

Inclusive Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)

Introduction

Secondary schools in England are now required to teach Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). Primary schools have the option to teach Sex Education. This presents challenges:

- Schools are required to communicate with parents about the RSE they plan to teach.
- Parents have the right to withdraw under-16 year old children from Sex Education.
- Relationships and sex can be difficult to talk about, especially for students from some cultural or faith backgrounds.
- Teachers in both primary and secondary schools have reported being less confident in engaging students of faith in RSE compared to the rest of the class.

It is important to children from faith backgrounds are able to access RSE. We help with this by providing teachers and schools with resources – which you can download here – for delivering inclusive RSE. We have designed these resources with busy teachers in mind. We recognise that for many teachers, RSE is not your primary subject, and it can be challenging to keep up with the changing curriculum. We have made these resources user-friendly, with teaching activities that can be adapted quickly.

Before designing these resources, we conducted research with teachers and schools, parents of faith, and young people in faith communities. You can read about this research, conducted by a team based at The University of Sheffield, educational consultancy Learn Sheffield and faith community organisation Faithstar.

Recommendations for Schools and Teachers

Inclusive teaching is for everyone equally. This means treating everyone the same. Singling out children from faith communities in activities or discussion can leave individuals feeling exposed and alienated. We have designed resources – provided here – for the whole class, not just children from religious backgrounds.

- Inclusive RSE begins with recognising that cultural and religious differences can influence attitudes to RSE. This means that, when delivering RSE, teachers are encouraged to acknowledge ways in which culture and religion can shape differing attitudes to sex and relationships. It is important to do so as positively as possible.
- Inclusive RSE, which is sensitive to religious diversity, is not to be confused with Religious Studies, where it is appropriate to teach the whole class about particular religions. This is why we do not provide lesson plans on subjects like FGM or forced marriage. Instead, we provide resources on dismantling bias (stereotypes and assumptions about people) and on broaching topics about sex and relationships in which all faiths (and none) and their associated values are important.
- Reaching out to parents makes all the difference. This is especially important for children and families who are marginalised within educational settings, such as those who have English as a second language.
- Widely held assumptions surrounding different faith groups can undermine RSE. Teachers can help to challenge and begin to change these misunderstandings and stereotypes by working through 'internal bias' exercises, provided here.
- It helps greatly if diversity in the classroom includes teachers – having teachers of faith can help everyone feel included.

Underpinning Research

The resources and information provided here are informed by research including online surveys, interviews, focus groups and classroom observations involving:

- Schools, teachers and pupils in and around the Sheffield: we worked with 18 schools, and interviewed or surveyed 26 teachers and 25 pupils.
- Parents of faith, and faith communities: 47 Muslim parents from 3 different communities, 8 Christian parents, 6 of whom were from Roma communities, 1 Jewish parent and 1 Catholic parent.
- Young people in particular faith communities. This project builds upon a 4-year project in which we worked with one particular faith community, namely young British Muslims of Pakistani heritage. You can read about this here.

Findings: What Teachers and Pupils are saying about RSE

- RSE teachers are very busy – many teaching RSE as a second subject – and are asking for guidance and resources to do this well
- Many teachers lack confidence when delivering RSE to diverse classrooms, including children of faith backgrounds.
- Teachers are particularly concerned with answering “tricky questions”, primarily relating to sex and sexuality, gender, contraception and sex before marriage.
- Many teachers acknowledge a desire to overcome internal bias.
- Some schools want better communication with parents and communities of faith. One school in particular requested dialogue with communities of faith where they could get “communities to check” that their teaching content was accurate and reflective of the lived reality of students of faith.
- Students and teachers unanimously agree that students prefer discussion, videos and active learning in comparison to reading and writing activities.
- Teachers recognise that students of faith don’t want to be singled out in class.
- One teacher in Sheffield said that they wanted resources that were ‘inclusive’ and ‘reflect (the) community we serve’

- Teachers and pupils both stress that children from faith communities do not want to be singled out, and they do not want their religion in the spotlight. Rather, they want to be treated like everyone else, in teaching that is sensitive and inclusive, and may not say much about religion at all. These resources are for diverse classrooms, not just children from religious backgrounds. They will help you to teach RSE without alienating children from religious backgrounds.

Findings: What Parents and Communities of Faith are saying about RSE:

- Parents and communities of faith express a wide range of views about RSE. Some are very positive and supportive, while others are undecided, and others are strongly opposed to this form of education.
- Many of the parents we spoke to were unaware of the RSE curriculum. Some lacked accurate knowledge of the age at which children begin sex education, and of the content of this teaching.
- Many parents would like better communication with schools. Some would like the opportunity to ask questions and express concerns.
- For some parents of faith, whose first language is not English, this presents a barrier between the family and the school.
- Some parents felt that teachers and schools lacked awareness and understanding of their culture and religion.
- Religion plays a foundation role in how topics relating to RSE are approached in the home, and influences how RSE in the classroom is wished to be taught. Differing interpretations of faith influences differing interpretations of RSE.
- Some members of faith groups do express concerns and objections to aspects of RSE, and some of these cite their faith as the reason. Open discussion of same sex sexuality was among the commonly cited concerns; another was explicit discussion of any form of sex, including safe sex and sexual consent.