



## **“I LOVE IT - BUT WISH IT WERE TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY”**

AN EXPLORATION OF RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION  
IN ENGLISH SECONDARY SCHOOL SETTINGS

## SAFELIVES

We are SafeLives, the UK-wide charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse, for everyone and for good.

We work with organisations across the UK to transform the response to domestic abuse. We want what you would want for your best friend. We listen to survivors, putting their voices at the heart of our thinking. We look at the whole picture for each individual and family to get the right help at the right time to make families everywhere safe and well. And we challenge perpetrators to change, asking ‘why doesn’t he stop?’ rather than ‘why doesn’t she leave?’ This principle applies whatever the gender of the victim or perpetrator and whatever the nature of their relationship.

Last year alone, over 8,500 professionals received our training. Over 75,000 adults at risk of serious harm or murder and more than 95,000 children received support through dedicated multi-agency support designed by us and delivered with partners. In the last six years, almost 3,000 perpetrators have been challenged and supported to change by interventions we created with partners, and that’s just the start.

**Together we can end domestic abuse. Forever.  
For everyone.**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# Executive summary

## BACKGROUND AND AIMS

In 2019, the Department for Education published the Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), and Health Education (RSHE) guidance for primary and secondary schools in England. The statutory RSHE guidance acknowledges that young people are growing up in an increasingly complex and digital world, exposing them to new opportunities, as well as new risks and challenges. The guidance aims to provide young people with information about developing relationships of all kinds, including family relationships, friendships, intimate, romantic, and sexual relationships, equipping them to make safe and informed choices as they progress into adult life (Department for Education, 2019).

This research project aims to explore how the 2019 RSE curriculum is being experienced, both by teachers involved in interpreting and delivering the content, and by the young people receiving it.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How have individual schools developed and delivered the new RSE curriculum?
2. What are teachers' experiences of delivering the RSE curriculum?
3. What ongoing support do teachers need to deliver the RSE curriculum?
4. What are young people's experiences of the RSE curriculum?
5. How has the RSE curriculum enhanced young people's learning around healthy relationships and what is missing?
6. What impact does opt outs from sex education, and home schooling, have on young people's learning around healthy relationships?

## METHODS

This mixed methods study combines quantitative data from two surveys, with qualitative data gathered by establishing partnerships with six secondary schools across England.

**Surveys**  
with 63 RSE teachers  
with 1025 young people

**Interviews**  
with 4 subject experts  
with 12 interviews

**Focus groups**  
7 focus groups with  
37 participants



## KEY FINDINGS THE TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- Staff are usually chosen to teach RSE based on timetabling and capacity, and 17% of RSE teachers surveyed volunteered to teach the subject due to their interest or skillset. This is likely to impact the quality of RSE young people receive, as well as the value students place on RSE as a subject.
- There is large variation in how frequently schools teach RSE and their form of delivery, with most schools (65%) teaching through timetabled lessons, but some teaching through ‘drop down days’ or assemblies.
- RSE is unlike other subjects as young people receive information and education about relationships and sex from many different sources outside of school. RSE teachers are positive about their roles, yet face unique challenges. These include navigating their role within the multitude of information relating to the topics, debunking myths and misinformation, and feeling pressured to deliver learning that they see as paramount to the emotional development of young people.
- There are inconsistencies in terms of how school governance and leadership prioritise and resource RSE. This impacts the ability to embed a whole-school approach and the quality of support teachers receive.
- As a result of lack of confidence and training, some subjects are being taught more consistently than others. When asked which topics they thought were taught well, there were no topics that over half of all students surveyed agreed well taught well. The topics taught the most well were sexual health and safe sex (48%) and consent and how to communicate it (46%). The subjects taught least consistently and least well were female genital mutilation (FGM) and coercive control.
- Teachers want more training in RSE, access to free and engaging resources and more time built into their roles to plan for and deliver RSE.



**The way in which the RSE guidance is being developed, interpreted, and delivered by schools varies a great deal from school to school, in terms of who teaches, the frequency with which it is being taught and the form it is delivered through.**

**Teachers want accessible and in-depth RSE training:**

**Only  
58%**

of teachers surveyed agreed with the statement  
**‘I have had sufficient training to  
teach RSE effectively’**

**14%**

of teachers surveyed  
**have received no training in  
RSE at all.**

This has led to some teachers avoiding ‘tricky topics’ or discussion-based activities that are crucial for young people’s learning.

**Only half (52%)**

of young people surveyed agree or strongly agree

**that RSE classes gave them a good  
understanding of toxic and healthy relationships.**

## KEY FINDINGS INCLUSION IN RSE

- RSE is being received differently by students according to their gender, ability, and racialised, sexual and religious identities, as well as how these identities intersect. This impacts how they experience their relationships with themselves and others, as well as how they receive education about it.
- Gendered norms and gender inequality impacts all young people’s experiences of relationships and help-seeking. Boys face a different set of unique gendered pressures in relation to conducting their personal relationships, including pressures to join gangs or criminal behaviour, the pressure to ‘man up’ and to conceal emotions and refrain from asking for support.
- Teachers and schools are not clear about what constitutes ‘sex education’ within RSE and therefore which parts of RSE students are legally permitted to opt out of. This leads to varied approaches in different schools and some students being removed from RSE due to LGBT+ content, which is not permitted in the guidance.
- Although limited data was collected on the prevalence and impact of opt outs, there is evidence to suggest that young people opted out of school RSE may not be receiving information about relationships and sex elsewhere, potentially preventing them from learning information and skills they need to keep themselves safe.



**LGBT+ students are receiving less education in RSE than heterosexual students: they feel less comfortable, less confident about where to go for support if they or someone they know is experiencing a toxic relationship or sexual abuse, and a significantly smaller proportion have a strong understanding of toxic and healthy relationships.**

The majority of LGBT+ students

**61%** disagree that LGBT+ relationships are being threaded throughout RSE, as is legally required by the guidance.

**Only half (54%)**

of young people surveyed have been taught about

**gender roles and gender equality, and a third (31%) thought this was taught well.**

## KEY FINDINGS SPEAKING TO THEIR REALITIES

- Students want RSE to be normalised and introduced at a younger age. They are aware of the stigma surrounding the subject and feel this impacts their quality of education.
- Students are often exposed to materials or discussions relating to sex or relationships before formalised education is provided, which prevents school based RSE from playing its vital role in supporting young people when they need it and reinforces a stigmatisation of discussions around relationships and sex.
- As a result of the ‘taboo’ nature of RSE in schools, RSE is sometimes an uncomfortable experience for students. Only around half (58%) of students surveyed reported feeling comfortable or extremely comfortable during RSE.
- Stigma around engaging in school based RSE was most evident when it came to the topic of sex and pleasure, however students have expressed an interest in learning more about this topic area. Students want discussions of sex and pleasure to be normalised as understandings of healthy relationships and sexual pleasure are intrinsically linked to understandings of unhealthy and healthy relationships.
- Strategies for normalising and creating safety in school-based RSE from the perspective of students includes discussion-based activities, a relaxed classroom lay-out and trust between students and educators.
- Students value trust between students and teachers and want transparent communication around the limits of confidentiality and safeguarding, as they feel this would encourage help seeking.



**Students want practical and relatable education that equips them with the practice-based skills to navigate relationships safely and healthily; be able to identify harmful behaviours, navigate situations in which someone is using harmful behaviours, and access support.**

When asked about what they want from RSE, the most popular responses from students indicate that they want more from RSE: they want

**‘more relevant examples’  
(47%)**

**‘more open discussions’  
(44%),**

**‘more regular classes’  
(42%).**

# Recommendations

## RSE GUIDANCE

- Guidance on RSHE should include information on intersectionality and a recognition of the importance of it as a concept. Young people are not a homogenous group and their experiences of relationships are simultaneously affected by distinct parts of their identity. The curriculum should make reference to the complexities of young people’s lives and how this impacts their relationship with themselves and others.
- It should include the teaching and inclusion of LGBT+ relationships at an earlier stage in young people’s education, supported with free and accessible resources demonstrating diverse types of relationships and family structures.
- It should also acknowledge the impact of gendered norms and gender inequality on all genders, in particular boys who may also be facing a range of challenges relating to their gender, and it therefore must be nuanced, integrated and comprehensive when addressing their needs.
- Finally, it should include education on sexual intimacy and pleasure, reducing the stigma surrounding healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships and supporting young people to understand boundaries and consent.

## LEADERSHIP

- Schools should be supported by their governance bodies to ensure that RSE is prioritised and provided with resources and time to meaningfully embed a whole-school approach, as recommended in the statutory RSHE guidance. School leaders should foster trust with students and clearly communicate the school’s approach to safeguarding and transparency, to enable help-seeking from students.

## CAPACITY

- Schools should aim to have a distinct pool of comprehensively trained RSE teachers who deliver the subject consistently year upon year. This will allow those teachers to build upon their learning, support one another with queries or challenges, and build trusting relationships with young people, which we know is essential for in-depth RSE skill-building and discussion.





## SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

- Teachers should be offered some training in RSE to adequately implement a whole-school approach which recognises the importance of the subject to young people’s personal development and safety. This should include training on which parts of the RSE curriculum students can and cannot opt out of, and how to manage requests to parental withdraw whilst ensuring children receive relationships education.
- PSHE/RSE Leads and teachers who deliver part or all of the RSE curriculum should receive comprehensive training in RSE, which includes practical teaching strategies and specialist knowledge about delivering RSE in an inclusive way. This training should include:
  - how to deliver skills-based learning about the practicalities of conducting personal relationships, as young people want practical skills as well as information-based knowledge.
  - how to deliver education on healthy relationships and sexual intimacy/pleasure in an age- appropriate and comfortable way, as this is essential for young people’s understanding of healthy and unhealthy relationships.
  - how to provide guidance on where to seek support for themselves or others who are experiencing domestic or sexual abuse
  - how to deliver education about gender norms in a way that includes everyone’s experiences, including ensuring boys feel included, informed and supportive in RSE, particularly regarding the negative impacts these can have on the relationships and mental wellbeing of boys and young men. how to deliver RSE in a LGBT+ inclusive way, including information on gender expression, gender identity and sexual orientation
  - how to address the concept of intersectionality, how it impacts young people’s experiences of themselves and relationships, and how to teach RSE content in an intersectional way.

## CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

- Teachers should ensure that RSE classes include not only factual based information, but also discussion-based activities that address the complicated nuances of navigating relationships. This should include examples and practical advice about how to handle different situations, in order to better reflect young people’s realities.
- There should be a greater focus within RSE on engaging with young men and boys from an early age about gender norms, masculinity and gender inequalities, stimulating conversations which they themselves tell us are missing about their experiences, attitudes, behaviours and expectations when it comes to forming relationships.
- Teachers should work with students through surveys, consultations and other regular engagement to identify when and how they want to receive RSE, to ensure it is meeting young people’s needs.



# Background

## CONTEXT

In 2019, the Department for Education published the Relationships, Relationships and Sex Education, and Health Education (RSHE) guidance for primary and secondary schools in England. Following years of campaigning and pressure from stakeholders, the guidance made it compulsory for all secondary schools in England to teach Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) (Department for Education, 2019).

The announcement was welcomed by youth, women’s and domestic abuse organisations alike, as evidence has demonstrated the potential for schools to play a central role in providing young people with the knowledge to recognise signs of abuse, develop skills to seek support when necessary, and ultimately, to prevent domestic and other forms of abuse (End Violence Against Women, 2017; Children’s Commissioner, 2017)

The guidance stipulates 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, up to and until three terms before the child turns 16 (Department for Education, 2019). According to the guidance schools are free to determine how to deliver RSE content, and therefore what constitutes sex education within RSE often differs depending on each school.

The statutory RSHE guidance acknowledges that young people are growing up in an increasingly complex and digital world, exposing them to new opportunities, as well as new risks and challenges. It aims to provide young people with information about developing relationships of all kinds, including family relationships, friendships, intimate, romantic and sexual relationships, equipping them to make safe and informed choices as they progress into adult life (Department for Education, 2019).

