

# Consultation Response:

# Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Consultation

November 2023



#### Introduction

Nexus has almost 40 years' experience offering a specialised professional counselling service to people impacted by sexual abuse and abusive relationships. We can provide support to anyone impacted by sexual abuse from age 4 and upwards, availability of children's counselling depends on funding available. We currently also provide support services to adults who are age 18+, identify as male, and who have been impacted by abusive relationships (domestic abuse) as an adult or child. Our Early Intervention and Prevention Training team provide a range of bespoke training and workshops that are available to schools, workplaces, volunteer groups, higher education institutions, individual practitioners, community groups, sports teams, voluntary and charity groups, and businesses.

As providers of Relationship and Sexuality Education as well as a therapeutic intervention service for people impacted by sexual abuse and abusive relationships, Nexus welcomes these measures to institute comprehensive, continuous, and fact-based RSE in all schools. Our organisation strongly believes, based on our work, research, and external evidence, that educating and supporting our children and young people is key to promoting healthy relationships in all areas of life. Therefore, Nexus welcomes the opportunity to share our knowledge and learning through this Consultation exercise.

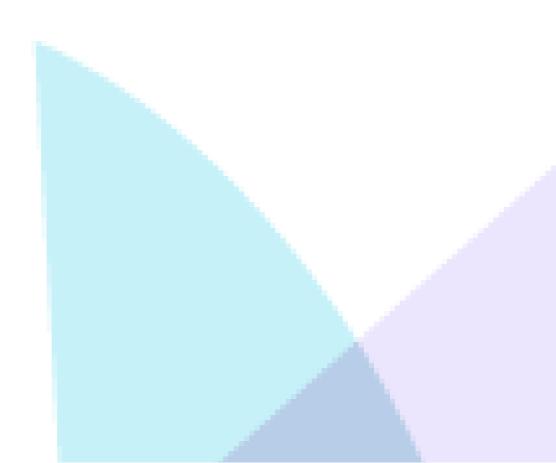
The following comments, suggestions, and questions are based on our expertise and experience delivering RSE across Northern Ireland, as well as our research into developing good practise to support, inform, and advise our children and young people, whose feedback on RSE content and delivery has also been included in this response.

### Background

On the 5th of June 2023, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland brought forward the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations. The Secretary of State cited the recommendations of UN Committee on the Ending of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 2018 report to implement recommendations as the basis for the amendment. For reference, paragraph 86 of the 2018 CEDAW Report recommended that the State <u>(link)</u>:

- Provide non-biased, scientifically sound and rights-based counselling and information on sexual and reproductive health services, including on all methods of contraception and access to abortion;
- Make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory component of curriculum for adolescents, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion, and monitor its implementation;

These regulations amend the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 as it pertains to the Learning for Life and Work to ensure pupils at Key Stages 3 and 4 "receive age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion ". The regulations also place a requirement on the Department for Education to conduct a public consultation on Relationships and Sexuality Education provisions, content, and delivery in the Key Stages 3 and 4 of Personal Development strand of Learning for Life and Work. The consultation closes on November 24th, 2023. The Department must, by 1 January 2024, issue guidance on the content and delivery of the education required, to be compliant with the CEDAW recommendations. Following this, the Department of Education must publish a report on the implementation of relationships and sexuality education in grantaided schools by 1st September 2026. In preparing the report, the Department must consult the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, and such other persons as the Department of Education considers appropriate.



#### **Consultation Questions**

The consultation contained a number of Statements. which asked respondents to indicate if we agree, disagree or neither agree nor disagree with the Statements. Please see our responses and additional comments below.

Question 1: The content of teaching and learning resources for Learning for Life and Work developed by CCEA should be factual and contain age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion and these resources should not advocate, or oppose, a particular view on the moral and ethical considerations of abortion or contraception.

Nexus agrees with the Statement, with the following qualifications:

We believe that one of the best ways to create a society free from sexual abuse and abusive relationships is to provide fully comprehensive and accessible relationship and sexuality education that, while includes, is not solely focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights, this point would need to be emphasised more clearly by the department. By providing a fully comprehensive programme we increase the potential that every young person is confident in their ability to engage in healthy and consensual relationships and intimacy, to support and advocate for themselves and their peers and friends, and to challenge abusive behaviours. Furthermore, the UNCRC called on the United Kingdom to "develop and adopt a comprehensive sexual and reproductive health policy... Ensure that meaningful sexual and reproductive health education is part of the mandatory school curriculum for all schools.... and provide age-appropriate information on: confidential sexual and reproductive health-care services; contraceptives; the prevention of sexual abuse or exploitation, including sexual bullying; the support available in cases of such abuse and exploitation; and sexuality, including that of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex children".

