

Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)

What evidence is there that says we should be teaching our children RSE?

The Sex Education Forum (SEF) has published an updated and accessible summary of the latest research evidence about Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). It includes sections on what RSE aims to achieve; what children and young people say; a summary of the latest research evidence about the impact of RSE on young people's health and well-being, and the features of effective RSE. The briefing was produced with input from leading academics as well as contributions from others, including Coram Life Education, and includes all references to the research cited. Regarding primary RSE here are the key takeaways:

- In SEF's 2021 poll, young people said they would like to have more open conversations with parents and carers from a younger age
- There is strong evidence for the effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention efforts, including teaching young children about body autonomy and communication
- Children who are taught lessons aimed at preventing sexual abuse at school are more likely to tell an adult if they have had, or were actually experiencing sexual abuse
- Where school-based programmes increased reporting of domestic violence, one of the most common benefits was an increase in children knowing how to identify a trusted person to whom they would report abuse
- Positive effects of RSE include increased communication with parents and carers about sex and relationships
- An LGBT+ inclusive curriculum was associated with higher reports of safety for individuals and lower levels of bullying in school; reports of adverse mental health among all young people, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation, were also lower
- RSE contributes to changes beyond health outcomes, including increasing gender equality, and building stronger and healthier relationships
- RSE works best if it is delivered in primary school onwards, starting with topics such as personal safety, bodily boundaries and friendships, and responds to the needs of young people as they mature
- Both primary and secondary school pupils, particularly girls, said they need RSE to start earlier
- 25% of girls did not know what to do when they started their period

How do I create a safe environment in my classroom to talk about these sensitive subjects?

Teaching children about puberty, bodies, and sex can sometimes feel awkward for teachers and pupils. This can often be because as teachers many of us did not receive good sex education and so will not have seen good RSE modelled to us. Pupils too may find it awkward, as they may not come from families where they are able to talk openly about these topics, without feeling they are making their parents feel uncomfortable and so avoid bringing it up and asking questions.

Developing a class group agreement is a really good way of helping children to recognise what is expected of them in an RSE lesson, and indeed what they can expect from you. It helps put boundaries in place, so both you and they know how the lessons are going to run and protects both teacher and pupil from being put in an unsafe situation. Good practice includes model ground rules, such as:

- Respect privacy. We can discuss examples but do not use names or descriptions that identify anyone, including ourselves.
- Listen to others. It is okay to disagree with each other, but we should listen properly before making assumptions or deciding how to respond. When disagreeing, challenge the statement not the person.

- No judgement. We can explore beliefs and misunderstandings about a topic without fear of being judged.
- Choose level of participation. Everyone has the right to choose not to answer a question or join discussion. We never put anyone 'on the spot' (no personal questions or pressure to answer)

Do we have to include LGBT in our RSE?

SCARF plans anticipate and encourage the inclusion of people with LGBT identities in discussions from the early years, where children are also encouraged to talk about the people who are special to them and who provide a nurturing environment.

SCARF includes LGBT identities content throughout the school years as part of a spiral curriculum and teaching about this is integrated into lessons about families, marriage, civil partnerships, similarities and differences, stereotyping, prejudice, media, puberty, bullying, body image and diversity, as required by the DfE guidance. A simple and appropriate primary school level example is the use of texts that include families with different sex and same sex parents or guardians.

Which parts of the Healthy (body) Value curriculum include sex education?

We interpret sex education to mean puberty, conception, contraception, reproduction and birth. All of these themes, with the exception of conception and contraception, are included within either statutory Health Education or National Curriculum Science.

The statutory RSHE guidance states that sex education should ensure children know how a baby is conceived. We interpret 'how a baby is conceived' as referring to what happens during sexual intercourse before an egg and sperm meet (reproduction). We therefore include sexual intercourse and IVF as well as some information about condoms in our Year 6 Making Babies lesson.

The DfE statutory guidance states the following in relation to Sex Education:

"The national curriculum for science also includes subject content in related areas, such as the main external body parts, the human body as it grows from birth to old age (including puberty) and reproduction in some plants and animals."

"It is important that the transition phase before moving to secondary school supports pupils' ongoing emotional and physical development effectively. The Department continues to recommend therefore that all primary schools should have a sex education programme tailored to the age and the physical and emotional maturity of the pupils. It should ensure that both boys and girls are prepared for the changes that adolescence brings and – drawing on knowledge of the human life cycle set out in the national curriculum for science - how a baby is conceived and born."

We therefore include sexual intercourse as well as IVF in our Year 6 Making Babies lesson, to help children understand how babies are conceived, particularly before they transition to secondary school to support the pupils' ongoing emotional and physical development effectively, as stated by the DfE. Condoms are also included in this lesson to help pupils understand that pregnancy can be avoided and does not always have to be a consequence of sexual intercourse. We also believe this to be a safeguarding issue, as children starting secondary school will be mixing with 16 year olds and possibly 18 year olds who will legally be able to have sex – and so by providing sex education in Year 6 we are laying the foundations to further sex education in secondary school, as well as helping children to identify what sexual intercourse is and its potential consequences (pregnancy), and how to avoid it, should anyone be trying to coerce them to engage in sexual activity.

We define menstruation, wet dreams and masturbation (all parts of puberty) as falling within Health Education (under the Changing Adolescent Body section) not Sex Education, and therefore part of the statutory requirements.

