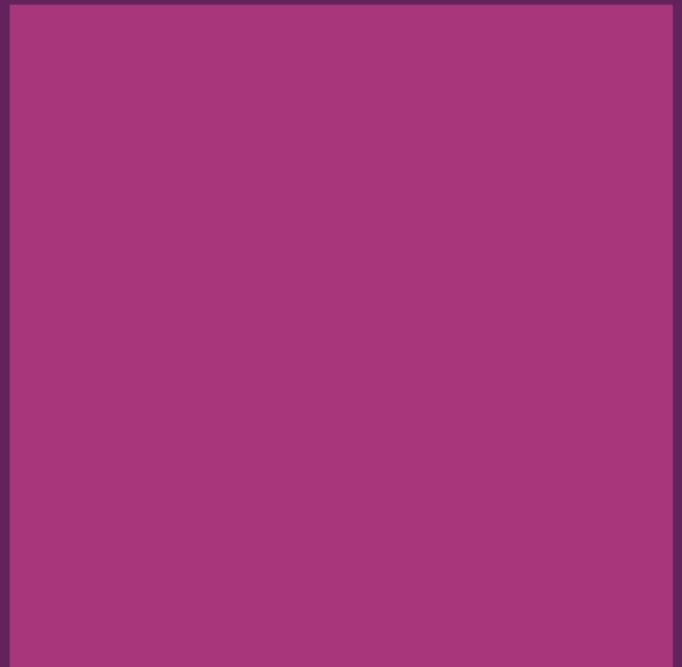


RSHE Consultation

Have your say



RSHE Consultation — have your say

- Have your say on draft statutory RSHE guidance by 11 July deadline
- A crucial opportunity to inform the next government's approach to PSHE education
- We believe the draft guidance falls short when it comes to safeguarding and wellbeing: with concerning proposals regarding age restrictions, inclusion and pedagogy

Any review of RSHE must be based on the best available evidence of what supports children and young people's safeguarding, wellbeing, health and preparation for life. The [current guidance](#) (in force since 2020) was based on robust evidence and supported by a broad coalition of safeguarding bodies, charities, teachers, parents and parliamentarians. It was a significant step in the right direction, and though not perfect, it has helped improve standards across schools (despite Covid disruptions).

We are concerned that the draft new RSHE guidance falls well short of what is required to keep children and young people safe, healthy and prepared for life's challenges.

Despite some welcome proposed additions, on balance it represents a significant downgrade, with some aspects neither in step with children and young people's reality, nor the pedagogy of effective PSHE education (nor preventative education in general). It would leave children at increased risk, while failing to fully represent or respect the diversity of modern Britain. We provide a more detailed analysis below, focusing on the following areas:

1. [Age restrictions](#)
2. [Diluted inclusion](#)
3. [Division of relationships and sex content](#)
4. [Downgrading the subject](#)
5. [Positive additions](#)

Why it's crucial to submit evidence

This consultation provides a real opportunity to inform the next government's approach to PSHE education/RSHE. The next government will be considering responses and their implications for any future updates to RSHE guidance and policy. As PSHE practitioners, you will be answering from an informed position about the challenges and pressures facing children and young people, and the extent to which this proposed update addresses them.

Completing the consultation

- [Visit the draft RSHE guidance and consultation page](#), making sure to read the draft guidance — or relevant sections — before completing the questionnaire.
- **If you have 10 minutes:** focus on the yes/no questions, adding comment at the end to summarise your rationale. Please note there are no compulsory questions — and some of the

yes/no questions are limited or unclear — so it is perfectly fine to skip those to which you feel there is no clear answer.

- **If you have 30–60 minutes:** provide more detailed, personalised responses to questions where invited to do so, and in your own words, supported where possible by your own experience as PSHE teachers and leads.
- You are encouraged to submit via the online questionnaire and please note that it is not possible to save progress. So be prepared to complete it in one go, or write your response in a document to copy over. You can also respond by emailing an attachment in some circumstances — see the consultation page for details
- We would also recommend reading [the Sex Education Forum's consultation guide](#) for a useful question-by-question analysis. Our '[PSHE education: what it covers and why it works](#)' [evidence guide](#) includes a wealth of prevalence data and impact research to help back up your answers.

Our analysis

1. Age restrictions

Age-appropriate preventative education needs to take place before children encounter potential harm. Placing age restrictions (versus providing guidance) on such preventative education is a dangerous step backwards, leaving children and young people more exposed to risk at a time when it's never been more critical to keep them safe.

