

This blog is written by a member of the independent Commission. These views do not necessarily represent the views of the Archbishops' or the Church of England.

One of the tasks for the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households is to explore the importance of - and changes in - couple relationships in today's society, recognising both the joys and difficulties and considering the supports and pressures around those relationships.

Concerns are frequently expressed about the numbers of marriages, civil partnerships and cohabiting relationships that break-up and the potentially negative impacts on the adults and children involved. Consequently, attention has been increasingly focused on how children and young people learn about relationships, and how to form and sustain healthy intimate relationships in adult life. As we explore expectations about relationships and the pressures and challenges young people face, we have begun to consider the role of Relationship and Sex Education in schools.

In 1987 eight organisations responded to a national focus on young people, their actions and sexual behaviours. This focus was driven in part by the growing awareness and fear of the AIDs epidemic, alongside changes in social attitudes towards marriage and divorce and the use of birth control. These organisations created the Sex Education Forum and began campaigning for good quality, non-biased sex education in all schools. Many others joined in this campaign, working with and alongside the Sex Education Forum to represent the needs of young people in parliament and in wider society.

[An overview of the timeline of the following years can be accessed here.](#)

Fast forward thirty years to 2017 when the then Education Secretary announced her intention to put relationships and sex education (RSE) on a statutory footing, which would require RSE to be taught in all secondary schools in England and relationships education in all primary schools in England. The legal requirement came into force on 1 September 2020 via Section 34 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017. Independent schools continue to provide RSE according to the Government's Independent School Standards Regulations.

Although the curriculum could be personalised by each school to fit their specific community and its needs, the guidance accompanying the legislation ensured that children of primary and secondary school age would receive a comprehensive understanding of different types of relationships, including friendships, family relationships, dealing with strangers and, predominantly at secondary school, intimate couple relationships.

The guidance set out a structure for RSE to be taught at appropriate times as a child grows and needs new knowledge to understand what is happening to them and those around them, both physically and emotionally. The overall aim was to enable every child to make wise and healthy choices about their relationships as they grow and develop their interpersonal skills. Within the RSE curriculum, time is set aside to fully focus on appreciating and embracing diversity and recognising how to gain and give consent.

Importantly, the guidance has detailed what children and young people should learn about caring and respectful relationships, being safe online and in person, and about giving consent for intimate relationships. Statutory Health Education is included alongside RSE (RSHE), enabling an understanding of the physical bodily changes during puberty. It was made clear that schools should take the religious affiliation of pupils into

account and teach RSHE from a faith perspective as appropriate.

The policy intent is to help young people to recognise, understand and build healthy relationships and to understand how their relationships may affect their health, including mental health, and wellbeing. Factual knowledge about sex, sexual health and sexuality is to be taught within wider teaching about relationships, giving young people the skills to navigate their relationships as they move through life.

Further reading of the content and delivery of this teaching can be found in the Government guidance on their website.

In June 2021 Ofsted published a report which drew attention to widespread sexual harassment in schools and made recommendations about the teaching of RHSE and the training of teachers delivering RSHE, which the government has subsequently accepted. Nevertheless, there remain some sensitive issues which surround the teaching of RSHE. These include the teaching of LGBTQI+ relationships, female genital mutilation, and the right of parents to withdraw children from sex education.

Having read the guidance, it is reasonable to consider a number of questions as we continue our evidence-gathering for the Commission.

As positive education about relationships and sex becomes commonplace will it help to break cycles of unhealthy relationships experienced by children and young people at home, or through the use of pornography, and empower them to have their own healthy relationships?

As schools teach children and young people about openness and inclusivity and to welcome diversity, will there be a positive change reflected in the attitudes of wider society?

How will relationship longevity and separation statistics change over the next decade, as today's generation of children and young people become increasingly articulate in their emotional language and express their desires and frustrations more effectively?

Will today's children and young people bring their learning at school into their relationships, the community and into the workplace? Will the teaching of RSHE have a positive influence on intimate couple relationships and wider?

Furthermore, will the younger generations' expectations of fluidity in self exploration and self-expression translate into different expectations of marriage and couple relationships?

Esther Gregory-Witham

Source URL: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/archbishops-commissions/families-and-households/news/relationship-and-sex-education-what-it>