The Bishop of Ely, Stephen Conway, the Church of England's Lead Bishop on Education, sets out why he supports incorporating age-appropriate sex and relationship education into the national curriculum:
Every parent wants the best for their children and every teacher wants their pupils to be safe as they negotiate life in an ever-changing world. Even before the birth of the internet; the explosion of social media through mobile phones and the ever more pervasive reach of advertising, concerns about what some call the sexualisation of childhood were widespread.

It is only natural, given much that we see in the world around us, to want to shield children as long as we possibly can.

That is why many, including many Christians, are concerned about what children might be taught in schools. There are those who fear that proposals to incorporate a form of age-appropriate sex and relationship education into the national curriculum could expose children to too much too young.

But it is becoming increasingly clear that what might have held in previous eras is no longer the most effective way of keeping our children safe and preparing them for life in the world in which they live.

In an age when even primary school children are becoming exposed to online pornography – often by accident – and when practices such as “sexting” are becoming commonplace at a younger and younger age, we cannot simply advocate an approach like the three monkeys coverings their eyes, ears and mouths, vowing to see, hear or speak no evil.

The NSPCC’s ChildLine service has reported a sharp rise in contacts from children about online bullying over the last few years. In a seemingly ever more image-conscious and body obsessed society, even children now feel compelled to doctor photographs of themselves. At the same time, concerns have been raised that young children are growing up unable to spot the difference between airbrushed photographs of celebrities and the real thing.

That is why I believe there is a need for carefully targeted and age-appropriate relationship education for children from primary school.

This is not, as some might claim, about teaching young children the mechanics of sex – or indeed anything at all about sex at that age. But if we want children to build resilience it is important to start young, teaching them about strong and healthy relationships.

Some, including some Christians, will argue that school is not the right place to teach such matters. We are clear that any such legislative change should come with suitable safeguards to ensure that parents are consulted and retain the right to withdraw their children and that the education is be framed in a way which is appropriate to the ethos and character of the school.

But the Church of England is, collectively, the biggest single source of education in the country, with around a million children learning in its schools. We know from everyday experience of the pressing need to equip children for the world in which they are growing up.

The Rt Revd Stephen Conway

Bishop of Ely