



Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)

A guide for Christian parents to understand and engage with the new RSE curriculum in England

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Why is this guide needed?

On 1 September 2020 the rights of parents with children in English schools¹ changed significantly with respect to the teaching of relationships education and sex education (RSE). As this booklet is published, the new changes are coming into effect between 1 September and the summer term 2021. Released in October 2020 to take into account supplementary guidance issued in September, this guide is written to help parents understand what has changed and how they can influence their school's curriculum.

Since, it is impossible to teach relationships education and sex education in a value neutral manner, teaching about sex and relationships always communicates deeply held values about what it means to be human, stemming from one's underlying worldview.

The education system in England (and indeed the wider UK) is grounded on the principle that children rest under the primary care of their parents and not the state. This principle has expressed itself in three central ways:

1

While children might go to school, it is their parents and not their teachers who are their 'primary educators'.

2

Schools act in loco parentis, on behalf of the parents, rather than parents acting on behalf of the state.

3

Until 1 September 2020, parents had two unique ways of influencing relationships and sex education: the curriculum was set locally and parents were able to tell governors their views on proposed content; and if they were unhappy with the curriculum they were able to exercise a 'right to withdraw' their children from the lessons.

1. Please note that the information contained in this guide only applies to English schools. Education policy is devolved and so there are separate laws and statutory guidance for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

The significance of the right to withdraw has not been primarily about its use but about its potential use. The fact that parents could withdraw their children gave schools a good reason to listen to their views in order to avoid withdrawals. It also communicated the important message that, at the end of the day, final responsibility for children rests with parents and not with the state.

This arrangement is certainly consistent with Christian theology. Many Christian theologians teach that God allocates different institutions or spheres their own authority: the family, the church, the state etc. The authority of the different institutions is not to suggest that any is separate from the law of the land, but it is to emphasise that there are areas where it is not the primary business of the state to legislate. This creates a social system of checks and balances between the different institutions or spheres which militates against the over-concentration of power².

In this theological context, the changes introduced on 1 September are a serious cause for concern because, while the new guidance continues to make the right noises about parents being the primary educators of their children (which is useful), there are important senses in which the changes significantly weaken the rights of parents in the teaching of relationship and sex education. It is

really important for Christian parents of school-aged children to understand these changes so they can shape their children's school education on sex and relationships education in the new context, to the greatest possible extent.

In setting out the need for this guide it is important to stress that CARE is not opposed to the education system playing a role in the teaching of sex and relationships education. The role played by schools in sex and relationship education is particularly important in contexts where, sadly, some parents do not talk to their children about such matters. The state should, however, never seek to replace parents as those who have primary responsibility for children and as their primary educators.

In what follows this guide will first set out what is changing in the teaching of relationships and sex education between 1 September 2020 and the summer term 2021. It will then provide a focused assessment of what this means for you as a parent comparing and contrasting your rights before 1 September and after 1 September before then reflecting on the challenges and opportunities relating to the new Relationship and Sex Education guidance. The guide concludes with actions you can take to engage the new subjects, particularly on how to participate constructively in school consultations.

2. For example, Wayne Grudem argues that parents and not the state have primary responsibility for their children, *Politics According to the Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2010, pp 247-250; Jonathan Leeman at 9 Marks, who writes: '...parents possess the primary responsibility for their children and for raising their children, which in turn means that governments should encourage both child-rearing and the parents' work of training and educating their children.' <https://www.gmarks.org/article/week-12-what-christians-should-ask-of-government-to-affirm-and-protect-the-family/>; Harriet Connor at The Gospel Coalition Australia, who writes: 'But according to the Bible it is parents, not schools, who bear the primary responsibility for their children's education. Parents are their children's first and most significant teachers.' <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/when-education-comes-back-home-parents-as-teachers/>; Colin Smothers at Public Discourse, who writes: 'One implication of this biblical account is the realization that the family, like the church, is a pre-political institution. As such, familial authority is prior to any political authority and should be respected as such—even if sometimes the state may have to interfere in familial affairs in its pursuit of justice and peace.' <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/08/66250/>

What is changing between September 2020 & summer term 2021?

In March 2017 Parliament voted to change the way sex education is taught in schools in England, introducing the new subject of **relationships education in primary schools** and changing sex education at **secondary school to be relationships and sex education (RSE)**³.

When Will the RSE Changes Come into Effect?

These new subjects were initially due to become compulsory in all schools from September 2020. In July 2020, however, the Department for Education announced that due to the impact of COVID-19 schools would have discretion to delay the introduction of the new curriculum until the start of the summer term 2021 if they are not ready or are unable to meet the statutory requirements⁴.

However, the rights of parents to withdraw children from certain elements of teaching ceased on 1 September 2020⁵.

How is the change being made?

This change is being made from September 2020 through:

- The implementation of a **new law**⁶, and
- **New statutory guidance** the Relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education Guidance 2019 that schools must have regard to as they plan their Relationships

and Sex Education curriculum⁷. This has been further complemented by the provision of supplementary guidance issued by the Department of Education on 24 September 2020, Plan your relationships, sex and health curriculum⁸.

What is the difference between law and guidance?

The law states what must happen. Schools must follow it. The guidance by contrast sets out the kinds of things the curriculum should include. Schools are required to have regard to the guidance, but they are not obliged to do everything it says. In understanding the significance of these two elements, the law is the more important because it cannot be contradicted. The guidance is very important, however, because it indicates what it is possible for schools to teach within the new framework.

Detail of changes

The table below summarises what has changed with the new subjects.

