

Royal Society for Public Health

Response to Department for Education Consultation on Changes to the teaching of Sex and Relationship Education and PSHE

- 1. Thinking about relationships education in primary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught for different age groups/key stages and why. Please include any considerations or evidence which informed your choices.**

We welcome the government's commitment to statutory status for RSE. Nonetheless, we note that it is important for all aspects of PHSE to be granted statutory status at the same time to ensure children are adequately protected and educated.

In agreement with the PHSE Association, we do not believe it is possible to rank these in order of importance and that this interdependence is emphasised by the International Standards for Sexuality Education (UNESCO 2018) which state that effective relationships education is structured around themes which 'are equally important, mutually reinforcing' and should be 'repeated multiple times with increasing complexity, building on previous learning using a spiral-curriculum approach'.

Primary relationships education should address the same themes as secondary relationships and sex education, however be tailored in an age appropriate way. It is important that a component of this education should feature the safe use of the internet and social media. By confronting the challenge of social media for children at this early age, this approach could help protect children and mitigate the negative effects which social media may have on a child as they grow up.

Furthermore, it is important to see Primary PSHE as vital in providing the foundations for Secondary PSHE further down the line. For example, if we are going to look at a topic like 'supporting someone in an unhealthy relationship' at secondary school level, then it is important to lay the foundations by discussing issues as simple as 'gender equality' at primary school.

- 2. Thinking about relationships and sex education in secondary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught for different age groups/key stages and why. Please include any considerations or evidence which informed your choices.**

Relationships and sex education (RSE) play a vital role in preparing secondary school pupils for the challenges which growing up in modern society presents. In agreement with the PSHE Association, we believe that relationships and sex education should ensure it 'prepares young people to develop and maintain healthy, positive relationships, make informed choices about their sexual health, and know how to access help'.

To provide a comprehensive programme of learning, RSE must not only reflect pupils' age and stage, but also respond to their feedback. Our Status of Mind report found eight in 10 (84%) young people support safe social media use being taught in PSHE. Thus, we stress the importance of safe social media use to be taught following primary school, as a component of relationships and sex education in secondary schools building on previous learning using a spiral-curriculum approach.

We emphasise that by having statutory status for RSE, we can ensure that all children and young people have access to the necessary education and resources to navigate and support them as they enter each new stage of their life. However, implementing statutory status for the whole of PSHE, not limited to RSE, is essential in effectively preparing children and young people for healthy relationships.

3. Are there important aspects of ensuring safe online relationships that would not otherwise be covered in wider Relationships Education and Relationships and Sex Education, or as part of the computing curriculum?

A major challenge facing young people in their development of relationships is social media. Social media has become a space in which we form and build relationships, shape self-identity, express ourselves, and learn about the world around us. It can promote a sense of community and facilitate the provision of emotional support and provides an unprecedented ability to connect people from all walks of life. Yet, on the other hand, this presents an increasing challenge to developing young people, with our Status of Mind report showing a link between social media use and anxiety and depression, poor body image and a lack of sleep.

As outlined, our Status of Mind report found eight in 10 (84%) of young people support safe social media being taught in PSHE. With this in mind, we stress that an important component of Relationships Education and Relationships and Sex Education should be the safe use of social media including: cyber bullying and where to seek help; social media addiction; body image and social media, and other potential effects of social media on mental health and wellbeing.

4. How should schools effectively consult parents so they can make informed decisions that meet the needs of their child, including on the right to withdraw? For example, how often, on what issues and by what means?

We believe all children and young people deserve equal access to the same level of education, furthermore, PHSE/RSE/ relationships education plays a vital role in protecting children and young people from neglect. Thus, we do not believe it appropriate for parents to hold the right to withdraw. Transparency surrounding the teaching of PHSE/RSE/ relationships education is essential and schools should share information with parents on statutory guidance and regulation, the aims of the school for RSE and how it supports safeguarding, and why this is an important part of the curriculum for each year group.

PSHE (inclusive of RSE/ relationships education), is most effective when complimented by support and discussions in the home and hence the effectiveness of PSHE can be maximised by informing parents of their child's curriculum, and through engagement between schools and parents, for example through question and answer sessions and correspondence with parents.

5. Thinking about PSHE in primary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught and why? Please include your reasons for choosing each subject area or evidence to support your suggestions.

RSPH has long called for the introduction of comprehensive, statutory Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) in schools. PSHE education plays a central role in preparing children for the real world under the core themes of PSHE - relationships, physical and mental health, careers and economic wellbeing.

Primary relationships education should address the same themes as secondary relationships and sex education, yet tailored in an age appropriate way. We do not wish to rank these, however these should be structured around three themes - 'relationships', 'health and wellbeing' and 'living in the wider world'.

We call for a component of PSHE in primary schools to feature the safe use of social media, and address the impact of social media on a child's personal and social health and wellbeing. This preventative approach could help mitigate the negative effects which social media may have on a child as they grow up.

6. Thinking about PSHE in secondary schools, what do you believe are the three most important subject areas that should be taught and why? Please also include your reasons for choosing each subject or evidence to support your suggestions.

PSHE in secondary schools plays a vital role in preparing young people for their adult life. To be effective, PSHE must be a comprehensive programme of learning. Currently, many schools are delivering effective PSHE which is structured around three themes - 'relationships', 'health and wellbeing' and 'living in the wider world'. It is important that this is structured in this way, rather than being taught as isolated topics, to ensure a coherent and effective programme.

As mentioned previously, our Status of Mind report found eight in 10 (84%) of young people support safe social media being taught in PSHE. With this in mind, we stress that an important component of PSHE should be the safe use of social media – particularly at secondary school age when children and young people are increasingly vulnerable to its negative effects such as cyber bullying and where to seek help; social media addiction; body image and the wide-ranging potential effects of social media on mental health and wellbeing.

One key gap for young people in secondary schools is financial literacy, which would fit into 'Living in the Wider World'.

At secondary school level it is important that there is an opportunity for the knowledge developed through PSHE to be put to use. For example, not only should we be talking to young people about issues such as the dangers of social media and mental health, but we also must give them the opportunity to apply this knowledge, build their strategies to handle these risks and then share them with their peers.

In PSHE at secondary school, some students can switch off or feel embarrassed by some of the issues under discussion. PSHE thus needs to be something which is, wherever possible, driven by young people themselves, as if young people are given the opportunity to take ownership of the subjects, they are more likely to engage with them and think more closely about how they are going to approach them in their own lives.

7. How much flexibility do you think schools should have to meet the needs of individual pupils and to reflect the diversity of local communities and wider society in the content of PSHE lessons in schools?

PSHE prepares children for real life and so covers themes which are relevant to all. Whilst the core themes of PSHE (relationships, physical and mental health, careers and economic wellbeing) should be used as a structure, schools should remain flexible to tailor their lesson content to meet the needs of the individual school, its pupils and the wider community in which they are growing up.