

Time to

Talk

**Better conversations about
Relationships and Sexuality Education**

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

evangelical alliance
together making Jesus known



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Introduction

A photograph of a man and a young girl washing their hands at a sink. The man is standing behind the girl, looking down at her hands. The girl is holding a bar of soap and looking down at it. The background is a blurred indoor setting, likely a kitchen or bathroom.

Some form of relationships and sex/sexuality education (RSE) is taught in all primary and secondary schools across the United Kingdom. There is no single definition of what relationships and sex/sexuality education is, and different nations use different terms and acronyms to describe it. The compulsory content will also vary to some degree and some topics may be taught under different areas of the curriculum.

This resource will explore some of the differences across the U.K. but will use the term 'RSE' throughout as a shorthand. Within this term we include issues related to the teaching of the personal development of children and young people, sex and relationships, and the exploration of sexual values, attitudes, and behaviours.

While schools teach children and young people some things about relationships, sex, and sexuality, our culture arguably teaches them more. The smart phone in their pockets has transformed the landscape and the conversation. Social media, music, TV shows and pornography are widely available and communicate powerful and persuasive messages. Some of this content may be explicit, but all of it communicates implicit values about worth and dignity, the role and value of sex, bodies, and human identity.

We know that young people talk about these things, but let's be honest, as a parent or carer we can be reluctant and find the conversation awkward at times! Perhaps you cringe as you remember the 'sex talk' you got in school or at home! Or maybe now as a parent you are really concerned about the headlines you've read about cases where gender ideology is being taught in primary schools. Talking about relationships, sex and sexuality can be challenging, but avoidance isn't an option. The way young people hear sex talked about informs what they think about it, and what they think about it informs how they behave when it comes to their relationship choices and sense of self-worth. So, as well as the challenges, consider the amazing opportunities for parents and carers to help children and young people form a good and healthy understanding of identity, relationships, sex and sexuality.

This resource is designed to help you as a Christian parent or carer to have better conversations about RSE with your children at home and with their school. Having better conversations will involve navigating complicated and contested issues, seeking common ground and cultivating space for distinctive beliefs and practices. This is about discipleship - helping our children follow Jesus in today's rapidly changing culture. This is also about mission – modelling to others the good, true and beautiful story that has changed our lives.

The resource starts in the home - the space in which parents and carers can most influence and help shape the culture. No-one is better placed than you to help your children have these conversations. We look at what is being taught in schools, outlining practical ways to engage in this conversation. We then more specifically look at what the Bible has to say and how this compares to the story our culture is telling. There are lots of case studies, relevant statistics and handy tips through out.

Rachel Gardner, author of *The Sex Thing*, asked young people if they felt that the church should talk to teenagers about sex.¹ Over 94% said 'yes', and when asked what they wanted the church to talk with them about, the top three answers were:

- » **How to have healthy relationships;**
- » **What the Bible says about sex; and**
- » **How to set sexual boundaries in pre-marital relationships.**

We can't promise an easy or quick fix, but these conversations cannot be avoided. It might take some practice and we are all learning as we go, but we can choose to see each conversation as a privilege and as an opportunity to build trust and relationship.

Young people want to understand how following Jesus can impact their choices around relationships, sex and sexuality, - so let's be prepared to have the conversations with them. You can do this!

¹ womana.live.co.uk/opinion/young-people-really-do-want-us-to-talk-to-them-about-sex/5703.article

1. Home

It starts at home ...

The Bible reveals the simple but profound truth that children are a gift from God. He entrusted parents with the responsibility and authority for the wellbeing and formation of their children. They are the primary nurturers, role models, socialisers and source of moral development for their children.

RSE is not just a subject taught in a classroom. Children and young people are constantly 'learning' values, habits and practices that shape how they understand themselves and their relationship with others - RSE in the broadest sense begins in the home. Most parents or carers, regardless of their religious beliefs, want to help their children develop both a healthy sense of identity and flourishing relationships. So, while this resource is designed for Christian parents and carers, we hope it could be useful for everyone.

Your child is being influenced by ideas and values, narratives and facts about relationships and sexuality. Their ideas are formed through conversations with friends, social media, TV, entertainment and teaching in school and church.

Across the UK, the parental 'right' to withdraw children from some aspects of RSE provision has largely been removed. So, a conversation with your child about how to receive and process information and values, that they may disagree with, will be vital to help them form their own views and practices in line with their faith as they grow older.

However, parents and carers still have a huge influence in the moral and spiritual formation of their children. They can model what faithfulness and forgiveness look like in practice; what kind and caring words sound like; and what honour and respect feel like. What children see, listen to and experience will shape their understanding of what is good, true and beautiful. You know your child, their personality and character, their interests and their challenges. You know how to best accommodate for special educational needs, temperament or communication style. You have an amazing opportunity to help shape how they understand their body, their relationships, and their choices.



No-one is better placed than you

Some parents might feel hypocritical or even disqualified from talking to their children or their school about sex and relationships because of their own past failures or ongoing secret struggles. There is an important continuous conversation to be had with our children about how we, even as Christians, make poor choices at times in many areas of life; how we will sin and fail to live according to the Bible and the beliefs we profess. This is an opportunity to talk about the reality of making mistakes and the forgiveness and hope found in Jesus, and how they can always talk to you or a trusted adult about anything.

Ongoing conversations

This is not about one 'big talk'. It involves everyday interactions and conversations - opportunities to tell a child how amazing and precious their bodies are, to let them know how valued, loved, and secure they are, and to help them recognise the kind and sacrificial things that they can say or do to make others feel valued and respected.

So be encouraged - it is never too early or too late to create a culture at home in which honest and authentic conversations can be had about relationships and sex.





Our bodies: ages and stages ...

A good place to start these conversations is by helping your child navigate and understand the changes in their body to aid the development of healthy self-confidence and self-image. It is also a key part of their discipleship journey in understanding that their bodies are good gifts from God to be cared for, used in worship of God and to bless others. In preparing to talk about relationships and sex, below are some things to consider at different ages and stages.²

² Adapted from some of the stages of sexual development explored in J.K. Balswick and J.O. Balswick, *Authentic Human Sexuality: An Integrated Christian Approach* (3rd ed.), 2019.

Young children

Most children between the ages of two and six are curious about their own body, as well as the differences between the body parts of the other sex. This creates an opportunity to affirm their body, how special it is, and how brilliant God's design in creation is. It is also important to help your child understand

safe and healthy boundaries for themselves and others, and what is and is not appropriate.

Creating a secure environment and sense of belonging can contribute to emotional stability and create opportunities for you to answer their questions in a calm, and clear way.

Try to give simple answers to simple questions.

Pre-adolescence

Between the ages of 7 and 12, children will be picking up messages and expectations around gender stereotyping. In light of this, it is important to make the distinction between what is cultural and what is biblical when it comes to understanding masculinity and femininity, remembering we are all called to live in a way that reflects the character of Jesus.

Continue to nurture a warm and secure environment in which to answer questions and talk openly. Don't jump too quickly to answer questions but take time to find out where the root of the question has come from. Use teachable moments to also ask questions, present a challenge, or introduce an idea; this might arise out of a storyline in a TV show, or an event that happens in the family. For example, talking about pregnancy may come about when a family member or friend announces a pregnancy.

