gendered and racialised context and is rooted in wider gender inequality. As such any RE/RSE curriculum should reflect and connect both online and offline experiences of sexual violence and VAWG, by exploring and challenging attitudes which support, minimise and normalise this behaviour.

Particular attention should be paid to coercive behaviour around requests for sexual material, the sharing and exposing of sexual images material without consent and online flashing where images of a sexual nature are sent to young people without them being asked for, i.e. image based sexual abuse. Reference to the law and consequences should be included, however emphasis around sexual ethics, empathy and the harm caused by perpetrating sexual abuse online must be paramount.

A whole school response, located within a framework of VAWG, where teachers are trained to respond to online sexual abuse in a sensitive and supportive way that focusses on the abusive behaviour and not on reinforcing victim-blaming, is of utmost importance.

**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?**

Any effective RE/RSE curriculum will include consideration of parents' questions and views, with open, honest and positive lines of communication between parents and schools around the curriculum content and approach to teaching. This communication could include;

- Access to RE/RSE policy and curriculum content for each year group on the schools website
- Yearly or termly workshops with parents to explore curriculum content, teaching approach and social/development context explaining the importance of the topics being taught at each particular stage

Whilst data available shows the majority of parents are overwhelmingly supportive of schools providing RE/RSE for their children, there may be some parents who seek to withdraw their children from parts of this subject. Schools must prioritise all children and young people's rights to access knowledge and support about their bodies and relationships, through an age-appropriate RE/RSE curriculum, within a framework of consent, ethics, equality, freedom and respect. The opportunity for parents to withdraw children from RE/RSE should be limited and by an active opt out option only. It should be noted when parents do withdraw children from RE/RSE subjects and considered alongside any further concerns. Under no circumstances should school status impact on whether RE/RSE is taught and the opportunity for parental withdrawal, i.e. independent, free, academy or faith schools.

Specialist training for teachers and senior leaders, as part of a whole school approach to RE/RSE and preventing abuse and VAWG, will be key to responding to parents' questions and concerns sensitively and supportively. This will need to include specialist training from services like Rape Crisis, around responding to disclosures of sexual violence and wider forms of VAWG, as effective prevention often creates space for disclosures of personal experiences from staff, pupils and parents within the school community.

**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.**

We support the calls from a range of specialist organisations for a “whole-school approach” to ending violence against women and girls. We also recognise the potential benefits of a PSHE cross-curriculum addressing areas such as mental health and drug/alcohol use in relation to RE. We echo concerns about RE curriculum becoming absorbed within a broader PSHE curriculum, rather than maintained as a specialist subject in its own right. The work evidence by frontline support services as part of the women and equalities committee inquiry into sexual violence and harassment in schools, was influential in the decision to make RE/RSE compulsory, to respond to the specific issues around sex, gender, relationships, sexual violence, abusive behaviour and consent. If RE were to become absorbed within a broader PSHE curriculum, it is unlikely to respond effectively to the complexity around young people’s experienced of sexual violence, harassment and abuse.

Further information and exploration of how a compulsory PSHE curriculum would be separate, yet supportive of an RE curriculum is welcomed.

Given this, the three most important PSHE subject areas at primary school level for a compulsory programme of PSHE to run alongside not in place of a compulsory RSE curriculum, would be (1) Ethics and relationships (to pick up and develop the work in RSE, not replace it) (2) Mental health and emotional wellbeing (3) citizenship, rights and equality (including ethical digital citizenship).

**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.**

We support the calls from a range of specialist organisations for a “whole-school approach” to ending violence against women and girls. We also recognise the potential benefits of a PSHE cross-curriculum addressing areas such as mental health and drug/alcohol use in relation to RSE. We echo concerns about RSE curriculum becoming absorbed within a broader PSHE curriculum, rather than maintained as a specialist subject in its own right. The work evidence by frontline support services as part of the women and equalities committee inquiry into sexual violence and harassment in schools, was influential in the decision to make RE/RSE compulsory, to respond to the specific issues around sex, gender, relationships, sexual violence, abusive behaviour and consent. If RSE were to become absorbed within a broader PSHE curriculum, it is unlikely to respond effectively to the complexity around young people’s experienced of sexual violence, harassment and abuse.

Further information and exploration of how a compulsory PSHE curriculum would be separate, yet supportive of an RSE curriculum is welcomed.

Given this, the three most important PSHE subject areas at secondary school level for a compulsory programme of PSHE to run alongside not in place of a compulsory RSE curriculum, would be similar to the points above: (1) Sexual ethics (to pick up and develop the work in RSE, not replace it) (2) Mental health and emotional wellbeing (3) citizenship, rights and equality (including digital citizenship).

**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?**

An inclusive and intersectional approach is crucial to delivering any RE/RSE/PSHE curriculum, which reflects and meets all children and young people's needs. Any effective curriculum will be able to adapt and respond to the specific needs of children and young people with SEND and/or disabilities, recognising the disproportionate levels of sexual violence and harassment experienced, particularly by girls within these groups. Considerations around how multiple inequalities around gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class and religion, intersect to shape children and young people's lived experiences in the world will also be of huge significance.

Sexual violence and harassment, along with wider forms of abuse and VAWG are social issues, which affect all communities and therefore all children and young people within society. With this in mind, schools must not be able to use their status as independent, free, academy or faith, for example, to restrict or exempt core RE/RSE/PSHE teaching on women's or LGBT equality, sexual and reproductive rights, or on the different forms of violence against women and girls, including FGM and forced marriage. Further consideration around how children and young people access the RE/RSE/PSHE curriculum who are home schooled, would also be welcomed.

All children and young people have the right to learn about their rights to freedom and bodily autonomy, to be treated equally and with respect, and to live their lives safe and free from the threat or experiences of violence and abuse. An RE/RSE/PSHE curriculum informed from a gendered and intersectional perspective, within a whole school approach is key to achieving this.