To provide a fully comprehensive programme it must be recognised that RSE is multifaceted: it is a social issue, a health issue and an education issue. Socially, we want to prepare our young people for the relationships that they will build as the get older and navigate new paths, and that may or may not include intimate relationships. Young people deserve an education that will enable them to feel comfortable in their own bodies, understand what consent actually means and to advocate for their needs and boundaries. RSE is also a health issue - we know from the data that de-stigmatising our bodies and sex that we can protect ourselves from STD's and other health complications. Having informed choice is also vital for anyone who is sexually active and who could become involved in a pregnancy.

Educationally, we want to provide safe spaces for young people to discuss all issues related to relationship and sexuality education free from influence, with accessible and relatable information that is relevant to their lived experience and will support them to make informed choices. We also advocate for rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure that children and young people are receiving consistent, and factual information across all educational settings. It is important that an in-depth description of how this monitoring would be carried out is produced. This should include details of who is responsible for monitoring, and how often this is required to ensure transparent, commitment to consistent, accessible, and factual RSE. In 2021, Nexus shared a public survey to capture data on public perceptions of sexual abuse, relationship education, and myths and stigma of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault. We received 107 responses, and 74% of respondents to the Nexus Public Survey said that young people primarily get their sex education from online pornography and other sexual materials, and 87% said that young people are more likely to speak to their friends and peers about relationships and sex as opposed to an adult. 90% of respondents said that RSE is a core part of a young person's education and growth, and 97% agreed that RSE should be taught in schools.

When asked about the subjects that should be included in a Relationship and Sexuality programme,

- 99% said Consent
- 99% said STD's
- 97% said Safe Sex
- 96.3% said Different Types of Contraception
- 86% said Sexual Identities
- 83% said Abortion
- 78% said Gender Identities

We also asked respondents about the role of teachers in RSE, and 79% agreed that teachers have a responsibility to educate young people on healthy relationships and sex. 92% also said that teachers should have training to identify unhealthy sex and relationship situations. This data supports our initiatives to promote informed RSE delivered in a way that builds safe spaces for students and teachers to ask for support and advice. Our Early Intervention and Prevention Team delivers specialist training sessions, workshops and resources for young people, parents, carers and professionals of all ages across Northern Ireland on topics including sexual abuse, abusive relationships, relationship and sexuality education, bystander intervention, and handling disclosures.

Below is a selection of feedback we have received from our RSE sessions in schools about the importance of good quality information and access to that information in a non-judgemental way:

"It was pretty cool that college did something like this. My high school never talked about this stuff"

"I learned so much more than I thought I knew. 10/10 very helpful"

We also asked the students what they would like to see included in their RSE learning:

"More details in types of abuse in our age group for example social media and how that starts - laws that protect our rights and how we can access these and their outcomes" "How to go about reporting any abuse we have experienced i.e. spiking, stalking"

> "I would like to know about dating"



The Belfast Council Youth Forum published the 'Any Use' Report in 2019 to gather young people's opinions on Relationship and Sexuality Education in Northern Ireland (<u>link</u>). The results are clear:

- Nearly half (49%) of students surveyed felt that the way RSE was taught was influenced by religion or the ethos of the school they attended, and 75% of young people felt that RSE should not be influenced by these factors.
- 60% of young people felt that the information they received was either 'not very useful' or 'not useful at all'
- 73% of young people said they only received RSE 'once or twice' or 'rarely'
- The most commonly given response in relation to who should teach RSE was 'a qualified RSE teacher', followed by 'young people who are trained to deliver RSE'.