Don't wait for a 'big talk' moment; be intentional and purposeful in communicating about relationships and sex. If you are not talking to your child, the surrounding culture certainly is.

Remember it is ok to admit you don't know the answer to a question; commit to finding a way to answer it.

This could be an important age to help children understand some broad and positive messages about relationships and sex within their Christian beliefs - 'As Christians we understand sex to be a really good gift from God. It can be pleasurable and fun, it can lead to the creation of new children and it works best in what the bible describes as the one-flesh relationship of marriage between a man and a women. Sex can also lead us to experience very powerful emotions and consequences, so that's why both the bible and the law say it is for adults, not children.

Feelings vs identity:

It is important to help your child understand the basic but important idea that our feelings are not the same as our identity. As we grow up, we will experience many different feelings at different times in our lives. This is completely normal and applies as we go through changes in how we relate to our own bodies, our friends, our sexual attractions, our family, jobs and wider society. Take moments and opportunities to remind Christian young people that their identity is not found primarily in their feelings, but in Jesus Christ.

Puberty

Talking about puberty is another ongoing conversation. The tone of these conversations is as important as the information shared. It is an opportunity to celebrate your child's body and all of the amazing things that their body can do.

Our bodies grow and change – remind your child how they and their body have changed, and let them know that they don't need to panic about the changes they experience as a result of puberty. Remind them that they are known and loved by God and were valuable even before they were born.

Talking about life before birth creates an opportunity to introduce the process of conception, when the sperm cell and the egg cell meet and brand new human DNA is formed. By following the development of a baby in the womb, perhaps through a video, you can emphasise the wonder, value and miracle of life.

This will also lay the foundation for talking about sex, as well as give the opportunity to tell them that the changes in their body during puberty create the potential for them to have their own children when they are older.

Puberty is a time of rapid sexual development. It typically begins two years earlier in girls than in boys. All children will develop at their own speed and no two are the same. Changes that can affect both males and females include: growing taller; hair appearing on the body; sweat glands become



more active; the appearance of spots and for some more greasy hair, hormonal changes. Changes that affect girls include: breasts start to change and grow; hips broaden; periods begin. Changes that affect boys include: voice changes and deepens; muscles grow; penis, testicles and scrotum grow; sperm production begins. Some will be nervous even reading these words, but if we don't talk with our children this way, we are leaving it up to someone else to lead this crucial conversation.

It is important to pass on enough information about male and female development so that your child values and respects not only their own body but also that of the opposite sex. Don't shy away from using the correct terminology. Explain that people use different words to describe the same thing, and encourage your child to tell you when they hear terms they do not understand.



Adolescence

As noted above, puberty into adolescence is a time of rapid physical and emotional change, the stage where children grow into adults and begin to gain independence. This is a natural, healthy and good part of growing up, but it can be challenging.

More recently, this is the stage at which many young people are given their first mobile phone. This is an extremely powerful technology, and coupled with social media, is giving rise to many trends and questions that are a first for this generation. Research has shown that media platforms like Instagram can have a significant impact on the mental health of teenage girls,³ while Love for Life found that 56% of 15-year-old boys access porn on at least a weekly basis.⁴

Adolescents are impacted by the sexual messages, imagery, and expectations in society. The widespread availability and use of internet pornography is profoundly shaping how many young people understand sexual relationships and expectations. Peers play an increasingly important role in their life and their developing sense of self, yet for many young people, their parents are still among the strongest influences on their choices.

It is vital to model healthy boundaries around technology use yourself and to set clear boundaries with your children around the internet and social media at the beginning. This could be both protective and preventative, including setting limits on where and when

Remember that going through puberty can be a scary and difficult time. Be understanding and approachable, and remind them that they are special and valued.

³ forbes.com/sites/kimelsesser/2021/10/05/heres-how-instagram-harms-young-women-according-to-research/

⁴ Love for Life Evaluations, 2016-2019

mobile technology can be used and safeguards which can monitor what everyone can access online.

Puberty into adolescence can also be a period of experimentation and risk-taking behaviour. There are social aspects to this but it is in part due to the slower development of the prefrontal lobe in the brain, which is not fully developed until a person is about 25 years old. This can include sexual risk-taking and experimentation.

Does your teenager know what your rules and expectations are around their relationships? Can you share your hopes and aspirations for them positively, without creating a sense of burden or shame? Why not consider marking significant milestones in your child's development such as a treat to 'celebrate' when your daughter's period starts or when your son starts shaving? Can you create some 'rites of passage' which can challenge your child's character development within their growing independence and renew a sense of belonging within your family and community?

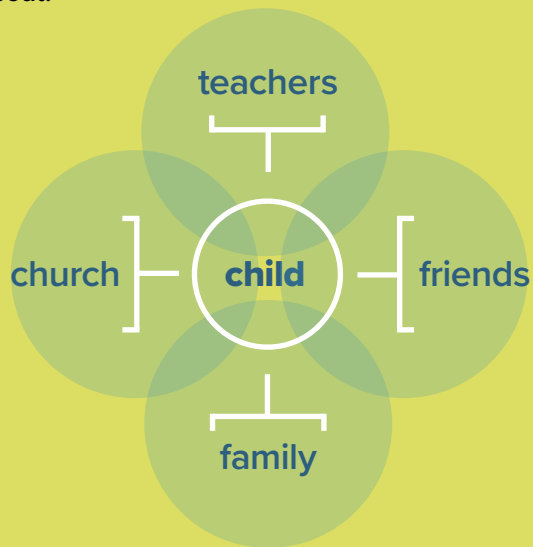
At each of these ages and stages, it is important to celebrate each child as unique and precious in God's eyes. Keep building on the foundations of openness, and the security of family belonging. Remind them often that you love them no matter what, and that they can talk to you about anything. If things get awkward, name it, and depending on the topic and your child's personality, consider using humour to lighten conversations as appropriate. And remember, you are not alone in this, so draw on the wisdom and help of others.





Consider your child's circle of influence

This is a good time to help your child think about who the safe and trusted adults are (apart from you) who they can turn to if they have a question or a concern. Help your child to identify these people and assure them that they can always come to you or them with anything that they want to ask or talk about.



Five trusted adults

Perhaps for younger children, draw out the shape of a hand as a tool to help them identify their five key people and let the five people know that they have been identified. It would be helpful to review who these people are as your child grows up. They will inevitably change so you might want to consider appropriate ages and stages to address this again, for example in the move to post-primary school and in their late teens.

Case Study: pornography

Online pornography is oftentimes free, easily accessible and highly addictive. It is also damaging and degrading to our understanding of sex and relationships. Young people can respond to viewing online pornography for the first time with feelings of curiosity, shock and confusion.

A research study in 2016, commissioned by the NSPCC and the Children's Commission for England,⁵ found that 28% of 11 to 12-year-olds had seen pornography; this rises to 46% of 13 to 14-year-olds and 65% of 15 to 16-year-olds. Young people were as likely to first come across it accidentally, (for example via a pop-up advertisement), as to actively search for it. The majority of respondents first viewed pornography on either a portable laptop or mobile phone, and the majority first viewed it at home.