3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/schools-to-teach-21st-century-relationships-and-sex-education>

4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education/implementation-of-relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-and-health-education-2020-to-2021>

5. Ibid.

6. As set out in the Children and Social Work Act 2017, Section 34 and the Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education (England) Regulations 2019 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/16/section/34/enacted>

7. Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education. Statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, teachers. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908013/Relationships_Education__Relationships_and_Sex_Education__RSE__and_Health_Education.pdf

8. Department for Education Guidance, Plan your relationships, sex and health curriculum, September 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/plan-your-relationships-sex-and-health-curriculum#right-to-request-withdrawal>

Table 1 – detail of changes to RSE law and guidance

The law up to September 2020	Under the new law (September 2020 onwards)
<p>Secondary Schools Local authority maintained secondary schools in England are required to teach Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) from age 11 upwards. In teaching SRE schools must have regard to the Government’s SRE guidance published in 2000⁹.</p> <p>As academies and free schools do not have to follow the national curriculum, they are not required to teach SRE. However, if they choose to teach SRE they must have regard to the 2000 SRE guidance¹⁰.</p>	<p>Secondary Schools All secondary schools in England are required to teach the revised subject Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)¹¹.</p> <p>In teaching RSE schools must have regard to new guidance issued in 2019¹².</p>
<p>Primary Schools There is no requirement on primary schools to teach sex or relationships education but they can choose to do so in which case they must have regard to the guidance¹³.</p>	<p>Primary Schools All primary schools in England are required to teach the new subject Relationships Education¹⁴.</p> <p>Primary schools can choose to teach sex education but it is not required¹⁵.</p> <p>In teaching Relationships Education schools must have regard to new guidance issued in 2019¹⁶.</p>
<p>Parental Consultation The governing bodies of maintained schools are required to make, and keep up to date, a written statement of their policy on the provision of sex education and provide this to parents on request.</p>	<p>Parental Consultation All schools are required to make and keep up to date a written statement of their policy on the provision of sex education and provide this to parents on request¹⁸.</p>

9. Sex and Relationships Education Guidance, 2000,

10. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/283599/sex_and_relationship_education_guidance.pdf

11. Hansard, House of Lords, 21 October 2013, Column WA124. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldhansrd/text/131021w0001.htm#13102118000503>

12. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit, paragraph 3.

13. Ibid. Page 6.

14. Sex and Relationships Education Guidance, 2000, Op Cit.

15. Ibid. Paragraph 65.

16. Ibid. Page 6.

The law up to September 2020	Under the new law (September 2020 onwards)
<p>Under the 2000 SRE Guidance schools are encouraged, but not required, to consult parents in putting together their SRE curriculum¹⁷.</p>	<p>All schools are required to consult parents before making or revising their statement on the provision of relationships education in primary schools¹⁹ or relationships and sex education in secondary schools. Note that there is no legal obligation to consult on the curriculum of sex education in a primary school, should the school choose to deliver sex education. However, it remains good practice for a school to involve parents²⁰.</p> <p>The responsibility for these elements of parental consultation lies with the governing body of a maintained school, the trustees/directors of academies and the proprietors of independent schools.</p>
<p>Right to withdraw Under the Education Act 1996 parents were able to withdraw their children from all or parts of SRE both in primary and secondary school, with the exception of elements of the national science curriculum that include biological aspects of reproduction and human development²¹.</p>	<p>Right to Withdraw At primary schools, parents are able to withdraw their children from all or parts of sex education if it is taught. Children cannot be withdrawn from relationships education.</p> <p>At secondary school, parents can request that their children be withdrawn from all or parts of sex education provided in relationships and sex education. Children cannot be withdrawn from relationships education elements of RSE.</p> <p>At both primary and secondary school children cannot be withdrawn from elements of the national science curriculum that include biological aspects of reproduction and human development²².</p>

17. Ibid. Page 6.

18. Sex and Relationships Education Guidance, 2000, Op Cit.

19. Education Act 1996, section 404(1), The Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education (England) Regulations 2019: Amendment to Education Act 2002, section 80B(1)(a), Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, Schedule, paragraph 2A(1)(e) and Non-Maintained Special Schools (England) Regulations 2015, Schedule, para 25(4)(a).

20. The Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education (England) Regulations 2019, Amendment to Education Act 2002, section 80B(3), Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, Schedule, paragraph 2A(1)(f) and Non-Maintained Special Schools (England) Regulations 2015, Schedule, para 25(5).

21. Governance Handbook, Academy trusts and maintained schools, October 2020, paragraph 44, page 79 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925104/Governance_Handbook_FINAL.pdf Education Act 1996, Section 405.

22. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit, paragraphs 45-50.

What rights do parents have?

As the last section demonstrated, significant changes have been made to parental rights. We will now unpack these in more detail.

Requirement to consult parents

The positive development is that the new law now requires schools to consult parents before making or revising the statement of their policy on relationships education (primary) or RSE (secondary)²³. Under the old regime schools were encouraged by the guidance but not required by the law to consult parents. In practice very few did. Now they must.

Section 5 of this guide explains in further detail how parents can engage both critically and constructively with schools in the consultation process.

Right to Withdraw

The negative aspects of the changes relate to the changes around the to the right of withdrawal.

Right to withdraw at Primary School

At primary schools, parents, as was the case previously, can withdraw their children from all or parts of sex education if the school chooses to teach sex education. All requests by parents to withdraw their children from sex education must be granted by the head teacher, and no reason has to be given for the request²⁴.