In the same survey, when asked about what they would like to see in an RSE programme, the students answered as follows:

- 66% said personal relationships
- 64% sexual intercourse
- 62% said STD's
- 59% said LGBTQ relationships
- 58% Healthy and Unhealthy relationships
- 57% Contraception
- 55% said Consent
- 52% Different kinds of families
- 50% Abortion
- 50% Menstruation

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission published a report into RSE in Post-Primary Schools, where they sent a questionnaire to schools across Northern Ireland (<u>link</u>). 149 schools responded, and 124 provided copies of their RSE policies, and as a result the Human Rights Commission made the following observations:

- 94% said that they used external providers to assist with the delivery of RSE, noting that external providers may "have specialist knowledge or comfort with certain topics that teachers themselves lack, particularly in relation to gender, abuse, and LGBTQ issues"
- Students have identified that "they want people teaching them about relationships and sexuality who enjoy (have chosen) this role, are confident, well trained, knowledgeable, comfortable, non-judgmental and open"
- There was an overall lack of focus on providing age appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate RSE.
- The experts assessed that the majority of schools in NI are not providing age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on access to abortion services- 65.3% of schools referenced various 'pro-life' values such as 'the right to life' 'precious life' and 'pro-life'. Only 26.6% of schools included abortion in their RSE content in an objective context.
- In terms of contraception, the independent experts found that RSE programmes in NI schools are prioritising abstinence and adopting a 'risk-focused' approach to contraception. 67.7% of schools promoted abstinence, celibacy and 'chaste and single' content
- 95% of schools still promoted the value of 'the sanctity of marriage' and the "positive benefits of commitment, monogamy, and marriage"

- In relation to teaching on sexual orientation and gender identity, the independently contracted experts reported that while the majority of schools oppose bullying of various kinds within their RSE polices, this may not go far enough to achieve positive sexual health for young people who are LGBTQIA+.
- Approximately one third of schools explicitly stated that their school would teach pupils that heterosexual relationships was the "main" or "ideal" context for sexual intimacy, with one school stating that it was "the most desirable option for a person's psychological development".
- Only approximately one third of schools listed gender and sexual identity in their curriculum content.
- In relation to gender inequality, most schools included references to gender-related topics, however these were limited to "rape, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and sexual harassment" without any reference to the gendered context of these kinds of abuses.
- 54% of schools focused on "strategies to protect themselves" from sexual violence and other forms of harassment, however they did not discuss the importance of preventing others from perpetrating violence.

We can also see from the 2022 Sex Education Forum Young People's RSE Poll, which surveyed 1,002 young people aged 16-17 in England (<u>link</u>) that:

- Only 40% of young people rate their lessons as 'good' or 'very good'
- Nearly one in five (18%) still say their in-school RSE is bad or very bad.
- Students report that they don't learn enough about today's most pressing issues, including pornography (58%), LGBTQ+-relevant information (54%), and healthy relationships (54%).

- While 44% of respondents agreed that what they learned in RSE had helped them and 42% said the content felt relevant to them, over a quarter still felt lessons were neither relevant (26%) nor helpful (27%).
- Almost 3 in 10 (29%) had learnt nothing about 'How to recognise when someone is being groomed for sexual exploitation'.
- More than a quarter (26%) had learnt nothing about the 'attitudes and behaviour of men and boys towards women and girls'
- Close to 3 in 10 (28%) of young people had not learnt about 'how to tell if a relationship is healthy, including online', with a further 31% feeling they had not learnt enough about this topic.
- One in three (33%) didn't learn 'how to access local sexual health services', yet this is a basic, mandatory part of statutory RSE.
- 39% had learnt nothing about 'gender identity and information relevant to people who are trans and non-binary'
- 37% percent reported learning nothing about 'Power imbalances in relationships.

These statistics highlight the gap in education for young people and showcase the importance of making sure that every student has access to comprehensive RSE. Question 2: Parents/carers should be informed about the specific nature and content of the age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion

Nexus agrees with the Statement, with the following qualifications:

We advocate for a partnership between young people, parents, and teachers when it comes to learning and promoting a safe space to ask questions about relationships and sexuality. RSE is for everyone, and parents should be part of the conversation and part of that knowledge sharing in order to continue educating their children at home and facilitating conversations that may arise after RSE sessions. However, we want to emphasise RSE content should be shared as part of the overall curriculum and not singled out, which may give the impression that it is something that parents should be concerned about rather than integral to children and young people's education like other subjects.

