

Relationships Education in England (primary): A Summary for Parents and Schools

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Relationships lie at the very heart of what it means to be human. Who we are is intrinsically linked to how we relate to others. Fundamental to Christians is the belief that all people are created in the image of God, which bestows an inalienable dignity and respect on all people. For Christians who worship the Triune God who is love, and are created in His image, loving relationships are core to what it means to be human.

Given the new Relationship (and Sex) Education subject explores what it means to be human and what it means to be a person in community, parents have an opportunity, whichever type of school their child attends, to show through their engagement with these issues that “we love because He first loved us”. [1 John 4:19]

All parents¹ have an important role to play when it comes to working with schools as they develop their Relationships Education policy. Even if your child does not attend a religious-character school, you should still have the opportunity to engage in the process. Remember, there will be no opt-out provision from Relationships Education in primary school.

As the Evangelical Alliance’s guide for Christian families in education, *You’re Not Alone*, notes:

“The Bible teaches that parents are above all responsible for their children’s education. Parents are the primary nurturers, role models, socialisers and source of morals for their children. It is parents whom God has invested with the highest authority for the wellbeing and education of their children.”

The relationship between schools and parents is vitally important. Parents are the most important relationship in a child’s life. But we typically delegate responsibility for our children’s education to the school. Therefore, we each have an opportunity as parents, to build positive, supportive and encouraging relationships with our children’s schools.

Many parents have expressed worry or concern to us regarding changes introduced by the new subjects Relationships Education and Relationships and Sex Education in England that will affect all children in both primary and secondary education. This briefing paper has been produced to help you understand the requirements now being placed on schools and how you as parents and carers can engage positively and effectively.

[On the following pages, paragraphs in brackets refer to the Government’s Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), and Health Education guidance, July 2019]

In brief

- From September 2020 there will be a new requirement to teach Relationships Education in every school in England (including academies and independent schools), with schools encouraged to teach the subject from September 2019.
- Schools are required to have a written policy on which parents must be consulted (though the school has the final say on the actual content). (Paragraph 13)
- There is no opt-out from Relationships Education. (Paragraph 4)
- Primary schools are not required to teach Sex Education, but the government encourages them to do so. If the school does teach Sex Education parents can withdraw their children from these lessons (see page 8 for more information). (Paragraph 65)
- All schools must take into account the religious background of all pupils. (Paragraph 20)
- Religious-character schools may teach their faith perspective on topics and all schools may teach faith perspectives on these topics. (Paragraph 21)
- LGBT content may be taught in primary, but it is not required (schools can decide). (Paragraph 37)
- Schools may use external agencies to deliver parts of the subject, but this teaching must fit with their planned programme and their published policy. (Paragraph 52)

What

A new subject for all schools in England created by Parliament² with guidelines for content defined by the Department for Education via Statutory Guidance.³

Who

Mandatory in every primary school in England (from September 2020).

When

Primary schools can start teaching the subject from September 2019 but it will be mandatory for all primary schools from September 2020; this includes all academies, free schools and independent schools. This means all schools will need to do consultations on their policies this year.

The central role and opportunity of parents

According to the guidance:

“All schools must have in place a written policy for Relationships Education and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). Schools must consult parents in developing and reviewing their policy. Schools should ensure that the policy meets the needs of pupils and parents and reflects the community they serve.”⁴

These policies must⁵:

- Define Relationships Education.
- Set out the subject content, how it is taught, and who is responsible for teaching it.
- Describe how the subject is monitored and evaluated.
- Include information to clarify why parents do not have a right to withdraw their child from lessons.

These policies will typically also cover:

- Details of content/scheme of work and when each topic is taught, taking account of the age of pupils.
- Examples of the resources the school proposes to use.⁶
- Who delivers either Relationships Education or RSE.
- How the policy has been produced, and how it will be kept under review, in both cases working with parents.
- How delivery of the content will be made accessible to all pupils, including those with special educational needs and disability (SEND).
- Requirements on schools in law, for example, the Equality Act (please see the Equality Act 2010 and schools: Departmental advice).⁷
- How the school deals with questions pertaining to sex or sexuality that go beyond what is set out for Relationships Education.⁸

While parents can have input to the policy, it is important to note that, according to the Minister for Schools, “ultimately, it is matter for the school itself to decide on the curriculum”.⁹

[Schools may also choose to teach Sex Education in primary school; see Appendix 2 of this document for more information.]

[**TIP:** Please see the ‘Parents and carers’ policy checklist’ in Appendix 2 for things to look for or ask to be included in your school’s Relationships Education policy.]

