Relate believes that all young people should be entitled to high quality Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in order to help children and young people learn about choice, control and consent so as to help them form strong and stable couple, family, social and professional relationships throughout their later lives. Evidence suggests there’s an urgent need for this and that current provision isn’t adequate. Relate believes that RSE should become a compulsory part of the national curriculum.
Introduction

There is growing concern that Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is not consistently high quality and not available to all children and young people. Relate sees good quality RSE as providing education and information to help children and young people learn about choice, control and consent so as to help them form strong and stable couple, family, social and professional relationships throughout their later lives.

There is widespread support for RSE in schools, from parents, children and young people, and from professionals, including Ofsted, the Children’s Commissioner and head teachers. Despite this, RSE has a lower statutory status than nearly any other subject, including ICT, PE and Citizenship. Following the PSHE (personal, social, health and economic education) review and the national curriculum review, the government has decided to keep PSHE as a non-statutory subject. This does little to promote the availability of consistently high quality RSE.

In keeping with the findings of a report by the Office of The Children’s commissioner, we believe that ‘Sex and Relationships Education’ (SRE) should be renamed ‘Relationships and Sex Education’ (RSE) ‘to place emphasis on the importance of developing healthy, positive, respectful relationships’ (Horvath et al., 2013, p.11).

Key messages

1. Relate believes that all children and young people should be entitled to high quality Relationships and Sex Education that includes teaching about choice, control and consent. This is not the case at the moment.

2. In order to achieve consistent high quality Relationships and Sex Education, Relate believes that it should be a compulsory part of the national curriculum delivered by experts. This could be as part of compulsory PSHE or as a part of Citizenship.

3. The evidence shows that Relationships and Sex Education can benefit children and young people in a range of ways, including helping them protect themselves from abuse.

4. Relate believes that Relationships and Sex Education is one part of a much needed wider approach to help young people form strong and stable couple, family, social and professional relationships.

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1 In this document we will largely use RSE and SRE interchangeably, using the latter only when sources have used the terminology.

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Why Relationships and Sex Education on the national curriculum matters

Relate’s vision is a future in which healthy relationships are actively promoted as the heart of a thriving society. We believe that the availability of high quality RSE is one way in which we can move towards this goal, as part of a set of wider relationship support initiatives. This belief is supported through decades of experience in supporting children and young people, including through our Children and Young People’s counselling services.

There is mounting evidence of challenges faced by children and young people in relation to relationships and sex. It has been argued that RSE should be made compulsory so as to help:

- Encourage greater use of condoms and contraception. Good quality SRE programmes have been shown to do this in international studies (Kirby, 2007).
- Encourage young people to delay the initiation of sex and reduce the number of sexual partners. Good quality SRE programmes have also been shown to do this in international studies (Kirby, 2007).
- Give young people the opportunity to explore the meaning of consent in the context of relationships and sex education (Coy et al., 2013; Berelowitz et al., 2013).
- Promote wider child protection, including through content on internet safety and all forms of bullying and harassment (Berelowitz et al., 2013).
- Mitigate the risk of pornography influencing children and young people’s engagement in ‘risky behaviours’ (Horvath et al., 2013) – although the influence of porn on young people’s relationships is far from conclusive.

In addition Relate believes that compulsory RSE would:

- Help children and young people to develop strong and stable couple, family, social and professional relationships that will contribute towards their well-being and happiness throughout their lives.
- Have positive spillovers into academic achievement and save public money. International evidence, largely from the US, suggests that social and emotional learning interventions, which include certain overlaps with RSE such as developing relationship skills, have demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). Such interventions have also been estimated to save the public sector substantial amounts of money through said improvements (Beecham et al., 2011).

There is also an increasing demand for better quality RSE amongst affected groups, namely young people, professionals and parents:

- ‘Relationships’ was the most cited element of PSHE that should be made statutory in responses to the Department for Education’s consultation on PSHE education (Department for Education, 2013). 30% (146) respondents to the question felt relationships should be a statutory element of PSHE; sex education was the second most cited element with 24% (120) citing it. Respondents to the consultation included parents (24% of respondents), voluntary and community sector organisations (16%), teachers (13%), and local authorities (10%).

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• In a survey carried out on behalf of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT, 2013), 88% of parents said sex education and lessons on adult and peer relationships should be mandatory in school.

• In a survey by the Sex Education Forum (2008), one in three young people described their SRE as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’.

• In a survey by Mumsnet (2011), 98% of parents said that they are happy for their children to learn about sex and relationships at school.

• In a recent DfE evaluation, qualitative research of couples that had accessed relationship support surveys found that participants felt that discussion about relationship problems and help with addressing them should begin in schools (Spielhofer et al., 2014).