⁵ NSPCC, Children's Commissioner, Middlesex University: The impact of online pornography on children and young people: [childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/an-examination-of-the-impact-of-online-pornography-on-children-and-young-people/](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/report/an-examination-of-the-impact-of-online-pornography-on-children-and-young-people/)

Here are a few tips about how you might raise this issue with your children

- 01** Help your child to understand that, just like in the physical world, there are things which are dangerous and harmful online. Teach and empower them to use the internet safely.
- 02** Adopt appropriate safeguards and protections around devices that use the internet, for example boundaries around mobile phone use or accountability software.



03 Model to your children how you also live within these good and healthy boundaries and protections for using the internet. Create a culture of openness so that your child knows that they can come to you if they see anything that shocks or upsets them.

04 Be open, as is age-appropriate, with your child. Remind them that curiosity is good and natural but that pornography is seductive and addictive, dehumanising and degrading.

05 Educate your children, as appropriate, about the dangers of creating or sharing inappropriate images, have a plan about what to do if they are sent these images or asked for them, and remind them that the sharing of some images could constitute to a criminal offence.

06 As appropriate, help them to understand the impact of using pornography on their own brain, mind, spirituality and relationships and the impact on others, particularly women who are degraded and objectified.

07 Feelings of shame associated with porn use can cause isolation and depression and many Christian parents may struggle with pornography use as well. As Christians, it is important that we can talk about pornography in a way that names sin and acknowledges the harm and damage to ourselves and others made in the image of God. However, we must also point to hope and redemption, forgiveness and a better way.

08 How can you help your child to create an alternative way out if they are tempted or a plan of action to use if others in their company are sharing pornography around them?

Case Study: conversations about sexuality and ‘coming out’

Cultural attitudes towards homosexuality and LGBT+ identities have changed a lot since many of us were at school. Today, Pride month is widely celebrated and same-sex marriage is accepted by most people in society as a win for equality. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender characters are routinely depicted across popular culture and many young people find a sense of identity and purpose in these communities themselves as LGBT+ or as allies or activists.

A relatively small number of Christian churches perform same-sex marriages and celebrate all of these changes as social and spiritual progress. In the midst of this, an orthodox Christian understanding of relationships, sex and sexuality is increasingly understood and portrayed as ancient, irrelevant

or repressive. So even though we can welcome a more open conversation with less stigma, our ongoing commitment to the best place for sexual relationship being within the covenant relationship of male and female marriage is enough to be considered homophobic and harmful.

In this context, there is no doubt that many young people, especially many young Christians, will struggle to talk openly with others about their beliefs or any feelings of attraction to the same sex. It can be difficult for many young people (and older people) to reconcile their faith with their feelings or the experience of their friends. So how should you talk to your children about sexual orientation and what should you do if they raise questions of attractions with you or ‘come out’?

01 Thank your child for talking to you and acknowledge their courage. It will likely have been a big decision to share their feelings with you or anyone else. These are deeply sensitive and important issues about identity, relationships and religious belief. Many of us find it difficult to listen and talk well about these things even as mature Christians.

02 Don't panic. Young people and parents alike may be fearful about what this could mean for their future, family and faith. Some will fear being a disappointment or being rejected. Pray for grace and compassion, wisdom and truth. Make sure that your child knows they will always be loved and will always belong and, they have hope now and in the future.

03 Listen carefully. Many young Christians will struggle to name and talk about their feelings openly because of stigma and shame. Some may feel despair, thinking that they are beyond help or without hope; some will be actively wrestling with their feelings, seeking to honour Christ through resisting their temptation to sin. Some may want to begin dating and/or identifying as LGBT+ and may be unclear about how this fits with their practice of faith, and may require gentle instruction.

04 Again, this is not a one-time conversation. Create spaces to begin or pick the conversation up again.

05 It could be useful to help your child understand the difference between attractions, behaviours and identity. Sexual attractions and feelings are often not chosen. Engaging in a sexual behaviour or assuming a sexual identity often involves an active decision. Explore the idea that, despite what culture may affirm, sexual feelings do not have to be acted upon or become the basis for anyone's personal or public identity. Affirm sex and sexuality as important and positive parts of human identity without being the defining feature.

06 Consistently model a loving disposition towards those who identify as LGBT+ and reject stereotyping, comments or attitudes that diminish the human dignity of anyone based on their sexual orientation or attractions. Be clear that homophobia or bullying are not acceptable.

07 Consistently model the positive biblical story around relationships, sex and sexuality which honours both marriage and celibacy and every human being equally. Take opportunities over the course of many conversations to affirm the good boundaries God has placed around sexual relationships.

08 Where appropriate, seek further support and help through specialist organisations or resources, some of which are listed at the end of this resource.

(Much of the above comes from *'Is God Anti-Gay?'* by Sam Allberry, pages 90-91.)



Case Study: abortion

Abortion remains perhaps one of the most sensitive and contested issues of our time. On a purely factual level, abortion is the deliberate ending of the life of an unborn baby/foetus and their expulsion from a pregnant woman. While people feel very strongly about the issue, these biological/medical facts around the process are not largely contested.

The real debate comes around the competing rights and interests of the woman and the unborn child and in which circumstance or stage of development the law should permit or restrict abortion. This is a conversation which touches upon law and morality, bodily autonomy, human dignity, personhood and philosophy.

In our culture today, the conversation is often framed in terms of a tug of war of rights between the woman and unborn child – the pro-choice and pro-life movements. For Christians, we understand that both lives have incredible value and so we start the conversation in a different place.

Here are some questions to reflect on:

01 Rather than enter the culture war, what if we seek the best for both? Where could that lead us in our thinking and practice as individuals, churches and in wider society?

02 How could you instill the value and dignity of both in your child through your words and actions?

03 For older teens or children, how could you advocate with them for both the dignity of unborn human life and for women by addressing the systemic reasons why women often choose abortion, such as poverty, lack of relational support or domestic violence?

04 How could you help your child to understand and appreciate the value which God places on us from before birth and throughout our lives? Can you help them make the link between the developing foetus in the womb and the child that God is lovingly knitting together? The link between the pregnant women who feels she has no other choice and the God who sees, hears and loves her and her child?

05 Where are the appropriate opportunities to talk about sex, contraceptives and unintended pregnancy? Can you explore biblically both the commitment of marriage as the best please to have children and the hope of grace and redemption in any situation.

06 How could you make your children aware of pregnancy crises care and the alternative support available for women, babies and men, if they or their friends ever unexpectedly found themselves in this position?

Handy hints

- 01 Don't settle for the 'big talk';**
drip-feed your values early and often.
- 02 Pray and be prepared -**
there are teachable moments every day - look out for them.
- 03 Be positive -**
your child will pick up on your attitude to your/ their body and sex.
- 04 Be open -**
nurture a safe and welcoming environment for conversation.
- 05 Keep a cool head -**
try not to be embarrassed or shocked by questions.
- 06 Don't rush -**
to answer a question before finding out where it has come from.
- 07 Keep perspective -**
sexual development and choices are part of a bigger picture.
- 08 Be involved -**
stay engaged in all aspects of your child's life, both in and out of school.
- 09 Be digitally aware -**
think through boundaries around technology.
- 10 Reach out -**
never be afraid to ask for advice or help.





