



WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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This article is the first of a series of articles, videos and resources that I am producing to help the Muslim community navigate this sensitive and important issue so that they know what the law says and understand that they have a major role to play in how RSE is taught in the schools that their children attend.

1. From September 2020 all primary schools will need to provide **Relationships Education** and **Health Education**.

Aspects of this are already in place in many primary schools who opted to include sex and relationships education (SRE) or PHSE in the curriculum when they were not compulsory. This is also true of most schools where Muslim children represent a large portion of the student body.

2. **Sex Education** continues to be non-compulsory, however, the DfE recommends schools to have a programme in place just as it did for SRE when it was optional. This means many schools will opt to include sex education.

It is Not Just About LGBT

3. RSE and Health education cover a range of issues. It is important to remember that RSE is **not just about LGBT education**. The Muslim community should recognise the positive aspects of the curriculum – there are many – and acknowledge that much of it is needed in our own community wherein parents, and madrasahs are not appropriately covering most of the things addressed in the curriculum. Many parents who are vocal against RSE are either only focusing on the LGBT aspect, or may feel that they *are* adequately teaching these things at home. But if we are honest with ourselves, we will have to acknowledge that most parents are not, and children are left with a massive void in their basic education which schools are having to cover. We need to understand the *whole* of RSE and then proportionately address areas of concern. See appendix below to see the full range of outcomes expected in RSE.

Is LGBT Content A Requirement?

4. It is clear to me that LGBT elements are not included in the letter of the law, however the DfE statutory guidance appears to require schools to include it as part of compliance ‘with the relevant provisions of the Equality Act 2010 under which sexual orientation and gender reassignment are amongst the protected characteristics.’ Whether or not primary schools are legally required to teach the LGBT element remains a matter of disputed interpretation with conflicting information coming from government sources. The DfE guidance seems to clearly state it as a requirement however, Nick Gibb, Minister for School Standards, has said during the Parliamentary Question Period on 25 June 2019, that [primary schools are not required to teach LGBT elements](#).

Furthermore, I have come across Christian groups such as the Values Foundation who are advising parents that ‘Some topics in the DfE statutory guidance go beyond the letter of the law,’ and that ‘There is no obligation for any school to “teach” the Equality Act 2010.’¹

The DfE statutory guidance seems to obfuscate the line between what schools *must* do and what schools *should* do.

How Much Flexibility is There? What Can Parents Do?

5. Schools have flexibility over how RSE is delivered. The guidance allows schools to differentiate and personalise for pupils based on factors like:
 - a. Age
 - b. Physical and emotional maturity
 - c. Religious backgrounds
 - d. Special educational needs and disabilities.
6. All schools have been instructed to draw up a new policy for relations (and sex) education and **they must consult parents when they develop and review it**. The requirement to consult parents and have ‘regard to the age and the religious background of pupils,’ are enshrined in the letter of law. It is now up to the community and parents to ensure that schools are in full compliance of this.

If Muslim parents do not ensure they participate in the consultation process and provide informed input, then RSE may be taught to their children in ways that they would not approve. Therefore, policies can vary from school to school dependent upon how effectively parents have communicated their concerns and preferences.

¹ See <https://values.foundation/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Retaining-Values-in-RSE-for-Schools-1.4-1.pdf>, and <https://christianconcern.com/comment/what-you-should-know-about-relationships-and-sex-education/>

7. Having attended meetings with schools and various local authority officials, I can confidently say that officials and school leaders have their own preferences that they will want to push through and convince parents to accept. Parents must know their rights, know what they want within the law, fully understand the school's policy, how and when RSE content will be taught, and then provide their input. We must understand that there is room for discussion and negotiation even on key questions such as what is required of the school.

The LGBT Lobby and Conflicting Sides

8. We must understand that local authorities and schools are also under pressure from pro LGBT groups such as Stonewall who lobby them very effectively². Policies will ultimately favour the groups that make the strongest case and apply the most pressure. As a community, we do not want the freedoms and rights of people we disagree with to be affected in any way. However, we need to be wary of the fact that the pressure they apply through lobby efforts can easily result in our own rights being trampled, and our inability to clearly make our voice heard can also result in the same outcome. There will be excellent examples of local authorities and schools producing excellent policies that all sides are pleased with but the opposite is also possible. Personal preferences of officials and school leaders will also inevitably play a part in how they draw up policies and implement them. I have encountered views and sentiments from officials and school leaders that I have found to be wholly unacceptable, betraying their lack of understanding of Muslim community sensitivities. We cannot take anything for granted.