The change that comes for parents is that they can no longer withdraw their children from relationships education at primary school. The Department for Education has explained that this is *"because it is important that all children receive this content, covering topics such as friendships and how to stay safe."*²⁵

Right to withdraw at Secondary School

The Government has made substantial changes to the right to withdraw at secondary school. Under the previous law and guidance parents were able to withdraw children from all elements of sex and relationships education, and head teachers had to grant any request.

Under the new law and guidance parents do not have the right to withdraw their children from relationships education and the right to withdraw from sex education has been changed to a 'right to request'. The law governing this states:

'If the parent of any pupil in attendance at a maintained school in England requests that the pupil may be wholly or partly excused from sex education provided as part of statutory relationships and sex education, the pupil must be so excused until the request is withdrawn, unless or to the extent that the head teacher

23. The Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education (England) Regulations 2019, Amendment to Education Act 2002, section 80B(3), Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, Schedule, paragraph 2A(1)(f) and Non-Maintained Special Schools (England) Regulations 2015, Schedule, para 25(5).

24. Education Act 1996, Section 405(1).

25. Department for Education. Understanding Relationships, Sex and Health Education at your child's primary school: a guide for parents. 2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907638/RSE_primary_schools_guide_for_parents.pdf

considers that the pupil should not be so excused.’²⁶

The guidance explains in detail how schools should implement this process, stating:

‘Before granting any such request it would be good practice for the head teacher to discuss the request with parents and, as appropriate, with the child to ensure that their wishes are understood and to clarify the nature and purpose of the curriculum.’ ‘Good practice is also likely to include the head teacher discussing with parents the benefits of receiving this important education and any detrimental effects that withdrawal might have on the child.’

‘Once those discussions have taken place, except in exceptional circumstances, the school should respect the parents’ request to withdraw the child, up to and until three terms before the child turns 16. After that point, if the child wishes to receive sex education rather than be withdrawn, the school should make arrangements to provide the child with sex education during one of those terms.’²⁷

Whilst the guidance explains that requests will be granted ‘except in exceptional circumstances’, the law, which is what really counts does not say this. Rather it places the final decision in the head teacher’s hands.

No examples of ‘exceptional circumstances’ have been provided and so parents will unfortunately be in the

dark about how head teachers will make these decisions and what limits will be placed on their decision-making abilities.

CARE’s concerns with the changes

Removing the right of withdrawal from relationships education

CARE is very concerned that the scope of the right of withdrawal has been narrowed so that it no longer applies to relationships education at either primary or secondary school. In some ways that might sound a strange concern. Someone might ask:

‘Surely everyone will benefit from learning about the importance of friendship and commitment and the importance of marriage. The sensitive area remains the teaching of sex education itself and from that the right of withdrawal remains to some degree?’

The problem with this approach, however, is that in some ways questions of value and of worldview impact the definition of happy family life, which is likely to come up in relationships education, just as much, if not more than, in relation to sex education. The implications of this for primary school children can be seen in answers listed on a ‘frequently asked questions’ page on the Department for Education website: *‘Primary schools are strongly encouraged and enabled to cover LGBT content when teaching about different types of families.’²⁸*

26. The Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education (England) Regulations 2019. Amendment to Education Act 1996, Section 405(3).

27. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit, excerpts from paragraphs 45-47.

28. Department for Education, Relationships education, relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education: FAQs. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education-faqs>

Replacing the right of withdrawal from sex education with a right of request in secondary schools and narrowing it to only apply to children up to 15

In a further significant change, the role of parents is also eroded by the fact that the nature of the right of withdrawal in relation to sex education in secondary schools is downgraded to a 'right of request'. The move to place the final decision in the hands of headteachers constitutes a significant shift in authority from parents to the state. In addition, the scope is narrowed so parents can only apply this right up until their child is 15.

Unworkable in Practice?

Moreover, where the right of withdraw will continue to exist, we are very concerned about whether it is workable in practice. Indeed, the new law and guidance are internally contradictory on the right to withdraw from sex education at secondary school. Giving parents the ability to withdraw their children from sex education but not relationships education depends on the two subjects being taught with some degree of separation between them. Schools will need to clearly communicate to parents where they are designating the boundary between sex education and relationships education.

Yet, the guidance does not distinguish between relationships education and sex education but puts all of this under the heading 'relationships and sex education'. The guidance states, *'In secondary schools, RSE will often address aspects of relationships and sex education in*

*an integrated way within a single topic. Schools should develop programmes of teaching which prioritise effective delivery of the content, and do not need artificially to separate sex education and Relationships Education.*²⁹ (Emphasis added)

The guidance thus put teachers in the impossible situation of telling them that relationships and sex education should be taught as an integrated subject whilst upholding the law that says parents have the right to remove their children from the sex education elements of lessons and not the relationships education elements. This contradictory guidance leaves parents in the dark about what elements of RSE they can request their child be withdrawn from. In so doing, the practice could water down the right to withdraw so much that it will be practically impossible to access.

Why does this matter?

At this point some might say, does this really matter? How often is the right to withdraw used at present?

As noted in the introduction, CARE believes that the fact that up until now parents have made the final decision is of great importance. Even if a parent never used the right to withdraw, the fact that it was there acknowledges that in the final analysis the child belongs to his or her parents, not the state. This reflects the fact that the Bible's view of society is that the family has independent authority under God on its own account and is not the property of the state. Moving away from this sets a disturbing precedent.

29. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit, paragraph 17.

What does the new guidance say?

An important aspect of engaging well with schools is understanding what the Government is asking them to teach. The Government's new guidance outlines in detail what schools should be covering in RSE and relationships education. However, it is not binding in the same way as the regulations, and affords schools flexibility in a number of areas.

