TRANSFORMING SCHOOL CULTURES THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION

GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS

UNIVERSITY OF SURREY

School of Sexuality Education

FUMBLE

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INTRODUCTION

This guidance has been designed to support schools with designing and delivering Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) that can equip pupils with the skills and knowledge they need to make healthy choices and to treat themselves and one another with dignity and respect.

It has been put together by:

- Emily Setty from the University of Surrey
- Lucy Whitehouse from Fumble
- Dolly Padalia from School of Sexuality Education, and
- A group of young people aged 16 to 18.

The guidance focuses on how to design and deliver engaging, relevant and meaningful RSE, focusing on:

- the roles of the 'educator' and 'pupil' within the classroom; and,
- the 'ecosystems' of pupils' socio-sexual development and lives beyond the classroom, specifically the sources of influence they encounter and the places in which they learn about sex and relationships.

It will help schools consider and understand how to:

- re-think the roles of 'educator' and 'pupil' in the classroom, in order to provide empowering RSE that engages with the realities and diversities of young people's lives; and,
- safely, inclusively and meaningfully encourage pupil participation, discussion and debate.

THE VISION FOR RSE

We want RSE to be a place where young people can learn, develop and practice the skills they need to navigate the ecosystem of socio-sexual life, develop healthy self-concepts, and make empowered choices that support and respect their own and one another's rights, health and wellbeing.

We think that RSE should go beyond just the provision of facts and information. It has the potential to be truly transformative when it helps pupils to learn how to make sense of complex and multi-faceted issues and challenges. RSE can help pupils to:

- develop their self-awareness, emotional literacy and maturity;
- make space for and respect their own and one another's identities and lived experiences (with all the vulnerabilities and insecurities thus entailed);
- become 'allies' to one another in which they can cope with (and ultimately respect) difference and develop commonalities and shared interests; and,
- understand themselves as part of local and global communities, and treat themselves and one another with dignity.

We are driven by the goal of harnessing the potential for RSE to truly transform school cultures through engaging with and addressing the dynamics of troubling and harmful attitudes and behaviours within young people's peer-based sex and relationship cultures.

Achieving the vision set out in this guidance will require time and resources. It will also require schools to reflect upon and potentially change their expectations of educators, pupils and RSE as a subject. This type of RSE has the potential to aid pupils' performance across the curriculum through skills such as critical thinking, respectful discussion and perspective-taking.

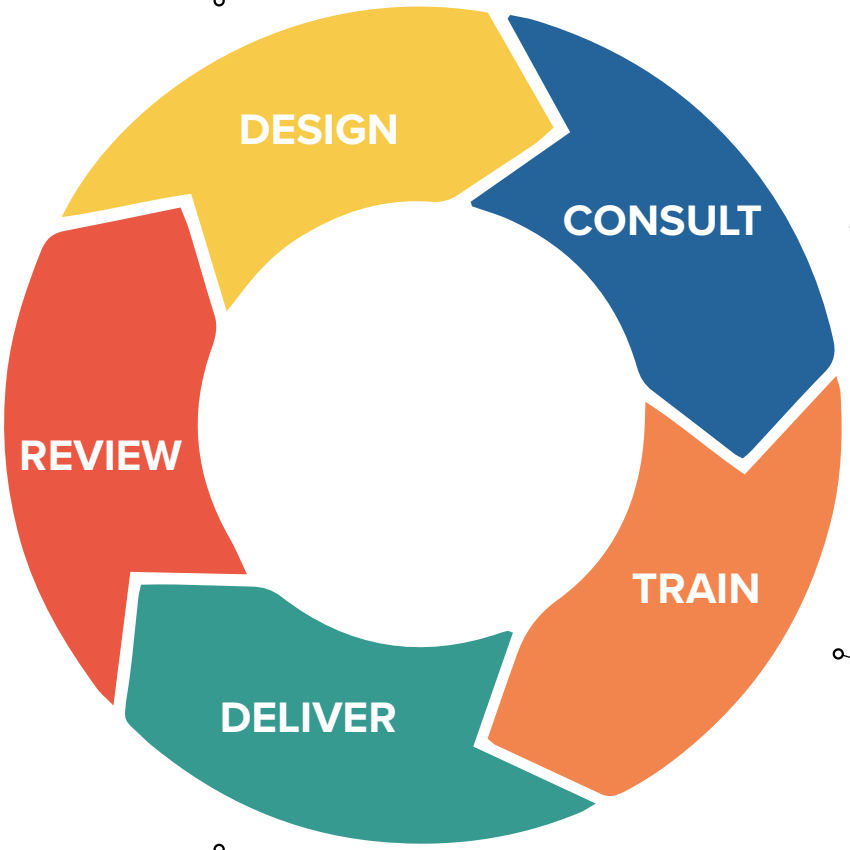
Teacher training ideas – discussion questions

- What do you think is the role of RSE?
- What can be achieved with RSE?
- What can not be achieved with RSE?

