

Relationships and Sex Education: supporting parental engagement

This guide provides secondary schools with practical advice – including a template letter and parent workshop plan – on how to positively communicate with parents about statutory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), as well as an overview of statutory requirements regarding withdrawal of pupils from sex education.

Under the Children and Social Work Act 2017 the government committed to making Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) statutory in all secondary schools, including local authority maintained schools, academies, free schools and independent schools.

Teaching about relationships and sex is nothing new for schools – RSE is covered through PSHE education, an established curriculum subject [taught in the vast majority of schools](#)ⁱ – but there have been concerns about consistency of quality and time allocated to it. The statutory changes have huge potential to ensure support for safe, effective PSHE practice across all schools – a ‘levelling up’ of standards.

[Statutory Guidance for Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education \(RSE\) and Health Education](#)ⁱⁱ, published by the Department for Education (DfE) in June 2019, outlines what schools need to cover from September 2020 (though not all they *should* cover as part of broader PSHE education). However, schools that are ready to implement the guidance from September 2019 are encouraged to do so and many schools are already teaching these crucial elements of PSHE.

PSHE education is a partnership between schools and parents and carers (henceforth referred to as ‘parents’). Engaging with parents about the content of your PSHE programme – including RSE – is therefore an important part of providing a high quality programme. We set out some suggestions in this guide for how best to engage with parents regarding this element of PSHE education.

Positive ways to engage with parents

It is important to create and maintain an open dialogue between parents and teachers as early as possible. As the DfE statutory guidance states: *'Parents should be given every opportunity to understand the purpose and content of Relationships Education and RSE. Good communication and opportunities for parents to understand and ask questions about the school's approach help increase confidence in the curriculum.'*

Most schools have existing mechanisms in place to engage parents and should continue to use these as their means of engaging parents with RSE – there is no requirement that this should involve additional mechanisms.

However, every school is different and what works well in one might not in another. Successful approaches for engaging effectively with parents include:

- **Communicating with parents** about all of PSHE education from the moment their child starts at the school. This is more likely to lead to a positive view of the subject and an understanding of its breadth and content
- **Policy consultation** – for example, involving parents in a working group, reviewing or establishing the RSE policy
- **Parent surveys** – establishing parents' current understanding of RSE, questions and concerns. This can be used to plan open evenings/information events/communications between school and home
- **Information evenings** – explaining what will be taught and sharing resources that will be used
- **Providing advice** on how to talk to young people about relationships and sex at home
- **Publishing the PSHE education curriculum** on the school website
- **Publishing FAQs** on PSHE education, including RSE, on the school website

RSE policy

All schools will have to have an appropriate RSE policy in place, which must be freely available for parents to access. This policy should:

- outline what will be taught to pupils within the RSE curriculum and the rationale for this learning (for example in relation to safeguarding)
 - clearly set out the procedure for requesting withdrawal from sex education
 - give reasons why the school believes pupils should not be withdrawn from these lessons.
- Download PSHE Association [guidance on how to write a comprehensive RSE policy](#)ⁱⁱⁱ

Curriculum content

The DfE has published a useful list of FAQs for parents on the new RSE/Relationships Education requirements, and two new guides on Relationships Education, RSE and Health Education. Schools should publish relevant policies online, and ensure parents are consulted and examples of resources shared, but the DfE is clear regarding curriculum content when they say *"What is taught, and how, is ultimately a decision for the school and consultation does not provide a parental veto on curriculum content."*

- Read [the Department for Education FAQs for Parents](#)^{iv}
- Download [the Department for Education guides for parents on Relationships Education, RSE and Health Education](#)^v

The current situation regarding the right of withdrawal from sex education

These changes have also led to an increase in calls from teachers for advice on the legal guidelines surrounding the withdrawal of pupils from sex education and how to communicate with parents about withdrawal. We encourage all schools to refer to the new statutory guidance for full details but have set out below a brief overview of the current rights of parents to withdraw their children and how these rights will change once RSE becomes statutory in September 2020.

There are likely to be a number of reasons why parents may choose to withdraw their children from sex education elements of PSHE education. For many, a good understanding of the importance of sex education (including its importance for keeping young people safe), familiarity with teaching approaches and resources to be used, and the opportunity to have their questions answered and concerns heard, are likely to reduce the chances of them requesting to withdraw their child. However, it is important for schools to be clear on the following, in order to manage circumstances where parents still wish to withdraw their child.

The new statutory regulations and guidance apply from September 2020, and until then the statutory [Sex and Relationships Education Guidance \(2000\)](#)^v is still in effect.

- Under the current SRE guidance, until September 2020, parents can choose to withdraw their child (up to the age of 18) from any or all aspects of Sex and Relationships Education that are not included within the statutory National Curriculum.
- This means that parents are not permitted to withdraw their child from elements of sex education (for example reproductive and biological aspects) that are within the science curriculum.
- Schools must make alternative arrangements for pupils whose parents choose to withdraw them from SRE lessons.

The right of withdrawal from September 2020

The statutory guidance for RSE and Health Education will come into effect in all secondary schools from 2020, including academies, free schools and independent schools.