While it's sensible to provide guidance for schools on when to cover particular topics, and to make sure any teaching is age and stage appropriate, proposed introduction of age *restrictions* on when topics can be taught or discussed is in direct conflict with the principles of effective preventative education. It also undermines the professionalism of PSHE teachers by restricting their ability to respond to their own pupils' needs. In short, the imposition of age restrictions suggests a lack of trust in teachers.

1.1 Developmental appropriateness

Children and young people in a single class will be at different stages of cognitive, physical and social development. All will have different levels of maturity, have had different life experiences, and will have different assumptions and misconceptions about the topics taught in PSHE education.

A key part of a PSHE teacher's job is therefore to ensure teaching is not only age but also stage appropriate, using assessment techniques, knowledge of the pupils in their classes, local and national health data and professional judgement. Proposed age restrictions fail to recognise this crucial part of PSHE teaching or its importance in ensuring that education can be genuinely preventative.

1.2 Undermining safeguarding

The proposed age restrictions are out of step with the reality of children and young people's lives.

There are many prevalence statistics to show the age at which children and young people encounter various risks and the proposed age restrictions are in many cases not aligned with this evidence. In addition, no evidence has been published to support the decision to limit education about such risks, or decisions around where to place such limitations. This has led to confusing, and sometimes contradictory, advice that prevents, rather than supports, schools from dealing with crucial safeguarding issues in a timely way.

Examples include a ban on teaching about harmful sexual behaviours before Year 7, or about violent abuse before Year 9, despite [55% of survivors of abuse stating that their abuse started before the age of 11 \(and 30% before the age of 9\)](#). Also proposed restrictions on understanding the risks of sending and receiving sexual images until year 7 despite the Internet Watch Foundation reporting [a 65% increase in 'self-generated' child sexual abuse imagery featuring 7-10 year olds in 2023](#). Likewise, limitations on age-appropriate teaching on pornography risk, despite [nearly 1 in 3 children having seen pornography by age 11, according to the Children's Commissioner](#).

With Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), [the NHS suggests that](#) "FGM is usually carried out on young girls between infancy and the age of 15, most commonly before puberty starts" so it makes no sense to restrict teaching about its risks until year 9.

Growth, change and the changing adolescent body now has an age limitation of 'not before Year 4'. This may reflect what many primary schools are already doing, but removes the option for teachers to use their discretion and will mean that some children don't learn about puberty [before they experience it](#). There's also reference to specifically teaching about the menstrual cycle but not about how puberty affects boys.

And it seems strange that the guidance suggests schools can teach Year 7 students about revenge porn, yet deems them too young to learn about contraception until Year 9.

These are just some examples of why the imposition of age restrictions is problematic from a safeguarding perspective, limiting protective teaching until after some children will have encountered risks.

1.3 Lack of coherence and rationale

The draft guidance asserts that children younger than Year 9 are not able to understand the concept of violent abuse. No evidence for this assertion is given, beyond claiming that it aims to ensure pupils are not *'introduced too early to concepts that they may not have the maturity to grasp, or which may be distressing'*.

Established safe practice principles are clear that PSHE/RSHE teaching should always avoid distressing or triggering detail — whatever the seriousness of the topic — but this doesn't mean such concepts cannot be raised in an age and developmentally appropriate way. Sadly, no child is too young to experience abuse, so it is crucial that teachers are empowered to teach them to recognise all forms of abuse and access help and support when necessary.

And of course, the imposition of age restrictions flies in the face of the concept of a well-sequenced curriculum, where learning is revisited and built upon year on year, the importance of which is often stated by both the Department for Education and Ofsted.

As some concepts which can be taught from Year 7 would require learning which is restricted until Year 9, the guidance risks creating an impossible situation for teachers. For example, the guidance suggests teaching about concepts related to sexual exploitation without being able to talk about sexual violence. One of the key issues here is that the guidance presupposes that teaching a concept like 'rape' involves 'explicit discussion of details of sexual acts', a fundamental misapprehension of how relationships and sex education is taught.

1.4 Reactive vs preventative

The draft guidance states that:

“Schools should seek to follow these age limits at all times. However, flexibility may be necessary in order to respond promptly to issues which pose an imminent safeguarding risk to their pupils.... For example, if a primary school becomes aware that pupils are circulating pornographic material on social media.”