SUGGESTED STEPS AND TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Design and/or review school policy for RSE that draws upon and incorporates the principles, based on an assessment of the school context and needs

Conduct broad ranging consultation with pupils to inform curriculum planning and design, and wider school cultures and policies (e.g. school uniforms)



Continuous pupil consultation and review/re-design of RSE delivery

Train relevant staff on the principles of designing and delivering effective RSE

Begin delivery, incorporating the tips and suggestions from this guidance document.

THE ECOSYSTEMS OF PUPILS' SOCIO-SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT AND LIVES

We know that young people do not just learn about sex and relationships in RSE. Peers, parents (and other caregivers), the media, the internet, the school curriculum and school rules, and wider social, cultural and political discourses are also influential.

It can be difficult to deal with all this in RSE. The young people in the team said that they want and value RSE but feel that the RSE that they currently receive is often disconnected from the realities of their wider lives and experiences across these different spheres.

We recommend that educators develop a clear awareness of the 'RSE ecosystem' that exists around their pupils, and into which classroom-based RSE fits. Let's take a look at some of these sources of influence in more detail over the next few pages.

Teacher training ideas – discussion questions

- What do you think are the sources of influence over young people when it comes to sex and relationships?
- What are the potential risks and benefits of these different sources of influence?
- Where does RSE fit in?

Peers

Peers (i.e. people of a similar age) include: strangers (or 'generalised others'); acquaintances, friends, relatives (e.g. siblings, cousins), and desired or actual partners ('casual' or 'committed').

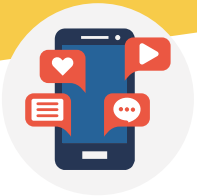
Young people can be directly and indirectly influenced by peers. Their interactions and relationships with peers may feel more or less personal depending on who it is, the context, and other characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, faith, gender identity, ability/disability, appearance, hobbies/interests, socio-economic status, etc.).

Adults sometimes characterise young people's peers as unreliable and problematic sources of influence. However, young people often say that they like having (what they describe as) confidential and non-judgemental conversations with people they feel they can trust, in which they can work through any issues that they are experiencing. That being said, young people can feel pressure from peers, and face risks of peer-to-peer abuse connected to sex and relationships. This pressure can also involve feeling obligated to support friends to the detriment of personal wellbeing.

Parents and other caregivers

Parents and other caregivers are highly impactful on young people's socio-sexual development. While the quality and extensiveness of relationships and sex education in the home can vary, young people often say that they do or would like to be able to speak to their parents/carers about the issues, particularly the emotional and personal side of sex and relationships. Parents are also an important source if and when things go wrong for young people, although young people vary in their willingness and ability to go to their parents at difficult times.

Like peers, parents and carers are directly and indirectly influential. They are 'role models' and convey values and beliefs through what they say and do. They can inspire and encourage young people to think critically and behave ethically and responsibly, although some can perpetuate stereotypical and judgemental attitudes and outlooks, that may alienate young people.



Media and the internet

The 'media' takes diverse forms in contemporary society. Digital media is of contemporary significance (i.e. the internet, social media, etc.), but the ongoing influence of more 'traditional media' (e.g. television, books, films, and music) should also not be underestimated as it is increasingly digitally mediated.

Like peers, the media is often criticised for perpetuating harmful ideologies and practices for young people. Young people are, however, both influenced by different media sources and actively seek out information and guidance from the media. They may, for example, search for information about sex and relationships online (a list of reputable online sources can be found on pages 56 and 57). Often, this just involves 'Googling' a question and going through the results to find what they are looking for. Young people also engage with media depictions (factual and fictional) of sex and relationships, for example in films, television programmes, books, music and the news. Social media is a space where young people are encountering representations of and information about sex and relationships, interacting with one another on a socio-sexual level, and expressing themselves and enacting their offline and online relationships.