In the Nexus Public Survey, 100% of respondents agreed with the statement "Parents and Guardians have a responsibility to support and encourage their children to learn about healthy relationships in safe spaces". One way to foster this educational partnership is to consistently provide easily accessible evidence in a guide format for parents and guardians to not only show the need for RSE so parents see the benefit but to ensure that the voice of children and young people is reflected.

The Belfast Council Youth Forum found that:

- 62% of young people learnt about sex and relationships from friends and peers
- 55% said they learnt from social media
- 44% said that they learnt about sex and relationships from their mothers, and only 15% said that they learnt from their fathers, and only 4% learnt from their guardians.

These statistics showcase the lack of familial support and advice for children and young people, which echoes our call for increased buy-in from parents and guardians in order to support effective and accessible RSE.

The Education and Training Inspectorate conducted a survey of parents and pupils on the Preventative Curriculum in 2023 (link) to gather views on effective ways to safeguard children, including relationship and sexuality education. The survey found that parents would like to know more about the preventative curriculum, including the content being addressed and when it is taught, and want more opportunities to provide their views on the preventative curriculum and more specific information on how they can reinforce the messages at home to ensure the needs of their child(ren) are fully met.

The 2014 Sex Education Forum polled 1,000 people with children at primary and/or secondary school in England (link) and found that:

- 78% of parents want primary schools to teach their children about the difference between safe and unwanted touch and how to speak up if someone treats them inappropriately
- 72% of parents think primary schools should teach children about what to do if they find pictures showing private parts of the body online or are asked to send them.

And again in 2018, the Sex Education Forum polled 1,000 people with children at primary and/or secondary school in England (<u>link</u>) and found that:

• 80% of parents think RSE teachers should be comprehensively trained to teach it.

ParentKind, an organisation that advocates for greater relationships between parents/carers and schools, conducted a Post-Pandemic RSE Parents Survey in 2020, where they asked 1,025 parents of children currently in a primary or secondary school in England (<u>link</u>) and found that:

- 85% said that it was important that Relationships Education should "improve relationships and acceptance of others in society"
- 71% said that it was important that schools overall help children to understand and be prepared for sexual relationships
- 89% said that Teaching should enable pupils to recognise unhealthy relationships

We believe that comprehensive, accessible RSE includes dispelling myths around the content of RSE to help parents better understand what their child is learning and why they should take part. Misinformation poses a significant risk to the wellbeing and education of children and young people as well as their parents and guardians, ultimately hindering health development and contributing to the stigma of healthy relationships and sexuality that results in a shame-based culture. Nexus believes in dispelling misinformation and de-mystifying RSE by directly communicating to parents and guardians and involving them in the educational journey. Question 3: The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child includes at Articles 1-3 and 12 the rights of the child to 'express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously' and at Article 5 'the rights and responsibilities of parents and carers to provide guidance and direction to their child as they grow up so that they fully enjoy their rights. This must be done in a way that recognises the child's increasing capacity to make their own choices.' The Department's guidance, when developed, should consider in such instances how schools balance the rights of both children and parents/carers in implementing the regulations.

Nexus disagrees with this Statement for the following reasons:

Nexus recognises the healthy, informed, and consensual autonomy of children over their own bodies and relationships. We believe in the rights of the child as well as the safeguarding role of parents, carers, and teachers. Article 13 of the UNCRC states that "The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice", and Article 28 explicitly states that "States Parties recognise the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity". The UNCRC 2016 report directly recommended that the United Kingdom "establish structures for the active and meaningful participation of children and give due weight to their views in designing laws, policies, programmes and services at the local and national levels, including in relation to discrimination, violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, harmful practices, alternative care, sexual and reproductive education, leisure and play".

We would like to see the above recommendation implemented in the design and implementation of RSE programmes to ensure that children and young people are regarded as key stakeholders in their education. It is important that due regard is given to guidance and provision for the children and young people who are keen to receive RSE but whose parents or guardians want to remove the student from the programme. This scenario is important to preserving the rights of the child to accessing factual information and a full education and underpins the need to also provide parents and guardians with robust and factual information. We call for a robust protocol for handling these scenarios that ensures the rights of the child are met.