## AIMS AND PURPOSE

The following research project aims to explore how the 2019 RSE curriculum is being experienced, both by teachers involved in interpreting and delivering the content, and by the young people receiving it.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. **How have individual schools developed and delivered the new RSE curriculum?**
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# Methodology

This mixed methods and exploratory study combines quantitative data from two surveys, with qualitative data gathered by establishing partnerships with six secondary schools in England.

Partner schools were identified and selected through a range of means; two through pre-established professional connections with SafeLives and the remainder through partnering with a company that has access to a large teacher directory.

Partner schools aimed to span across diverse populations and were situated in London, North West, South East, South West, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and the Humber.

Partner schools disseminated the young people’s survey amongst their students and hosted two SafeLives researchers to conduct focus groups and interviews with young people and teaching staff respectively. In return, SafeLives provided each partner school with a bespoke report summarising their student’s anonymous survey data, thereby supporting teachers to adapt and improve their RSE provision.

School Name	Urban/Rural	School Type	Faith Status	Gender Composition	% Pupil premium eligible students <sup>1</sup>	Progress 8 score <sup>2</sup>
School A	Urban city and town	Free school	None	Mixed	27%	Above average (0.8)
School B	Urban city and town	Academy converter	Church of England	Mixed	10%	Average (-0.12)
School C	Urban minor conurbation	Academy converter	None	Mixed	16%	Well above average (0.73)
School D	Rural town and fringe	Independent boarding	Church of England	Mixed	11%	N/A
School E	Urban major conurbation	Academy converter	None	Mixed	38%	Average (-0.08)
School F	Rural town and fringe	Independent boarding	Church of England	Girls	27%	N/A

1 Pupil premium is funding provided to schools to improve education outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in schools in England.

2 Progress 8 score is a measure published annually showing the average academic performance of a secondary school.

# Research activities

M E T H O D O L O G Y

## CONSULTATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

### Survey (1,025 responses)

Participants in the young people's survey comprised of 1,025 adolescents aged between 11 and 18 years old, attending secondary schools in England. The demographics of participants included a range of genders, sexual orientations, and ethnicities, as detailed in Appendix 1.

The survey was disseminated through partner schools, SafeLives networks, social media, and in collaboration with a TikTok influencer. We also collaborated with Youth Realities to design and carry out a workshop based on the survey questions, which was delivered in two schools in London.

### Focus groups (7 focus groups, with 37 participants)

Focus groups were chosen as a method to uncover the complexities of young people's views on relationships, the role of

education in enhancing their understanding of relationships, and to allow them to reimagine the future of RSE according to their needs.

Seven focus groups were conducted: one in each school, with the exception of one school which held two focus groups. They were facilitated by two SafeLives researchers and held with small groups of five to eight students aged 13-16 years old. Further demographic information is detailed in Appendix 2.

Existing research suggests that the gender mix of focus groups may influence the views expressed when discussing sensitive topics, such as relationships or sex, especially if participants are not familiar with each other (Adler et al., 2019). However, as most partner schools had been delivering RSE in mixed gender groups, both mixed-gender and single-gender focus groups were held, including two focus groups exclusively with boys and two exclusively with girls.

At the start of each focus group participants were explained the aims and ethical considerations, given time to ask questions and asked to sign a consent form if they agreed to continue. The structure of the focus groups was designed around scenario-based questions about what they would teach if they were teaching young people their age to navigate their personal relationships, how they would teach it, and the extent to which this imagined ideal education resembles their current RSE classes. The power relationship between researcher and the researched is likely to be pronounced when working with young people (Wire, 2021), and may have been compounded by the fact that focus groups took place during school time in classrooms. Therefore, scenarios were used to empower participants to adopt the role of the educator and lead the discussion in the direction of their choice, ensuring sensitive topics were only brought up if participants themselves felt comfortable to do so (Whitaker & Savage, 2014).

## CONSULTATION WITH SUBJECT EXPERTS

### Interviews (4 participants)

Individuals with expertise in RSE were identified and interviewed to provide contextual and socio-political information about relationships education, the statutory curriculum, and the sector as a whole. Experts included academics, a practitioner with expertise in RSE for students with special educational needs or disabilities, and a relationships and sex education workshop facilitator.

## CONSULTATION WITH TEACHERS

### Survey (63 responses)

The teacher survey questions revolved around both practical considerations relating to how RSE is developed, structured and delivered, as well as some confidence and motivation related questions.

Respondents to the teacher survey came from a range of geographical regions and types of schools. Their roles are summarised in the table (right).



Teacher roles	%
<b>PSHE lead</b>	<b>67%</b>
<b>Subject teacher<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>39%</b>
<b>Head of Department</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>Pastoral lead</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>17%</b>
<b>Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo)</b>	<b>3%</b>

### Interviews (12 participants)

Interviews generated information on respondents' daily experiences and captured personal perspectives that are difficult to gather through quantitative research methods. In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out virtually with twelve teachers, comprising of two teachers from each partner school. Seven of the twelve participants chose to disclose their demographic data. The sample included one male and six females, which are detailed in Appendix 3.

3. Also referred to as classroom teacher

## CO-CREATION

SafeLives is committed to placing those with lived experience at the heart of everything we do. We worked with a victim-survivor of domestic abuse referred to as a 'SafeLives Pioneer' to guide the design of research tools.

The research design aimed to centre the voices of teachers and young people, foregrounding inclusivity, and using participatory and collaborative approaches to allow for nuanced and meaningful discussion (Scott et al., 2020). SafeLives worked closely with a group of young people referred to as 'Change Makers' who were consulted at three stages across the research process to ensure that the research materials for young people were appropriate, age relevant, and engaging. The collaboration also aimed to empower youth by providing them insight into professional research skills.

## ANALYSIS

Data analysis was undertaken between August and October 2022. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups was transcribed and analysed using Dedoose qualitative analysis software to conduct thematic analysis, using deductive and inductive approaches. Transcripts were read several times and initial codes relevant to the research questions were identified. After the data was coded, codes were incorporated into sub-themes and final themes, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2008). SafeLives consulted with specialist organisations FORWARD and Comics Youth to support with analysis of specific themes according to their expertise.

## LIMITATIONS

Efforts were made to reach out to home-schooled young people. Although the statutory RSE guidance does not apply to home-schooled young people, we wanted to include their perspectives on RSE in general. However, after reaching out to partner schools for contacts and contacting home schooling associations for their participation, we weren't able to reach this cohort.

# Findings and discussion

## The teaching experience

The following section pieces together an understanding of the current landscape for teachers delivering RSE, including the practicalities, challenges, motivations, and training needs.



### KEY FINDINGS

- The way in which the RSE guidance is being developed, interpreted, and delivered by schools varies a great deal from school to school, in terms of who teaches, the frequency with which it is being taught and the form it is delivered through.
- Staff are usually chosen to teach RSE based on timetabling and capacity, and 17% of RSE teachers surveyed volunteered to teach the subject due to their interest or skillset. This is likely to impact the quality of RSE young people receive, as well as the value students place on RSE as a subject.
- There is large variation in how frequently schools teach RSE and their form of delivery, with most schools (65%) teaching through timetabled lessons, but some teaching through ‘drop down days’ or assemblies.
- RSE is unlike other subjects as young people receive information and education about relationships and sex from many different sources outside of school. RSE teachers are positive about their roles, yet face unique challenges. These include navigating their role within the multitude of information relating to the topics, debunking myths and misinformation, and feeling pressured to deliver learning that they see as paramount to the emotional development of young people.
- There are inconsistencies in terms of how school governance and leadership prioritise and resource RSE. This impacts the ability to embed a whole-school approach and the quality of support teachers receive.
- Teachers want accessible and in-depth RSE training. Only 58% of teachers surveyed agreed with the statement ‘I have had sufficient training to teach RSE effectively’. Most teachers (69%) surveyed have received in-school training, however 14% of teachers have received no training in RSE at all. This has led to some teachers avoiding ‘tricky topics’ or discussion-based activities that are crucial for young people’s learning.
- As a result of lack of confidence and training, some subjects are being taught more consistently than others. When asked which topics they thought were taught well, there were no topics that over half of all students surveyed agreed well taught well. The topics taught the most well were sexual health and safe sex (48%) and consent and how to communicate it (46%). The subjects taught least consistently and least well were female genital mutilation (FGM) and coercive control.
- Only half (52%) of young people surveyed agree or strongly agree that RSE classes gave them a good understanding of toxic and healthy relationships.
- Teachers want more training in RSE, access to free and engaging resources and more time built into their roles to plan for and deliver RSE.

# Variation in delivery

Through research activities in partner schools, we found great variation in how schools and teachers interpret and adapt the RSE guidance and suggest that this variation impacts the quality of relationships skills and information young people receive.

## VARIATION IN STAFFING APPROACHES

Overall, teachers in surveys and interviews understood and loved their roles. Most teachers (84%) felt they had a good understanding of the RSE curriculum, felt *'lucky to be teaching a subject like this'* and others found it *'really rewarding as I think you can genuinely make a difference'*.

However, findings from the teacher survey found that most staff teaching RSE aren't doing so as part of a dedicated RSE or PSHE role. One in four (25%) reported that they were selected to teach RSE due to capacity, and only 17% volunteered to teach RSE due to their interest or skillset. It is worth considering that these figures are likely to be impacted by response bias, since the survey was directed at 'RSE teachers', and many teachers asked to deliver RSE may not consider themselves

as such, and therefore may not have chosen to participate in the survey.

Interviews with teachers across the six partner schools provide a more holistic representation of the teaching experience. Teachers in interviews shared that staff are usually chosen to teach RSE based on timetabling and capacity, but large variation was observed in how schools divided RSE content amongst staff. In some schools, dozens of teachers were selected to teach RSE content, most of whom weren't 'specialists'<sup>4</sup> and some of whom felt 'chucked in the deep end', at times expressing reluctance to teach certain topics.

One teacher explained that in their school *"it's not always the same people teaching it, year in, year out, and*

**"You might have a teacher teaching something and they don't really know ...you know... and there isn't an RSE department, you know – there aren't specialists of that thing – and like... in the same way as you wouldn't send an English teacher to go and teach Maths, just because they were under in their hours."**

TEACHER

## THE TEACHING EXPERIENCE

*sometimes, it's not even the same teacher teaching it for the whole year'*, and estimated they had *'25, 30 staff delivering PSHE'*. They expressed concern around the impact of this on young people's learning and development, admitting that as a result, *'I think they devalue it, for sure'*.

This was reflected in a focus group with young people:

(P1, Male): I don't... I don't think it's the teacher's fault. I think it's just...

(P2, Male): The way it's taught.

(P1, Male): Not... not the way it's taught. It's just what the teachers aren't, cos most of the teachers that teach it, after the... aren't qualified for it.

(P3, Male): Yeah.

(P1, Male): Yeah, I think it should be...

(P2, Male): They don't have the experience.

(P1, Male): Most of them are like RE teachers...

(P2, Male): Not... no, there's... it's not history teachers...

(P1, Male):... history teachers.

(P3, Male):... his... there's... we've got...

(P1, Male): It's just anyone

Young people in this focus group were aware that RSE is taught based on capacity as opposed to skills or interest and appeared to associate this with the perceived value and importance of the subject.

<sup>4</sup> Teachers in interviews referred to PSHE/RSE Leads or those with experience and/or training in RSE as 'specialists'.

In other schools, RSE is taught by a smaller distinct group of staff led by a passionate PSHE Lead, and one teacher said they had “maybe four teachers who have regularly taught PSHE, and they take quite a chunk of the classes”. This school’s young people’s survey results were dramatically different, highlighting the positive impact of this teaching structure on the education on relationships and sex received by students.

**Good practice**

In one school, the PSHE Lead plans all RSE classes from Years 7 upwards, teaches every year group and had been in the role for many years. She herself recognised the value of this structure, allowing her to develop in-depth knowledge of the topic and trusted bonds with students. This mirrors findings from the focus group at this school, in which young people appeared to value consistency and familiarity as tools to fostering a comfortable learning environment built on trust.