2. School

What is RSE?

Many parents will read this and think back to their own days at school where they may have received anything between excellent, awful or no teaching on these issues. It is worth noting that both the content and focus of the syllabus has changed considerably over the years. As we begin, it would be helpful to define what we mean by RSE.

As noted at the outset, there is no single agreed statutory definition of what RSE covers across the UK. Exact terms and acronyms vary and we explore this further below. But first, let's explore these broader concepts:

RSE

R is for relationships

Across the different nations, there is a requirement to teach about what constitutes good and healthy relationships. There is potential for this kind of relationship education to be deep, wide and rich – focusing on respect and responsibility as well as rights and to include the importance of relationships in families, friendships, communities, citizenship and our duties to the most vulnerable across our society.

S is for sex, sexuality or sexual health

As noted above, the terminology varies across the UK and covers issues from biological development and reproduction, sexual health and contraception, through to identity markers and social issues.

In years past, most teaching concentrated on the biology and mechanics of sex and methods of contraception. In recent years, there has been a movement from teaching about sex to teaching about sexuality. This has become a broader conversation about sexual feelings, attractions, behaviours, attitudes and increasingly, identity. The teaching of these issues has always been controversial, however, as the surrounding culture has placed increasing weight on sexual orientation and sexual attitudes as a marker of personal and

political identity, an already sensitive issue has become even more contested.

For Christians, there are obvious concerning examples of how issues of sex and sexuality have been taught. However, some recent developments are welcome. Relationships are about much more than sex, and sex is about much more than a physical act. We understand sexual relationships to be a good gift from a good God for the mutual enjoyment of men and women made in His image. Sex is part of His creation design for the procreation of new life through the equality and difference of our male and female bodies. We understand sex to fit best within the physical, emotional and spiritual relationship and mutual commitment of marriage. The curriculums and guidance across the UK, in theory at least, provide space for teaching about religious beliefs and values when it comes to RSE.

E is for education

As people who care deeply about relationships, there will be a lot of good practice, teaching and content that we can celebrate and affirm. However, as well as the potential to positively shape RSE policies, there may also be challenges in how this education is taught. RSE can raise any number of questions for parents, carers, children and teachers due to the sensitive nature of the subject. Cultural and moral values, as well as the ethos of the school, will inevitably influence what is taught and how it is received.

In this rapidly changing culture, issues of identity and relationships can be hotly contested. This can create anxiety, uncertainty, and confusion for parents and carers, young people and teachers, and it is important to acknowledge these concerns.

This is not about winning a culture war or compelling schools to teach religious texts. We recognise that many other parents, teachers and young people will not share our beliefs. There will be points of sharp difference but also important spaces where we will share common ground and values.

This is about encouraging the understanding that everyone brings values and a worldview to this conversation. We genuinely want to see every young person develop good relationships and a healthy sense of their own identity.

This means that good RSE should create the space for young people, with different views, to think carefully about how their own beliefs might shape the quality of their relationships, and their sexual behaviour.



Across the UK

There are different education systems and curriculums across the UK; therefore, teaching and learning will look different in each country. Despite these differences, some things are commonly acknowledged, such as:

- » **the sensitive nature of the subject;**
- » **the importance of age-appropriate teaching and resources;**
- » **the need to consider the backgrounds and religious beliefs of pupils and parents; and**
- » **the role of the school to complement and support parents.**

The specific topics which ought to be taught within the RSE curriculums vary across the regions and between primary and secondary schools. The actual content and the methodology of teaching in these issues is largely covered by way of guidance but may include:

- » **Abortion**
- » **Contraception**
- » **Consent**
- » **Confidential sexual and reproductive health advice and treatment**
- » **Marriage**

- » **Pornography**
- » **Protected characteristics (Equality Act)**
- » **Pregnancy and fertility**
- » **Sexually transmitted infections**
- » **The law**

Importantly, even though in some areas parents no longer have the legal right to remove children from classes, parents and carers are not excluded from the learning experiences that happen in school. Opportunities remain to be actively informed and involved. So, wherever you live and regardless of the school your child attends, parents and carers should be able to participate in the process as schools develop their RSE policies.

The Evangelical Alliance advocates on RSE policy across the UK. This is an area which is often under review or subject to legal challenge and change. You can see the most up to date summary of RSE policy across the UK here:

eauk.org/what-we-do/public-policy/relationship-and-sex-education

Below we have provided a brief summary for each part of the UK:

England - Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)

In September 2020, Relationships Education in primary school and RSE in secondary school became a statutory component of curriculum for all schools. Sex education is not compulsory in primary schools; the focus is on teaching the fundamental building blocks and characteristics of positive relationships.

OPTING OUT?

Primary School

- Parents/carers **do not** have the right to withdraw their child from Relationships Education.
- Parents/carers **do not** have the right to withdraw their child from the elements of sex education that are taught within the science curriculum.
- Parents/carers **do not** have the right to withdraw their child from Health Education.
- Parents/carers **do have the right to request** to withdraw their child from any or all of sex education as part of RSE.

OPTING OUT?

Secondary School

- There is **no opt-out** from Relationships Education in secondary school.
- There is **no “right” of an opt-out** from Sex Education in secondary school but **parents can still “request” an opt-out**, though this is now at the discretion of the headteacher.
 - The guidance says it should normally be granted except in “exceptional circumstances”; however, exceptional circumstances are not defined in the guidance.
 - If a parent requests an opt-out but the pupil wishes to have RSE, and the pupil is 15 or over, the school is directed to make arrangements for the child to receive sex education against the wishes of the parent.

The statutory guidance states that “*all schools may teach about faith perspectives*”. In particular, schools with a religious character may teach the distinctive faith perspective on relationships, and balanced debate may take place about issues that are seen as contentious.

All schools must have in place a written policy for Relationships Education (primary schools) and RSE (secondary schools) and schools must consult parents in developing and reviewing their policy.

[gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education)

Wales - Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

Legislation introduced in 2022 provides for a new RSE curriculum and the removal of the parental right to remove children from certain elements of teaching. This takes effect in autumn 2022 for primary schools and 2023 for secondary schools. The RSE statutory guidance and code will shape how this is delivered. At the time of writing this resource, this guidance is being legally challenged in a judicial review.

Current guidance states that “*all maintained schools must have an up-to-date written sex education policy that is available for inspection, particularly by parents/carers.*”

OPTING OUT?