SafeLives, a UK-wide charity working to end domestic abuse, surveyed 63 RSE teachers, 1025 young people, as well as conducted interviews with subject experts and focus groups with 37 participants in 2022 (<u>link</u>):

- 10 out of 21 students 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. Their ages range from 12 to 17 years of age, and the average age of those who responded 'no' was 13.5 years.
- Of the remaining 11 students who responded 'yes' to the same question, 6 students said they talk to friends as opposed to a teacher, parent, or caregiver, demonstrating that young people will turn to their peers for the information they seek, which is not always factual, healthy, or supportive.

In the Nexus Public Survey, 30% of respondents said that age appropriate RSE should be first taught to children and young people from the ages of 6-10; 14% said under 5, and 43.9% said between 11 and 13 years old. We would like to see the above recommendation implemented in the design and implementation of RSE programmes to ensure that children and young people are regarded as key stakeholders in their education. Particularly, we would like to see guidance and provision for the children and young people who are keen to receive RSE but whose parents or guardians want to remove the student from the programme. This scenario is important to preserving the rights of the child to accessing education and underpins the need to also provide parent with robust and factual information. We call for a robust protocol for handling these scenarios that ensures the rights of the child are met.

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In the Nexus Public Survey, 30% of respondents said that age appropriate RSE should be first taught to children and young people from the ages of 6-10; 14% said under 5, and 43.9% said between 11 and 13 years old. The following feedback from our educational workshops with children and young people highlight why it is important to provide information, resources, and support at an early age:

From our Techworld & Me Session Feedback:

"I really enjoyed this session, and it has made me feel more confident with the topic of sexual abuse and grooming"

"I think this topic needs to be heard more as it is really important"

"It was really good, and you should keep going to schools and talking about internet safety"

"It was a very good and informative project and I like how they are spreading awareness"

From our Healthy Relationships Session Feedback:

"Very good project and it is great to keep spreading the word of sexual abuse and unhealthy relationships" "I feel this was a very helpful project and spread good awareness to everyone"

"I thought the project was really good as it gave me a lot of information about relationships, I didn't think I needed to know" 'A very helpful project that I feel could help a lot of people" "It's good to know where you can go and signs of a unhealthy relationship"

"I think this topic has taught me a lot about abuse and sexual abuse etc" "I feel it was really interesting and helped me gain more knowledge"

"Very informative, important topics discussed"

"It is a good project. I learned about sexuality and other thanks Nexus"

"This was very well put together, the PowerPoint was spot on and had the perfect balance of professionalism and applicability to the people of my age, it was easy to understand and enjoyable"

"It helps if anyone getting it done to them or something"

> "It was very helpful and educational, and it helped me understand and know what to do if I or someone else may be in that situation"

"Very informative. Opportunity to receive factual information around consent, legalities & agencies" The Belfast Council Youth Forum's 'Any Use?' Report asked 120 students their opinions on RSE, with the following results:

- 72% of young people said they knew they had a right to receive RSE in school
- However, 52% said they felt their right to RSE was not being met
- Over half of respondents felt that young people should start to be taught about personal and sexual relationships when they are between 11 and 13 years of age
- 89% said that young people should be giving feedback on RSE classes
- 81% said that young people should be advising on how RSE is taught
- 75% said that young people should be helping to choose the content
- 66% said that young people should be choosing who delivers RSE
- 59% said that young people should be delivering RSE sessions

The above feedback from young people in Northern Ireland paints a clear picture of the importance of including young people in the design, delivery, and feedback of RSE.

The Education and Training Inspectorate's Preventative Curriculum survey asked pupils, schools, and parents their views on the programme, and reported back that almost two-fifths (39%) of all schools/centres who responded to the online questionnaire indicated that they do not seek the views of pupils regarding the content of the preventative curriculum. Pupils echoed this findingonly 49% of young people felt that they had been asked their views on the content or impact of the preventative curriculum. For example, pupils said that "There should be a set curriculum that clearly outlines consent, includes LGBTQ+ people and does not shame sexual choices. It should be the same for every school" and that prevention programmes should be "Making sure any and all information is up-to-date and doesn't present certain issues, such as consent or respecting other sexual orientations as optional or as a debate to be had instead of basic human rights. Having someone well experienced, passionate, realistic, knowledgeable could also improve education regarding such things".