*“Because we know her, because she’s been our Head of Year as well, so we know her and you know it’s like normal ... and she’s always been the PSHE teacher as well ... So it’s like, it’s like building a friendly relationship with her.” – Student*

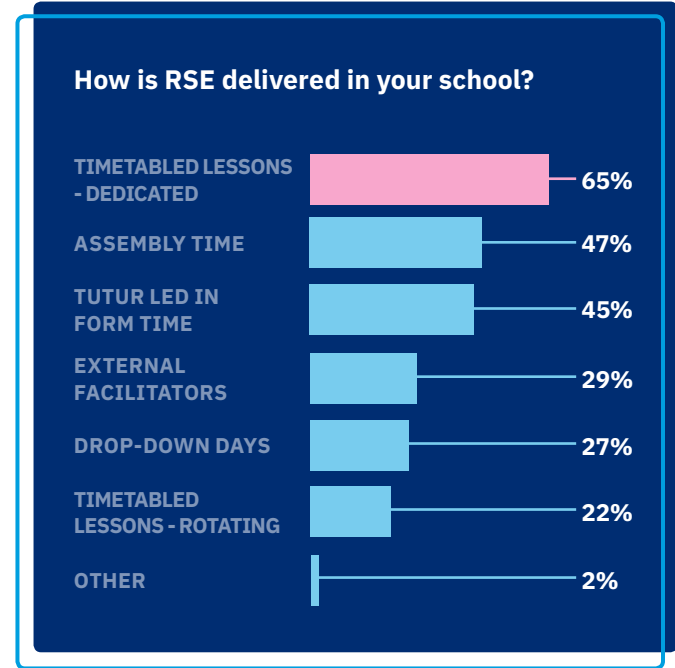
**VARIATION IN FREQUENCY AND DELIVERY**

There was large variation in how schools structured the frequency and delivery of RSE, including once a week, fortnightly, in large chunks during one or two entire days referred to as ‘drop down days’, during timetabled PSHE lessons, during group tutor time, in assemblies, in boarding houses, and as lectures led by external workshop leaders. Most indicated that their schools taught RSE in a combination of ways.

It is positive to see that the majority of schools (65%) had timetabled PSHE lessons, as ensuring dedicated and regular time slots allow for a ‘spiral’ model of delivery in which students build upon foundational knowledge year upon year (Department for Education, 2019; PSHE Association, 2022). This was seen as an effective approach, by experts, young people and teachers in the research.

**“We talk a lot about a spiral curriculum, where we build on previous knowledge, and we constantly reinforce past messages and add new ones, that would be the ideal, for there to be a reliable, constant, ever-building and reinforced kind of knowledge.”**

EXPERT 2



Although different delivery approaches should be adapted to the specific contexts of each school, there was agreement amongst students, teachers and experts that ‘drop down days’ were not conducive to learning, as young people acknowledged that they were seen as ‘a day off’, and one expert described them as a ‘disaster’.

Teachers and experts acknowledge that time, resources and school prioritisation presented major barriers to effective delivery. As one teacher put it *‘I love it - but wish it were taken more seriously by my school. They get two hours a year in an assembly format.’*



# RSE as a different kind of subject

THE TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Through interviews with teachers, we found that as a subject, RSE is different to others, bringing with it unique and at times pressuring challenges which require the subject to be conceptualised differently.

## Schools as only one source of RSE information

Evidence suggest that knowledge and education about relationships fit within an eco-system of information that spans far beyond the classroom (Barter et al., 2009; Daw, 2021; Setty, 2021). As part of the Your Best Friend Project, SafeLives and partners found that, 71% of young people have seen, or had a friend talk to them about worrying behaviours in a relationship and of those 9 in 10 young people had talked to a friend to try to help them (Daw, 2021). The SafeLives Verge of Harm[ing] report found that young people’s relationships are interconnected, and the way in which these relationships can normalise abuse and reinforce this normalisation (Meechem et al, 2022). Stanley et al (2015) explored schools as settings for violence prevention and argues that conceptualisations of abuse and relationships are culturally shaped (Stanley et al, 2015). The role of school RSE therefore, represents one source of information and skill-building amongst many, and this is reflected in the young people’s data.

Almost half (46%) of young people said they talk to other people or access information about sex and relationships outside of school. Of those, 36% talk to friends, 24% talk to parents, 16% through social media, 12% talk to siblings, 12% learn through TV shows, 11% through online content or websites, and 6% learn through watching pornography.

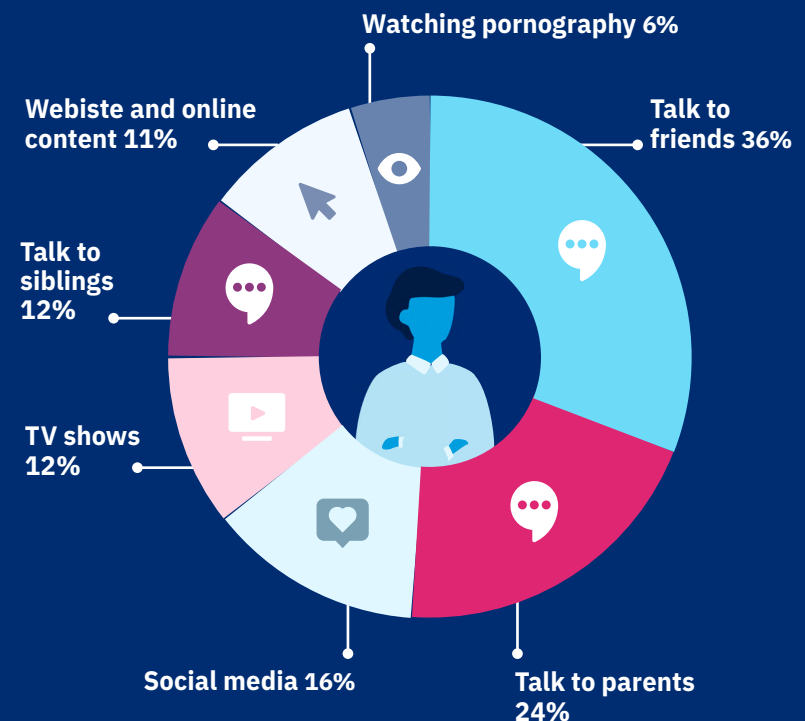
This eco-system of influences shapes how and what the young people learn about relationships and sex. Teachers have told us that this means navigating and debunking misinformation relating to complex topics, such as social pressures, body image and ‘pornography, and that kind of whole idea that this is how we should be.’

A result of the complex and personal nature of the topics covered in RSE, as well as the multiple influences received about it, findings indicate that RSE teachers conceptualise their roles differently, and understood their roles as paramount to the emotional development of students, transferring to them values and emotional skills. Some felt pressured to ensure young people were kept safe, and conceptualised their roles as instrumental to creating ‘good citizens’.

“It’s the most important subject in my view. Everyone needs PSHE knowledge. They don’t always get it at home or they have a lot of incorrect information. We are trying to help them become decent human beings and good citizens in the world.’

TEACHER

## Where do you talk about or get information about sex and relationship outside of school?



# Prioritisation of RSE and whole-school approach

## THE TEACHING EXPERIENCE

The findings showed inconsistencies in terms of how schools prioritise and resource RSE, and that this may impact the quality of education students receive about healthy relationships. There was agreement amongst most teachers that some schools prioritise the subject more than others. One teacher shared that they were currently looking for a job in a school **‘that actually values it’**, whilst another teacher in the survey reported that they felt **‘lucky, as our SLT holds PSHE high up on their agenda.’**

Through interviews, teachers shared that key to the subject’s prioritisation is school leaders’ understanding and appreciation

of the value of RSE, and the meaningful integration of RSE as a whole-school approach. A ‘whole school approach’, as encouraged in the statutory guidance, describes the ideal approach in which education on relationships, values and safety are embedded within the context of a school’s broader ethos and approach to developing students socially, morally, spiritually and culturally (Department for Education, 2019)

Teachers felt strongly about the importance of good quality RSE, but that without the structural support and prioritisation by the school governance, there was too much pressure.

**“I think there’s a lot of pressure on a very few people, to actually make it work... I get an hour a week to do the job – you know, to do all the planning and everything – and yet, I’m getting real pressure from above, saying, “This is so important. ... “The girls will ...you know... they’ll suffer if we don’t get it right.” Of course they will, yeah, but it’s a hell of a lot of bloody pressure, when you are ...you know... you’re one person.”**

TEACHER

**“I think I hope, long-term, in all schools, it’s recognised as a real... as a subject, you know? And you have your strengths – your strongest staff – teaching that subject.”**

TEACHER

Overall, two thirds of teachers surveyed (67%) agreed that they get enough support from their school to deliver RSE effectively and safely. However, when looking at answers from non-PSHE Leads, this drops to only half (52%). This mirrors recent findings from NSPCC, which found that 86% of teachers feel they need more resources and training in RSE (NSPCC, 2022).

The teachers who felt RSE was prioritised by school leaders emphasised open communication between subject leads and Heads, leading to collaborative development and delivery of the RSE policy and curriculum. According to some teachers, improving attitudes to RSE by school leaders should be rooted in affording RSE the status of a legitimate subject and regarded with the same legitimacy as more traditional subjects like mathematics. They suggested that doing so would ensure that the subject is properly resourced and taught by those staff who are best placed to do so.

# Training needs

THE TEACHING EXPERIENCE



**T**raining and the lack thereof emerged as a prominent theme.

Most teachers surveyed had received some form of RSE training, but this was mostly in-school training (69%). One third (31%) received 'Other' form of training, 29% percent received training from the Department for Education, 24% received training in ad hoc drop down days and 14% reported to have received none at all.

Teachers in interviews told us that staff who lack confidence and experience in RSE sometimes direct students away from discussion-based activities and rely on a lecture-style of delivery or invite external speakers to cover topics considered challenging. This was noted by students too, who could recognise when a teacher was or wasn't an RSE specialist and knew they weren't trained.

**"I mean, some of them may know a lot about what they're teaching but some of them will just flick through a PowerPoint and say what it says on it and they're just... they're doing their job and I'm sure they do it to their best but I think, having a specialist, who really knows about it and knows how to teach it and make it interactive, would... it would just help everyone out and you would learn a lot more."**

STUDENT

Hesitancy towards delivering RSE appeared to be rooted in feeling unequipped to facilitate debates, personal religious views, or expected embarrassment about discussing sensitive topics with students, and one teacher admitted they 'can see that quite a lot of staff who aren't specialists will... will veer away from the tricky conversations. I would say that's common.'

Overall  
**Only 58%**  
 of teachers agreed with the statement  
**'I have had sufficient training to teach RSE effectively'**

This is reflected in the young people's survey, in which students were asked about which topics they were taught in RSE, and which topics they thought were taught well. Unsurprisingly, the findings show that the topics taught the most were also, generally, the topics taught the most well according to young people.

**“I LOVE IT - BUT WISH IT WERE TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY”**

The graph shows that when asked which topics they thought were taught well, there were no topics that over half of all students surveyed agreed well taught well. The topic which the highest proportion of young people reported being taught, and taught well, was ‘sexual health and safe sex-STIs, contraception etc.’ (71% were taught this, 48% said they were taught this well). Although scientific explanations are essential for young people’s understanding of reproductive health and their bodies, teachers saw these topics as the ‘easier topics’ that are based on facts, as opposed to the more nuanced and challenging subjects such as tactics of domestic abuse, controlling behaviours or navigating sexual boundaries. Scholars and practitioners have recently been advocating for a ‘Rights-based approach’ to RSE, that applies a human-rights framework to create an active, sex positive and participatory education that goes beyond biology focused subjects (Setty & Dobson, 2022).