- Parents **will not** be able to withdraw their child from **Relationships Education** in primary school or secondary school.
- Parents **will be able** to withdraw their child from primary school classes which address sex education – that is, those that do not sit within the Relationships Education curriculum.
- Maintained primary schools are required to teach National Curriculum science, which includes some elements of sex education. Parents **do not** have a right to withdraw their child from this.
- At secondary school level, parents **will be able** to withdraw their child from sex education (other than the sex education which sits in the National Curriculum as part of science in maintained schools). However, a child will also have a right to opt into sex education from their 15th birthday (specifically three academic terms before they turn 16).

hwb.gov.wales/api/storage/fb82a7b3-c88a-4473-a0b2-80fb2395b872/sex-and-relationships-education-in-schools.pdf

Scotland - Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP)

Relationships, Sexual Health, and Parenthood (RSHP) is a component of the Health and Wellbeing area of the Curriculum for Excellence. The Scottish government has published guidance for state-maintained schools. Faith schools can follow their own guidance.

The government's guidance for teachers states that *"it should be standard practice for schools to consult with parents and carers when they are developing or reviewing their programme of RSHP education. All parents and carers should be given the opportunity in advance to view key teaching materials and to ask questions about any aspect of the programme"*.

OPTING OUT?

In Scotland, the issue of a parent's ability to remove a child from RSHP is framed in terms of a child's right to education. In the instance of a parent wishing to withdraw a school-aged child from sexual health education lessons, schools must remind parents of the child's right to an education and to participate, bearing in mind their age and maturity. Where, after due consideration, the parent or carer decides to withdraw a school-aged child from sexual health education lessons, arrangements should be made for the child to have alternative positive educational provision, which meets the Health and Wellbeing outcomes.

[gov.scot/publications/conduct-relationships-sexual-health-parenthood-education-schools/](https://www.gov.scot/publications/conduct-relationships-sexual-health-parenthood-education-schools/)

Northern Ireland - Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

The Department of Education requires all grant-aided schools to develop their own policy on how they will address Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) within the curriculum. A school's policy should reflect the school's ethos and should be subject to consultation with parents and pupils and endorsed by the board of governors. CCEA have created an online hub of resources where organisations can request to provide content which individual teachers can then use in the delivery of RSE in accordance with the curriculum.

At the time of writing this resource, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission is currently conducting an investigation into the provision of RSE across schools in Northern Ireland. This follows the introduction of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 which introduced paragraphs 85 and 86 of the CEDAW report directly into Northern Irish legislation, namely a duty to, *“Make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory curriculum component for adolescents, covering early pregnancy prevention and access to abortion, and monitor its implementation”*.

OPTING OUT?

In Northern Ireland, there is currently **no legislative provision** permitting parental withdrawal from sex education; however, parents **do have the right to request** that their child be withdrawn from a particular lesson and schools can grant this request on an individual level (CCEA guidance, post-primary, page 11).

Within education, parents are regarded as primary educators, and schools should complement and reinforce their role.



Some questions you could ask about the RSE curriculum:

In every region of the UK, parents and carers are permitted and indeed encouraged to be involved in ongoing consultation around the RSE policy within their child's school. A good place to start is by requesting that a written copy of the policy be sent to you.

- » What will my child be taught?
- » Could I please have a copy of the RSE policy?
- » How is the subject scheduled to be taught in this academic year?
- » Who will be involved in the delivery?
- » What teaching materials or resources will be used?
- » Do the resources reflect, or are they sensitive to, a range of values and beliefs?
- » How will faith perspectives be represented?
- » How will parents be kept informed?
- » What criteria does the school use to assess external groups seeking to deliver RSE?



Case Study:

sexual harassment

In June 2021, Ofsted reported⁶ that sexual harassment, including online sexual abuse, has become “normalised” for children and young people. The report was carried out in England and Wales but it is likely that results would be similar across the UK. Some of the findings are presented in the tables below representing answers from secondary school age children and young people.

Table A:

These things happen “a lot” or “sometimes” between people my age (%)	Boys	Girls
Unwanted touching	24	64
Feeling pressured to do sexual things they did not want to	27	68
Sexual assault of any kind	38	79
Unwanted or inappropriate sexual comments	55	80
Rumours about sexual activity	53	81
Sexist namecalling	74	92

Table B:

These things happen “a lot” or “sometimes” between people my age (%)	Boys	Girls
Being sent sexual pictures or videos they did not want to see	49	88
Being put under pressure to provide sexual images of themselves	40	80
Having pictures or videos that they sent being shared more widely without their knowledge or consent	40	73
Being photographed or videoed without their knowledge or consent	34	59
Having pictures or videos that they don’t know about being circulated	19	51

Note: around 790 pupils answered the question for each type of harmful sexual behaviour. The number varies slightly by question because a few children and young people skipped some questions.

⁶Ofsted: culture change needed to tackle ‘normalised’ sexual harassment in schools and colleges - GOV.UK (gov.uk)

So, let's consider how a parent might want to raise or respond to an issue like sexual harassment with their child or their child's school.

The statistics in the graphs and tables above are shocking for any parent or teacher to read. They show that unwanted sexual behaviours are prevalent and are disproportionately affecting girls. The report also shows that as young people grew older, they tended to report higher incidences. This could indicate that sexual harassment and violence, including online, happen more as children and young people grow older, or

that they become more aware of them and more likely to report.

Many people recognise that we live in a hyper-sexualised culture in which people are routinely being commodified into sexual objects through dehumanising attitudes and behaviours which leave young people vulnerable to pressure and manipulation.

This should be an area of agreement – the need to promote dignity and respect, and tackle language and behaviours which are demeaning and offensive (or even criminal) and that reduce people to sexual objects.

01 How could you find the right moment to appropriately and sensitively raise your concerns about these statistics with your child or with a teacher in the context of RSE?

02 Has sexual harassment been identified as an issue in your child's school? Are there particular problems around bullying or sexting that the school has had to deal with? You may consider a conversation with a pastoral care lead in the school to find out.

03 Find out how your child's school approaches the issue of pornography and how it is taught within the context of RSE. Where and how does the use or sharing of pornography inside or outside of school become a disciplinary or pastoral issue? Does this approach encourage increasing respect for human dignity and is it proportionate, just and redemptive?

04 Ask your child what pressures they face. What do they feel is expected of them? What

are they uncomfortable with? What are they fearful of? Consider asking them, if they could change one thing about the sexual language and behaviour in their school culture, what would it be? What do they wish adults would talk more about? How could they be supported better to use their voice to bring about change from within? Don't respond too quickly; listen carefully, attentively and compassionately.

05 In this moment of deep concern around how young people are relating to each other sexually in our culture, we have an opportunity to point to a better way when it comes to expectations around language and behaviour. Not many parents or teachers are likely to disagree, this is an area of common ground and mutual concern.

06 Is your child equipped to be able to say no to requests for sexual images etc? Do they feel able to report any harassment they have witnessed or experienced?

Case Study: consent

The teaching of consent in RSE is a topic where we can find common ground and look for opportunities to positively enrich the language around it.

Sex should always be a choice, and any person engaging in sex should have capacity to make that choice. The age of consent in law is designed to protect young people and should be upheld. But for consenting behaviour to build towards strong, safe, and stable relationships, we need to go much further than the law. We can enrich conversations around consent by raising the bar further to mutual respect, concern for the wellbeing of a partner, and qualities of a healthy and committed relationship, like honesty, trust and faithfulness.

