

## Relationships Education and Relationships and Sex Education (RE RSE)

### What is RE/RSE?

It stands for Relationships Education (RE) and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). Relationships Education will be taught in primary schools, and Relationships and Sex Education in secondary schools (though primary schools wishing to teach age-appropriate RSE can do so as long as parents are consulted about what will be covered). Parents should note that the science curriculum in all maintained schools also includes content on human development, including reproduction, which may apply in an age-appropriate way to primary schools. There is no right to withdraw children from classes covering the science curriculum.

See the sections below for more details about what RE/RSE involves, what parents' rights are, and what the reaction has been to the changes so far.

### Will RE/RSE be taught at my child's school?

Yes, from September 2020, the teaching of RE/RSE will be compulsory in all schools in England, regardless of school setting. Around 1,000 schools have signed up to a pilot starting in September 2019. Health Education will be also compulsory from September 2020 for primary and secondary state-funded schools. Parents of children at independent (fee-paying) schools, please note that PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) is already compulsory in independent schools, which covers Health Education.

### Why has RE/RSE been introduced and updated?

Relationships Education in primary schools is a new development, and is to be compulsory, meaning that there is no opt-out for parents. It will teach children about healthy relationships, including the concepts of friendship and privacy. It does not involve sex education, which is still taught in secondary schools. Since sex education has not been updated in England since 2000, there have been increasingly loud calls for the government to overhaul it and bring it up to date and make it relevant for young people living in the digital age. New RSE guidance takes into account sexting, online dating apps, social media and other fundamental changes to the way people, and especially young people, socially interact, and the new risks involved.

### Part 1: Relationships Education - What is RE?

Relationships Education (RE) will be taught to children of primary school age. The government describes RE as *"the fundamental building blocks and characteristics of positive relationships, with particular reference to friendships, family relationships, and relationships with other children"*

*and with adults."*

## What is taught in RE?

Pupils will be taught about topics including:

- what a relationship is
- what friendship is
- what family means and who the people are who can support them
- how to take turns
- how to treat each other with kindness, consideration and respect
- the importance of honesty and truthfulness, permission seeking and giving
- the concept of personal privacy.

DfE guidance includes reference to 'different types of committed and stable relationships'. There is particular reference to teaching about marriage and civil partnerships as 'formally and legally recognised' forms of long-term commitment. This is introduced in primary and expanded upon once students reach secondary school. Teaching more specifically about consent takes place at secondary school level. [See p 19 of the government's draft guidance](#) for more details about Relationships Education course content.

## Can I withdraw my child from RE?

There is no right for parents to withdraw their child from Relationships Education. This has proved somewhat controversial, and it's a measure that has both supporters and detractors. While some say that this is the state overstepping its boundaries and intruding upon the parental role, others say that the content is age appropriate, and all children are expected to understand social differences, and require the knowledge base that RE aims to provide. However, parliament agreed that the content of Relationships Education, such as friendships and staying safe, is important for all children to learn, which is why no provision was made for parents to withdraw their child.

## Part 2: Relationships and Sex Education - What is RSE?

Relationships and Sex Education. The subject will be taught to pupils of secondary school age.

## What is taught in RSE?

Government guidance suggests the course content should cover topics including:

- what a healthy relationship looks like and what makes a good friend, a good colleague and a successful marriage or other type of committed relationship
- contraception, developing intimate relationships and resisting pressure to have sex
- acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in relationships
- safer sex and sexual health

- the benefits of healthy relationships to pupils' mental wellbeing and self-respect
- the facts and the law about sex, sexuality, sexual health and gender identity in an age-appropriate and inclusive way. All pupils should feel that the content is relevant to them and their developing sexuality
- grooming, sexual exploitation and domestic abuse, including coercive and controlling behaviour
- the physical and emotional damage caused by female genital mutilation (FGM)
- Internet safety and harmful online behaviours.

For schools with a faith ethos, the government says, "Schools may choose to explore faith, or other perspectives, on some of these issues in other subjects such as Religious Education." For more details on the faith perspective, see the sections on **What has the response been to the new curriculum?**

For more details on RSE content, see [p25 of the government's draft guidance for schools](#).