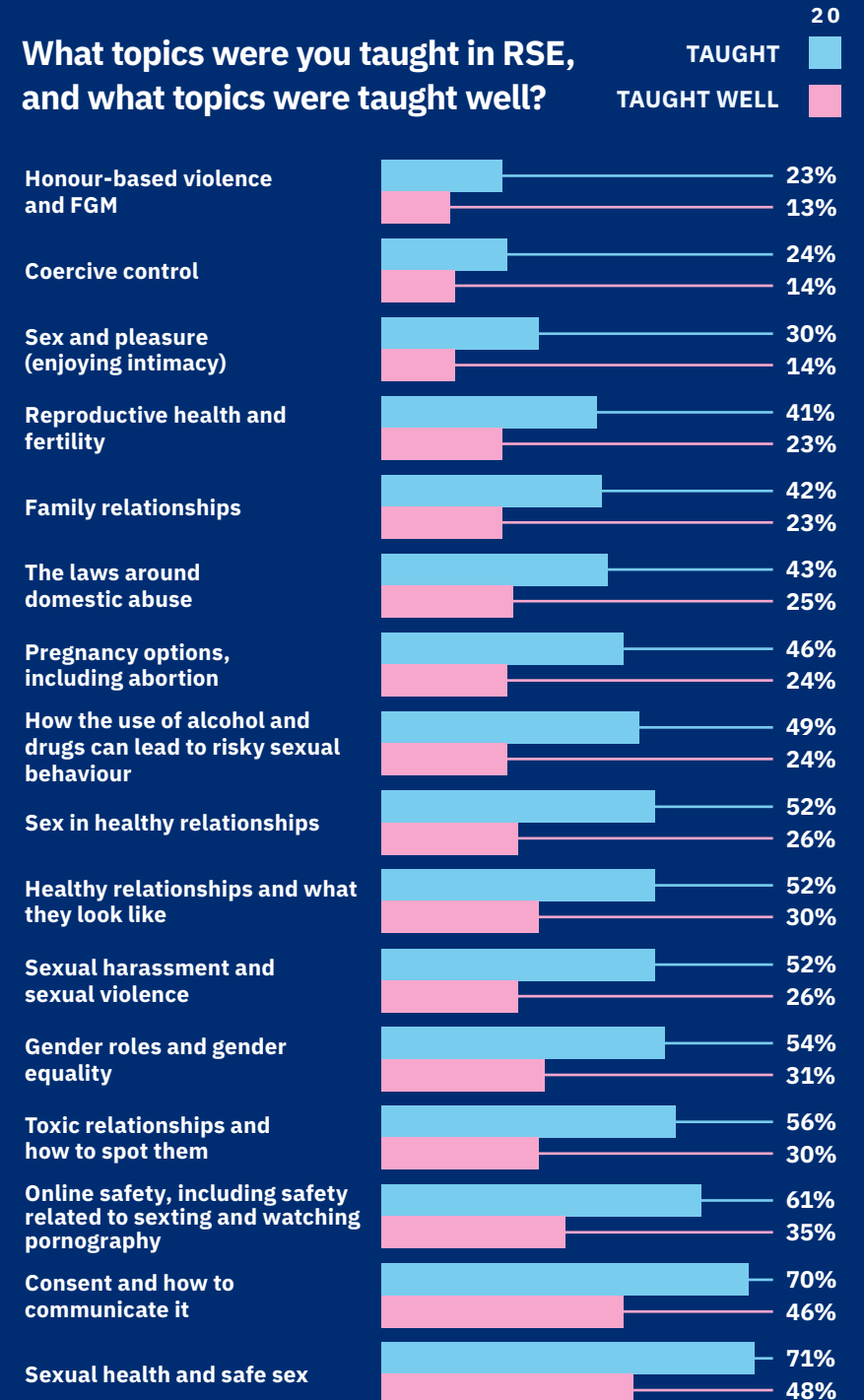
The next most commonly received topics were ‘consent and how to communicate it’ (70% were taught this, 46% said they were taught this well), and ‘Online safety, including safety related to sexting and watching pornography’ (61% were taught this, 35% were taught this well). It is positive to see that consent and online safety have been added to RSE to reflect the current realities of young people’s lives, however the data does also show room for improvement in teaching these topics.

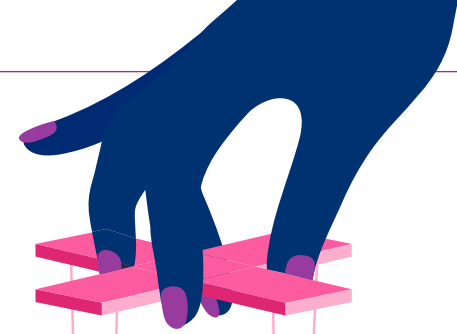
The topics taught the least frequently and the least well were ‘Honour-based violence and ‘Female genital mutilation (FGM)’ (23% were taught it, 13% reported it was taught well).

We consulted with FORWARD, a specialist FGM organization, to integrate their professional expertise into the analysis of the data. They told us “when these subjects are delivered to students by knowledgeable facilitators who use appropriate language and methodology, the response from teachers as well as students has been very positive”, supporting the idea that the teachers’ lack of confidence in these subjects may be influencing the quality of education students are receiving.

Although FORWARD highlighted that the data on FGM and HBV in this research is limited and does not show the full context of schools’ experience when dealing with these topics, they suggested that further research is needed to understand why the students feel the topics are not taught well, and whether the context in which these sessions are delivered to students differs from the other topics the students felt were taught well. FORWARD also identified an urgent need to standardise training on FGM in schools to ensure that the same curriculum is used by all organisations, and the need to create more accessible resources that are suitable for different ages and abilities of children.

**What topics were you taught in RSE, and what topics were taught well?**





In terms of topics taught in RSE, it is also concerning to see that only 24% of students reported being taught about coercive control, and only 13% thought it was taught well, especially since there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that partner violence amongst young people is relatively widespread (Korkmaz et al., 2020). One study of 74,908 school students aged 11-16, found that 18% of girls and 16% of boys reported instigating emotional dating violence (Young et al., 2019). Findings from the Young Best Friend Project, in which SafeLives and partners conducted research into how girls, young women and non-binary people conduct relationships, found that coercive and controlling behaviours are so common in their social circles, they consider them normal (Daw, 2021).

Research from SafeLives and others has also shown that young people are most likely to go to their friends for help if they are experiencing abuse in relationships (Barter et al., 2009; Daw, 2021), therefore, it is vital that young people have a good understanding of toxic and healthy

relationships, how to identify them, and how to signpost to support. For resources for young people themselves, The Your Best Friend Project launched the #FriendsCanTell campaign which provides advice and resources for young people worried about a friend’s relationship.

When we asked teachers what they needed to enable them to deliver RSE effectively, three aspects of support emerged very strongly: resources, training, and time. Some teachers wanted training on how to set up a safe learning environment, whilst others wanted training to create lessons that were reflective, interactive and practical. This reflects what young people want from their RSE which is further explored later in this report. In general, teachers felt that although many resources existed, not all were free, centralised, or engaging for young people in this current socio-cultural context.

Teachers are aware that subjects that are assessed are prioritised, and that although RSE is now compulsory ‘nothing went with it to make it a priority in school...other than

Data from the young people’s survey found that

**Only half (52%)**

**agree or strongly agree that RSE classes gave them a good understanding of toxic and healthy relationships.**

writing the policy, and saying, “Oh, you’ve got to deliver this”, nothing was... no time was ring-fenced for it, **and I think you’re going to see that across different schools they deliver it in different ways!**

This quote encapsulated the findings presented in this theme, and show how, despite passionate and informed teachers, a lack of ringfenced time and funding has led to schools interpreting and delivering the statutory RSE guidance very differently. As a result, the quality of relationships education students are receiving depends very much on the school and the values and priorities of those who govern them.

**“Everything. Resources, training, time.”**

TEACHER

# Findings and discussion

## Inclusion in RSE

This section discusses how the different and multiple identities of students intersect and impact both their experiences of personal relationships and their education around them.



### KEY FINDINGS

- RSE is being received differently by students according to their gender, ability, and racialised, sexual and religious identities, as well as how these identities intersect. This impacts how they experience their relationships with themselves and others, as well as how they receive education about it.
- LGBT+ students are receiving less education in RSE than heterosexual students: they feel less comfortable, less confident about where to go for support if they or someone they know is experiencing a toxic relationship or sexual abuse, and a significantly smaller proportion have a strong understanding of toxic and healthy relationships.
- The majority of LGBT+ students (61%) disagree that LGBT+ relationships are being threaded throughout RSE, as is legally required by the guidance.
- Gendered norms and gender inequality impacts all young people’s experiences of relationships and help-seeking. Boys face a different set of unique gendered pressures in relation to conducting their personal relationships, including pressures to join gangs or criminal behaviour, the pressure to ‘man up’ and to conceal emotions and refrain from asking for support.
- Despite the impact of gender on their everyday lives and relationships, only half (54%) of young people surveyed have been taught about gender roles and gender equality, and a third (31%) thought this was taught well.
- Teachers and schools are not clear about what constitutes ‘sex education’ within RSE and therefore which parts of RSE students are legally permitted to opt out of. This leads to varied approaches in different schools and some students being removed from RSE due to LGBT+ content, which is not permitted in the guidance.
- Although limited data was collected on the prevalence and impact of opt outs, there is evidence to suggest that young people opted out of school RSE may not be receiving information about relationships and sex elsewhere, potentially preventing them for learning information and skills they need to keep themselves safe.

# Intersectionality

I N C L U S I O N I N R S E



**“There can be that tendency to... infantilise people a little bit, and sort of talk about... maybe say to a girl, ‘Oh, well when you get a boyfriend’ or ‘When you get married to a man’ or whatever”**

EXPERT 4

The term intersectionality was first coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw and describes how categories of social and political experience such as race, gender, ability, socio-economic status and immigration status, amongst others, are interconnected and intersect with one another, causing additional vulnerabilities to discrimination or structural disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1998).

Almost all experts interviewed highlighted the importance of RSE providing an education on intersectionality, particularly in terms of harassment, disability, and how faith and gender intersect in relation to gender-based violence. One expert who works with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) both in special and mainstream schools, highlighted a tendency by teachers to ‘infantilise’ disabled people in relation to their sexual orientation, including assuming heterosexuality.

Experts also highlighted the need to teach about racialised elements of sexual harassment, especially in relation to girls from racialised minorities. One expert explained that *“there is no standard body form, but in terms of ethnic diversity, particularly, I think there is an assumed whiteness as the norm in RSE.”* This was reflected in a focus group with majority Black female participants:

**“I really want to make a point. I feel like... let’s say we had these classes; I feel like we need to understand that some girls are gonna be curvy. That’s... they’re beautiful. That’s genetic.”**

STUDENT

**“I just feel like they should teach boys that it doesn’t matter about the body shape or what kind of body you have, it’s all about the heart and about the personality etc. because some girls they be feeling... they be getting insecure when boys say, ‘aw, she’s not light skin, I don’t want her blah blah.”**

STUDENT

Participants spoke about how attractiveness was often positioned in relation to ‘whiteness’, demonstrating how their experience of relationships are shaped not only by their girlhood but also their race, and crucially, how the RSE classes received did not speak to this reality.

The Good Practice Guide for Teaching RSE recommends that RSE needs to educate and empower young people to understand and challenge unequal power structures (Jenkinson, 2021), and the need for this was reflected in discussions with young people. Of course, the application of intersectionality in terms of practice and delivery of RSE may be challenging, especially for teachers with less experience and training on intersectional dimensions of relationships. However, findings demonstrate how young people’s relationships are shaped by intersectional structures, in turn evidencing the reasons why RSE should aim to reflect these realities and provide young people with the appropriate tools for them to navigate these realities safely.