Young people also use media to interact intimately and romantically, and sometimes to consume and create sexually explicit material. This is often characterised as risky and harmful, but young people report varying experiences and perspectives, and risk and harm can clearly be linked to broader social inequalities.

School curriculum and school rules

RSE does not just happen in the classroom but indirectly through other aspects of school life. Young people say that subjects such as History, English and Religious Studies are particularly noteworthy examples of where issues connected to sex and relationships apply and could be explored, but often are not. Across the curriculum, both what is taught and how the material is presented could support young people's socio-sexual development and help them to apply and develop their thinking around the topics.

Young people are aware of the standards and expectations for sex and relationships conveyed indirectly and informally in school. School rules regarding dress, appearance and behaviour, for example, can be related to expectations about gender and sexuality. How pupils are treated by staff and how staff react and intervene (or not) in response to pupils' behaviours can likewise convey these norms and expectations to beneficial or harmful effect. Young people are aware of any divergences between what they are taught, for example about equality and diversity, and what they see play out around them in the day-to-day culture of their school. They ascribe significance to particularly impactful teachers and school staff members; the team of young people shared both negative and positive examples of individuals having a big impact which sits almost between parents and the regulatory structures within the school. When positive, young people feel able and willing to open up and share their experiences with staff.

Society, culture and politics

Young people do not operate in a vacuum. They are part of society and are, therefore, influenced by and learning from what they see play out socially, culturally and politically. Representations of and ideas about sex and relationships may be communicated by and through the media, politicians, public figures and others, which creates a normative backdrop to young people's sex and relationship cultures. A lot of the things that educators are concerned by (for example, sexual harassment) are reflective of broader issues in society and are not exclusive to young people.

Young people – like adults – can find it difficult to navigate the different arguments about sex and relationships in society and figure out how they feel. Different young people occupy different positions in society and factors such as ethnicity, faith, gender identity and sexual orientation, among others, can affect how young people feel about their place in the world and in terms of these wider discourses. These dynamics can play out on a micro level in young people's peer cultures. Family factors are also important; young people come from different social, economic, faith and cultural backgrounds, all of which is important to explore and discuss.

It is important to understand these different spheres of influence as fluid, intersecting and unique in their effects for different young people. It is not possible, or desirable, to make assumptions or generalisations about young people's experiences and perspectives based on any one particular factor. For example, it should not be assumed that because a pupil is a boy or a girl, or non-binary, that they will be affected by gender in a specific and set way. Likewise, if a pupil comes from a particular faith or family background it should not be assumed that they will think, act and feel in a certain way because of that background. By not homogenising young people (i.e. based on an aspect of their identity) we can create more inclusive spaces and be responsive to the diversity within RSE classrooms.

It needs to be acknowledged that young people are individuals and play an active role in making sense of the world around them. Their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and experiences are based on the processes by which they give meaning to and interpret what goes on around them and what they are exposed to in the different spheres of influence. Their expression and understanding of their gender, cultural identity and so forth is theirs and should not be assumed nor extrapolated to other young people who are perceived to share those characteristics. This guidance contains suggestions about inclusivity and cultural sensitivity based on recognising individual diversity and agency. This is about delivering effective RSE and ensuring that RSE equips young people with the emotional literacy skills they need to understand the complexity of identity and lived experience.

