PSHE Association response to call for evidence on RSE and PSHE

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.

To deliver Government objectives of ‘child safety and pupils prepared for adult life’, relationships education must be designed in line with the significant body of evidence of effective practice.

Relationships education, taught as an integral component of PSHE education, covers a range of themes, including the physical self and preparing for puberty, healthy relationships, and safety within relationships. It is not possible, however, to rank these in order of importance. Relationships education is about equipping children to navigate real world experiences. Research shows that this requires interdependent and overlapping areas of subject knowledge, through which children develop the personal attributes and skills they need to foster and maintain healthy, positive relationships.

Learning that protects children from online grooming, for example, must include a combination of practical internet skills, understanding positive relationships, communication skills, risk management, understanding rights and responsibilities, consent, help-seeking skills and so on.

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 therefore addresses the same themes as secondary RSE, but through age appropriate subject content, building from KS1. Secondary RSE is only effective if these early foundations are laid down in primary. Teaching about ‘sexting’ in secondary, for example, requires children to have learned about personal boundaries in primary and this principle applies across PSHE education.
Thinking about **relationships 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.

The most important consideration for RSE in secondary schools is ensuring 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 do this effectively, RSE must reflect the complex, changing world young people are growing up in. Pressing issues including sexual exploitation, online pornography and sexting must be incorporated. To address these issues, however, RSE needs to provide a comprehensive programme of learning. It cannot be broken down into isolated subject areas which can then be prioritised. Protecting young people from sexual exploitation, for example, requires understanding of healthy relationships, consent, gender equality, drug and alcohol education, economic literacy, internet skills, help-seeking skills and more.

Effective RSE will therefore cover a number of mutually reinforcing themes including the physical self and sexual health, types of relationships, healthy relationships and safety in relationships. It will also be delivered as an integral part of PSHE education which includes learning about other issues which have a significant impact on relationships, such as mental health, drugs and alcohol, personal safety and media literacy. The secondary programme will build on and revisit learning in primary, developing underpinning skills, personal attributes and age appropriate knowledge. Through effective assessment it will reflect pupils’ age and stage and respond to their feedback.

Many schools already provide this high quality offer, some don’t. Statutory status for PSHE education would ensure all children can access this necessary learning, supporting healthy, positive relationships throughout their lives.

**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?**

There is learning necessary to ensuring safe online relationships which clearly falls outside RSE. For example, understanding online privacy and identity; understanding the impact of the internet on mental health, body image and self-esteem; accessing reliable information online and how online content influences beliefs and attitudes. An issue like ‘sexting’ requires an understanding of all of these areas plus trust, equality, persuasion and rights.

Teaching young people about safe online relationships will therefore only be effective if it is part of a wider programme of learning. This wider programme is not principally about how technology works – the domain of the computing curriculum. Nor is it solely about relationships. Primarily it is about the effects of technology on behaviour and attitudes, how it amplifies and accelerates risks whilst offering opportunities for social, creative and economic life.

To ensure young people are ‘prepared for adult life’ this programme of education must go beyond ‘online safety’ to encompass the knowledge and skills young people need to thrive in this increasingly digital world. Research also shows that safety education is most effective when it doesn’t simply focus
on risk but takes a positive approach, developing personal and social skills which can be applied in a range of situations.

An effective curriculum will then address the digital aspect of all elements of young people’s lives - whether that is sex and relationships, physical and mental health, drugs, economic wellbeing or careers. PSHE education is an established model for providing this planned, cohesive programme of education.

How should schools effectively consult parents (on RSE/rel ed) so they can make informed decisions that best meet the needs of their children, including on the right to withdraw? For example, how often, on what issues and by what means?

PSHE education, including RSE/relationships education, is most effective when it is a partnership between school, pupils and parents. Well taught, age-appropriate lessons in line with best-practice, enhanced and supported by discussions at home with a parent, provide children and young people with the best possible relationships and sex education. If parents are engaged and well-informed, they are likely to be supportive of RSE and understand its value for their children.

Schools should share information with parents on:

- statutory regulations and guidance
- school aims for RSE and how it supports safeguarding
- the curriculum for each year group.

