

## Changes to the teaching of Relationships and Sex Education and PSHE: A call for evidence

# Church of England Education Office Response

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### The Church of England Education Office

The Church of England Education Office serves children and young people in a variety of church and educational settings and seeks to promote an education that allows children and young people to live out Jesus' promise of life in all its fullness. In the statutory sector the Church engages through governance and pastoral contact with every category of school and has particular responsibility for provision of education in 4,644 Church of England schools. A quarter of primary schools and over 200 secondary schools are Church of England, educating approximately one million children.

We are committed to working with the Government as the guidance on RSE is developed. We look forward to further engagement in this work and the opportunity to respond to the full consultation that will follow this call for evidence.

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### Vision for Relationships and Sex Education

Relationships and sex are good gifts of God and should bring joy. In our experience, young people most desire to learn about (and have modelled for them) good, healthy relationships. They want to learn how to secure, develop and sustain healthy relationships and how to be able to recognise when and how relationships go wrong. They must be prepared for the opportunities, challenges and responsibilities of being in relationship with other people. Relationships education and RSE must give pupils the understanding, vocabulary and strategies they require to keep themselves safe and to thrive within good, stable long-term relationships of all kinds. RSE should give pupils accurate information to equip them for life in the modern world and to make sure they are not influenced by unrealistic dangerous materials.

In Church of England schools, and in all schools, we want young people to flourish and to gain every opportunity to live fulfilled lives. For Church schools, RSE is about the emotional, social and physical aspects of growing up, healthy relationships, sex, human sexuality and sexual health. It is also about the spiritual and moral aspects of relationships within a context of a Christian vision for the purpose of life.

RSE should teach the diversity of healthy relationships, lifestyle choices and beliefs and schools must be given the flexibility to reflect their own ethos and values as well as that of their local context. This must include their context of belief, faith and religion. In Church schools RSE must be culturally and community sensitive as well as encompass the teachings of the Church, including the Christian understanding of marriage as the context for sexual relationships and the importance of trust, loyalty, fidelity and choice as well as the understanding of abstinence and celibacy as positive life choices.

Relationships education and RSE must be inclusive and meet the needs of all pupils. Schools should be supported through guidance and training so that they can provide relationships education and RSE that is suitable for pupils with different needs, including pupils who are particularly vulnerable and pupils with learning disabilities.

### **Our understanding of relationships education**

We understand relationships education to be that pertaining to the development of pupils' understanding and ability to have positive, healthy, meaningful and sustained relationships of all kinds.

- 1. The importance of being in relationship**
- 2. Healthy relationships and staying safe**
- 3. Respecting others**

### **Our understanding of sex education**

We understand sex education to be that pertaining to the development of pupils' understanding of sex, sexual health and human sexuality.

- 4. Sex**
- 5. Sexual health**
- 6. Conception, contraception and pregnancy** (some of which is covered by the science curriculum)
- 7. Human sexuality**

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### **Engaging with parents**

Parents and carers must be given every opportunity to understand the purpose and content of relationships education and RSE. Clear and open communication with parents and carers will help them to understand the importance of modelling positive relationships and make sure that pupils are not withdrawn from sex education for reasons based on a misunderstanding of the subject.

The role of parents and carers in the development of children's understanding about relationships is vital and they hold the responsibility of ensuring their children grow and mature into healthy relationships.

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### **Right of parents to withdraw their children from sex education**

As emphasised above, engagement with parents to ensure they understand the purpose and importance of RSE is integral to how schools deal with the right of withdrawal. However, we recognise that even with effective parental engagement, some parents and carers will want to withdraw their child from sex education. We have experience managing the process of the right of withdrawal in relation to religious education (RE) and this includes experience of managing differential withdrawal. The RE community have learnt lessons from this experience and it gives rise to some particular questions, concerns and suggestions.

Whilst we have outlined above our understanding of the different elements of relationships education and sex education we also recognise the connections and overlap between them. Consequently, the question arises of how clarity is going to be established and maintained on the right of withdrawal from sex education. If the right of withdrawal from sex education is going to work, it will be essential that the DfE issues clear guidelines on what constitutes sex education and what constitutes relationships education. School leaders, teachers and parents must all be given sufficient information so that all are clear on what pupils can and cannot be withdrawn from.

In RE we have managed situations in which pupils are withdrawn from the teaching about particular religions. Whilst this is not a desirable situation, it has been possible to sensibly withdraw pupils where different religions have been taught as units of study. This is more problematic when RE is delivered thematically or in a cross curricular way. It will therefore be necessary for schools to be able to identify on their curriculum planning what is relationships education and what is sex education, and for teachers to be able to explain this to parents. This is an area that may well be contested in the courts and it will be important to ensure that individual pupils, teachers, schools and headteachers are given clear advice to make sure they do not become 'test cases'.