We can also raise questions about sex itself, by considering if it has any meaning, purpose or morality beyond procreation or recreation. We can enrich RSE conversations by asking questions beyond simple consent and exploring the context of a sexual relationship. For example, how could strong and stable relationships like covenant marriage contribute to strong communities and be good for children?

We are bombarded by so many messages in culture, which can often appear compelling and positive. How could this help us ask better questions as we navigate these messages alongside our children?



Consider a few distinctions between the cultural story and the Bible story below:

Culture's narrative

- » You can find yourself by yourself
- » Your feelings are the best judge of your identity and your choices - go with your gut.
- » Morality is determined by a society at any given time.
- » Individual happiness is life's ultimate goal. You be you.
- » You are free to do what you want, as long as you're not harming anyone else.
- » A romantic relationship is the ultimate relationship.
- » Your sexual identity is the core of who you are.
- » Young people engaging in sexual activity is natural and normal.
- » Sexual fulfilment is essential to human happiness.
- » Consent is the moral guide to sexual behaviour.



Biblical narrative

- » You have a God-created identity, dignity and value.
- » Feelings are important but they are unreliable moral guides for our choices and for determining our identity.
- » There is a holy created moral order.
- » We are human and fulfilled through relationship with God and others.
- » Freedom and rights are gifts to be exercised responsibly, for the good of all.
- » Friendship with God is above all else and loving our neighbour as ourselves.
- » Sexuality is a God-given part of our identity, but does not define us.
- » Sexual development is normal, and sexual abstinence is possible.
- » Sexual relationships are a gift in the context of marriage, but are not essential to human flourishing.
- » Consent is an essential starting point, but relationships are about so much more.

Case Study: transgender

Even a quick glance of recent news headlines will reveal just how contested the teaching about identity, gender and transgender within schools has become. Feminists, members of the LGBT+ community, people of faith and concerned parent groups have all raised questions. These are primarily around the conflict between science and ideology, noting the particular impact on females and the decreasing space within which to disagree.

The Evangelical Alliance has produced a resource called *Transformed*⁷ which gives a broad introduction to understanding transgender in a changing culture and a list of further reading can be found at the end of that resource.

Many Christian parents are rightly concerned about what is being taught in their child's school, and/or about how their child who may struggle with their sense of identity might be treated. Below are some questions you might want to ask those teaching RSE or responsible for pastoral care within your child's school:

01 Please may I have a copy of the RSE policy?

02 Does the school teach about gender, transgender and gender identity?

03 If so, which resources or groups are used to deliver teaching in this area?

04 Is there any conflict between what is taught in biology about sexual difference and what is taught in RSE about gender identity?

07 How does the school respond pastorally in its care for young people and children who may identify as transgender or non-binary?

05 This is obviously a very contested area – how is the school ensuring different views are presented and what is the school doing to protect the freedom of students and staff to disagree well and express different views which might be considered 'gender-critical'?

06 What impact does the teaching of RSE in this area have on the practical administration of the school (and vice-versa) when it comes to sports, governance and sex-specific spaces?

08 How does the school differentiate between pastoral care and reasonable accommodation for young people who may identify as transgender or non-binary, and what is taught to everyone on these issues?

⁷eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/transformed-understanding-transgender-in-a-changing-culture

Handy hints

01

Connect with key teachers.

Who is the pastoral care lead in the school? Who is your child's head of year and is there a teacher responsible for coordinating RSE in the school? In order to be fully informed around RSE provision, it is important to know who the key teacher contacts are. How can you build an appropriate, positive and respectful relationship?

02

Look for opportunities to serve.

What opportunities are there for parents to engage in the RSE provision and wider pastoral care issues? How are parents resourced and equipped to handle issues related to RSE? Perhaps you could suggest a workshop and a suitable speaker who the school could facilitate on a related issue, such as equipping parents to help children engage safely online.

03

Build relationships with other parents.

If you have a question about the RSE provision in your child's school, there will probably be another parent in the school and/or your church, who shares that same concern. Be actively involved in building relationships with other parents. Perhaps organise a parent/carer event in your church to engage on a related topic.

04

Become a school governor.

The board of governors offers strategic leadership in a school, which includes upholding the ethos and values of the school. It is responsible for overseeing the school's performance, plans and policies. Consider bringing your skills, knowledge and experience to serve your school in this way if and when an opportunity arises.



3. Bigger stories

We've looked at some examples of how conversations about RSE might arise at home or in a school context. Let's step back to consider further the bigger stories being told around us every day.

No one lives in a vacuum. Everyone exists within a story of the world which influences their sense of purpose and their values. Obviously, for Christians, the Bible speaks deeply to these questions; Muslims will look to the Qur'an, while others may look to a non-religious value base.

As a subject, RSE is concerned with fundamental questions about human dignity, identity and relationships. Implicit and explicit judgements will be made about what it is to be human, why relationships matter, as well as whether there is any meaning or purpose in sexuality.

While facts are increasingly being disputed, the most contested aspects of RSE provision are often about very different beliefs or values – what is healthy or harmful and good or bad?

The key point is that there is no such thing as value-neutral RSE. Curriculums, lessons and their central messages cannot be detached from worldview assumptions.

We want to help our children and young people to engage with the messages they hear, as well as with those who hold very different beliefs to them. In order to do this, let's consider the distinctiveness of the biblical story compared to many of the current western cultural assumptions around identity, relationships, and sexuality.⁸

⁸We want to acknowledge the work of Vaughn Roberts in applying the classic structure of Creation, Fall, Redemption, Renewal to the area of sexuality.

The Bible story

Creation

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...

We believe that the entire cosmos was created by God for His glory. Relationships are central to God's good purposes in this world – relationships with God and each other as neighbours, friends, citizens and families. Human beings – male and female – were created in God's image. Our bodies are good gifts from a good God. There is inherent sexual equality, sexual difference and sexual compatibility. Genesis 2 talks about a man leaving his father and his mother to be with his wife and the two becoming one flesh. Jesus affirms this model of marriage in Matthew 19.

Marriage, between one man and one woman for life, serves as a picture of Christ's covenant relationship with the church, and is a symbolic mystery which some are invited into, and through which all are blessed. And so most Christians understand sex to be a good gift from a good God, designed to be of physical, emotional and spiritual significance and best expressed within the relationship of marriage. Uniquely, sexual

intimacy between a man and a woman can be an act of procreation, the beginning of new life and family.

Marriage and sexual relationships are not for everyone in scripture and while essential within society, are not prerequisites for anyone to live a flourishing human life. The most obvious example is Jesus, who lived a full but celibate life. In the Bible, family is not merely nuclear; it's broad and welcoming, married couples and birth children, single people and extended family, widows and orphans, refugees and strangers, all bound up within the family of God and first fruits of the new humanity in Christ. We know that God's design for family is important because it is through the picture of family that God often relates to His people as Father and children.