It is possible to imagine that some schools will use the guidance to teach RSE in a manner that will not be problematic for Christian families. It is equally clear, however, that the flexibility of the guidance will mean that some schools will teach RSE in a way that would cause Christian parents serious concerns, even to the extent that they might want to withdraw their children.

It is the flexibility afforded different schools that makes parental engagement with the RSE consultation so crucial.

The section below outlines the main elements of the guidance at primary and secondary level. If you are a parent of a school aged child we would encourage you to look at the guidance yourself. The relevant sections can be found on pages 19 (primary) and 25 (secondary) at <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/>

[system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908013/Relationships_Education__Relationships_and_Sex_Education__RSE__and_Health_Education.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/attachment_data/file/908013/Relationships_Education__Relationships_and_Sex_Education__RSE__and_Health_Education.pdf)

The guidance contains many positive elements that Christians can support, as well as elements that are more concerning.

Relationships Education – Primary School

The guidance says that *'the focus in primary school should be on teaching the fundamental building blocks and characteristics of positive relationships, with particular reference to friendships, family relationships, and relationships with other children and with adults.'*³⁰

The guidance outlines five topic areas that students should learn about:

Table 2 – guidance on relationships education (primary)

Topic	Pupils should know
Families and people who care for me	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of families for growing up because they can give love, security and stability. • That a healthy family life includes commitment to one another during hard times. • That others' families, either in school or in the wider world, sometimes look different from their family, but that they should respect those differences. • That marriage represents a formal and legally recognised commitment of two people to each other which is intended to be lifelong.

30. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit, paragraph 54.

Topic	Pupils should know
Caring friendships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That friendships are important in making us feel happy and secure. • The characteristics of friendships, including mutual respect, truthfulness, trustworthiness, loyalty, kindness, generosity, trust, sharing interests and experiences and support with problems and difficulties. • That healthy friendships are positive and welcoming towards others, and do not make others feel lonely or excluded.
Respectful relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of respecting others, even when they are very different from them. • The conventions of courtesy and manners. • The importance of self-respect and how this links to their own happiness. • That in school and in wider society they can expect to be treated with respect by others, and that in turn they should show due respect to others, including those in positions of authority.
Online relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That people sometimes behave differently online, including by pretending to be someone they are not. • That the same principles apply to online relationships as to face-to-face relationships, including the importance of respect for others online including when they are anonymous. • The rules and principles for keeping safe online, how to recognise risks, harmful content and contact, and how to report them.
Being safe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What sorts of boundaries are appropriate in friendships with peers and others (including in a digital context). • That each person's body belongs to them, and the differences between appropriate and inappropriate or unsafe physical, and other, contact. • How to respond safely and appropriately to adults they may encounter (in all contexts, including online) whom they do not know. • How to recognise and report feelings of being unsafe or feeling bad about any adult

In addition, the guidance has a short paragraph on 'managing difficult questions'. This notes that students will often ask questions about sex or sexuality that go beyond the set curriculum set out for Relationships Education. The guidance says that the school's policy should cover how the school handles these questions³¹.

The supplementary September 2020 guidance for schools says that questions relating to sex education which the school may not be teaching, or not yet 'should generally not be answered in front of the whole class' and that '*Strategies to handle such questioning could include offering a word outside the lesson, referring to another more senior member of staff or offering a simple 'holding' answer and mentioning the question to parents and carers at the end of the day.*'³²

31. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit, paragraphs 63-64.

32. Department for Education Guidance, Plan your relationships, sex and health curriculum, September 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/plan-your-relationships-sex-and-health-curriculum#handling-difficult-questions>

Sex Education – Primary School

As sex education is not compulsory at primary school, the guidance is more focussed on relationships education.

The national curriculum for science (which is compulsory and pupils cannot be withdrawn from) includes content in related areas such as the main external body parts, the human body as it grows from birth to old age (including puberty) and reproduction in some plants and animals.

*The guidance states that 'It will be for primary schools to determine whether they need to cover any additional content on sex education to meet the needs of their pupils.'*³³

The guidance puts particular emphasis on the *'transition phase before moving to secondary school'* and notes that the Department for Education recommends *'that all primary schools should have a sex education programme tailored to the age and the physical and emotional maturity of the pupils.'*³⁴

If your child's school does choose to offer sex education at primary school you should read this section of the guidance on pages 23-24 in detail.

Where a school does choose to teach aspects of sex education, beyond those in the science curriculum, the school *'must set this out in their policy and all schools should consult with parents on what is to be covered. Primary schools that choose to teach sex education must allow parents a right to withdraw their children.'*³⁵

In addition, schools *'must also ensure that their teaching and materials are appropriate having regard to the age and religious backgrounds of their pupils.'*³⁶

Separate September 2020 guidance from the Department for Education for schools notes that, *'Teachers should be aware of age inappropriate material on the internet. Great caution should be exercised before setting any assignment, in class or at home, that involves researching a subject where there is a high risk that a child could accidentally be exposed to age inappropriate material, such as pornography. Particularly at primary level, you should be careful not to expose children to over-sexualised content.'*³⁷

Relationships and Sex Education – Secondary School

The guidance states that the aim of RSE at secondary school is *'to give young people the information they need to help them develop healthy, nurturing relationships of all kinds, not just intimate relationships. It should enable them to know 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.'*³⁸

RSE is much more focussed on sex and sexuality at secondary school, stating that *'pupils should be taught 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. Sexual orientation and gender identity should be explored at a timely point and in a clear, sensitive and respectful manner... There should be an*

33. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit, paragraph 66.