In secondary education from September 2020:

- Parents will not be able to withdraw their child from any aspect of Relationships Education or Health Education.
- Parents will be able to withdraw their child (following discussion with the school) from any or all aspects of Sex Education, other than those which are part of the science curriculum, up to and until three terms before the age of 16.
- After that point, the guidance states that *'if the child wishes to receive sex education rather than be withdrawn, the school should make arrangements to provide the child with sex education during one of those terms.'*
- Where pupils are withdrawn from sex education, schools should document the process and will have to *'ensure that the pupil receives appropriate, purposeful education during the period of withdrawal.'*

Sample letter to parents

Whilst you will want to decide with your senior leadership team how best to communicate with your parent body, this template may provide a useful model to work from and adapt to your own school context.

Parents and Carers,

As a part of your child's education at **(insert school name)**, we promote personal wellbeing and development through a comprehensive Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education programme. PSHE education is the curriculum subject that gives young people the knowledge, understanding, attitudes and practical skills to live safe, healthy, productive lives and meet their full potential.

I am writing to let you know that, over the next **(insert number)** weeks, starting **(insert date)**, your child's class will be taking part in lessons which will focus on the relationships and sex education (RSE) aspect of this programme. RSE lessons in year **(insert year)** will include teaching about **(select as appropriate or add examples below)**: *Healthy relationships, including friendships and intimate relationships; families; growing and changing, including puberty; personal hygiene; changing feelings; becoming more independent; keeping safe and consent; developing self-esteem and confidence.* Pupils will also have opportunities to ask questions that help prepare them for relationships of all kinds in the modern world.

PSHE education is taught throughout the school in every year group and is monitored and reviewed regularly by the staff and governing body. Please visit the school's website: **(insert link to curriculum information here)** for more detail about our PSHE curriculum. All PSHE teaching takes place in a safe learning environment and is underpinned by our school ethos and values.

We would like to invite you to attend a parent information meeting on **(insert time/date)** to find out more about what your child will learn, view the materials and resources being used in lessons and discover how you can best support your child to discuss these topics at home.

As a school community, we are committed to working in partnership with parents; recent parental feedback has indicated that the overwhelming majority of parents continue to be highly supportive of the relationships and sex education programme. If you would like to find out more or discuss any concerns, we would urge you to attend the information meeting and look forward to seeing you there.

Yours sincerely,

(Subject lead for PSHE education & contact email address)

Sample parent workshop plan

This is an example of a parental engagement workshop. We recognise that schools will have very different approaches to events such as these and so expect that this plan will be adapted to suit your own school context.

SESSION OBJECTIVES	
<i>To inform parents about the relationships and sex education (RSE) provision offered at our school</i>	
4.00pm – 4.15pm	Welcome and refreshments
4.15pm – 4.30pm	<p>Introduction from the PSHE education / RSE subject lead which includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is RSE? <i>A brief overview of the subject and its statutory status</i> • The context and purpose of RSE in the school curriculum <i>This may explore national/local data trends, responses from pupil voice, the importance of RSE for safeguarding, evidence linking PSHE teaching to health outcomes</i> • Aims and ethos of our PSHE education/ RSE curriculum <i>An introduction to the school's approach to teaching RSE, in line with the ethos and aims of the whole school</i> • Key headlines from the school's RSE policy <i>Share any relevant information e.g. safe practice in teaching, how teachers are allocated, work with the pastoral team, inclusive and equal messages, the parental right of withdrawal (balanced with the reasons why young people benefit from receiving RSE) and the process in the school should they wish to withdraw.</i> <p>The importance of parental engagement in RSE and how parents can support the work of the PSHE department <i>This might include a focus on how to discuss RSE at home and sharing useful websites or information leaflets for parents</i></p>
4.30pm – 5.00pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent break-out groups organised by year group / class group with an opportunity to view the relevant schemes of work and resources used in lessons • Share with parents the recommended websites, books and further resources for having discussions at home with their child • Parent group discussion about their suggestions for what they would like to see taught in RSE lessons
5.00pm - 5.15pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question and answer session • Parents fill in evaluation forms

Schools' commitment to equality and diversity

This guidance refers to what is covered under Relationships and Sex Education, but there have been challenges from a vocal minority of parents to schools' commitment to equality and diversity, including LGBT+ inclusion.

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) has produced a very useful [policy update](#) on schools' commitments under the Equality Act in this regard, outlining reasons why the right of withdrawal does not apply in these circumstances. Whilst this is aimed at primary schools, secondary schools may also find it useful.

- Read [the NAHT policy update](#)^{vii} on schools' commitments under the Equality Act and Relationships Education.

Curriculum guidance

- Download [PSHE Association guidance](#)^{viii} on preparing for statutory Relationships and Sex Education within your PSHE curriculum.

The PSHE Association is the national body for personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education. A charity and membership organisation, the Association works to improve PSHE education standards by supporting a national network of teachers and schools with advice, training and resources. Find out more at www.pshe-association.org.uk and contact us at info@pshe-association.org.uk

ⁱ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/687010/Teacher_Voice_report_Summer_2017.pdf

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/curriculum-and-resources/resources/writing-your-rse-policy-guidance-pshe-association>

^{iv} https://www.gov.uk/government/news/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education-faqs?utm_source=2b45920e-083a-44ad-9c3f-16fed9168d3f&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate

^v https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-sex-and-health-education-guides-for-schools?utm_source=4e32b008-7c1e-40eb-b0ee-d3d05e10d9a7&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate

^{vi} https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/283599/sex_and_relationship_education_guidance.pdf

^{vii} <https://www.naht.org.uk/news-and-opinion/news/curriculum-and-assessment-news/policy-update-the-equality-act-and-relationships-education-in-primary-schools/>

^{viii} <https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/curriculum-and-resources/resources/preparing-statutory-rse-and-relationships>