Fall

We also know from the Christian story and experience that our bodies, relationships, sexual attractions and experiences of being a man or a woman are broken by sin. This is evident both in our own lives and at a systemic level across society. There are clear warnings through many stories and direct commands in the Bible about the dangers and damage of abusing relationships in general, and the gift of sexual



PSALM 113:6

6 Who humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth! Ps. 113:4

7 He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill: 1 Sam. 2:8

8 That he may set him with princes, even with the princes of the earth: Job 36:7

9 He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children. Praise ye the LORD.

772 Tremble at the Presence of the Lord

4 Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. Deut. 4:28

5 They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not.

6 They have ears, but they hear not; noses have they, but they smell not.

7 They have hands, but they handle not; feet have they, but they walk not; but they will not give heed, neither speak they through their throat.

8 They that make them are like unto them: so is every one that trusteth in them.

1 Gracious Lord

1 Gracious Lord, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live.

2 The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow.

3 Then called I upon the name of the LORD: O LORD, I beseech thee, deliver my soul.

4 Gracious is the LORD, and righteous: yea, our God is merciful.

5 The LORD preserveth the simple: I was brought low, and he helped me.

773

PSALM 117

1 O praise the LORD, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people.

2 For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the LORD endureth for ever. Praise ye the LORD. Ps. 100:5

PSALM 118

1 O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: because his mercy endureth for ever.

relationship in particular. We can be damaged by our own sins, we can damage others by our sins and/or be affected by those who sin against us. We don't have to look far today to see the effects of sin on relationships, sexuality and identity in our own lives or wider society.

Redemption

Jesus came to reconcile us to God, to restore our broken relationships and invite us into a new identity in Him. We see and live differently because He is the first of the new humanity and He is making us new in His image. He is the basis of our identity, not our feelings or failures, our attractions or attributes. We live under His grace and His lordship, as ambassadors of His kingdom, which is radically more hopeful and redemptive than many of the stories of relational brokenness we encounter around us.

So, when we see brokenness in the world, we don't tut or condemn; we want to move in step with God's Spirit towards redemption and restoration. We speak words of hope, life and truth into situations of despair, death and lies. We pursue order in the chaos, freedom from bondage. We live generous and attractive lives, humble and salty, where light shines out of our own brokenness pointing the way towards Jesus.

Renewal

Jesus defied the sins and stereotypes around sex, sexuality and relationships. However, our bodies, our maleness and femaleness, our relationships and identity, our experiences of gender and sexuality – all these things can still be broken today.

Romans 8:23 says this...

“And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

We long for redemption – not to be released from these bodies as if they are bad and our minds are good – but we long to be recreated, resurrected, renewed and restored. As Christians, we can experience something of this redemption and newness through Christ and the grace and goodness of God in the here and now. For those things which remain broken for now, our cries of lament or injustice about abuse, or not feeling at home within our own bodies or culture, fall upon the loving ears of a kind and just God who is returning to make all things new.



The cultural story

The story and values of western culture have been deeply shaped by Christianity. These roots run through our understanding of governance and democracy, human rights and justice, health and education systems, charities and social customs. Despite this, we live in a culture where God is largely assumed not to exist, especially within the thinking and practice of institutions such as government departments of health or education. This has been replaced by an atheistic or humanistic worldview; we still have the remnants of cultural Christianity, but new values and priorities are fast emerging.

Atheist writer Yuval Noah Harari says,

“Homo Sapiens (us human beings) have no natural rights, just as spiders, hyenas, and chimpanzees have no natural rights... there are no gods, no nations, no money, no human rights except in our collective imagination.”

This is largely an evolutionary story, which says: there is no God and we are an accidental collection of cells; humans are higher functioning animals with no ultimate purpose bar passing on our genes; biological sex is little more than plumbing; gender is a social construct – a product of our collective imagination; sex is a consensual activity largely for pleasure; love is a feeling or emotion; marriage is an optional extra – a convenient contractual arrangement for some; and the Bible is full of patriarchy, sexism and violence – some may find it helpful, but others find it oppressive and even repressive.

And if there is no creation, there is no fall.

As atheist Richard Dawkins says,

“In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.”

Most people don’t live like this though, do they? Our friends and family members who don’t believe in God don’t live each day like human life is meaningless. Rather, our society lives between this stark dark despair and a vague hope in progress that we – human beings – can make things better.

Our culture knows the world is broken when it comes to our bodies and minds, political failings and institutional abuse and the way we fail to treat each other well. We strive for a better world, more compassion and kindness, truth and integrity. Yet we also want our own way, to write the script of our own lives, and reject any boundaries put on us by other people – or even our own bodies. And so, despite our claimed invention of human rights, we struggle to live well together with our deepest differences. There is no-one outside of us to lovingly determine what is truly good or true or beautiful and no meaningful hope of redemption when we fail.

In this new western cultural story, there is no creation and there is no fall – there is no purpose to life at all. There is no redemption or restoration – we’re just clumps of cells in a random constellation.

Intersections

We're not suggesting that you sit down to explain all of this to your primary school-aged child or indeed their teacher! However, it's helpful to frequently remind ourselves just how different the biblical story and the cultural stories are – especially when it feels like these worlds are colliding with each other.

Every day, our lives as Christians intersect with the cultural story around us. The teaching of RSE always involves a worldview and values. Christian beliefs should not be coerced onto anyone, but neither should any other worldview. We have a role to listen and speak within the conversation.

Sometimes, living at the intersection means sharing common ground with friends, parents and teachers of different faiths and none. Almost all of us want to be truly known, to be loved intimately, to belong and to pursue justice for the marginalised, kindness and truth. Keeping the wellbeing of your children at the centre of your collective efforts could open a lot of common ground, for example shared concerns around bullying, the freedom to articulate personal beliefs, the sexualisation of children and the impact of pornography.

In other instances, living at the intersection will mean holding ground that is distinctive. Challenging teaching which promotes the idea that a child or young person can change their sex to become male or female, neither, or both, can be difficult. Advocating for the value and protection of both women and unborn children in the abortion debate may defy and frustrate the cultural categories of pro-life or pro-choice. But these are surely the difficult spaces we are called to.

The Bible offers a comprehensive and positive vision, an alternative, and often a challenge to our society and public conversations. Scripture places a high value on female and male bodies, sex and sexuality, marriage and family, relationships, redemption and renewal. The reality of sin in the life of every believer should lead us to humility and holiness, rather than hypocrisy or judgementalism. This is a positive and good news story to share with your children and wider society as we live together at the intersection.

Take a few minutes to consider the opportunity you have to shape the larger overarching story that your children are learning and living in. How can this give meaning and purpose to their relationships and sexuality? Where are the intersections where your faith will be contested or where you can find common ground?

Distinctions

In the middle of a disagreement or conversation about a sensitive and controversial issue, it can be easy for things to get a little muddy. Here are a few distinctions that it could be useful to consider as you approach a given issue:

Bullying and disagreement

The bullying or degradation of anyone based on their sexual orientation, sense of gender identity or any other reason is plainly wrong. As Christians, we want to see every child and young person cherished, valued and protected from any form of bullying. However, it is vital that there are appropriate spaces in schools where pupils, teachers and parents can disagree with, or dissent from, the prevailing cultural norms. For a wide variety of religious or ideological reasons, people will disagree on these issues and the mere act of disagreeing should not be considered homophobic or transphobic bullying.