34. Ibid. Paragraph 67.

35. Ibid. Paragraph 68.

36. Ibid. Paragraph 68.

37. Department for Education Guidance, Plan your relationships, sex and health curriculum, September 2020 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/plan-your-relationships-sex-and-health-curriculum>

38. Ibid. Paragraph 69.

equal opportunity to explore the features of stable and healthy same-sex relationships. This should be integrated appropriately into the RSE programme, rather than addressed separately or in only one lesson.’³⁹

On the other hand the guidance also recommends a cautious approach, noting that *‘effective RSE does not encourage early sexual experimentation but should teach young people to understand human sexuality and to respect themselves and others. RSE enables young people to mature, build their confidence and self-esteem and understand the reasons for delaying sexual activity.’*⁴⁰

Importantly, the guidance recognises that there will be a range of opinions regarding RSE and says that *‘the starting principle when teaching each of these must be that the applicable law should be taught in a factual way so that pupils are clear on their rights and responsibilities as citizens.’*⁴¹ It goes on to state that *‘Pupils should be well informed about the full range of perspectives and, within the law, should be well equipped to make decisions for themselves about how to live their own lives, whilst respecting the right of others to make their own decisions and hold their own beliefs.’*⁴²

The guidance outlines five topic areas that students should learn about:

Table 3 – guidance on Relationships and Sex Education (secondary)

Topic	Pupils should know
Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That there are different types of committed, stable relationships. • How these relationships might contribute to human happiness and their importance for bringing up children. • Why marriage is an important relationship choice for many couples and why it must be freely entered into. • The roles and responsibilities of parents with respect to raising of children, including the characteristics of successful parenting.
Respectful relationships, including friendships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The characteristics of positive and healthy friendships including: trust, respect, honesty, kindness, generosity, boundaries, privacy, consent and the management of conflict. • How stereotypes, in particular stereotypes based on sex, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation or disability, can cause damage. • About different types of bullying (including cyberbullying), the impact of bullying, responsibilities of bystanders to report bullying and how and where to get help. • That some types of behaviour within relationships are criminal, including violence, sexual harassment and coercive control.

39. Ibid. Paragraph 75.

40. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit, paragraph 70.

41. Ibid. Paragraph 76.

42. Ibid. Paragraph 78.

Topic	Pupils should know
Online and media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Their rights, responsibilities and opportunities online, including that the same expectations of behaviour apply in all contexts. • About online risks, including that any material someone provides to another has the potential to be shared online and the difficulty of removing compromising material placed online. • That specifically sexually explicit material e.g. pornography presents a distorted picture of sexual behaviours, can damage the way people see themselves in relation to others and negatively affect how they behave towards sexual partners.
Being safe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The concepts of, and laws relating to, sexual consent, sexual exploitation, abuse, grooming, coercion, harassment, rape, domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour-based violence and FGM [female genital mutilation], and how these can affect current and future relationships. • How people can actively communicate and recognise consent from others, including sexual consent, and how and when consent can be withdrawn (in all contexts, including online).
Intimate and sexual relationships, including sexual health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to recognise the characteristics and positive aspects of healthy one-to-one intimate relationships, which include mutual respect, consent, loyalty, trust, shared interests and outlook, sex and friendship. • That there are a range of strategies for identifying and managing sexual pressure, including understanding peer pressure, resisting pressure and not pressurising others. • That they have a choice to delay sex or to enjoy intimacy without sex. • The facts about the full range of contraceptive choices, efficacy and options available. • That there are choices in relation to pregnancy (with medically and legally accurate, impartial information on all options, including keeping the baby, adoption, abortion and where to get further help). • How the different sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/ AIDs, are transmitted, how risk can be reduced through safer sex. • How the use of alcohol and drugs can lead to risky sexual behaviour. • How to get further advice, including how and where to access confidential sexual and reproductive health advice and treatment.

Teaching LGBT Issues

The guidance gives schools some discretion on teaching LGBT issues, emphasising that teaching must be 'sensitive and 'age appropriate'. The guidance states:

'Schools should ensure that all of their teaching is sensitive and age appropriate in approach and content. At the point at

*which schools consider it appropriate to teach their pupils about LGBT, they should ensure that this content is fully integrated into their programmes of study for this area of the curriculum rather than delivered as a stand-alone unit or lesson. Schools are free to determine how they do this, and we expect all pupils to have been taught LGBT content at a timely point as part of this area of the curriculum.'*⁴³

43. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit, Paragraph 37.

Elsewhere, the Government has given clearer direction for how primary and secondary schools should cover LGBT topics. Department for Education FAQs state that, *'Primary schools are strongly encouraged and enabled to cover LGBT content when teaching about different types of families' and 'Secondary schools should cover LGBT content in their RSE teaching.'*⁴⁴

The supplementary guidance issued in September 2020 has directed schools to be cautious in teaching around gender identity stating,

*'We are aware that topics involving gender and biological sex can be complex and sensitive matters to navigate. You should not reinforce harmful stereotypes, for instance by suggesting that children might be a different gender based on their personality and interests or the clothes they prefer to wear. Resources used in teaching about this topic must always be age-appropriate and evidence based. Materials which suggest that non-conformity to gender stereotypes should be seen as synonymous with having a different gender identity should not be used and you should not work with external agencies or organisations that produce such material.'*⁴⁵

44. Relationships education, relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education: FAQs, Department for Education, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education-faqs>

45. Department for Education Guidance, Plan your relationships, sex and health curriculum, September 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/plan-your-relationships-sex-and-health-curriculum>

Taking Action: RSE starts at home

So far, we have explained what is changing, what parental rights are and what the guidance actually says. The final two sections explore ways that you can take action as a parent. First we think about how RSE starts at home and second we explain in detail how school consultations are meant to take place and how you can engage constructively.