Religious families and children in schools

Concerning all pupils at whatever type of school, the guidance notes that:

“In all schools, when teaching these subjects, the religious background of all pupils must be taken into account when planning teaching, so that the topics that are included in the core content in this guidance are appropriately handled. Schools must ensure they comply with the relevant provisions of the Equality Act 2010, under which religion or belief are amongst the protected characteristics.”¹⁰

This means you can take the opportunity of the policy consultation to explore with the school how they plan to “take into account” the religious background of all pupils, whether the school has a religious-character or not.

In addition to the requirements concerning the school’s policy, the guidance notes, regarding Relationships Education (and Sex Education if the school teaches it), that:

“All schools may teach about faith perspectives.”¹¹

Therefore, all schools, including non-religious schools, can teach diverse and different perspectives on these issues in Relationships Education, including religious perspectives. Subsequently, it may be helpful for parents who are encouraging the schools to take their child’s religious background into account to draw their attention to the opportunity all schools have to teach a faith perspective.

Religious character schools

In addition, regarding religious-character schools in particular, the guidance notes that religious-character schools are allowed to:

“Teach the distinctive faith perspective on relationships, and balanced debate may take place about issues that are seen as contentious...”¹²

The guidance notes that “schools are free to determine how to deliver the content set out in this guidance, in the context of a broad and balanced curriculum”.¹³

[**Note:** While the guidance only mentions the “distinctive faith perspective” on relationships, in a meeting of an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education, the Minister for Schools, the Rt Hon Nick Gibb, confirmed this also applies to Sex Education.¹⁴]

External agencies

“Schools should also ensure that the teaching delivered by the visitor fits with their planned programme and their published policy. It is important that schools discuss the detail of how the visitor will deliver their sessions and ensure that the content is age-appropriate and accessible for the pupils. Schools should ask to see the materials visitors will use as well as a lesson plan in advance so that they can ensure it meets the full range of pupils’ needs (for example, special educational needs).”¹⁵

IMPORTANT: While there is no requirement that schools follow best practice in this area and notify parents ahead of time with details of which organisation and what they will be teaching, parents may wish to encourage the school to include this information in their policy on Relationships Education. See Appendix 2, the ‘Parental Checklist’ for more information.

Subject topics

[Please see Appendix 1 for the full list of topics required to be taught in Relationships Education in primary schools.]

The guidance notes that “schools are free to determine how to deliver the content set out in this guidance, in the context of a broad and balanced curriculum”.¹⁶

IMPORTANT: Many new pre-packaged curriculums are being developed for Relationships Education, so it is important that during the consultation your school provides detailed information on which curriculum(s) it will be using (if any) and that these align and agree the definition of Relationships Education listed in the written policy. Please see the ‘Parent’s Checklist’ for more detailed questions and considerations. (Appendix 2)

Topics currently taught under a different ‘umbrella’

While not in the statutory guidance, a recent DfE document for schools entitled *Parental Engagement on Relationships Education* notes:

“Where primary schools have previously been teaching some or all of this content in the above guidance under a different umbrella subject – for example, Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE), equality education, or Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural education – this overlapping content must from 2020 form part of the school’s Relationship Education policy and be subject to parental consultation.”¹⁷

Sensitive topics (Relationships Education)

Same-sex relationships – The guidance states that by the end of primary school pupils should know (among other things):

- “that other children’s families, either in school or in the wider world, sometimes look different from their family, but that they should respect those differences and know that other children’s families are also characterised by love and care.”
- “that stable, caring relationships, which may be of different types, are at the heart of happy families, and are important for children’s security as they grow up.”
- “that marriage represents a formal and legally recognised commitment of two people to each other which is intended to be lifelong.”¹⁸

It should be noted that while specific forms of care for children are not mentioned here, a list of examples is given earlier in the guidance which says: “Families can include, for example, single-parent families, LGBT parents, families headed by grandparents, adoptive parents, foster parents/carers, amongst other structures.”¹⁹

Further, it notes that “teaching about families requires sensitive and well-judged teaching based on knowledge of pupils and their circumstances” and that “care needs to be taken to ensure that there is no stigmatisation of children based on their home circumstances and needs.”²⁰

LGBT content – according to the guidance:

“In teaching Relationships Education and RSE, schools should ensure that the needs of all pupils are appropriately met, and that all pupils understand the importance of equality and respect.”