Whilst flexibility is of course vital, this is essentially saying that schools must follow the guidance on age limits, unless the issue has already affected their pupils! This fundamentally misunderstands preventative education but also risks encouraging poor practice, with schools making knee-jerk reactions at times of heightened emotion and stress for the school community and when pupils have potentially already suffered harm.

2. Diluted inclusion

The watering down of content in the draft guidance when it comes to LGBT inclusion undermines the idea that families of different types are equally legitimate, leaves young people at greater risk of prejudice-based bullying and leaves schools without clarity on how to meet their obligations to teach about protected characteristics.

The draft guidance has some very problematic changes relating to inclusion — and LGBT inclusion in particular (although it is also the case that the guidance around the needs of pupils with SEND has been reduced as well).

2.1 Framing of relationships and family types:

The current guidance clearly states that:

‘all pupils should feel that the content is relevant to them and their developing sexuality’

but the new draft guidance says:

‘We expect the majority of primary schools to teach about healthy loving relationships. Primary schools have discretion over whether to discuss sexual orientation or families with same-sex parents’

and that:

‘Schools can most commonly refer to families with a mother and a father when discussing families’.

This raises a few questions. As Relationships Education is statutory in *all* primary schools, why are only ‘the majority’ of them to teach about healthy loving relationships? And crucially, why move away from using inclusive and widely-used terminology such as ‘parents’ or ‘the grown-up(s) you live with’ when nearly every classroom will include pupils whose families do not have “*a mother and a father*”? Doesn’t this proposed change demote the value of different family set-ups, while ‘othering’ pupils of, for example, LGBT parents?

And seemingly small changes can matter a lot. The current guidance states that at primary, pupils should know:

“that stable, caring relationships, which may be of different types, are at the heart of happy families”.

However, the new draft guidance has amended that wording to:

“that stable, caring relationships are at the heart of happy families”.

It is hard to imagine a valid reason for omitting the words “*which may be of different types*”, as this clearly renders the tone of the statutory content less inclusive.

Whilst primary schools are not prevented by the draft guidance from teaching about LGBT relationships and families, it will very likely lead to many lacking the confidence, or being reluctant, to do so. How then can teaching promote respect for all and prevent prejudice-based bullying, if schools wait until secondary phase to teach about LGBT relationships?

2.2 Gender reassignment and gender identity

There are many concerning issues in relation to how gender reassignment and identity are referenced in the guidance.

As a protected characteristic, schools have to teach about the law regarding ‘gender reassignment’. However, under this guidance they would have to do that without discussing ‘gender identity’ or a person’s own sense of their gender. There is no guidance included for teachers on *how* they would go about that and indeed, it is difficult to envisage how it would be possible. A ban on teaching this concept would also make it difficult for teachers to address issues that overlap, such as gender stereotyping and gender-based violence.

The guidance states that schools should not teach about the concept of gender identity because “*gender identity is a highly contested and complex subject*”. But does this not set a dangerous precedent for the government of the day to ban any topic considered to be ‘contested and complex’?

Trans, non-binary and gender-questioning young people are already amongst the most vulnerable to prejudice-based bullying. This guidance would put them at greater risk, not only generating a taboo on discussion of gender identity but also failing to recognise what inclusive PSHE education is actually about. Effective PSHE education/RSHE is not about debating or promoting societal or political issues, but about reflecting – and being equally relevant to – the lives and experiences of all pupils, meeting their individual learning needs, promoting respect for all and preventing prejudice-based bullying.

3. Division of relationships and sex content

The draft guidance states that at secondary school, the RSE policy should:

“Differentiate between relationships and sex education where applicable. Relationships education should not include topics which involve explaining different forms of sexual activity. This includes discussions of forms of abuse that involve explaining details of sexual activity, for example rape. In secondary schools, RSE will often address aspects of relationships and sex education in an integrated way within a single topic, but the policy should clearly differentiate relationships and sex education so that parents are clear what they can request to withdraw their children from.”

This is extremely unclear. How exactly can schools, in practice, “*address aspects of relationships and sex education in an integrated way within a single topic*” whilst still accommodating parents’ right to withdraw their children from Sex Education but not Relationships Education?