Parents' Rights

9. Schools are obligated to inform parents of their plans for teaching RSE including providing samples of schemes of work and resources. Parents have a legal right to be informed about what is being taught. Their opinions **must** be taken into consideration.
10. Remember: UK law protects the right of parents to guide the education of their children as fundamental and protected. This is particularly true of educational content which has a moral character; schools **MUST NOT** undermine the manner in which parents seek to bring up their children. Schools **MUST** respect the manner in which parents seek to raise their children in accordance with their own religious or philosophical convictions.
11. There is enough flexibility in the law and in the statutory guidance for Muslim parents to demand that:
 - a. School policies clearly show exactly how pupils' age and religious backgrounds have been proportionately and sensitively taken into consideration.
 - b. Pictures are not used when teaching about private parts.
 - c. That boys and girls are separate when teaching about private parts.
 - d. That LGBT elements are not taught in primary schools. If they must be taught, then they should be taught at the end of primary education.
 - e. That when LGBT elements are taught, schools comply with the law and ensure that any references to same sex family/relationships etc are carefully scripted so that they are not promoted or normalised before the children but are strictly discussed in the context of equality and tolerance. Furthermore, children are told that their religion may have specific teachings with reference to LGBT that they should discuss with their parents.
 - f. When these elements are taught, parents are informed of how, when, and using what resources these elements are being taught. Furthermore, the communication about this must be effective and not tokenistic.

The above is not an exhaustive list but examples of perfectly reasonable expectations.

² To get an understanding of how LGBT groups such as Stonewall lobby see <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/lgbt-inclusive-education-everything-you-need-know>

Appendix

What is Covered in RSE

The table below is taken from the DFE statutory guidance document.

By the end of primary school:

Families and people who care for me	<p>Pupils should know</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• that families are important for children growing up because they can give love, security and stability.• the characteristics of healthy family life, commitment to each other, including in times of difficulty, protection and care for children and other family members, the importance of spending time together and sharing each other's lives.• that others' families, either in school or in the wider world, sometimes look different from their family, but that they should respect those differences and know that other children's families are also characterised by love and care.• that stable, caring relationships, which may be of different types, are at the heart of happy families, and are important for children's security as they grow up.• that marriage represents a formal and legally recognised commitment of two people to each other which is intended to be lifelong.• how to recognise if family relationships are making them feel unhappy or unsafe, and how to seek help or advice from others if needed.
Caring friendships	<p>Pupils should know</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• how important friendships are in making us feel happy and secure, and how people choose and make friends.• the characteristics of friendships, including mutual respect, truthfulness, trustworthiness, loyalty, kindness, generosity, trust, sharing interests and experiences and support with problems and difficulties.• that healthy friendships are positive and welcoming towards others, and do not make others feel lonely or excluded.• that most friendships have ups and downs, and that these can often be worked through so that the friendship is repaired or even strengthened, and that resorting to violence is never right.• how to recognise who to trust and who not to trust, how to judge when a friendship is making them feel unhappy or uncomfortable, managing conflict, how to manage these situations and how to seek help or advice from others, if needed.

Respectful relationships	<p>Pupils should know</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the importance of respecting others, even when they are very different from them (for example, physically, in character, personality or backgrounds), or make different choices or have different preferences or beliefs. • practical steps they can take in a range of different contexts to improve or support respectful relationships. • the conventions of courtesy and manners. • the importance of self-respect and how this links to their own happiness. • that in school and in wider society they can expect to be treated with respect by others, and that in turn they should show due respect to others, including those in positions of authority. • about different types of bullying (including cyberbullying), the impact of bullying, responsibilities of bystanders (primarily reporting bullying to an adult) and how to get help. • what a stereotype is, and how stereotypes can be unfair, negative or destructive. • the importance of permission-seeking and giving in relationships with friends, peers and adults.
Online relationships	<p>Pupils should know</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that people sometimes behave differently online, including by pretending to be someone they are not. • that the same principles apply to online relationships as to face-to-face relationships, including the importance of respect for others online including when we are anonymous. • the rules and principles for keeping safe online, how to recognise risks, harmful content and contact, and how to report them. • how to critically consider their online friendships and sources of information including awareness of the risks associated with people they have never met. • how information and data is shared and used online.
Being safe	<p>Pupils should know</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what sorts of boundaries are appropriate in friendships with peers and others (including in a digital context). • about the concept of privacy and the implications of it for both children and adults; including that it is not always right to keep secrets if they relate to being safe. • that each person's body belongs to them, and the differences between appropriate and inappropriate or unsafe physical, and other, contact. • how to respond safely and appropriately to adults they may encounter (in all contexts, including online) whom they do not know.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• how to recognise and report feelings of being unsafe or feeling bad about any adult.• how to ask for advice or help for themselves or others, and to keep trying until they are heard.• how to report concerns or abuse, and the vocabulary and confidence needed to do so.• where to get advice e.g. family, school and/or other sources.
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