SOURCE	BENEFITS	RISKS
Peers	• Non-judgemental, candid conversations • Can help with feeling supported and not alone • Can back you up/stand up for you in difficult situations • Similar vantage point and shared experiences/perspectives	• Pressure – both direct and indirect - and judgemental attitudes and beliefs about sex, relationships, gender and sexuality, including 'virginity' and queerness. • Source of harm – peer-to-peer abusive behaviours, bullying, sexual violations etc. • Bystander apathy and inaction • Normalisation of harmful/problematic behaviours • Toxic relationships • (can be) a source of inaccurate, misleading and/or stereotypical information and ideas
Parents/carers	• Emotional support based on love and care • (can be) a source of reliable and trustworthy information based on your best interests • Opportunity to be open about feelings and not be judged • Can draw on life experiences • (can be) positive role models both directly and indirectly	• Lack of willingness and ability to engage in high quality conversations (for various reasons) • Can role model problematic and harmful ideas and behaviours • Abusive and dysfunctional behaviours in the family • Can seek to monitor, control and punish behaviour (which can inhibit open dialogue) • (can) impart information based on personal views rather than comprehensive facts
Media	• Factual and fictional media can provide 'teachable moments' to consider and explore different issues, ideas and representations of sex and relationships • Where diversity and inclusivity is apparent, it can be empowering for young people • The internet offers opportunities to connect and express themselves with like minded others (who may or may not be present in more immediate peer networks) • (can be) a source of accurate, reliable and trustworthy information, guidance and advice • Opportunities for private and self-directed learning and self-expression via the internet and digital media, and a powerful source for digital activism	• Can normalise harmful ideas, behaviours and expectations • Can involve restricted and normalised representations (of bodies, sex and relationships) • Shaming and abusive behaviours can occur and play out online (by known and unknown others) • Potential for echo chambers and problematic subcultures to develop online – 'bubbles' of opinions can develop and content is created by and directed to particular cohorts in a way that limits perspectives, creates divisions and narrows the discourse • Privacy can be difficult to control and is sometimes not upheld by others
School curriculum and rules	• Potential to model and uphold prosocial and egalitarian expectations and behaviours • Curriculum can offer opportunities to explore and reflect upon issues connected to sex and relationships • Teachers and other staff can be a source of reliable, trustworthy and helpful guidance, information and support • School has a safeguarding role which can prevent/intervene in incidents of abuse and harm • If managed effectively, incidents can offer opportunities for 'teachable moments' and restorative justice	• Problematic and harmful behaviours, attitudes and beliefs can be normalised and perpetuated through rules and expectations • Missed opportunities to meaningfully intervene and tackle root causes of abuse and harm • Curriculum can be narrow in scope resulting in missed opportunities for exploring relevant issues • Pupils can be concerned about confidentiality and safeguarding protocols within schools which may inhibit them from speaking openly with staff. • Lack of a pupil-centered approach • Concerns regarding reputation and efficient resolution of issues can hinder efforts to respond effectively to incidents
Society, culture and politics	• Exposure to different discourses and dialogues in society – can be inspiring and empowering, and lead to progressive and positive change • Potential for young people to learn how to consider, debate and discuss different ideas and perspectives, and learn from different people • Potential for young people to align themselves with movements and collectives that they believe in and that have resonance in their lives – opportunity to practice and engage with activism • Faith and cultural backgrounds can be a positive part of young people's self-concepts and personal development/growth journeys – can help anchor and provide a sense of self	• Discourses and dialogues can perpetuate and uphold problematic and harmful attitudes, beliefs and expectations • Public discourse can be divisive and of poor quality, which can lead to censorship (including self-censorship), leading to missed opportunities for learning and perspective-taking • Can create and reflect division within young people's peer contexts • Faith and cultural background can be one influence among many that young people need to navigate when forming their ideas and beliefs

SCRUTINY, JUDGEMENT, POLICING AND SHAME IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S PEER CULTURES

Some of the issues that young people face connected to sex and relationships are impacted by toxic cultures of judgement and shame in their peer cultures (which are also present more broadly in society).

The complexity of the ecosystem of socio-sexual life and development can help in understanding why adolescence is often fraught. Young people are trying to make sense of themselves and one another, and, in turn, act and make choices. Teenagers are often described as 'self-absorbed', but this is a normal and necessary process of development that requires introspection.

The fact that young people are exposed to and operating within multiple spheres of influence regarding sex and relationships means that their development can be non-linear and young people may struggle to figure 'who' they are and to develop their values. They may compare themselves to others as a way of trying to make sense of who they are.

This means that young people can appear both self-absorbed and intensely interested in what their peers (and other sources of influence in the ecosystem) are thinking, feeling and doing. Peer culture can, therefore, be a place of scrutiny, judgement, policing and even shaming, often in order for individuals to validate their own feelings and interests and to 'feel normal'. Young people can interrogate what each other are doing and personal boundaries and privacy can be disrespected or ignored.