“At the point at which schools consider it appropriate to teach their pupils about LGBT, they should ensure that this content is fully integrated into their programmes of study for this area of the curriculum rather than delivered as a stand-alone unit or lesson. Schools are free to determine how they do this, and we expect all pupils to have been taught LGBT content at a timely point as part of this area of the curriculum.”²¹

IMPORTANT: It is worth noting that this section comes in the general section of the guidance, not specifically the primary school’s Relationships Education section. Therefore, it would appear, primary schools may choose to teach LGBT content, but they may also “consider it appropriate” to not teach it in primary school.

Sex Education in primary schools

Primary schools in England are not required to teach Sex Education²² though the Government continues to encourage them to do so.²³ The guidance notes that:

“The content set out in this guidance covers everything that primary schools should teach about relationships and health, including puberty. [...]”

“The national curriculum for Science also includes subject content in related areas, such as the main external body parts, the human body as it grows from birth to old age (including puberty), and reproduction in some plants and animals. It will be for primary schools to determine whether they need to cover any additional content on Sex Education to meet the needs of their pupils.”²⁴

IMPORTANT: It would appear from a plain reading of the guidance that anything not explicitly mentioned in the topics for Relationships Education or the national curriculum for Science, but that is mentioned in the topics for Relationships and Sex education in secondary school would be ‘Sex Education’ if taught in primary.

So, for example, Sex Education would therefore cover:

- Abortion
- Contraception
- Intimate (sexual) relationships

Therefore, if primary schools choose to teach sex education, this has to be clearly laid out in a written policy that:

- Defines any Sex Education they choose to teach other than that covered in the science curriculum.
- Sets out the subject content, how it is taught, and who is responsible for teaching it.
- Describes how the subject is monitored and evaluated.
- Includes information about a parent’s right to withdraw their child.²⁵

The guidance also notes that “primary schools should consult parents before the final year of primary school about the detailed content of what will be taught”.²⁶ This would appear to be in addition to the consultation when the school’s policy is written or updated. Additionally, if teaching Sex Education, schools should ensure that “teaching and materials are appropriate, having regard to the age and religious backgrounds of their pupils.”²⁷

IMPORTANT: For Sex Education in primary school, there is a full parental opt-out. The guidance clarifies that:

“Primary schools that choose to teach sex education must allow parents a right to withdraw their children. Unlike Sex Education in RSE at secondary, in primary schools, head teachers must comply with a parent’s wish to withdraw their child from sex education beyond the national curriculum for Science.”²⁸ [emphasis added]

The guidance, however, says that good practice involves the head teacher discussing with parents “the benefits of receiving this important education and any detrimental effects that withdrawal might have on the child”.²⁹ But as noted above, if you choose to withdraw your child, it is not a requirement to have a discussion prior to the withdrawal and head teachers (in primary school) cannot refuse a parental request to withdraw their child from Sex Education.

Conclusion

Along with a challenge there is an opportunity with this new subject. We as Christians, can take this moment to witness to the truth that Triune love shapes how we relate to God and how we relate to people. That the God who is Love calls us to love Him and love our neighbours as He first loved us, supremely through the gift of His Son Jesus Christ.

References

- 1 Throughout this document ‘parents’ refers to both parents and carers.
- 2 Children and Social Work Act 2017, Section 34 & 35 and Statutory Instrument No. 2019/924.
- 3 The guidance is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education>
- 4 Guidance (July 2019), Para 13, p.11
- 5 Guidance, Para 16, p.11
- 6 Guidance, Para 24, p.13
- 7 Guidance, Para 16, p.11
- 8 Guidance, Para 63, p.23
- 9 Minister of State for Schools, Rt. Hon. Nick Gibb MP, HC Deb, 16 July 2019, c708
- 10 Guidance, Para 20, p.12
- 11 Guidance, Para 21, p.12
- 12 Guidance, Para 21, p.12
- 13 Guidance, Para 5, p.8
- 14 Minister of State for Schools Rt. Hon. Nick Gibb, at the APPG on Religious Education, 16 July 2019
- 15 Guidance, Para 52, p.18
- 16 Guidance, Para 5, p.8
- 17 Parental Engagement on Relationships Education, Department for Education, 10 October 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/engaging-parents-with-relationships-education-policy>
- 18 Guidance, pp.20-21
- 19 Guidance, Para 59, p.19
- 20 Guidance, Para 59, p.19
- 21 Guidance, Para 37, p.15
- 22 Guidance, Para 65, p.23
- 23 Guidance, Para 67, p.23
- 24 Guidance, Para 65, p.23
- 25 Guidance, Para 16, p.11
- 26 Guidance, Para 67, p.23
- 27 Guidance, Para 68, p.24
- 28 Guidance, Para 68, p.24
- 29 Guidance, Para 46, p.17