# LGBT+ inclusion



## INCLUSION IN RSE

The policy position of the LGBT+ community in the UK has improved considerably over the past decades (Harris et al., 2021). Section 28 of the Local Government Act was repealed in 2003, ending the Act that prohibited local authorities from ‘promoting’ homosexuality. In addition, according to the Department for Education, schools now must comply with relevant provision of The Equality Act 2010, and The Equality Act 2010: Advice for Schools, under which sexual orientation and gender reassignment are included amongst protected characteristics (Department for Education, 2014). However, research has documented the ‘legacy’ left behind by Section 28 in schools, resulting in a continued ‘othering’ of LGBT+ students within discussion of relationships and sex, and a fear within schools of discussion of non-heterosexual relationships (Glazzard & Stones, 2021, Sauntson, 2021)

In the statutory RSE guidance, schools are advised that:

**“At the point at which schools consider it appropriate to teach their students 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 standalone unit or lesson. Schools are free to determine how they do this, and we expect all students to have been taught LGBT content at a timely point as part of this area of the curriculum.”**

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION, 2019

Although SafeLives welcome the inclusion of LGBT+ relations in statutory RSE, the above wording is vague and the requirement to include LGBT+ content *‘at the point at which schools consider it appropriate’*, inadvertently frames LGBT+ identities and relationships as somehow ‘inappropriate’ for younger students (Sauntson, 2021), in turn perpetuating a homophobic discourse that positions queerness as ‘deviant’, and sexualises LGBT+ relationships in a way that heterosexual relationships are not (Glazzard & Stones, 2021). As one male pupil recalls, it is often normalised *‘in nursery and reception people have mini girlfriends’*, and yet queer relationships in nursery are framed as ‘inappropriate’.

One expert interviewed explained that the wording of the guidance is likely to

be intentionally vague to appease groups who oppose LGBT+ inclusion in RSE, whose backlash was most obviously manifested through protests outside schools in Birmingham when the guidance was first released in 2019 (BBC News, 2019). The latest Home Office statistics showed a 56% increase in the number of hate crimes against transgender people, and a 42% rise in hate crimes targeting people’s sexual orientation from March 2021 to March 2022 in England and Wales (Home Office, 2022). In this current context, teachers may feel under pressure to teach about gender and sexuality in an inclusive way, but unequipped to do so causing them to avoid the discussion of sexuality and gender identity completely, further alienating trans and non-binary people.

The impact of this can be seen in the data. Although the vast majority (77%) of teachers surveyed reported that they feel equipped to deliver the RSE curriculum in an inclusive way to LGBT+ students, results from the young people’s survey show a less decisive picture.



Since LGBT+ identities include both gender identity and sexual orientation, LGBT+ responses are represented in two survey questions, one concerning gender identity and another concerning sexual orientation. In order to analyse responses from the LGBT+ community and ensure duplication does not occur, responses have been split according to these questions, thereby grouping LGB+<sup>5</sup> students (15%) and Trans+<sup>6</sup> and Non-binary students (3%).<sup>7</sup>

As shown in **graph 1**, when asked about whether LGBT+ relationships are threaded throughout RSE classes, views from heterosexual identifying young people are relatively evenly split, with one third (33%) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that LGBT+ content is threaded throughout.

Amongst LGB+ students, who are more likely than heterosexual students to be aware of LGBT+ content due to their lived experience, two fifths (61%) disagree or strongly disagree that LGBT+ content is threaded throughout, possibly indicating that teachers and schools are struggling for ways to integrate LGBT+ relationships gradually and naturally, thus continuing with heteronormative education. Similar results are seen when splitting the data by gender identity, as over two thirds (67%) of Trans+ and Non-binary disagree

of strongly disagree, compared to just one third (30%) of male respondents and (34%) of female respondents.

This was reflected in focus groups with young people:

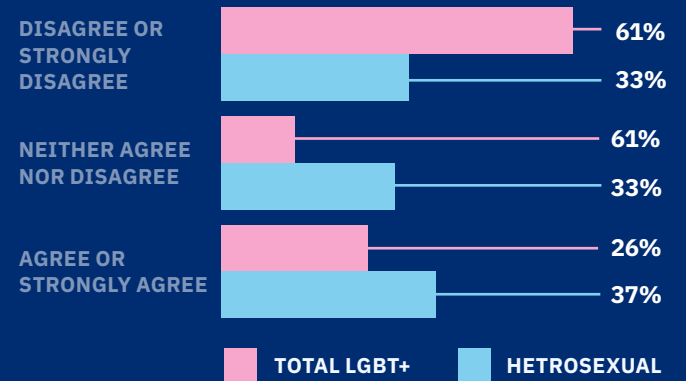
**“I feel like when we’re looking at our own sexuality it’s all a bit confusing and you don’t really know where to go, and I also think that because of heteronormativity- being straight- is just kind of the default that they just assume you are.”**

STUDENT

Further divisions between LGB+ students and heterosexual students are observed when splitting the data from the young people survey. Not only are classes not seen to be threaded throughout, but overall, LGB+ students report feeling less comfortable in classes, less confident about where to go for support around abuse, and reported less understanding of toxic and healthy relationships.

Data showed that one third (32%) of LGB+ respondents felt ‘uncomfortable’ in RSE, which is more than double the proportion when compared to heterosexual students (15%).

**Graph 1 To what extent do you agree that LGBT+ relationships are threaded throughout RSE Classes?**



**Graph 2 How comfortable did you feel in relationships and sex education classes?**



<sup>5</sup> 'LGB+' includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual or asexual participants respondents.

<sup>6</sup> 'Trans+' includes respondents who preferred to self-describe as genderfluid, Demi boy, and trans masculine.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that when asked about sexual orientation, 6% answered 'not sure' and 5% answered 'prefer not to say' respectively. When asked about gender identity, 2% answered 'not sure' and 3% answered 'prefer not to say'.

What’s more, as shown in **graph 3**, when asked about how confident they are that they know who to talk to if they or someone they know is in a toxic relationship or experiencing sexual abuse, it is concerning to see that under one in five (24%) of heterosexual students, and just 14% of LGB+ students, felt ‘very confident’. When splitting the data by gender identify, only one the Trans+ and Non-binary respondent said they felt ‘very confident.’

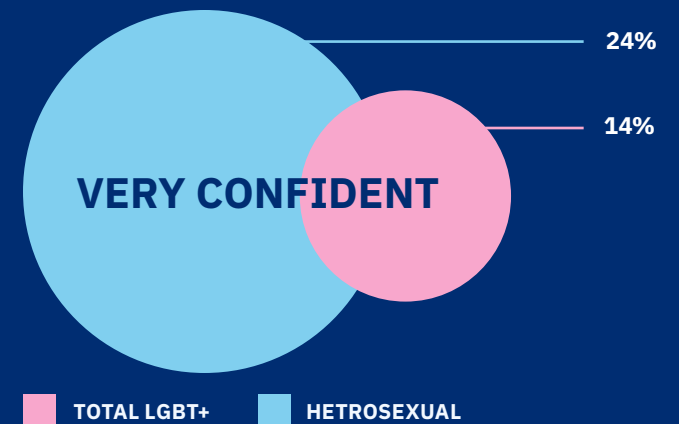
This demonstrates a significant disparity in terms of access to support for LGB+ students, potentially placing young LGB+ students at higher risk. It also highlights the need for RSE to ensure all students are confident in accessing support.<sup>8</sup>

Crucially, when asked about whether the classes provided them with a good understanding of toxic and healthy relationships, the majority (61%) of heterosexual students agreed, compared to the minority (41%) of LGB+ students. Similar to the findings above, the data shows that all students aren’t receiving enough education on toxic and healthy relationships, as only 16% of heterosexual students strongly agree. However, the outcome for LGB+ students is significantly worse, with under one in ten (8%) strongly agreeing that RSE gave them a good understanding of toxic and healthy relationships.

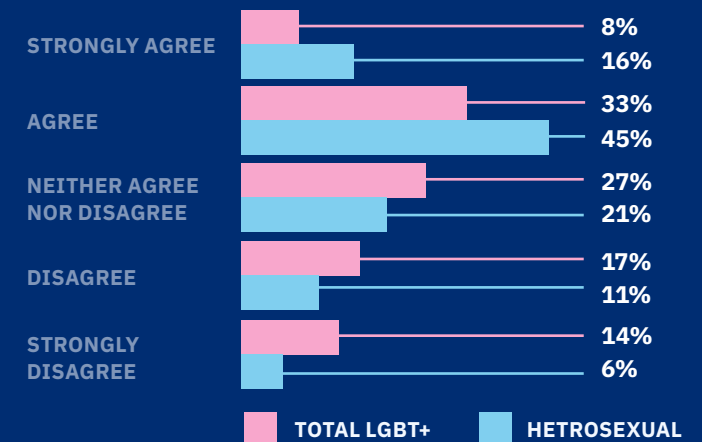
The results demonstrate a clear and alarming barrier for LGB+ students. SafeLives spoke to Comics Youth, a youth organisation who run a LGBT+ programme, to ask for their expertise and views on these findings. They told us that the findings from the research *‘are not surprising to us at all. As an organisation, we strongly believe the education system needs to be much more inclusive and progressive with its [sic] approach to teachings around sex, sexuality and relationships-taking into account different types of people.’*

They also shared that due to the lack of inclusivity with RSE, *‘our young LGTBQIA+ people are supplementing their learning of sex and relationships online [and] they are often finding information that is not age appropriate, hyper-sexual and often just incorrect.’* This suggests that inclusivity in RSE is not only important for equality and inclusion, but that it may be imperative to the online safety and wellbeing of students. Comics Youth warn against teachers relying on LGBT+ students to lead lessons around their experience and community and encourage teachers to reach out to specialist LGBT+ organisations for support on how to teach RSE inclusively.

**Graph 3** How confident are you that you know who to talk to if you or someone you know is in a toxic relationship or experiencing sexual abuse?



**Graph 4** To what extent do you agree that RSE classes gave you a good understanding of toxic and healthy relationships



<sup>8</sup> Galop have created some LGBT+ specific resources as part of the #FriendsCanTell campaign, accessible here.

# Masculinity and gendered experiences of relationships

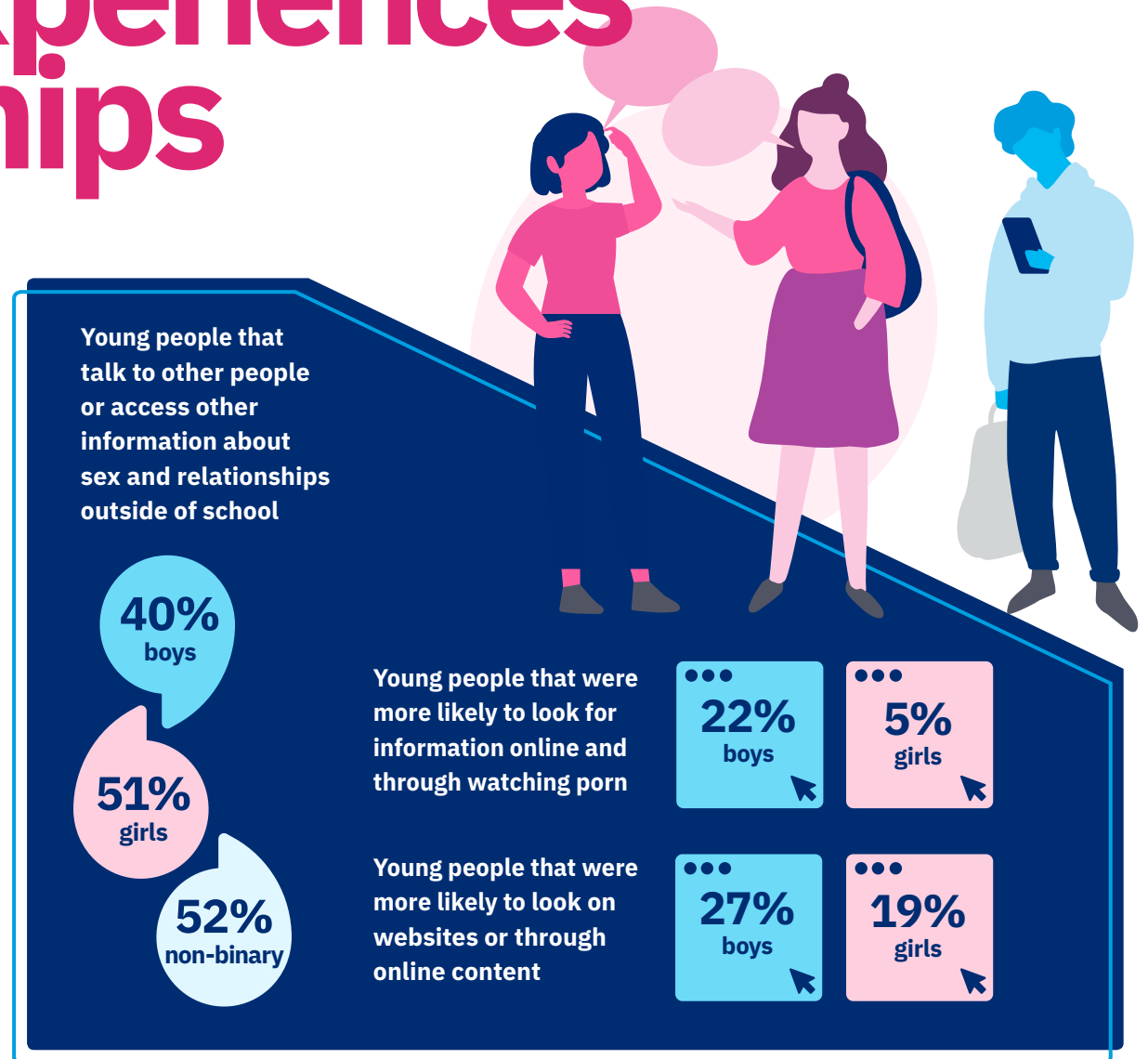
INCLUSION IN RSE

**G**ender and the impact of gendered norms on young people was raised in focus groups and in interviews with teachers. Boys and girls in focus groups raised different aspects of gendered norms that impact them, and there is evidence to suggest that RSE needs to ensure that gendered challenges facing boys are included in classes.