KEY QUESTION

How can schools create and maintain spaces where people are protected while beliefs can be challenged?

Facts and ideas

RSE is more than just the transmission of objective, scientific information – for example,

biological realities or legal facts. Value judgements are being made on what should be taught and when. Additionally, all RSE is delivered within a moral framework that is shaped by beliefs and values about identity, relationships and sexuality. Some of what is currently taught about gender identity is heavily informed by contested ideas such as queer theory. Some of the tensions here can be seen in the current splits in both the feminist and LGBT+ movements between competing rights on the basis of biological sex or gender identity. Can you identify exactly where the conflict is arising from? Is it about the teaching of facts or opinions?

KEY QUESTION

What happens when facts and ideas are in conflict and how should this be taught?

Identity and behaviours

Similar to the point above, some people chose to define their identity in a large part based on their sexual attractions, orientations and behaviours or their feelings about their gender. Others may experience some of the same feelings but for a number of reasons, religious or otherwise, choose not to identify themselves by their sexual attractions or behaviours.

KEY QUESTION

What does generous disagreement look like when it comes to acknowledging identity? How can people be acknowledged and respected without necessarily celebrating or promoting their **every** belief?

Pastoral care and normative teaching

It may be appropriate for a school to make reasonable accommodations for a child who identifies themselves as LGBT+ when it comes to some personal or practical issues. However, this does not necessitate changing policies and procedures for every pupil or teaching that these ways of identifying are normative for everyone.

KEY QUESTION

How do we respect the one and the many?

Much of this is about assuming the best in others and creating, and keeping open, spaces for different people to genuinely hold and express different views. When handled well, there is a real opportunity for Christians to maturely model how to live well together with and across deep differences.



Postures

So, what postures might we adopt to help us navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by the teaching of RSE and related conversations with our children?

Humility

The church has not always treated people the way we should when it comes to issues of relationships and sexuality. At times, we have conflated or confused cultural stereotypes of what it means to be a man or a woman with what scripture teaches us. At times, some Christians have been hypocrites, failing to practice what they preach, or practicing what they wished the scriptures would say. Other times the church has remained silent when it should have spoken up about the ill-treatment of people made in the image of God because of their sex or sexual attractions. At times, we have fallen into the trap of believing that we start from a place of sexual purity, rather than starting from a place of brokenness and finding wholeness through Christ. This emphasis on 'purity culture' and/or a refusal to engage with the cultural reality has resulted in some young people being ill-informed and led to secrets and shame rather than openness and grace. These instances should not discourage us from the good news of a better story around relationships and sexuality in Christ, but they should help us to embody a humble posture.

Hospitality

We can have confidence in our Christian distinctiveness. We have lost our saltiness and turned off the light if we simply mirror the same values as the culture around us. At the same time, let's be open to others in our school in a spirit of hospitality, including those who

hold different beliefs to us. It's easy to find some common ground and we don't need to agree with others in order to show kindness and respect. In doing so, we can model to our children what it is for them to disagree well.

Wisdom

It can be helpful to carefully discern exactly what our concern is about a particular issue. Is it a question of principle or practice? Is it an issue of tone or a case where dissenting views do not even seem to be permitted? Is it a conflict between fact, opinion and ideology? What opportunities do we have to address it, and how can we do it positively? The book of James encourages us to be slow to speak but this does not necessarily mean we remain silent. We should not refrain from speaking up when we have genuine concerns about harmful ideology or teaching. The question might be, how can we speak the right words at the right moment, neither out of haste nor anger? This will involve careful listening to different voices and perspectives on an issue, including that of your child..

Creativity

Despite challenges and opposition, let's not allow ourselves to adopt a posture of fear and suspicion. God is always at work, and we can pray for imaginations which are full of hope and redemption in any situation. This will mean being courageous, sensitive, kind and humble. There will be times to confront and to critique, but these are not often helpful as permanent postures. Andy Crouch in his book, *Culture-making*, encourages the postures of "creating" something better and "cultivating" the good as effective means of changing a culture. How could we reimagine what a good and healthy

conversation about relationships, sex and sexuality could look like today?

Proactivity

As we have noted, government guidance requires that parents be actively consulted, both on the approach of the school to the teaching of the subject, and on the materials that are used. In order to build a constructive partnership with your school, it is important that you engage

positively and proactively ahead of any issue of concern or a complaint you may need to make. Perhaps consider now how you can help build the capacity of schools and parents to partner more effectively. It is also important to consider the partnerships that can be established between parents, between churches and other faith communities, and how protective bonds and connections can be strengthened around your child.



Conclusion and commission

Conversations about relationships and sexuality are potentially some of the most contentious in our culture today. They can also be some of the most missional and transformative.

We are not alone. Jesus faced tough questions on marriage, sex and relationships. Prayer is so powerful as we seek to navigate these challenges and the local church offers a supportive community, reminding us we are in this together.

Through confident and compassionate engagement, we have an incredible opportunity to shape and influence not just the lives of our children, but the lives of other children in our schools and beyond.

A truly Christian approach will share some of the concerns that our culture has about pornography, consent and sexual harassment. It will share spaces with others who are challenging the dominant discourse around

gender identity and the impact on young women and girls, boys and men. It may offend some by challenging concepts of identity and boundaries of relationships, by often placing a higher value on sex while refusing to turn it into an idol. Properly professed and expressed, it will be more loving, more redemptive and more compelling than the greatest love stories our culture can tell.

So, go...

- » **deep in prayer and wide in your engagement**
- » **work on your posture, be humble, practice hospitality, be wise and creative, and be proactive in building partnerships**
- » **remember you have an amazing opportunity and an almost unbelievably good story to share**

Go, and continue the conversation!

Prayer

God of all creation, of body, mind and soul, grant grace and wisdom, as we pursue and bear witness to all that is good, true and beautiful.

Forgive our many failings in this confused and contested landscape. Give us humility and hospitality to share common spaces. Grant us resilience and bravery to hold holy ground.

Help us to listen compassionately, and speak plainly and hopefully. Sanctify our many conversations. Protect and enliven our children. Bless and encourage our schools. May they flourish together.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

Additional resources

- » For our most up-to-date summary of the RSE legislation and policy across the UK – eauk.org/what-we-do/public-policy/relationship-and-sex-education
- » *A Better Story: God, sex and human flourishing* – Glynn Harrison
- » *Ten Questions Every Teen Should Ask about Christianity* – Rebecca McLaughlin
- » *On Marriage* – Tim Keller
- » *Transformed* – The Evangelical Alliance – eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/transformed-understanding-transgender-in-a-changing-culture
- » *Transgender* – Vaughan Roberts
- » *Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality* – The Evangelical Alliance
- » *Is God Anti-Gay?* – Sam Alberry
- » Living Out – livingout.org/
- » The Naked Truth Project – thenakedtruthproject.com/
- » Both Lives Matter – bothlivesmatter.org/
- » *The Sex Thing* – Rachel Gardner





176 Copenhagen Street, London, N1 0ST

T 020 7520 3830 | E info@eauk.org | W eauk.org

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