When asked for some examples of the things that young people judge each other for, here was what the team of young people said:

- If you haven't been in a relationship at all
- The discussion of people waiting to have sex after marriage seems to cause judgement - especially from students
- People judging may have their own insecurities and so they shame others in order to feel good about themsleves
- Nude photos/videos being passed around
- Pressure to have sex - shamed if not having it but shamed if having it
- Not drinking or doing drugs
- There seems to be shame around discussing how to get help if you need to take the morning-after pill/ talk to a doctor etc.
- Sexuality (sexual preferences)?
- Skins - TV show - glamorising a toxic culture around mental health, lifestyle and body image and related issues (eg character of Effie)
- Again media influences this (gossip girl) so perhaps schools should be warning against these shows - that they are not always reality
- When people eat carbs and people judge what they eat (I find this so annoying)
- I think the fact that we don't get taught very well about 'plan b' it can cause more shame too
- Nicer bra/knickers when getting changed in PE is something that's talked about and shamed
- There is no discussion about being tested for STDs - a lot of shame around STIs
- Physicality: body type (for example penis size/ boobs/bums/etc?
- Pronography/ use of porn?
- How class/socioeconomic background informs what gets shamed
- There's some sort of 'glamorisation' of drugs/unhealthy habits/mental illness (Especially on tiktok) - it becomes a toxic environment especially online

Teacher training ideas – discussion questions

- What might be the challenges for young people in navigating the ecosystem?
- What might be the impacts on how they relate to themselves and one another?
- In what ways might young people judge and shame each other? Why does this happen?

When discussing these examples, the young people felt that there was a sense that 'you can't win'; whatever you do, you will be judged by someone. You may find a friendship group of like-minded others (or may connect with like-minded others online), but those who think, feel or act differently to you may judge you negatively.

This plays out online as well as face-to-face; expressions of identities, opinions and ideas online can be met with both support and criticism. Young people may experience judgement and shame directly or vicariously as witnesses and bystanders. Whether direct or vicarious, these experiences can impact how they feel about themselves and one another.

The key points to remember about judgement and shame include:

- It is rarely about the target: instead, it is often a projection of insecurities and vulnerabilities;
- It can reflect both local peer group power dynamics and hierarchies, and wider social and cultural discourses about sex and relationships. For example,
  - Girls suffer particularly from the 'virginity paradox' (in which both having sex and not having sex is shameful)
  - Queer and gender non-conforming youth can be more likely to have their identities and choices questioned, judged and shamed compared to young people who express themselves more 'normatively'.

Judgement and shame can involve a failure to respect privacy and personal boundaries. Young people can show an intense interest in what others are doing, for example whether they are having sex, and pressures to be 'open' and 'sex positive' may be misconceived and can obscure the personal and intimate nature of sex and relationships.

Judgement and shame also reflects what is depicted and normalised in the ecosystem beyond the peer group. As we can see in the examples on page 15, young people perceive a 'toxic culture' in which unhealthy and abusive behaviours and practices are 'glamourised'. They also feel exposed to discourses of openness, for example about sexuality and mental health, which can create uncertainties about what is 'authentic' and 'genuine'.

Such uncertainties can feed into judgements of themselves and one another, and other people's words and actions can be triggering and difficult to deal with. A perception that young people are more open and have more of a language around particular topics, for example mental health, gender identity and sexuality, may mask ongoing complexities and difficulties, and feelings and experiences of shame.

HOW CAN RSE ENGAGE WITH AND ADDRESS JUDGEMENT AND SHAME?

Young people's tendencies to judge and shame one another can, sometimes, be taken-for-granted and seen as inevitable. Worse still, adults in the ecosystem (teachers, parents and others) can reinforce judgement and shame in the education (formal and informal) that they impart to young people about sex and relationships. Of course, there are risks and harms connected to sex and relationships for young people (and adults). However, when these risks and harms are addressed through warnings and messages based on fear and shame it is problematic. Young people on this project expressed that they this approach only gives a partial view on sex and relationships, and does not engage with the positive potentialities of sex and relationships, which they find unhelpful and uninformative. They also feel that such education does not equip them to navigate risk and harm effectively.

Rather than danger and fear, young people want RSE that gives them the skills and knowledge they need to be able to identify risk and to take steps if and when harm occurs.

They want this information to be evidence-based and imparted in a non-judgemental and unbiased way, because otherwise feelings of shame and self-blame can prevent people seeking help or reporting abuse. In that sense, education needs to go beyond 'harm avoidance' and give tools for dealing with problems when they arise. It is also important for RSE to challenge what and who is seen as a risk or at risk.

Young people also want educators to challenge the idea that people need to 'fit into boxes'. They want RSE to explore diversity and show that there are many different journeys that individuals can take. For example, they want recognition that there is no standard or normal way to feel or act with regard to sex and relationships.