## Part 3: Parents and RE/RSE - Will I have a say in what is taught in RE/RSE?

Government guidelines require schools to consult parents as they decide on and regularly review RE/RSE policies. A guide for parents says, "*You can express your opinion, and this will help your child's school decide how and when to cover the content of the statutory guidance. It may also help them decide whether to teach additional non-statutory content. Schools are required to ensure their teaching reflects the age and religious background of their pupils.*"

The government guidance for schools says that, "*Schools should ensure that parents know what will be taught and when, and clearly communicate the fact that parents have the right to request that their child be withdrawn from some or all of sex education delivered as part of statutory RSE.*" There is no prescribed way in which informing and engaging parents must be done, but schools generally gauge parental opinion by conducting a survey, holding group meetings, or using a parent consultation group such as a parent council or parent forum to approach the parent community. However, RE/RSE policies must be published on the school website and readily available to all parents and prospective parents, so that parents have advance knowledge of what their child will be taught.

## Can I withdraw my child from RSE if I wish to?

Parents may request that their child is withdrawn from the sex education parts of Relationships and Sex Education classes in secondary school (but not from the RE parts, and not from classes where reproduction is taught as part of the science curriculum). New legislation introduces the concept that, once a child is three terms away from turning 16, they may overrule their parents' wishes and attend RSE classes if they choose to. There is an area of confusion at present because the government has suggested that a parent's right to withdraw their child from sex education until the child is three terms before the age of 16 will always be agreed, "except in

exceptional circumstances”. However, there is currently no definition of what these “exceptional circumstances” may be, and how head teachers are expected to apply judgement in such cases. See [Hansard](#) for some clarification on the legislation provided by ministers. A consideration for parents is that withdrawal will not prevent children from hearing about RSE content in other ways. This may be formally, such as through compulsory topics in the science curriculum, or informally from their peers in the playground. Ensuring that their child is equipped with the same level of knowledge as their year-group cohort is important, and should be planned for.

## **What do I do if I want to withdraw my child from RSE or raise issues?**

Parents may prefer to oversee the teaching of sex education themselves, seeing it as part and parcel of their parental duty. Others may choose to withdraw their child for cultural or religious reasons, but again, the expectation would be that alternative sex education is provided to the child within the faith tradition of the parent(s). If you choose to withdraw your child from the sex education aspects of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in primary or secondary school, then the school must meet your request. The best approach is to ask for a meeting or telephone call with the head teacher, who may ask your reasons for wishing to withdraw your child to ensure that you have all the information available about course content to ensure that you are making an informed decision. Although this can be daunting, such a conversation should be constructive, and aimed at seeking genuine understanding. See our guidance on [How to raise concerns with your school](#), or our [Blueprint for Parent-Friendly Schools](#) for more help on how homes and schools can collaborate effectively. See also the DfE's [RE/RSE FAQs](#) and [DfE guidance for parents](#) which answer some common parental concerns.

## **Can RSE also be taught in primary schools?**

Yes, but schools should adhere to guidelines which include consultation and a right to withdraw. School leaders must ensure that the content of the lessons is age-appropriate. If you are aware of your child's primary school teaching RSE and have any concerns, relevant staff must arrange to speak to you to address them.

## **Can I withdraw my child from RSE if it is taught at primary school?**

Parents retain the right to withdraw their child from the sex education parts of Relationships and Sex Education classes taught in primary school.

## **What has the response been to the new curriculum? 1.**

### **Parents**

A [Parentkind survey of 341 parents](#) taken to respond to the government's consultation on RE/RSE found that:

- 86% believe it is important that their child's school consults with them about how it teaches RE/RSE
- 70% are in favour of sex education being taught in primary schools
- 57% would be wholly or mostly supportive if their child's primary school opted to teach RSE, with a further
- 21% possibly supportive following consultation with parents over course content
- 77% agree that primary schools wishing to teach RSE must consult with parents about course content
- 67% agree that once a child is three terms away from turning 16, they should be able to attend RSE classes against their parents' wishes to withdraw them if they want to.