CARE believes that relationships and sex education from a biblical perspective is crucial to helping children and teenagers understand God's gift of sex and how to relate well to all people. The Bible's vision for sex and intimacy within marriage is a precious and liberating truth that enables flourishing in human relationships.

We believe that the primary relationships children have for their wellbeing and development, nurturing and education is within their families and with their parents.

This means that relationships and sex education starts at home.

This guide has focussed particularly on RSE at school due to the significant changes to the curriculum beginning in September 2020. We do not, however, want parents to hear from this that schools should be the only or even the main place that their children receive relationships and sex education. Parents are the primary educators of their children and we want to encourage them to take up this role with confidence.

There are a wide variety of good resources available for parents from Christian publishers such as 10 of Those or The Good Book Company.

Children and teenagers today are growing up in a culture that is radically different to what the Bible says society should look like, particularly in the area of sexual ethics. Christian parents and churches therefore have a key role to play in telling children the better story that the Bible teaches us. The better story about intimacy and marriage, the better story about singleness and community, the better story about sexuality and identity.

While part of this can be entirely independent of what happens at school, you should also consider how what you do at home fits with what happens at school. With this in mind, it is advisable to ask your school to give you advanced notice of when sex and relationships education will be taught and what material will be used so you can follow up with helpful conversations on the appropriate days with your child at home.

Taking Action: Engaging with school consultations

As schools are now required to consult with parents when they draw up or revise their policy on relationships education or RSE, **parents will now gain a new opportunity to have their views heard by schools to influence the way that the curriculum is put together and how the subjects are taught.**

In approaching the consultation (and indeed questions of how the school engages with your child generally), we would encourage you to do so mindful of the things that the guidance says that support you as a parent. Indeed, you may find it helpful to cite these at certain points:

Most importantly, on **the role of parents** in the new subjects, the guidance states:

*'We are clear that parents and carers are the prime educators for children on many of these matters. Schools complement and reinforce this role and have told us that they see building on what pupils learn at home as an important part of delivering a good education.'*⁴⁶

*'The role of parents in the development of their children's understanding about relationships is vital. Parents are the first teachers of their children. They have the most significant influence in enabling their children to grow and mature and to form healthy relationships.'*⁴⁷

The guidance also says some helpful things about **the role of faith** that can help a Christian parent in raising any concerns they might have, even in non-faith schools.

The guidance is very clear that faith should not be sidelined in the teaching of

relationships education and RSE, but can play a central role in how schools teach these subjects and when they teach certain topics.

The guidance states:

'A good understanding of pupils' faith backgrounds and positive relationships between the school and local faith communities help to create a constructive context for the teaching of these subjects.'

'The religious background of all pupils must be taken into account when planning teaching, so that the topics that are included in the core content in this guidance are appropriately handled.'

*'All schools, not just schools with a religious character, may teach about faith perspectives. Religious schools are able to teach their distinctive faith perspective on relationships, and balanced debate may take place about issues that are seen as contentious.'*⁴⁸

Taken together, this guidance clearly underlines the importance of both parents and faith. As Christian parents you can help your school understand the importance of faith to teaching about sex and relationships, as well as how the Bible informs your view is on these issues. Having made these introductory comments, we will now turn specifically

46. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit, Page 4.

47. Ibid. Paragraph 40.

48. Ibid. Paragraphs 19-21.

to the school's consultation with parents. First, we will look at the consultation process in order to gain an understanding of how it works. We will then set out some specific action points.

Understanding the consultation process

At its most basic level, schools must have a written statement of their policy on relationships education or RSE and this policy must be provided free of charge to parents upon request and be made available on the school website.⁴⁹ As schools draw up or revise their policy in the light of the changes in the law, they are required to consult parents.⁵⁰

This raises a few questions: What will an RSE policy look like? How are schools meant to run their consultations? What role is the Christian faith able to play in the teaching of relationships education and RSE? What does it look like to engage constructively in this process?

We will address these issues in turn.

What should an RSE policy include?

The guidance states⁵¹ that in their policy statement schools should:

- Define relationships education (primary) and/or relationships and sex education (secondary).
- Set out the subject content, how it is taught and who is responsible for teaching it.
- Describe how the subject is monitored and evaluated.

- Include information to clarify why parents do not have a right to withdraw their child (relationships education).
- Include information about a parent's right to request that their child be excused from sex education within RSE only.
- Confirm the date by which the policy will be reviewed.
- Include details of content/scheme of work and when each topic is taught, taking account of the age of pupils.
- Set out who delivers either Relationships Education or RSE.
- Set out how the policy has been produced, and how it will be kept under review, in both cases working with parents

How are schools meant to run their consultation?

The Department for Education guide for schools *Parental Engagement on Relationship Education*⁵² explains the broad process for how consultation should work.

The guide explains that consultation should 'involve the school providing clear information to all parents, in an accessible way, on their proposed programme and policy; parents being given reasonable time to consider this information; the school providing reasonable opportunities for parents to feed in their views; and the school giving consideration to those views from parents. Schools ultimately make the final decisions and engagement does not amount to a parental veto.'⁵³

When schools consult, they should provide parents with **examples** of

49. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit., paragraph 15.