Arguments against RSE being on the national curriculum

Schools should be given flexibility

The government’s view is that because it is statutory for schools to have a SRE policy, this is adequate and that schools should be free to flexibly decide how they teach SRE, what content is covered and what format lessons take. While agreeable in theory, the evidence suggests that SRE is inconsistently delivered and it is often not of a high enough standard. This is supported by Ofsted (2013), whose PSHE review found that PSHE is ‘not yet good enough’, and required improvement in over a third of the 50 schools evaluated, leaving young people vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Research by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner found that due to the lack of consistent and required content in SRE in England, young people have limited access to information on how to negotiate sex (Coy et al., 2013).

Schools need to focus on more academic subjects so that the country is economically prosperous and in order to compete in the ‘global race’

The government’s education policy has been focused on raising standards in more traditional or academic subjects in order to compete in the ‘global race’ (Department for Education & 10 Downing Street, 2013). This focus has arguably led to the neglect of the development of other elements of school life and of children and young people’s development, namely emotional health and well-being, including relationships and sex education.

However, evidence suggests that it is not necessarily an either-or situation. An international meta-analysis of school-based, universally-provided social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions found that compared to controls, participants that had undertaken SEL demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). The proximal goals of the SEL programs were to
foster the development of ‘self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships skills, and responsible decision making’ (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 406).

While RSE does not in itself constitute a SEL intervention, there are some overlaps, especially in relation to the relationships elements of RSE. The evidence therefore should not be taken as for RSE, but just an indicator of some benefits that could arise.

Further international evidence suggests that interventions that focus on SEL could save the public sector and other sectors substantial amounts of money over time through the interventions leading to significantly improved social and emotional skills attitudes and behaviour (Beecham et al., 2011). The sources of the savings estimated at year five are predominately attributed to a reduction in Criminal Justice and NHS costs as well as a reduction in crime victim costs (Beecham et al., 2011)

### RSE should be left to the parents

Some argue that it is not the place of schools to be teaching children about relationships and sex, but that instead it should be the responsibility of the parents. Whilst there is a certain appeal to this, the evidence suggests that this does not work in practice:

- Many children are not receiving high quality RSE from their parents. This is evident in the findings that young people ‘have a very limited sense of what getting consent might involve’ (Coy et al., 2013, p.10) and have confused ideas about what constitutes rape (Coy et al., 2013).
- The vast majority of parents want RSE to be mandatory. A survey carried out on behalf of the National Association of Head Teachers (2013) found that 88% of parents said that sex education and lessons on adult and peer relationships should be mandatory in schools. In a Mumsnet (2011) survey, 98% of parents said that they are happy for their children to learn about sex and relationships at school.
- Not everyone has a stable family in which parents can take this role. Louise Casey, the lead of the government’s Troubled Families Unit, found when interviewing families working with Family Intervention Projects that many ‘…were just not very good at relationships’ (Casey, 2012, p.48). This suggests that such parents would not be in a good position to provide high quality education to their children about sex and relationships.

### RSE will encourage children to have sex at a young age

There are fears among some that teaching about RSE will encourage children to form sexual relationships before they would have otherwise have. However, this is not supported by the evidence. The research suggests that good quality RSE encourages young people to delay the initiation of sex and reduce the number of sexual partners (Kirby, 2007).
**Relevant statistics**

- There were 7.7 million children in schools that have to follow the national curriculum in England in January 2013 (ONS, 2013).
- Approximately 50,500 children in the UK are known to be at risk of abuse (NPSCC, 2013)
- In a random probability sample of over 2,800 young adults (aged 18-24) 25.3% were severely maltreated during childhood (NSPCC, 2013).
- In 2012 in England and Wales there were 26,948 births to mothers under 20.
- According to a survey by Brook (2011) one in four young people said they don’t get any SRE in school at all and 26% of those that do say their SRE teacher is not able to teach it well.
- Women’s Aid research (2013) shows 50% of 16-18 year olds wouldn’t know where to go to get support if affected by domestic abuse and 18% were unsure or didn’t believe slapping counted as domestic violence.
- A YouGov poll conducted on behalf of End Violence Against Women (2010) found almost a third (29%) of 16-18-year-old girls say they have been subjected to unwanted sexual touching at school.
- NSPCC found that a third of girls in relationships aged 13-17 have experienced sexual violence in relationships, while one in 16 of this group reported experiencing rape (Barter et al., 2009).

We believe that RSE could help to address some of the negative outcomes above, helping children and young people protect themselves from abuse and violence, reduce the number of under-age pregnancies.

**Policy and legislation**

**What’s statutory and what isn’t?**

Neither RSE nor PSHE, which includes an RSE element, are statutory subjects. By a statutory subject we mean one that is on the national curriculum. There is some confusion because there is SRE statutory guidance which dates back to 2000. While the guidance does cite the fact that it is mandatory for some sex education content to be delivered, relationships education is under-represented. In the guidance, relationships education is only included as one of a series of topics that ‘schools might need to address’ (Department for Education and Employment, 2000, p.11), it is not statutory that the content is actually delivered. All that is statutory is that all schools must have a SRE policy which includes (as a minimum) information about HIV and AIDS and other sexuality transmitted diseases. In addition, Science includes a biology based sex education which is statutory, but relationships education is not necessarily, or usually, a part of this.