The Sex Education Forum ran a People's RSE Poll in 2022, surveying 1,002 young people aged 16-17 in England (<u>link</u>) and produced the following results:

- One in five young people reported having had an 'opportunity to ask my questions and get answers' as part of their RSE at school over the last year
- Only 14% of young people recalled 'being asked my opinion about how RSE could be improved'
- For many young people (23%), there has been no RSE from parents and carers, but for those that did receive some it was more often one big talk or a few separate talks.
- Only 1 in 6 (17%) of young people have had RSE at home in the form of regular talks or conversations
- One in five (20%) of the young people surveyed were clear that they do not have a trusted adult with whom they feel comfortable to discuss matters to do with relationships and sex. For those young people that do, the trusted adult is female in 3 out of 4 cases.

Question 4: Pupils and parents/carers should have access to an overview of their school's RSE policy and planned RSE programme.

Nexus Agrees with the Statement, with the following qualifications:

We believe in full transparency to dispel any myths, misinformation and misconceptions about the content and purpose of the programme. By sharing the policy and programme with parents and carers, there is an increased partnership between educators and the other important people in a child's life that will positively inform and influence our young people's future relationships with themselves and others. Sharing the policy and programme also gives parents and carers the opportunity to share ideas, feedback, and act as their child's advocate. The schools RSE policy should be available alongside other policies such as the bullying policy, the safeguarding policy and the uniform policy for example.

From our Your CHOICE Project the 2 most requested topics from young people feedback was:

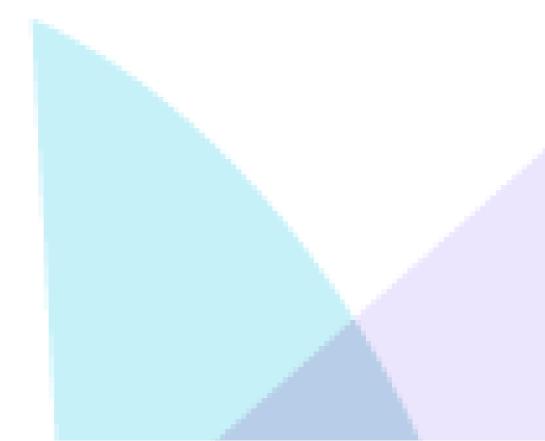
- Healthy Relationships
- LGBTQIA+ and Sexuality.

We also reiterate our position in Question 2 that it is imperative to the healthy development of children and young people's relationships that evidence-based guides are developed for parents and guardians to provide continuous learning and support for conversations at home. ParentKind ran an RSE in Northern Ireland Survey in 2021, with 191 respondents (<u>link</u>) who said:

- 96% of parents said that it is important for them to be able to access guidance on how to support what their child is being taught in RSE lessons.
- 69% of parents who completed this survey said that they don't know if their school has a RSE policy

ParentKind also conducted an RSE Parents Survey in 2020, where they asked 1,025 parents of children currently in a primary or secondary school in England (<u>link</u>) and found that:

- 87% said that teaching staff should be knowledgeable and confident to deliver RSE
- 81% said that school leadership should champion RSE and support staff in its delivery
- 89% said that there should be positive relationships and communication between parents and staff
- 83% said that RSE should be adapted to the realities of each child and their community.



### Conclusion

In summary, we would like to emphasise the importance of mandating fact-based, scientific, and comprehensive relationship and sexuality education alongside a robust monitoring and evaluation process in order to support continuous learning for all students across Northern Ireland, regardless of the school they attend. We welcome the opportunity to share our views and expertise, however we are keen to see further detail on the exact protocol for ensuring that schools are held accountable for providing inclusive, informative and supportive RSE.

As evidenced in our submission, our young people are consistently left unsupported, disappointed, and disadvantaged by the current state of RSE in schools. Any RSE mandate must be LGBTQIA+ inclusive, address gender-based violence, destigmatise healthy emotions for boys, and must be embedded in the young person's entire educational journey. Alongside this, there is a large awareness piece needed to dispel the myths, misconceptions, and misinformation that exists about the nature of RSE in order to support our young people's holistic education journey and to inform parents and guardians to continue the learning process outside of the traditional classroom setting. Nexus looks forward to further stakeholder engagement and participating in informing, supporting, and raising awareness of healthy relationships.

## Further Information



For more information please contact the Nexus Communications Team using the details below:

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