This guidance outlines how schools can design and deliver RSE that:

- engages with the ecosystem of young people's socio-sexual lives and development;
- explores and challenges cultures of judgement and shame; and
- helps transform school cultures through advancing the rights and wellbeing of all young people.

A video explaining how shame and judgement in peer culture can be addressed in RSE can be found here: youtu.be/97wLxzMsGwk

SUGGESTIONS FOR DESIGNING AND DELIVERING RSE AROUND THE ECOSYSTEM

It can be challenging for RSE teachers to engage with the ecosystem of young people's socio-sexual development and, in turn, to deliver RSE that resonates and has impact in their daily lives in terms of their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours (with the latter being particularly tricky to exercise influence over)

Like the rest of the ecosystem, classroom-based RSE presents opportunities and risks.

Opportunities include:

- A captive audience of pupils (at least those who are present in school);
- A space to discuss and debate different ideas and issues, and develop skills in perspective-taking, critical thinking and self-reflection;
- Pupils can ask questions and share their experiences and opinions;
- Pupils can receive accurate and reliable information, guidance and advice;
- It can be inclusive and respectful of diversity; and,
- It can create an open dialogue and contribute to a climate in which pupils feel able to share issues with school staff.

Benefits include:

- Improved levels of knowledge among pupils about themselves and one another and the topics of sex and relationships;
- Enhanced emotional intelligence and emotional literacy, including the ability to self-reflect, take the perspective of others, and cope with difficult, uncertain and hitherto unconsidered ideas and perspectives;
- Greater willingness among pupils to report issues and seek further information, guidance and support (from educators/school staff and elsewhere in the ecosystem in an appropriate way);
- Genuine attitude and belief change, in which pupils gain a deep understanding of the issues from a variety of perspectives rather than just simply internalising warnings and regulatory messages; and,
- The ability to think critically about everyday issues and the world around them.

The risks of RSE include:

- It can be normalising and restrictive in scope;
- Pupils can be and feel inhibited from speaking openly and honestly (which may affect some pupils more than others);
- Educators can lecture and focus on risk and harm to the detriment of balanced discussion and skill-development;
- Peer dynamics can play out in the classroom which can hinder perspective-taking and constructive discussion;
- Complex issues are either dealt with superficially or not discussed at all;
- The content can be disembedded and disconnected from the realities of young people's day to day contexts;
- It can problematise and homogenise young people's experiences and other aspects of the ecosystem; and,
- It can seek to filter out other sources of influence in a decontextualised approach that seeks to be 'impartial' and 'objective' despite how sex and relationships are more complex and social than just being about 'facts'.

Teacher training ideas – discussion questions

- Where does RSE fit within the ecosystem?
- What are the benefits and risks of RSE?

The harms that can results from RSE where these risks are not addressed include:

- A sense of isolation, alienation and marginalisation among some/all pupils;
- Defensive and offense-taking rather than genuine growth and learning;
- Incomplete and partial knowledge;
- Perpetuation of stereotypes and other problematic attitudes that sit underneath harmful and abusive behaviours;
- A reluctance to report issues or seek further information, guidance or support;
- A sense of fatalism regarding harmful behaviours and attitudes, thus inhibiting social change and progress;
- Ongoing division and suspicion within peer culture and associated judgement and shame; and,
- Little-to-no desired behaviour or culture change.

At a time when there is contestation and division in society about issues connected to sex and relationships, it is important that RSE offers pupils an opportunity to explore and discuss the issues and the different perspectives, and to learn and practice their skills in constructive and tolerant debate and exchange of ideas.

Before looking at how active learning and participation can be safely and inclusively facilitated, there is a need to consider how RSE and the roles of educator and pupil are conceptualised.

CONCEPTUALISING CLASSROOM-BASED RSE

RSE is sometimes limited to an educator just imparting factual information to a passive audience of pupils who, it is hoped, will absorb the information and behave accordingly.

Instead, it could be conceived of as an opportunity for skill-development and consolidation of the different sources of influence within the ecosystem of socio-sexual development.

When we asked young people what they thought RSE should (or could) be, this is what they said:

What should RSE be?

Can you share a good experience of RSE?

Charity youth board for a relationships charity hearing about the progression of people's relationships (married couples of different ages)

A friendly, welcoming teacher who is informative and honest and genunely cares about the progression and welfare of her students. She used personal stories which made what you were learning more memorable and interesting to listen to.