50. Ibid. Paragraph 13.

51. Ibid. Paragraph 16.

52. Department for Education, *Parental Engagement on Relationships Education*, 2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884450/Parental_engagement_on_relationships_education.pdf

53. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit., Page 2.

resources that they plan to use⁵⁴ and they should ensure that parents know **what will be taught when**.⁵⁵ These two points are very important. Schools cannot hide behind vague explanations of what the curriculum will be. Good consultation will be thorough and parents should feel they understand what the school is teaching and when they are teaching it.

Consultation should *'give parents a voice'* as well as *'the knowledge that their views are being listened to'*. It should provide an *'opportunity for parents to feed in their views on the school's proposed Relationships Education policy, and includes considering whether any strongly held views of their parent body should lead the school to adapt when and how they approach certain topics with their pupils'*.⁵⁷

Importantly, the guide recommends that schools engage parents on a **regular basis**, given that the parent body at a school does not remain static and the subjects may therefore need to be updated.⁵⁸ This is not a one-off process.

The First Step of Engagement

The first thing to do is to approach your school and tell them that you are aware that they are now required to consult parents on the curriculum and ask them when the consultation will take place.

We have provided a series of model letters in the appendix that can be used as a template for your correspondence with the school, depending upon the type of school your child attends.

Engaging with the consultation

Engaging well in a topic as controversial and sensitive as sex and marriage is very important. As Christians we are called to stand by biblical values and ethics. Our faith also calls us to recognise the image of God in every person and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

In order to be fully prepared for a parental consultation and to engage well you may want to consider the following principles:

Cite the government guidance

- Have a good understanding of the new guidance. Note down issues and topics you think are important to teach well and that you support.
- When you talk these areas of the guidance, reference the specific paragraphs. (The endnotes in this guide should be helpful in this regard.)
- In setting out your aspirations and concerns it is very helpful to cite the sections of the guidance that acknowledge that parents are the primary educators of their children and the commitment in the guidance to have regard to the faith background of children and parents.

Understand your school

- Try to understand where the school is coming from in teaching RSE. What is driving their RSE policy? What convictions are behind their decisions?

54. Statutory guidance, 2019, Op Cit, paragraph 24.

55. Ibid. Paragraph 41.

56. Ibid. Page 4.

57. Ibid. Page 5.

58. Department for Education, Parental Engagement on Relationships Education, 2019. Page 3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/engaging-parents-with-relationships-education-policy>

Biblical values and compassion

- Whilst these issues can be very emotive, engaging well will involve being respectful, kind and generous as you participate in debate and conversation.
- You should maintain firm biblical convictions about human sexuality, whilst also maintaining the biblical call to love our neighbour and do good to those who disagree with you.

Did you feel heard?

- Although the school is not obliged to comply with the requests of parents, if you do not feel like you have been heard it is helpful to note that there is almost always a way you can continue to raise your concerns. While the consultation is of central importance you could also follow this up by requesting meetings with teachers or the head teacher, governors or trustees, engage with other parents to share concerns and support one another, or file an official complaint if all other avenues have been exhausted.
- Department for Education guidance for schools from September 2020 states that *'Where parents and carers have complaints which cannot be resolved through informal discussion, you should ask them to follow your school's (curriculum) complaints policy.'*⁵⁹

Questions you might want to raise during the consultation:

Below is a list of questions you might want

to raise during the consultation. They are themed by topic.

- Right to withdraw
 - How does the right to withdraw for parents work in practice?
 - What are the exceptional circumstances in which you will not grant a request? (Secondary)
 - How are you defining the split between sex education and relationships education?
 - How will it practically work to remove a child from only one element of RSE? (Secondary)
- Teaching faith perspectives on RSE
 - How will the religious background of students be taken into account in the teaching of these subjects?
- The curriculum
 - Will the school be using a pre-written curriculum from an outside organisation or writing it themselves?
 - Who will be teaching the curriculum? Will it be teachers or an outside organisation?
 - If an outside organisation, how and why did the school decide on this group? Has the school assessed if the resources from the outside organisation are age appropriate?
 - Will parents be notified in advance of what will be taught and when? Will parents be sent a copy of the curriculum in advance so they can complement this teaching at home?

59. Department for Education Guidance, Plan your relationships, sex and health curriculum, September 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/plan-your-relationships-sex-and-health-curriculum#right-to-request-withdrawal>

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- Sensitive issues
 - You could ask for examples of how sensitive issues will be taught, such as abortion, contraception, pornography, LGBT issues etc.
 - How will the school handle difficult questions that go beyond the set curriculum?
 - Primary and secondary school topics
 - You might want to look through section 4 of this guide and ask specific questions about how positive areas will be taught. For example, the Department for Education's guidance on relationships education says that pupils should learn about why marriage is an important relationship choice for many couples. How are you planning to teach pupils about marriage?

Conclusion

We hope that this guide has been helpful to Christian parents as they engage with the new way in which relationships education and sex education are taught in schools in England.

If you are unhappy with the way sex education is taught at your child's primary or secondary school then you are still able to withdraw your child from these lessons. Unfortunately, you are not able to withdraw them from relationships education but you can contribute to the consultation process and the way this subject is taught.

We encourage you to remember that you are the primary educators of your children. RSE starts at home, not in the classroom. Remember that faith can play an important role in the way RSE is taught and that schools must take the religious background of their pupils into account as they plan their curriculum. Remember that as Christians we are called to maintain biblical convictions and love our neighbours in all that we do.