[FASTN](#) has called for RSE that, among other things, *"Involves and supports parents to work with children and young people on relationship education."*

LGBT charity [Stonewall](#) said, *"This will be a crucial step towards ensuring every young person has the information and support they need to have happy and healthy relationships."*

## What has the response been to the new curriculum? 2.

### Politicians

The response from parliament and education decision-makers has been largely positive, and in an era where there is much political disagreement, all sides of the house collaborated to overwhelmingly vote in favour of putting these changes into law.

## What has the response been to the new curriculum? 3.

### Faith communities

Despite the positive reactions from many politicians and parents, there have been plenty of newspaper headlines about parents protesting outside schools over the teaching of Relationships Education at primary schools, because some course content has referenced LGBT relationships. The schools, which are based in Birmingham and Manchester, have Muslim-majority pupil and parent populations, and there is a resistance from some stricter faith communities about their children learning about and being made aware of LGBT relationships.

[The Muslim Council of Britain](#) is currently consulting concerned parents. It has said, *"Numerous MCB affiliates and concerned parents have approached the Muslim Council of Britain expressing their concern and requesting guidance, on the apparent erosion of parental rights and the potential exposure of young children to graphic sexual images and concepts from a very young age. Many Muslim teachers are also calling for clarity on what they may be expected to teach in Relationships & Sex Education classes."* [Education Secretary Damian Hinds, commenting on the protests](#), has said, *"This sets out my position that open and constructive dialogue between parents and schools is central to effective teaching of sensitive topics, but that ultimately schools decide what is taught in their curriculum. I absolutely support school leaders and teachers to make reasonable decisions in the best interests of their pupils, having considered parent views."*

## Other faith bodies or leaders

Most faith bodies have been supportive of the changes to RE/RSE. Here are a few quotations.

[The Catholic Education Service](#): *“The content of the Government’s draft guidance is compatible with a Catholic approach to RSE.”* They have [also said](#): *“We additionally welcome the Government’s commitment to protect parental right of withdrawal and involve parents in all stages of the development and delivery of RSE in all schools. It is essential that parents fully support the school’s approach to these sensitive matters. The experience of Catholic schools is that parental involvement is the basis for providing consistent and high quality RSE at home and at school.”* They said on the [Catholic Education Service website](#): *“The Catholic Church teaches that parents are the prime educators of their children and we are pleased to see the Government sharing this fundamental principle.”*

[The Church of England](#): *“We welcome the fact that health education has been included in the statutory guidance and are confident that this will help inform and enrich RSE programmes of study as well as helping support pupils at a time when there are growing concerns about the rise in the number of pupils reporting mental health problems.”* On the [Church of England website](#), they said: *“The new guidance is about promoting healthy resilient relationships set in the context of character and virtue development, with a focus on respecting others, including the beliefs and practices of people with a specific faith commitment, as well as those from the many different types of families that make up our cultural context. It makes explicit a shared duty of care between parents and schools, and that what takes place in the classroom builds on what has been taught in the home. It maintains the need for schools to consult their parental community in developing the curriculum, with parents ultimately having the right to excuse their children from sex education if they wish. Our hope is that they will not do so, but this must nonetheless remain an option in order to honour legitimately-held positions of concern. I hope and pray that schools, families and carers will work together to recognise the complementary contributions of each in enabling children to navigate safely growing up in the digital age, and ensuring they develop the skills they need to flourish in healthy relationships throughout their lives.”*

The [Office of the Chief Rabbi](#) has recently published a Guide for Orthodox Jewish schools on the welfare of LGBT+ pupils.

The [Jewish News](#) has reported that Orthodox Jewish educators welcome the opt-out for parents in the Government’s proposed new guidance on sex-education in schools.

## Case studies

### Engaging with parents to make RSE a success

Thanks to a careful approach to strengthening children’s relationship skills and strong parent engagement, Bankside Primary School pupils are learning about big issues in their community, like knife crime, consent and when a trusted adult becomes untrusted. [Read more here](#)

### Working with experts to build confidence and parent engagement

St John's Catholic Primary School, in Shropshire, is starting work on the new RSE curriculum by signing up for Shropshire Council's Respect Yourself programme, building staff confidence and communicating with parents. [Read more here](#)

Reviewed: June 2019