However, we know from our young people's survey that only half (52%) of all respondents have been taught about gender roles and gender equality, and a third (31%) taught this well.

The data shows gendered differences in whether and how

young people gather information about relationships and sex outside of school. Only 40% of boys reported that they talk to other people or access other information about sex and relationships outside of school, compared to 51% of girls, and 52% of non-binary young people. It also showed that boys were more likely to look for information online and through watching porn: 22% of boys said they would access other information about sex and relationships outside of school through watching porn, compared to 5% of girls, and 27% of the boys we spoke to would look on websites or through online content, compared to 19% of girls.



The SafeLives Verge of Harm[ing] report found relationships to be a gendered experience for young people, and that for the girls and young women interviewed, a heteronormative gender hierarchy framed relationships with males as a necessity, and singleness as a worse fate than victimisation (Meechem et al, 2022). This research found differences in how boys are socialized to conduct their relationships too, and found that boys appeared to face slightly different challenges to other young people. In focus groups with boys, participants expressed a desire for RSE to provide them with tools to navigate difficult friendships that place pressures upon them to get involved in ‘crime’ and that ‘in a bad friend group that’s... you feel pressured to maybe take drugs or drink... or drink at a young age.’ These challenges differed to those expressed by girls and reflect the harmful constraints of socially constructed masculinities that boys and men are socialised into, and the need for RSE to better support them with this.

Mental health and wellbeing were brought up in half of the focus groups and appeared to have different focus depending on the gender of the participants. Amongst the girls, there was a desire to learn more about mental health conditions and to develop skills to improve their relationship with themselves. Yet, amongst the boys, discussions in relation to mental health revolved around stigmatisation of mental health and the barriers to emotional expression. The boys also reflected on the differential way in which boys and girls are socialised to conceptualise and respond to emotions and mental health.

**(P1, Male): Yeah, that’s what I was going to say. Like, I don’t wanna offend anyone but sometimes like boys don’t speak up about it, as much as girls. Yeah, that’s what I was going to say. Like, I don’t wanna offend anyone but sometimes like boys don’t speak up about it, as much girls.**

**(I): Yeah. Do you guys agree with that?**

**(P2, Male): Yeah.**

**(P3, Male): Yeah.**

**(P4, Male): Yeah.**

**(I): Why do you think that is?**

**(P2, Male): Because they’ve got more to prove...**

**(P1, Male): Cos...**

**(P2, Male): ... maybe or something like that.**

**(P1, Male): Just like... just...**

**(P3, Male): Because maybe we should... like shouldn’t be able to show any emotion or like...**

**(P1, Male): It’s like just how men... men are just... and that... like they’re just... or just how... or not like they are.**

**(P3, Male): I mean like the stereotypes.**

**(P1, Male): It’s just like they’re forced to like... forced to be.**

**(P3, Male): There’s more of an ex... exception of... or at least in some of our views, that it’s easier for a woman to be more open about it, than... or a female, than a male.**

SafeLives’s Men and Boys Voices project found that health and wellbeing challenges for men and boys, such as excessive alcohol consumption and mental health concerns, are often related to traditional constructions of masculinity, such as the social norms for men and boys to be ‘tough’ and ‘strong,’ to appear in control, and to not ask for help. RSE needs to address the disproportionate health risks that men and boys can face as a result of harmful gendered norms.

Boys in both focus groups shared that that there is still considerable stigma around ‘speaking out’ about their feelings and fear of being mocked by classmates acts as a barrier to changing this narrative.

**(I): What do you think it is that like, stops men... like boys and men being able to express themselves, as easily as girls?**

**(P4, Male): Because they don’t wanna be seen as like vulnerable or something. So...**

**(P5, Male): Yeah, they don’t wanna like...**

**(P4, Male): ... they don’t wanna seem like... yeah**

**(P5, Male): ... so... someone starts opening up, then they might get like made fun of, stuff like that.**

Girls also noticed the impact of gender upon boys:

**“They don’t speak about their harassment, that often, probably cos of like toxic masculinity and that, probably they don’t wanna talk about, like, ‘I got harassed by a girl’; you’ll feel less masculine because of that and, yeah, that’s what they feel like.”**

STUDENT



“I feel like, most of us here, are of the mind that... **something needs to change**, which shows that maybe we think that men should be able to speak out about it. But the problem is, **people are too afraid to say that**. If that makes sense? Because we all may think that, but I don’t know how we would... or I don’t know how I would be able to start something and say it.”

STUDENT

Some boys also expressed a desire for more confidence in their emotional literacy and the ability to being able to start tricky conversations about how they’re feeling.

The quote (left) expresses a collective feeling amongst boys of wanting to feel supported and comfortable enough to speak about their mental wellbeing, but that fear and a lack of tools represent a barrier for putting that into action. This supports SafeLives’ 2019 survey findings from over 1,000 men and boys, who when asked whether they agreed with the statement “society’s view of masculinity can have a negative effect on the mental health of men and boys”, nearly half (44%) strongly agreed, and 40% agreed (SafeLives, 2019).

The generational divide between young people and their parents was mentioned as a barrier to feeling supported in speaking about their feelings.

“Yeah, and also it’s only just come across like, this generation, about **men’s mental health**. So also like older people, they just won’t understand it. They’ll just tell you to like... just... they don’t care about it.”

STUDENT

Teachers acknowledged the ‘changing’ nature of gender and the impact of social media on young people’s understanding of gender. Interestingly, a couple teachers also highlighted the gendered

difference in how students were reacting to education on gender stereotypes, suggesting that gender and gender stereotypes may be being taught in a way which centres the girls’ experiences of gender, more than the boys, which may serve to exclude boys from important conversations relating to masculinity.

“**I think sometimes delivering it... it depends on the class; I think some of the boys – which I know links into the gender stereotype thing! [chuckles] – but some of them don’t really like listening to it, which is interesting, but the girls are always normally really involved.**”

TEACHER

“**Boys don’t particularly access a lot of stuff to do with relationships – I don’t think they’d really be that bothered about at all...**”

TEACHER

When asked about how RSE classes could be improved, the most common answers for boys were more relevant examples (47%) and more engaging learning materials (45%). A significantly higher proportion of male participants said their experience of RSE classes could be improved by having less regular classes (13%) compared to female participants (7%), indicating that RSE in its current form may be less applicable to boys than girls.

# Opt outs

As part one the research, information was gathered about the prevalence, impact and ways navigating opt outs. The guidance stipulates 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, up to and until three terms before the child turns 16, however they are not permitted to opt out of relationships education (Department for Education, 2019).

The young people's survey gathered 21 responses from people who had been withdrawn from some or all of sex education.

Of those, around half (10 students) said they do not speak to or access other information about relationships and sex outside of school. Their ages range from 12 to 17 years of age, and the average of those who responded 'no' was 13.5 years. It is alarming that this cohort of

young people are receiving no information about sex education from either school or their parents, which may be vital for keeping them safe as they enter adolescence. Of those who responded 'yes', 6 students said they talk to friends, demonstrating that students withdrawn from sex education will seek information

from their peers, which risks it being distorted or incorrect.

Teachers interviewed were concerned for the pupils who were withdrawn, some felt 'sad' for them

'because it singles them out and makes them feel... different', and others were concerned about the openness and attitudes at home for those children. When students are withdrawn, there is concern about how these students will navigate the world as adults.

**"It's so detrimental, because it narrows down their learning field... and yet these children have got to operate in modern Britain, which is very diverse."**

TEACHER

## 10 out of 21

of young people's surveyed who had been withdrawn from some or all of sex education said **they do not speak to or access other information about relationships and sex outside of school.**

### Good practice

One teacher who worked in a majority religious school, found face-to-face parent-teacher meetings, in which they give their rationale for why RSE is essential for young people, talked them through the lessons and showed them the materials used in class, to be really helpful in reducing withdrawal from religious parents. **"Talking to parents – certainly since we've been doing parents' evenings face-to-face – has been more reassuring that...because they want their children to know about it, but they don't want to talk about it at home". – Teacher**

## INCLUSION IN RSE

One teacher spoke of the challenge of when **'the parents have opted out, but they've wanted to be in, you know, and that's quite difficult.'** - Teacher

Teachers shared that the main reasons for withdrawal was in relation to LGBT+ content which should not constitute sex education as it should be integrated into all RSE classes. Some teachers felt that the line between what constitutes sex education is blurred within the RSE curriculum, which gives teachers discretion when navigating withdrawals with students and their parents. Some teachers in this research used this discretion to negotiate with parents into withdrawing their young people from as little as possible. In the same vein, experts reflected experiences where school's permitted withdrawals for aspects of the curriculum that can be reasonably considered as relationships education.

However, most teachers interviewed for this research were passionate about reducing the number of withdrawals and some had established successful ways of navigating this with parents.

# Findings and discussion Speaking to their realities

The final section of this report explores how students centred their aspirations for RSE to speak to their realities and be delivered in a way that fosters trust and engagement.



## KEY FINDINGS

- Students want RSE to be normalised and introduced at a younger age. They are aware of the stigma surrounding the subject and feel this impacts their quality of education.
- Students are often exposed to materials or discussions relating to sex or relationships before formalised education is provided, which prevents school based RSE from playing its vital role in supporting young people when they need it and reinforces a stigmatisation of discussions around relationships and sex.
- As a result of the ‘taboo’ nature of RSE in schools, RSE is sometimes an uncomfortable experience for students. Only around half (58%) of students surveyed reported feeling comfortable or extremely comfortable during RSE.
- When asked about what they want from RSE, the most popular responses from students indicate that they want more from RSE: they want ‘more relevant examples’ (47%), ‘more open discussions’ (44%), ‘more regular classes’ (42%).
- Stigma around engaging in school based RSE was most evident when it came to the topic of sex and pleasure, however students have expressed an interest in learning more about this topic area. Students want discussions of sex and pleasure to be normalised as understandings of healthy relationships and sexual pleasure are intrinsically linked to understandings of unhealthy and healthy relationships.
- Students want practical and relatable education that equips them with the practice-based skills to navigate relationships safely and healthily; be able to identify harmful behaviours, navigate situations in which someone is using harmful behaviours, and access support.
- Strategies for normalising and creating safety in school-based RSE from the perspective of students includes discussion-based activities, a relaxed classroom lay-out and trust between students and educators
- Students value trust between students and teachers and want transparent communication around the limits of confidentiality and safeguarding, as they feel this would encourage help seeking.

# Normalising RSE from a young and relevant age

## SPEAKING TO THEIR REALITIES

For young people, the position of school based RSE within their ecosystem of learning was imagined as a safe space where discussions of relationships and sex is normalised. In reality, many students involved in this research reflected that RSE was still a very taboo topic, and that their schools were not doing enough to normalise discussions of relationships and sex.