Parents have the right to withdraw their children from any parts of sex education, apart from the biological aspects of human growth and development contained in national curriculum science.

Indirectly connected with RSE and PSHE is a statutory requirement in the Education Act 2002, which requires schools to offer a balanced and broadly based curriculum that: (a)
promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society, and (b) prepares all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life. This was changed with the 2014 national curriculum.

There has been recognition that PSHE is a key way of fulfilling the need stated in the Education Act 2002. Despite this it has not been made statutory. In contrast, Citizenship is statutory and covers issues around our political and legal system and financial responsibility. There is no content related to RSE in the Citizenship framework.

PSHE review

On the 21st March 2013, the outcome of the DfE’s review of PSHE (which dates back to 21st July 2011) was published, along with a ministerial statement from then minister for education and childcare, Elizabeth Truss. The main result was that PSHE will not become a statutory subject, though funding is being given to the PSHE association ‘to work with schools to support them in developing their own PSHE curricula and improve the quality of teaching’ (Truss, 2013). The outcome of the DfE’s review of PSHE matches the outcome of the Reform of the National Curriculum, given that PSHE has remained off the national curriculum. It has been received with disappointment from those in support of PSHE (Sex Education Forum, 2013).

Coalition for Consent

This campaign was created in order to promote New Clause 20 of the Children and Families Bill in June 2013; an amendment proposed in the commons which would put PSHE on the national curriculum. Included in the coalition are: Relate, Woman’s Aid, the Family Planning Association, National Union of Students, End Violence Against Women, Brook, the Sex Education Forum, the PSHE Association, the EQUALs coalition, No More Page 3, Everyday Sexism, NSPCC, Terrance Higgins Trust and Women’s Aid as well as the Labour Party. The clause was defeated in the commons following near unanimous opposition from the government, with only two MPs rebelling, Dr Sarah Wollaston MP and Julian Huppert MP.

Relate’s work on RSE

Ongoing

- We are a core member of the Sex Education Forum (SEF).
- We are working on a project with the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) which investigates the views of young people and Relate counsellors on the impact of pornography on young people’s relationships. Findings are due to be published in late 2014.
- We support The Telegraph’s Better Sex Education campaign that started in September 2013.

Formerly it said: ‘(a) promotes the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and (b) prepares all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life’.

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Previous

- We are part of the Coalition for Consent, which attempted to amend the Children and Families Bill with New Clause 20 (in June 2013) that would have made PSHE part of the national curriculum. The clause failed in the commons.

- Our Try to see it my way: Improving relationship support for men report (2013) in partnership with the Men’s Health Forum recommended that:

  ‘The Department for Education should ensure that good quality personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education is made available to all young people in schools across England as a statutory requirement. Sex and relationships education should be a core component of this. Consideration to gender should be included in monitoring of the quality and effectiveness of this programme.’

(Wilkins, 2013)

- Relate, as part of the Relationships Alliance, submitted evidence to the Education Committee inquiry into PSHE and SRE in June 2014; responded to the DfE’s 2013 consultation on the Reform of the National Curriculum in England; and responded to the DfE’s 2013 consultation on the National curriculum review: new programmes of study and attainment targets from September 2014.

Views of other relevant organisations

Generally there is a consensus from organisations in the third and public sector in support of a similar view to ours, though sometimes the emphasis is less on relationships and more on sex.

The Relationships Alliance together have responded to consultations and issued press releases consistent with our messaging here. In addition:

- Teaching unions are in broad support.
- The SEF broadly shares our view.
- The Coalition for Consent includes a wide range of organisations with broadly similar beliefs and aims with relation to RSE.
- Research from the Office of the Children’s Commissioner recommended that: “The Department for Education should ensure that all schools understand the importance of, and deliver, effective relationship and sex education which must include safe use of the internet. A strong and unambiguous message to this effect should be sent to all education providers including: all state funded schools including academies; maintained schools; independent schools; faith schools; and further education colleges” (Horvath et al., 2013, p.11).
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This paper was written by Patrick Sholl. It is part of a series of policy positions published by Relate that set out our view on a variety of topics relevant to our work. The positions contain our overarching key messages on a given subject and provide some context including supporting evidence, relevant statistics and the policy and legal background.

More policy positions dealing with other relationship issues can be downloaded from www.relate.org.uk/policy

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email policyandresearch@relate.org.uk

About Relate

Relate is the UK’s leading relationship support organisation, serving more than one million people through information, support and counselling every year. Our vision is a future in which healthy relationships are actively promoted as the basis of a thriving society.

We aim to develop and support healthy relationships by:

- delivering inclusive, high-quality services that are relevant at every stage of life
- helping couples, families and individuals to make relationships work better
- helping both the public and policy makers improve their understanding of relationships and what makes them flourish.

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