Any school RSE policy should include:

- agreed approach to RSE in the curriculum
- whole school statement of intent for RSE within the context of the school’s ethos
- the school’s objectives for RSE
- overview of content and methodology used

Parent and pupil voice should be listened to when a school’s RSE policy is written or updated. As well as policy, which provides an overview of a school’s RSE provision, additional information about what’s being taught – and more importantly why – should be regularly communicated to parents – for example, at the beginning of each academic year, or term when RSE is to be taught.

Examples of how schools have effectively informed and engaged with parents:

- parent letters/emails requesting feedback
- after-school open classrooms to explore teaching materials
- question and answer sessions
- ‘market place’ events with stands for aspects of PSHE, including example resources and plans
- Parent governors joining a working party to inform RSE policy
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.

PSHE is best delivered using a ‘spiral curriculum’ structured around core themes which are revisited. In primary schools, PSHE must reflect pupils’ age and stage but will differ from secondary PSHE in complexity and content, not in the themes it covers. Keeping healthy, for example, is important whether you are five, fifteen or fifty. Your understanding increases in complexity and behaviours and choices become more sophisticated, but the principles of a healthy lifestyle remain the same.

This ‘spiral curriculum’ approach - in contrast to presenting a ‘series of topics’ - enables teachers to reinforce previous learning and build on it, reflecting pupils’ increasing independence, physical and social awareness and experiences of the world.

Many primary schools already use three themes - ‘relationships’, ‘health and wellbeing’ and ‘living in the wider world’ - to develop effective programmes. These mutually reinforcing, interdependent themes continue through secondary, enabling a developmental spiral curriculum from key stage 1-4.

Government objectives of ‘child safety and preparing children for adult life’ will only be met if PSHE is delivered effectively in primary schools. Introducing this learning at 11 is too late. Not only do primary pupils need PSHE to help them stay healthy and safe, but secondary PSHE will only be effective if built on firm foundations. Credit and debt, for example, make little sense without an early understanding of what money is for.

Many primary schools already provide this successfully. Statutory status is necessary to ensure equal access for all children to this essential learning.

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.

In secondary schools PSHE plays a critical role in preparing young people for adult life. There is clear evidence that high quality PSHE has a positive impact on young people’s physical and mental health, relationships, safety, academic attainment and employment prospects, with the greatest benefits experienced by the most disadvantaged pupils.

To meet this potential, however, PSHE must be a comprehensive programme of learning. PSHE supports young people across many important issues – including mental health, online safety and sexual violence – but it is not a ‘series of topics’ which can be prioritised. It is a school subject which develops knowledge, skills and attributes young people need to be healthy and thrive in personal, social and economic aspects of their lives.

Many schools are already delivering effective PSHE structured around three themes - ‘relationships’, ‘health and wellbeing’ and ‘living in the wider world’. These are taught as interdependent, rather than discrete, themes. A scheme of work preparing for careers, for example, would draw on learning from both ‘relationships’ and ‘living in the wider world’.
These broad themes enable schools to plan a spiral curriculum, developing in complexity in line with young people’s age and stage. This requires teachers trained in PSHE pedagogy, regular lessons and assessment of pupils’ learning. Many successful schools guarantee this time and resource, recognising that PSHE improves academic attainment in other subjects. Statutory status is necessary to ensure high quality provision in all schools and equal access to the benefits of PSHE for all young people.

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. The core themes of PSHE – relationships, physical and mental health, careers and economic wellbeing – affect everyone’s lives and all pupils should be entitled to a curriculum which supports them to develop positive relationships, stay healthy and thrive. There must be a broad framework of content to ensure a comprehensive programme for all pupils, and support for those designing curricula in schools.

To be effective, however, schools must have flexibility to use this broad framework to design PSHE programmes which respond to new challenges and are responsive to their pupils’ specific needs and lived experiences e.g. relating to learning needs, cultural heritage, local area and faith. Every child is entitled to a comprehensive programme, however, and subjects should not be excluded because of faith.

Many schools already do this well, tailoring programmes based on national guidance such as the PSHE Association Programme of Study. To provide this responsive curriculum, however, teachers must be able to assess their pupils’ needs and establish what they already know, understand and are able to do and say about particular issues. Due to its non-statutory status, teachers of PSHE are too often inexperienced or untrained, meaning they don’t always have the skills necessary to plan their own schemes of work or lessons.

Statutory status is necessary to allow all schools to prioritise PSHE, and ensure their teachers have skills to plan and deliver tailored, comprehensive programmes all children deserve.