Only 58% of surveyed students reported they feel comfortable or completely comfortable in RSE classes. Lack of normalisation means in some cases that students do not feel comfortable receiving the information or talking with teachers about RSE.

Discomfort engaging in RSE could be ameliorated, according to one boys focus group, if the topics were introduced to them earlier. Young people felt this could reduce the abrupt and unnatural way in which they

are suddenly presented with information about relationships and sex, after having never being taught about it in school at a younger age.

**“When you’re a kid it’s never spoke about. And then when you hit puberty, it’s like, put right in your face.”**

STUDENT

Inevitably, many young people will experience familial relationships and friendships, and be exposed to cultural imagines of intimacy before they have the opportunity to discuss them in a classroom setting. In Ofsted’s 2021 Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, it was found that sexual harassment in schools is much more prevalent than previously thought, and 90% of girls, and nearly 50% of boys, said being sent explicit pictures or videos of

things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers (Ofsted, 2021). Yet, RSE often is reserved or withheld despite this reality, the taboo around engaging in these discussions is reinforced. Students in this research expressed a desire for RSE to be delivered at an age which reflects their realities, so that it is normalised and so they can be equipped with not only the knowledge, but also the skills, to engage in relationships safely.

Only 58%

of surveyed students reported

**they feel comfortable or completely comfortable in RSE classes.**

**“And we’re being taught this stuff too late and, at this point, I feel like, from the information that we have, either we learnt it from our parents or we learnt it on the internet because the school really doesn’t do much to help us with these types of topics.”**

STUDENT

**“I think you need to learn as it becomes more relevant to you. Because like a healthy relationship is relevant whenever you are, whatever age you are ... relationship and consent as well ... sex or stuff I don’t think you really need to know, until your little later, a little older, but something like healthy, toxic relationships, and how to consent is important.”**

STUDENT



Young people are aware that the RSE carries a level of stigma that presents a barrier to their learning. When young people surveyed were asked about how classes could be improved for them, the three most popular answers indicate that young people just want more: they want ‘more relevant examples’ (47%), ‘more open discussions’ (44%), ‘more regular classes’ (42%).

**“Was this at the right time – should it have been earlier, should it have been later?” But with all of those things, to be honest, in all of my experience, you find that ...you know... some will say “It’s the right time”, some will say “No, way too early”, and some will say, “Way too late” And then you’ve got to kind of think, “Well, where the flippin’ heck do we pitch it?” [chuckles] You know?”**

TEACHER

Teachers highlighted a difficulty of gauging at what age to pitch topics, despite acknowledging that young people are being exposed to varied RSE information before entering the classroom.

Decisions around at what age to teach RSE has at times been informed by assumptions based on a perceived fragile innocence in students. In reality, and as documented in evidence and reflected by one teacher, RSE doesn’t operate to endanger students through early exposure to the topics of relationships and sex, but instead equips them to make safe decisions in relationships.



**“My attitude to it has changed over the 10 years I’ve been involved because when I first started looking at it, the programme we had was very much in terms of “The students will be making rash decisions, and actually, they won’t be thinking about the consequences”. And actually, it very quickly became obvious that they do know quite a lot – sometimes it’s not wholly accurate – but they do know a lot, and they actually, when they make decisions, they’re based on the information they have available at the time. So, the more information we can give them, the better placed they are to make decisions that will keep them safe.”**

TEACHER

Young people just want more: they want

**‘more relevant examples’ (47%)**

**‘more open discussions’ (44%),**

**‘more regular classes’ (42%).**

# Missing discussions of sex and pleasure

Campaign groups and politicians such as Jess Phillips have advocated for the inclusion of sexual pleasure in the RSE curriculum (Phillips, 2018). The last Sex Education Forum

young people’s poll found that one in four young people felt they needed to learn about sexual pleasure (Sex Education Forum, 2022). Despite this, the word ‘pleasure’ does not appear in the statutory guidance. Instead, ‘sex and intimacy’ is as a required topic. Although

pleasure isn’t explicitly included, we know anecdotally that some teachers are providing education on sexual pleasure, drawing from resources from Brook, Life Lessons and other providers.

**“I think, particularly with people with learning disabilities, but I guess this probably stands for mainstream young people as well; they’re going to have enough people in their lives who are telling them that sex is a bad thing, or that they need to protect themselves in some way”**

TEACHER

The topic of ‘sex and intimacy’ as prescribed by the RSE curriculum is arguably one of the least comfortable for teachers and students to engage in. Less than a third (30%) of

students surveyed reported that they had learnt about sex and pleasure and just 14% believed it had been taught well. This is even less compared to research from Sex Education Forum, which found that around half (46%) of young people had learnt nothing about it (Sex Education Forum, 2022). The

lack of sex and pleasure education was supported by students in focus groups who stated that **“we’re supposed to be doing relationships just now, but they have not mentioned sex once”**.

According to teachers, effective engagement in the topic of sex and pleasure is also challenged by a lack of inclusive resources that tend to focus on a traditionally male experience of sexual pleasure, and existing discourses within education and at a societal level of fear and protectionism towards young people and relationships.

When sexual pleasure is excluded from conversations around relationships and sex, sexual relationships can be stigmatised and students can leave education with a lack of knowledge about how to develop positive sexual relationships. Healthy relationships, sex and being able to negotiate boundaries and expectations of what each partner wants is important in understanding consent, control and abuse (Brook, 2019). Therefore, understandings of sexual pleasure and healthy relationships more broadly are intrinsically linked to understandings of intimate partner abuse.

## SPEAKING TO THEIR REALITIES

**“It becomes very difficult to... to prevent sexual harassment and violence in sexual relationships education too, because the focus is on like minimisation of risk or prevention of risk rather ... without teaching young people what can feel good and what can feel pleasurable and how to ask for those things and negotiate boundaries around those things first.”**

EXPERT 3

Readiness to engage in the topic of sex and pleasure with students varied amongst teacher’s according to experience as while almost all (95%) of PSHE leads surveyed felt confident teaching about sex in healthy relationships, this dropped to just two thirds (67%) among non-leads. Thus, if school-based RSE is to be regarded as a key stakeholder in the prevention of harmful behaviours and abuse, there is a clear need to tackle stigma towards sexual pleasure and equip teachers with inclusive resources to deliver RSE that promotes healthy relationships.

# More of the ‘How to’s’

RSE’s relevance to young people’s realities also concerns how different topics are approached from within the curriculum and through the educator’s style of delivery. Some experts involved in this research felt that the curriculum’s focus on monogamous relationships and marriage was unhelpful, since this doesn’t normally reflect the realities of relationships of the students.

Experts also discussed in interviews that the curriculum seems to prescribe a factual, legalistic approach, which obscures the complicated nuances of navigating consent, sexual harassment and online image sharing in a safe way. This could be confusing for young people, since they may be taught about consent as a simple transaction thereby not equipping them for the complex nature of boundary negotiation. In addition, a legal understanding of consent is a partial education according to one expert interviewed. Consent framed in relation to the criminal prosecution can be misleading since so few instances of rape and sexual abuse enter the criminal justice system (Centre for Women’s Justice et al., 2020).<sup>9</sup>

**‘What you do with a relationship you are in for six months is different to someone you are just hooking up with at a party. And I thought, ‘Yes you need skills actually to navigate all these different environments you might end up in where consent might be important’. But the framing of relationships just in terms of commitment and monogamy and so on is kind of like just looking at one scenario you might be in.’**

EXPERT 2

## SPEAKING TO THEIR REALITIES

This approach seems to be reflected in students’ experience of RSE, with some expressing confusion about ‘sex and when you’re allowed to have it’ or how to communicate if they do not consent to sexual behaviour.

Yeah. And you mentioned like ‘getting out of sticky situations’, like do you mean actually the practicalities?

(P1, Female): Yeah.

(P2, Female): I don’t know, like...

(P3, Female): The best way to, if you’re uncomfortable, if you don’t like how to say no. Because someone’s pressuring you, and...

(P1, Female): How to, yeah. How to get out of the situation.

(P3, Female): Effectively, I think. How to get out.

(P2, Female): Yeah, without offending anyone.

The quote (left) reflects a continuous thread across this research of a desire from the young people to learn about the ‘how to’s’, and for education to better reflect the reality of navigating relationships as a young person. Almost half of students (46%) surveyed thought more relevant examples would improve their RSE.

When asked if there were anything missing from their RSE education, surveyed students reported missing ‘how-to’s’:

**How to access contraception**

**How to properly consent**

**How to give pleasure**

**How to deal with rape effects**

**How to enjoy intimacy**

**How to communicate consent**

**How to use protection**

**How to use/take/access contraceptive methods**

**How to break up with someone without hurting them**

**How to have safe sex**

**How to know if talking to a catfish**

STUDENTS SURVEY RESPONSES

<sup>9</sup> Centre for Women’s Justice, End Violence Against Women coalition, Imkaan, and Rape Crisis England and Wales (2020) The decriminalization of rape: Why the justice system is failing rape survivors and what needs to change. [Online] Available at: <https://rcew.fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/c-decriminalisation-of-rape-report-cwj-evaw-imkaan-rcew-nov-2020.pdf>

One focus group discussed how learning more about complexities of consent as a continuous and ongoing process, caused them to reflect differently on their past experiences. They concluded that learning about consent from a younger age, not necessarily sexual consent, but personal boundaries and reading social cues- could help prevent sexual assault.

**(P1, Female):** No, I was just saying like, all the consent and stuff like that. Like some girls don't even know that pressuring someone into that is like, you know, not consent, so it's like different forms of like, rape, that they might have gone through.

**(P5, Female):** Yeah.

**(P6, Female):** You only recently realised 'oh, I was raped'.

**(P1, Female):** They should start like lessons like that, like more about stuff like that early on, like when they're kids, so they understand, in case anything's happened to them, or does, eventually.

More broadly as it relates to safely navigating relationships and sex, young people in this research greatly desired examples and tangible practical advice on how to identify

**“Schools for example, they say “just say stop, stop, stop” tell them you don't like it, this and that, but I feel like in school they need to like elaborate on what more you can do because it's not just a thing where it's like, you say stop or you say I don't like this and someone immediately listens because in reality you never know what could happen.”**

STUDENT

**“They should have one of those clues for like spotting the red flags. It would be like, ‘is he doing that?’ ‘Is he doing this?’ ‘Is he doing that?’ Like a checklist.”**

STUDENT

harmful behaviours in relationships, how to navigate situations where someone is using these behaviours, and how to support themselves and their friends in help-seeking, which they are not currently receiving. This supports findings from the Your Best Friend Project too (Daw, 2021).

Without this critical and practical approach to RSE, young people are more likely to struggle to be able to respond to instances of harm or abuse in their relationships. Less than half (46%) of students surveyed reported feeling confident in knowing who to talk to if they or someone they knew was experiencing harmful behaviours, supported by one teacher who said their students 'would struggle way more' in responding to unhealthy relationships.

Students involved in the research were acutely aware that sexual harassment is a real and current concern for them, whether that be online, in public spaces or within schools themselves.

Some students felt individually responsible to protect themselves from victimisation, referencing less the role of schools or other statutory institutions. As a result, students want teaching to focus on practical tips of how to protect themselves from sexual

**“It can happen regardless, it's like we you live in the world where it's always going to happen, so it's better to be more cautious about it.” “And bring, like, protection with you. Like, just put a screwdriver in your bag, or something.”**

STUDENT

harassment and violence. Some students had a perception that their school feel they are not mature enough to engage in discussions of sexual harassment and violence, despite it being a current concern for them. This is supported by Ofsted's finding that young children do not want to talk about sexual abuse for fear adult will not believe them, will blame them, or will take the situation out of their control (Ofsted, 2021). In our research, delivering content on sexual harassment and violence was less discussed by teachers in schools, though some acknowledged a culture of sexual harassment operating within their schools and there is a need for this to be taken seriously at a whole school level.