It will also need to be made clear whether parents will be able to withdraw their children from just some aspects of sex education or whether they must withdraw them from the whole subject. Both could be logistically difficult for schools to manage, but the former even more so. We are concerned about the capacity and workload issues that could arise if a pupil is withdrawn. The DfE must make it clear who is responsible for the supervision of withdrawn pupils and who is responsible for providing alternative work. It would be a considerable addition to teacher workload if they had to set alternative work. If alternative work is to be set by parents or carers, accessible and comprehensive guidelines on what is acceptable to set must be issued. In RE we have had issues where pupils have been found to be studying inappropriate material sent in by parents. The potential for unacceptable material set as an alternative sex education programme is a real concern.

DfE must also make the legal process for withdrawing a child clear. We suggest that, as in RE, this request needs to be made in writing so that teachers and schools can demonstrate to Ofsted and other regulatory and inspection agencies that they have met statutory requirements.

Finally, there should be clarity about the age at which the right to withdrawal from sex education lessons passes from the parents to the pupil. Consideration may also be given to guidance around what happens when the parents disagree about withdrawing a child from sex education.

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## **Key subject areas**

### **1. The importance of human relationships**

A key part of relationships education must be teaching pupils the importance of all the different types of relationships in our lives and what it means to have faithful, supportive, trusting and loving relationships with other people. At primary school the focus should be on family relationships and friendships, giving pupils the opportunity to understand the value of human relationships, how to have healthy relationships and how to stay safe. At secondary level, intimate and sexual relationships should also be addressed.

At both levels the importance of commitment and cherishing our relationships should be taught. This should include the good of marriage as a relationship of trust, loyalty and fidelity. In Church schools, the Christian understanding of marriage as a spiritual relationship based on Christ's relationship with the church will be key, as will the Christian teaching of marriage as the context for sexual expression. The legitimacy and value of abstinence before marriage or as a life choice will also be important in Church schools. The good of life-long friendships should also be recognised as an important gift that should be honoured and cherished.

## **2. Healthy relationships and staying safe**

Relationships education needs to prioritise time to explore and give pupils the vocabulary and strategies to keep themselves safe and flourish within good, stable, long term relationships of all kinds. Pupils should be taught about consent and boundaries, recognising abuse and staying safe. This must include teaching about how to stay safe online and the dangers of exploitation and grooming. Distorted representations of sex and relationships should be addressed so that children are aware of the damaging influence of pornography, the harmful gender stereotyping that it often involves, and the link to abusive and coercive relationships and damage it can do to young people.

As a part of staying safe and having healthy relationships, relationships education must also include how we protect self-esteem and good mental health. This should be based on the recognition that all people are valuable and deserve to be loved and cherished. It should also include education on the impact of social media on self-esteem and mental health, and it should include information about how to find and access help and support.

## **3. Respecting others**

Relationships education must allow for the diversity of belief across our country and our school communities. All pupils and members of the school community deserve dignity and respect; these values and the refusal to manipulate, exploit or bully must be taught and modelled in all schools. Different views, including different religious views, on relationships and sex must be respected and pupils must be taught to hold healthy and respectful conversation, to appreciate differences of view which they should be encouraged to understand and engage with as their own views are formed and shaped.

In recognising this diversity, relationships education must ensure that all pupils feel it includes them and their families. Pupils from same-sex parents or trans parents, pupils who have LGBT+ family members and pupils who may themselves identify as LGBT+ should feel included and find relationships education helpful. Similarly, pupils from religious or other belief backgrounds should also feel included, and their religious beliefs treated with respect and understanding, even or especially where such beliefs may not align with majority opinion. Pupils should be given accurate information as a basis for understanding difference and removing prejudice.

## **4. Sex**

In sex education pupils should be provided with accurate information so that they understand the meaning of consent and know how to be safe and responsible. In Church schools sex is taught in the Christian context as a gift of God as part of creation. In Christian understanding, marriage is the perfect context for sexual expression, and in all schools, pupils must be taught that sex is intrinsically connected to human relationship, it involves questions of trust, loyalty and faithfulness and how we see others and ourselves. Healthy and responsible sexual relationships can be a positive element in human flourishing, and this should be reflected in sex education. The validity and value of celibacy should also be taught.

## **5. Sexual health**

In sex education pupils must be given factual knowledge about sexual diseases and how to protect themselves against them. They should also be taught about the importance of taking responsibility for their own sexual health in order to protect themselves and others against sexual disease.