CARE has real concerns about the new framework which is why we have produced this resource.

If you are a parent, we would be interested to hear from you about the experiences that you have with the new system, especially if you feel that your role as a parent and/or the best interests of your children are not being respected. If you would like to contact us please email mail@care.org.uk.

Appendix: Letter templates for schools

This appendix includes templates of letters that you can send to your child's school to ask about the implementation of the new curriculum and how consultation will take place. There are two letters, one for primary schools and one for secondary schools. Each letter has three drafts addressed to the different types of schools with some small but important differences in what law they reference. The three types of school are: maintained schools, independent schools or academies, and non-maintained special schools.

If you are not sure what type of school your child attends you can look on the school's website, or ask the school in advance of sending this letter.

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If you are not sure what type of school your child attends you can look on the school's website, or ask the school in advance of sending this letter.

Template of letter to primary school head teacher/chair of governors (maintained school)

Dear Head Teacher and Chair of Governors,

I am writing to you regarding the implementation of the new curriculum on relationships education. I am aware that the new subjects will be brought in during this school year and that the school now has a statutory obligation to consult parents on the curriculum.
[1]

I very much want to engage in this process, so please can you let me know well in advance, on what date the consultation will open and on what date it will close and what opportunities there will be to see the material and topics being taught? It would be greatly appreciated if you could provide any material in advance of consultation meetings so that I can understand it beforehand and therefore contribute to any meeting in the most helpful way possible.

In addition, please can you outline whether the school is electing to teach sex education, and if so, whether it will be taught at the same time as or separately to relationships education and if together how the right of parental withdrawal will be provided in relation to sex education?

Finally, please can you send me a copy of the current school policies on sex education and relationships education?[2]

Kind regards,

XXX

1. See Section 80B(3) Education Act 2002 (as amended in 2019): '(3) The governing body must consult parents of registered pupils at the school before making or revising a statement under subsection (1).'
2. See Section 80B(1) Education Act 2002 (as amended in 2019): Relationships education and relationships and sex education: statements of policy
3. The governing body of a maintained school must—
 - make, and keep up to date, a separate written statement of their policy with regard to the provision of education under each of paragraphs (1)(c) and (d) of section 80, and
 - publish a copy of the statement on a website and provide a copy free of charge to anyone who asks for one.

Template of letter to primary school head teacher and proprietor/ (Independent School) or Trustees (Academy)

Dear Head Teacher and Proprietor/Trustees

I am writing to you regarding the implementation of the new curriculum on relationships education. I am aware that the new subjects will be brought in during this school year and that the school now has a statutory obligation to consult parents on the curriculum. [1]

I very much want to engage in this process, so please can you let me know well in advance, on what date the consultation will open and on what date it will close and what opportunities there will be to see the material and topics being taught? It would be greatly appreciated if you could provide any material in advance of consultation meetings so that I can understand it beforehand and therefore contribute to any meeting in the most helpful way possible.

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Finally, please can you send me a copy of the current school policies on sex education and relationships education?[2]

Kind regards,

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1. See paragraph 2A(1)(f) of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 (as amended in 2019): 'The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor... (f) consults parents of registered pupils at the school before making or revising a statement under subparagraph (e).'
2. See paragraph 2A(1)(g) of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 (as amended in 2019): (1) The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor '(g) publishes a copy of the statement on a website and provides a copy of the statement free of charge to anyone who asks for one.'

Template of letter to primary school head teacher/chair of governors (non-maintained special school)

Dear Head Teacher and Chair of Governors,

I am writing to you regarding the implementation of the new curriculum on relationships education. I am aware that the new subjects will be brought in during this school year and that the school now has a statutory obligation to consult parents on the curriculum. [1]

I very much want to engage in this process, so please can you let me know well in advance, on what date the consultation will open and on what date it will close and what opportunities there will be to see the material and topics being taught? It would be greatly appreciated if you could provide any material in advance of consultation meetings so that I can understand it beforehand and therefore contribute to any meeting in the most helpful way possible.

In addition, please can you outline whether the school is electing to teach sex education, and if so, whether it will be taught at the same time as or separately to relationships education and if together how the right of parental withdrawal will be provided in relation to sex education?

Finally, please can you send me a copy of the current school policies on sex education and relationships education?[2]

Kind regards,

XXX

1. See Non-Maintained Special Schools (England) Regulations 2015, Schedule, para 25(5) (as amended in 2019): '(5) The proprietor must consult parents of registered pupils at the school before making or revising a statement under sub-paragraph (4) (a).'
2. See Non-Maintained Special Schools (England) Regulations 2015, Schedule, para 25(4) (b) (as amended in 2019): '(4) The proprietor must (b)publish a copy of the statement on a website and provide a copy of the statement free of charge to anyone who asks for one.'

Template of letter to secondary school head teacher/chair of governors (maintained school)

Dear Head Teacher and Chair of Governors,

I am writing to you regarding the implementation of the new curriculum on relationships and sex education. I am aware that the new subjects will be brought in during this school year and that the school now has a statutory obligation to consult parents on the curriculum [1].

I very much want to engage in this process, so please can you let me know well in advance, on what date the consultation will open and on what date it will close and what opportunities there will be to see the material and topics being taught? It would be greatly appreciated if you could provide any material in advance of consultation meetings so that I can understand it beforehand and therefore contribute to any meeting or written submission in the most helpful way possible.

In addition, please can you let me know whether the school is electing to teach sex education at the same time as, or separately to relationships education, and if together how the right of parental withdrawal will be provided in relation to sex education?

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