# Creating the right space for RSE engagement

SPEAKING TO THEIR REALITIES

Students involved in this research were astute, and acutely aware of the challenges informing their current experience of RSE and engaged in their aspirations for what effective RSE could look like. They also reflected on how students’ comfortability and engagement could be improved in RSE through discussion based activities, an informal physical space, and a trusting relationship with teachers.

Students want to move away from the formality of traditional classrooms which were regarded by some ‘sterile’, ‘pressurised environments’, perhaps through alternative seating plans and arrangements. This helps to foster comfort in the space and is more conducive to open discussion, which students told us were engaging and conducive to learning.

Students felt more relaxed in small groups, with some agency in who they were discussing RSE with. One young person explained that when some teachers make *‘a seating plan [they] put you with someone you would like rather not talk to, like ever. And then you have to talk to them about sex and you’re like ‘uh, brill.’ (Student)*

Teachers in both boarding schools spoke of the advantages of being able to teach some RSE in boarding houses in the evening time, *“which is a bit more informal, and a bit more casual, and I think that really helps for having a discussion about sensitive topics like that, because if you only ever teach them in the classroom setting it’s hard to break down those kind of barriers of discussion between you and them.”*



**“With a normal classroom you’re kind of just this is this, this is that and you’re just putting up a lot of facts, in this one you can express yourself.”**

TEACHER

**Good practice**

To build trust with their students, one PSHE Lead shared that they felt it was important to emphasise they could not be embarrassed.

*"I'm not shocked by anything – I've heard it all before, and I'm quite straightforward. So, if somebody asks a question, they're just going to get an age-appropriate answer, and it's not a... a 'thing'. I know when people have observed me teaching it, they've said "I can't believe some of the things they ask you! They just come out with it! ... you've just got a really good rapport with them".*

TEACHER

Creating a safe and trusting classroom environment could also have implications for disclosures and help-seeking. Although schools have mechanisms to support students with disclosures and help-seeking, some students expressed that they do not have faith in them. Some students feel that while schools are very deliberate in advertising safeguarding mechanisms (appointed counsellors, pastoral support staff etc.) within schools, negative experiences from other students or of their own spread pessimism about the school's ability to uphold confidentiality and offer valuable support.

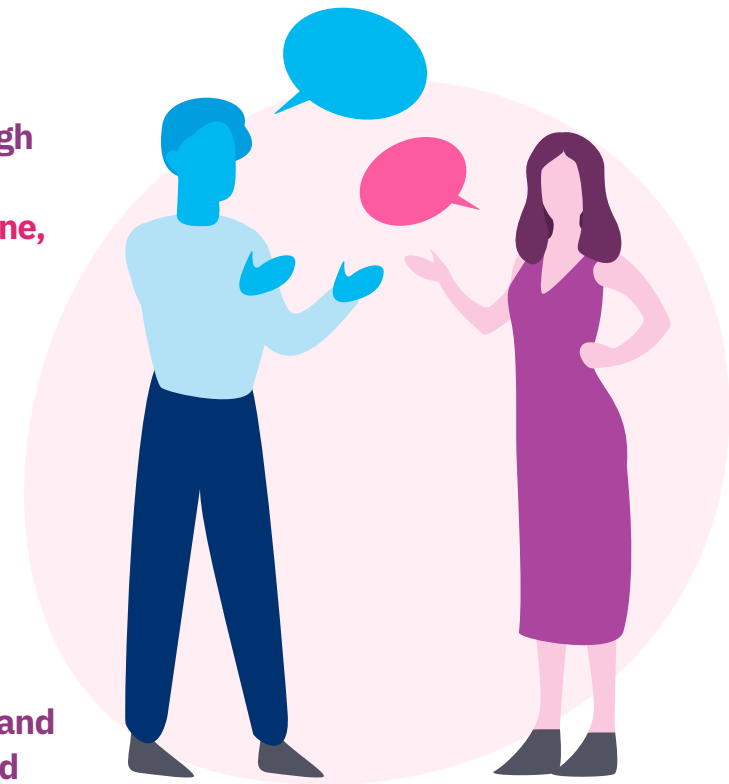
Students felt there was a disconnect between the qualities of staff offering pastoral support prioritised by the school and by students. Trust by students in staff to support them with disclosures and other pastoral issues was not influenced by formal qualifications or academic understandings, but by availability, honesty (particularly around limits to confidentiality and safeguarding procedures), and warmth.

**"She told [name] about something that was making her anxious... then [name] went and told [name] even though she specifically said 'please don't tell anyone, I want to kind of keep this to myself and my friends'"**

STUDENT

**"I think we need someone less clinical, like clinically inclined and kind of more warm and friendly and...like you'll trust them, you have a connection"**

STUDENT



# Conclusion

This research project set out to explore how the new RSE guidance was being interpreted and delivered by teachers and received by young people in secondary schools in England. Through meaningful engagement with six partner schools we were able to uncover the challenges, perspectives and needs of both young people and teachers, to create an understanding of how things are now, and how things could be.

We found that RSE teachers are often passionate educators who value the subject, but face additional challenges due to the complex and multi-faceted nature of RSE as a subject, varied prioritisation by schools, and a notable lack of training, resources and time. As a result, delivery of RSE is patchy and inconsistent, with schools varying greatly in how they teach the content and the quality of the education delivered. In some cases, resulting in topics essential to understanding healthy relationships, being taught poorly or not at all.

We found that the impact of social constructs of gender, race, ability and religious identity shape not only the relationships young people face and the challenges they bring up, but also the education they receive. This is particularly the case for LGB+

identifying students, who according to our data are less comfortable, knowledgeable and confident understanding how to identify abuse, and how to seek support, potentially placing them at aggravated risk of exploitation. The constraints faced by boys as a result of gender norms and constructed masculinity impact the ways boys receive and relate to their RSE. In addition, RSE often isn't meeting the needs of boys, especially around emotional expression and support with having difficult conversations about relationships of all kinds. These findings show the need for RSE to be taught in an intersectional way that speaks to the realities faced by young people from all backgrounds.

Finally, we found that young people want a RSE that is normalised, that is destigmatised, and is delivered through self-expression and discussion, allowing young people to find their own path and come away with practical and useful tools for how to lead healthy and happy relationships.

If RSE is to be conceptualised as playing a vital role in preventing domestic abuse nationally, it is essential that RSE continues to improve and be shaped by the young people who need it, and form a part of the strategy for ending domestic abuse for everyone, for good.



# Recommendations

## RSE GUIDANCE

- Guidance on RSHE should include information on intersectionality and a recognition of the importance of it as a concept. Young people are not a homogenous group and their experiences of relationships are simultaneously affected by distinct parts of their identity. The curriculum should make reference to the complexities of young people’s lives and how this impacts their relationship with themselves and others.
- It should include the teaching and inclusion of LGBT+ relationships at an earlier stage in young people’s education, supported with free and accessible resources demonstrating diverse types of relationships and family structures.
- It should also acknowledge the impact of gendered norms and gender inequality on all genders, in particular boys who may also be facing a range of challenges relating to their gender, and it therefore must be nuanced, integrated and comprehensive when addressing their needs.
- Finally, it should include education on sexual intimacy and pleasure, reducing the stigma surrounding healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships and supporting young people to understand boundaries and consent.

## LEADERSHIP

- Schools should be supported by their governance bodies to ensure that RSE is prioritised and provided with resources and time to meaningfully embed a whole-school approach, as recommended in the statutory RSHE guidance. School leaders should foster trust with students and clearly communicate the school’s approach to safeguarding and transparency, to enable help-seeking from students.

## CAPACITY

- Schools should aim to have a distinct pool of comprehensively trained RSE teachers who deliver the subject consistently year upon year. This will allow those teachers to build upon their learning, support one another with queries or challenges, and build trusting relationships with young people, which we know is essential for in-depth RSE skill-building and discussion.





## SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

- Teachers should be offered some training in RSE to adequately implement a whole-school approach which recognises the importance of the subject to young people’s personal development and safety. This should include training on which parts of the RSE curriculum students can and cannot opt out of, and how to manage requests to parental withdraw whilst ensuring children receive relationships education.
- PSHE/RSE Leads and teachers who deliver part or all of the RSE curriculum should receive comprehensive training in RSE, which includes practical teaching strategies and specialist knowledge about delivering RSE in an inclusive way. This training should include:
  - how to deliver skills-based learning about the practicalities of conducting personal relationships, as young people want practical skills as well as information-based knowledge.
  - how to deliver education on healthy relationships and sexual intimacy/pleasure in an age- appropriate and comfortable way, as this is essential for young people’s understanding of healthy and unhealthy relationships.
  - how to provide guidance on where to seek support for themselves or others who are experiencing domestic or sexual abuse
  - how to deliver education about gender norms in a way that includes everyone’s experiences, including ensuring boys feel included, informed and supportive in RSE, particularly regarding the negative impacts these can have on the relationships and mental wellbeing of boys and young men. how to deliver RSE in a LGBT+ inclusive way, including information on gender expression, gender identity and sexual orientation
  - how to address the concept of intersectionality, how it impacts young people’s experiences of themselves and relationships, and how to teach RSE content in an intersectional way.

## CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

- Teachers should ensure that RSE classes include not only factual based information, but also discussion-based activities that address the complicated nuances of navigating relationships. This should include examples and practical advice about how to handle different situations, in order to better reflect young people’s realities.
- There should be a greater focus within RSE on engaging with young men and boys from an early age about gender norms, masculinity and gender inequalities, stimulating conversations which they themselves tell us are missing about their experiences, attitudes, behaviours and expectations when it comes to forming relationships.
- Teachers should work with students through surveys, consultations and other regular engagement to identify when and how they want to receive RSE, to ensure it is meeting young people’s needs.



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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Demographics of young people’s survey respondents

Gender identity <sup>10</sup>		
	Female	49%
	Male	40%
	Prefer not to say	3%
Sexual orientation <sup>11</sup>		
	Heterosexual	66%
	Bisexual	7%
	Not sure	6%
	Prefer not to say	5%
	Pansexual	3%
	Gay	1%
	Lesbian	1%
	Asexual	1%
	Prefer to self-describe LGB+	1%
Ethnic group <sup>12</sup>		
	White	60%
	Asian or Asian British	16%
	Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	7%
	Mixed or Multiple ethnic	6%
	Other ethnic group	4%
	Prefer not to say	3%

## Appendix 2: Demographics of focus group participants

Age		
	12	0%
	13	8%
	14	51%
	15	11%
	16	16%
	Not stated	14%
Gender		
	Male	41%
	Female	54%
	Non-Binary	0%
	Not sure	0%
	Prefer to self-describe	0%
	Prefer not to say	0%
	Not stated	5%
Sexuality		
	Heterosexual	81%
	Gay	0%
	Lesbian	3%
	Bisexual	0%
	Pansexual	0%
	Asexual	3%
	Not sure	8%
	Prefer to self-describe	0%
	Prefer not to say	0%
	Not stated	5%

Ethnic Group		
	Asian or Asian British	19%
	Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	14%
	Mixed or multiple ethnic group	8%
	White	49%
	Prefer to self-describe	0%
	Prefer not to say	3%
	Not stated	8%
Disability or long term health condition		
	Yes	5%
	No	84%
	Prefer not to say	5%
	Not stated	5%

10 Gender: response rate was 96%

11 Sexual orientation response rate was 93%

12 Ethnic group response rate was 96%

### Appendix 3: Demographics of teacher interview respondents

<b>Gender identity</b>		
	Female	86%
	Male	14%
	Prefer not to say	0%
	Non-binary	0%
	Not sure	0%
<b>Sexual orientation</b>		
	Heterosexual	86%
	Bisexual	14%
	Not sure	0%
	Prefer not to say	0%
	Pansexual	0%
	Gay	0%
	Lesbian	0%
	Asexual	0%
	Prefer to self-describe LGB+	0%
<b>Ethnic group</b>		
	White	86%
	Asian or Asian British	0%
	Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African	0%
	Mixed or Multiple ethnic	14%
	Other ethnic group	0%
	Prefer not to say	0%
<b>Disability</b>		
	Yes	14%
	No	71%
	Prefer not to say	14%



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