## **6. Conception, contraception and pregnancy**

Pupils must be given factual knowledge about conception, contraception and pregnancy (some of which will be covered in the science curriculum) and the privilege and responsibility of parenthood.

## 7. Human sexuality

Sex education should include an understanding that all humans are sexual beings and that sexual desire is natural. Pupils should be taught that humans express their sexuality differently and that there is diversity in sexual desire.

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## PSHE

RSE is an important subset of PSHE. Together they are part of the wider desire to teach a broad curriculum and both are equally important to the flourishing of children and young people. As such they should both be offered as part of a broad and balanced education and both must be properly resourced and supported. Accordingly, there should be a specialist PSHE and RSE teacher/subject leader in every secondary and primary school. This will be necessary to ensure the quality of teaching and learning in these subjects.

Many schools currently use specialist groups to come in for one off days to deliver their PSHE programme. Whilst the use of such groups can be an effective way to supplement the PSHE curriculum, we suggest that it is not good practice to rely solely on these groups. If PSHE and RSE are going to effectively reflect the unique context and needs of the school and its pupils, these subjects must be primarily delivered by internal specialist teachers who understand that context. Schools must therefore be resourced with specialist PSHE/RSE teachers in order to make sure they do not rely on external groups and these teachers must be able to access professional and effective training.

One training model that could be used to deliver effective training to schools is the 'cascade model'. Evidence from other organisations suggests this model can be very effective and we have found that to be the case with the use of this cascade model with our *Understanding Christianity* resource. *Understanding Christianity* is a resource designed to improve the teaching of Christianity in RE in both primary and secondary schools. RE teachers and subject leaders have been trained by our specialist trainers on the *Understanding Christianity* materials. Those trained teachers/subject leaders then disseminate the training within their schools. So far the evidence and feedback suggests that this is proving to be a highly effective model to disseminate high quality training and consequently to improve teaching and outcomes in the subject. We suggest this model could be effectively employed to disseminate expert PSHE training to schools. It is a particularly effective model for primary schools where specialist teachers/subject leads are not as common.

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## Key subject areas for PSHE

### 1. Health and wellbeing

The physical and mental health and wellbeing of pupils must be a key topic in PSHE. Pupils should be taught about the importance of healthy lifestyles, including education on the importance of fitness and nutrition as well as drugs, alcohol and tobacco education. The dangers of addiction (from a physical and mental perspective) must be addressed, including the risks associated with gambling. Mental health must be

addressed, and pupils taught how to look after their mental wellbeing and how to access support should they need it.

## 2. Identity and self-esteem

Intrinsically connected to the above, pupils must be allowed to explore questions of identity and how we value our own identity and the uniqueness of other people. PSHE must help pupils recognise their true identity, and teach them that our media-framed, market-driven culture that often leads to body image anxiety can be challenged. This issue is the focus of the Bishop of Gloucester's [#liedentity campaign](#) which aims to challenge negative body image and encouraging young people to look within to discover true value and beauty.

## 3. Diversity, equality and anti-bullying

All pupils must be given the opportunity to understand the importance of diversity and equality and how we must treat each other with dignity and respect. This should include how we value diversity of faiths, beliefs, culture and race, as well as how we support gender equality and challenge gender stereotyping.

Alongside this, schools must also teach pupils about bullying and the importance of challenging bullying in school. Pupils must be taught about the different types of bullying (including homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying), the different forms it may take (including cyber bullying), the effects of bullying and what they should do if they witness bullying or experience bullying themselves.

## 4. Financial and economic education

Pupils must be taught how to manage money wisely and they must be given the opportunity to develop economic literacy. Research done by the Just Finance Foundation suggests that only 20% of KS1 pupils talk about money at home, and in a time when many in our society are financially vulnerable it is vital that pupils are given the opportunity to develop the life skills such as saving and budgeting that will enable them to make good decisions about money in the future.

In partnership with Young Enterprise, and with support from Virgin Money and the Government, the [Just Finance Foundation](#) has delivered a financial education programme for primary schools called [LifeSavers](#). LifeSavers helps children manage money wisely now and in the future by providing training and resources for teachers, offering support for school savings clubs, and encouraging parental and wider community engagement. These teaching materials are designed to engage pupils in learning about money through the lens of four core values: generosity, wisdom, thankfulness and justice. LifeSavers is a good example of a successful programme that is helping pupils to become financially capable.

## 5. Careers

Pupils should be given the opportunity within PSHE to learn about career possibilities and they should be given support to explore and fulfil their career aspirations. Schools must give pupils the knowledge they need to navigate their way to career choices, as well as support to enable pupils to understand their strengths, values and motivations that will help them make choices for their future. Schools should ensure that all pupils are supported in this way and that any perceived barriers based on gender, race or class are challenged.

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