RE teacher who encourage us to see both sides of discussions regarding abortion, sex before marriage, same-sex marriage etc. Encourage us to have our own opinions but respect others

In our tutor groups and having a relaxed discussion with our tutor. It wasn't massively serious which helped make the environment relaxed, but there was still that element of seriousness - everyone was listening, no interrupting or stupidity

An external company came to my school to discuss RSE and I liked how it didn't just focus on sex but also how to have healthy relationships and they gave out some information leafltes that we were free to take

These examples illustrate the importance of:

- Balanced and holistic teaching;
- Experts and real-world, applied examples;
- An approachable and open educator style; and,
- Relaxed but also well-managed teaching and learning where different opinions can be expressed and respected without giving problematic (e.g. queerphobic or racist) ideas a space under the guise of debate.

Here is what they said it shouldn't be:

What shouldn't RSE be?

Can you share a bad experience of RSE?

Students not being able to accept the opinions of others and debates becoming disrespectful

We had the same lessons on the basic things such as STIs, different types of protection and told not to send nudes etc. This was all we learnt in RSE classes and the same lessons were strung out over the course of the year through worksheets/posters

Very short session used gross/scary images of STDs instead of spending time going into detail on how to prevent them. Everyone was laughing it was extremely awkward and uninformative

Teacher training ideas – discussion questions

- What are some examples of the 'facts' of sex and relationships?
- What are the potential implications of just taking a purely facts-based approach?

These examples highlight the importance of avoiding RSE that:
is overly or solely negative in tone;

- doesn't prioritise student choice and empower sexuality;
- that seeks to scare and control what pupils think and do;
- is repetitive and involves passive learning; and,
- doesn't help pupils develop and practice their skills in listening to and respecting one another.

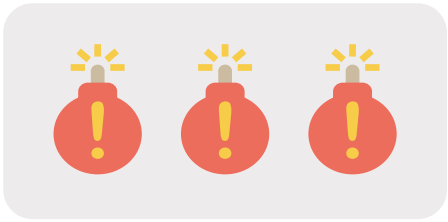
It is important for young people to be taught facts and to have an opportunity to develop their knowledge. A solely factual and risk averse approach can, however, be partial and limited in scope, and shaped by taken-for-granted assumptions and value systems. It can also fail to then equip young people with the skills and outlooks that they need to navigate socio-sexual life responsibly and ethically.

The young people felt that RSE can often involve adults imposing their preconceived ideas, values, beliefs and attitudes onto learners rather than basing what they say on evidence and giving learners the space to figure out what they think.

For example, teaching about LGBTQIA+ identities as a standalone topic rather than embedded across RSE reinforces the marginalisation of these identities. Concerns about age-appropriateness specific to LGBTQIA+ while heterosexual/cis-gender experiences are seen as unproblematic often reinforce homophobic, queerphobic and transphobic narratives.

This can play out with the teaching of specific topics. For example, teaching about sexual health but not including content on PREP and PEP is not inclusive.

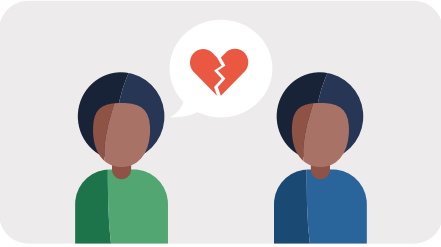
Teaching about puberty and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) without talking about pleasure is by definition partial and incomplete and will fail to equip pupils with the knowledge they need both for positive sexual self-concepts and for safeguarding against abusive behaviours.



Teaching exclusively about risk and harm, including with regard to the ecosystems of socio-sexual life, is simplistic and may serve to normalise harmful behaviours and experiences rather than challenging them.

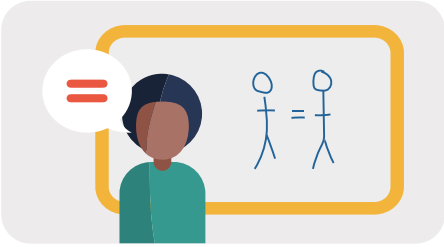
Teaching that advances stereotypical and inaccurate ideas about gender and sexuality (for example that boys are naturally and uniformly hormonally sex-driven and prone to be disrespectful of girls while girls are 'gatekeepers' whose sexual behaviours can be linked to problems of low self-esteem and self-worth), reinforces cis-heternormativity and serves to normalise the problematic beliefs, attitudes and expectations that underpin abusive and harmful behaviours.