Also, the statement that: “*Relationships education should not include topics which involve explaining different forms of sexual activity. This includes discussions of forms of abuse that involve explaining details of sexual activity, for example rape*” is deeply concerning. If Relationships Education – from which there is no parental right of withdrawal – is to be taught without reference to sexual assault and rape, and schools are required to include such teaching within Sex Education, then young people whose parents have withdrawn them from Sex Education will potentially never be taught about sexual assault and what constitutes rape. This is a serious safeguarding concern as it is crucial that children and young people can identify when

they are being abused, especially in the context of increasing misogyny and sexual harassment in schools, and when the majority of abusers are known to their victims.

4. Undermining good practice and downgrading the subject

The draft guidance ignores the established pedagogy of PSHE education, including RSHE, and of preventative education in general. It also effectively downgrades PSHE/RSHE, removing existing focus on the importance of assessment and leadership and undermining teacher agency and autonomy.

4.1 Removed focus on assessment

The short, but important, emphasis on assessment in the current guidance has been removed. This includes removal of the following strong statement about taking pupils' learning in RSHE as seriously as in other subjects:

“Schools should have the same high expectations of the quality of pupils’ work in these subjects as for other curriculum areas. A strong curriculum will build on the knowledge pupils have previously acquired, including in other subjects, with regular feedback provided on pupil progress.”

The one remaining reference to assessment — *“Lessons should ensure that all pupils are challenged, and assessments should identify where pupils need extra support or intervention”* — is focused on identifying the need for targeted intervention and fails to put RSHE on a par with other subjects in the way that the current guidance does.

4.2 Subject leadership

The draft guidance effectively downgrades the subject. The section on ‘Senior leadership and whole school approach’ in the current 2020 guidance recognises the importance of good subject leadership by someone senior with time to do the job well, stating:

“Schools which demonstrate effective practice often ensure clear responsibility for these subjects by a senior teacher in leadership position with dedicated time to lead specialist provision”.

Not only did this sentence fail to make it into the new draft, but the whole leadership section has been removed.

4.3 Undermining trust in teachers

[The Core Content Framework](#) for initial teacher education states that *“Teachers are key role models, who can influence the attitudes, values and behaviours of their pupils”*. However, the

guidance suggests a lack of trust in teachers to do just that. For example, it states that if pupils ask a teacher questions on topics that go beyond the suggested age restrictions, the school's policy *"may include asking a pupil to speak to their parents or a trusted adult"*. Surely in this situation the pupil is already speaking to a trusted adult?

The guidance discourages teachers from answering questions in certain circumstances on certain topics, while at the same time recognising that *"children whose questions go unanswered might instead turn to inappropriate sources of information, including online"*, which seems problematic (to say the least) from a safeguarding perspective, considering the sensitive nature of these topics. This also creates a fundamental gap in trust, and fails to recognise that asking questions may be the first indicator of a safeguarding issue where teachers have the opportunity to intervene and support the pupil.

In summary, this guidance gives the impression that PSHE/RSHE is no longer a subject on a par with any other, and incredibly unfairly, that PSHE/RSHE teachers are not to be trusted. This could lead to schools questioning allocation of time, budget and training for staff to ensure "specialist provision" — with worrying potential to reverse progress we've seen in recent years regarding improved standards and well-sequenced learning through timetabled lessons.

4.4 Knowledge without skills

PSHE teachers understand the importance of factual knowledge, but if pupils are not taught to develop the skills and attributes to apply this knowledge effectively then PSHE cannot achieve its aims. The draft guidance still focuses almost entirely on knowledge with little emphasis on skills. For example, the secondary content on 'Drugs, alcohol tobacco and vaping' is entirely factual, with no mention of skills such as managing peer pressure, assessing and managing risks, and decision making — all vital for effective drug education.

5. Is it all problematic?

Despite the overwhelming feeling being one of concern, the draft guidance does include some useful suggested additions. For example, personal safety was a notable omission in the current guidance, so it's great to see content on this at both primary and secondary in the new draft, together with "identifying risk" making its first, long overdue appearance. Obviously, it should be part of every topic, but this is a start.

At primary phase we welcome new content on grief, loss and bereavement, although strangely this is not included at secondary level.

We are also pleased that there is more content at primary and secondary relating to scams and gaming, video game monetisation, fraud, gambling and other financial harms — which is acknowledgement of the seriousness of these risks, and yet another argument that the 'economic' element of PSHE education should be statutory in its entirety, alongside RSHE content.

At secondary phase there is content on the emerging issue of A.I. and deepfakes, increased content on menstrual and gynaecological health, and increased content (as there is at primary) on vaping.

Further reading

[Read the Sex Education Forum's consultation guide](#) for a useful question-by-question analysis.