Naming parts of the body, including genitalia, comes under statutory Relationships Education, within the Being Safe unit; requirement number 7: 'How to report concerns or abuse, and the vocabulary and confidence to do so', It also comes under National Curriculum Science where children are required to be able to name the external body parts and so is again statutory.

What lessons can parents and guardians withdraw children from?

If a parent wants to withdraw their child from Relationships Education in Reception or Nursery they can. Parents and guardians can withdraw children from a lesson that includes non-statutory Sex Education, therefore parents can withdraw their child from the Making Babies lesson in year 6 which shows what sexual intercourse is to show how a baby is made and briefly explains what a condom is.

Do we have to teach FGM?

We do not teach about Female Genital Mutilation - FGM - by name but cover this illegal and unsafe practice, using different language. We explain that very occasionally young people have things done to their bodies which are criminal in this country. These crimes involve cuts made to female genitalia - the external area around the opening to the vagina. This is taught in the context of conversations about our bodies and emphasising with all children that they are the person who should decide what happens to their own body. In turn, this helps to safeguard those children both in school and any female members of their family.

Is teaching about masturbation statutory?

We believe that masturbation would come under the statutory requirements to teach Changing Adolescent Body under Health education, where children should know: key facts about puberty and the changing adolescent body, particularly from age 9 through to age 11, including physical and emotional changes. The statutory guidance states puberty should be covered in Health Education and should be addressed before onset so, as far as possible, pupils are prepared in advance for changes they will experience.

We believe masturbation to be a physical and emotional change, where sexual development includes not just the genitals developing but feelings associated with ourselves, and others, change too. In SCARF we have two lessons that include masturbation. The first is in Year 4 and the second is in Year 5. The reason why we first start talking about masturbation in year 4 is that we know that children can begin to get more curious about sex from the age of 9. This is supported by the NSPCC which has written an article on healthy sexual development where it states: During these ages (9-13), children begin to get more curious about sex and relationships. They may start to be attracted to other people. Examples of typical sexual behaviour during this stage are...masturbating in private (National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, 2013; NCTSN, 2009; SECASA, 2017; Stop It Now, 2007; Stop It Now, 2020; Virtual Lab School, 2021).

All children go through phases of sexual development. As children grow, so does their understanding of what is sexual, and we must remember not to sexualize, or place unnecessary sexual meaning, on behaviours we observe in children. An infant who touches their genitals learns that when they move and touch their body parts, they experience pleasurable sensations; this is an exploratory, normative sexual behaviour. As we have mentioned above, once they reach puberty, they may have an increased desire to touch their genitals for pleasure. Our Year 5 lesson explores a variety of feelings and emotions that may come up during puberty, and we reflect on and debunk the myth that masturbation is harmful to help reduce the shame, stigma - and related risks to mental health - a child might feel if they are developing an interest in touching themselves in this way. In line with statutory requirements, we also acknowledge that there are different opinions and beliefs about it too. Just like every other part of growing up, some children mature sooner or later than others.

To what extent do the lessons cover sexual abuse and sexual harassment?

The term 'sexual harassment' won't appear in lesson plans (in the same way that the term Female Genital Mutilation isn't named in the language that children are introduced to and taught about) but the principles that underlie prevention of it are very much included.

The values of respect, kindness and caring that underpin many lessons in our values curriculum and in this programme of lessons permission and consent is covered and regularly revised.

Teaching menstruation in Year 3 – is that too early?

The statutory guidance states puberty should be covered in Health Education and should be addressed before onset so, as far as possible, pupils are prepared in advance for changes they will experience.

The NHS states that girls as young as 8 years old start menstruating. Children turn 8 in Year 3, so it is a timely point for them to receive the information before the changes take place. In a Sex Education Forum survey, nearly a quarter of respondents identifying as female did not learn about periods before they started having them. Anecdotally we hear of girls who thought they were dying when they first discovered blood in their knickers, because they had been unprepared. The shame and stigma surrounding menstruation has a big impact on a girl's identity and mental wellbeing.

The statutory guidance states that both boys and girls are to be prepared for the changes that adolescence brings. Best practice states that menstruation education should be delivered to both boys and girls, as learning about menstruation is a concept of reproduction, as covered by the national curriculum science and fosters good relationships by breaking down the stigma of going through these changes leading to less teasing and bullying.

Is the teaching of correct words for genitals the right thing to do and when should it start?

It is recommended that the correct words are used and taught from Nursery/Reception. This ensures all children know the correct words to use, and have the language to communicate to any member of staff, if they need to, about anything related to their genital health, as well as for safeguarding purposes.

Normalising the use of correct anatomical language from an early age helps reduce the stigma that comes with talking about bodies, puberty and sex. It lays the foundations for children to be able to talk openly about these topics and helps create a safe learning environment that allows questions to be asked and answered in an age-appropriate way. The alternative is that children adopt nicknames for their body parts - often unique to their family – that can lead to confusion and embarrassment in later years. It can also lead to missed opportunities as trusted adults are unable to safeguard children who haven't been taught to use the correct vocabulary

Do you recommend teaching girls and boys together or separately for RSE?

DfE recommends avoid segregating by gender and that it has a positive impact on pupils with children show more empathy and understanding towards each other, leading to a reduction in incidences of teasing and bullying. When deemed beneficial, pupils have opportunities to ask teachers questions in small groups or individually if they have personal concerns about topics and these groups could be gender specific.