Teaching about legal definitions of consent, contraceptive options, and other seemingly factual information will fail to resonate unless it engages with the realities of negotiating these things in day to day contexts and the constraints on choice that differently situated young people may experience.



While an overly negative approach can be problematic, it is important to talk about such realities of relationships (including relationship breakdown, conflict resolution rejection, jealousy and so on). It is necessary to equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need to identify, navigate and cope with different experiences they may personally have or otherwise see (in their families, friends, communities and the media).

Teaching about 'marriage' and procreation as the ultimate expression of relationships is placing more importance on certain relationships over others and fails to give regard to the different life choices and experiences that young people may have within their family contexts. For example, if marriage is discussed, but not separation or divorce, then the education is not comprehensive. Young people need to learn that whether they do or do not want sexual and/or romantic relationships is their choice to make.



Teaching about concepts such as 'rights', 'responsibilities', 'agency', 'respect', 'equality' and 'diversity' will lack meaning and will fail to resonate unless the social and cultural contingencies of these concepts are made visible and discussed. Differently situated young people have access to different discourses of rights and respect, for example the idea that LGBT+ identities should be 'tolerated' serves to marginalise their rights as contingent on how they behave and as 'gifted' to them by those in normative positions which does not constitute true respect or equality.

Finally, outlining the options for pupils to seek recourse in the event of harmful or abusive incidents is insufficient if the causes of these incidents are not discussed and deconstructed. It will also not be helpful unless the reasons for reluctance to pursue particular options (e.g. telling a teacher or another adult) are not addressed. Sometimes these reasons may be valid and it may be other parts of the ecosystem that will be more beneficial for young people to consult.

It will be necessary for both educators and pupils to be alive to how there may not always be simple and straightforward answers or factual information that can 'solve' the dilemmas and complexities of socio-sexual life.

It can be difficult to talk about these complexities in RSE and some educators may want to depoliticise and decontextualise the issues. However this just results in partial and incomplete education that does not help pupils practice the skills or develop the knowledge they need for navigating the issues in real-life contexts. Furthermore, given the social and cultural contingencies of abstract notions of 'rights', 'responsibility', 'agency', 'respect', 'equality' and 'diversity', it is important to recognise and engage with the variability among pupils rather than try to paper over it or discuss it purely in abstract terms.

Classroom-based RSE can be an opportunity for pupils to develop skills and their ability to cope with challenging ideas and different views, identities and lived experiences, as well as their own feelings of confusion and ambivalence. It can help them develop the emotional literacy, maturity and skills to have healthy and appropriate relationships.

It can also be a way to create a climate of openness, in which pupils with particular needs connected to the topics feel able to seek further support and help as required.

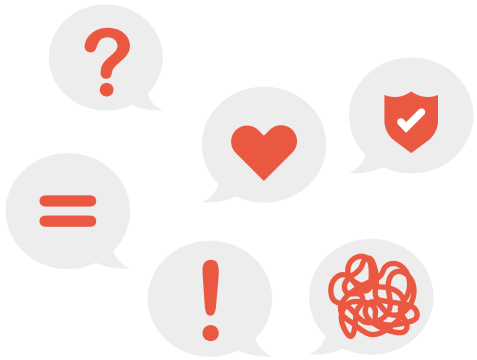
It is important for both educators and pupils to be aware of how different individuals and groups may feel more or less personally invested in or affected by different ideas and discourses. It may, therefore, be more or less easy for some to engage in the discussions. For example, a transgender pupil may find a discussion about gender identity more emotionally evocative because it relates to their identity and lived experience in a deeply personal and significant way. Developing pupils' emotional maturity and literacy is not about dampening emotions or compelling all pupils to express themselves in the same way. Pupils need to be supported to understand and be able to cope with their own and other people's different emotional responses and to respect, validate and learn from these.

Rather than hoping that pupils leave being able to recite facts about the different topics, the ultimate goal could instead be that they have had an opportunity to reflect, take the perspective of others, gain self-knowledge, and develop awareness of the complexities of the issues and the opportunities (and risks) of the different sources of influence and learning within the ecosystem that they can engage with going forward. It may be useful for teachers to discuss in class about how RSE is different to other subjects like Maths where there is a clear question and answer.

RSE may not give firm or direct answers to everything, pupils may leave with more questions and uncertainties, but that is okay if they have developed skills.

Classroom-based RSE should be trauma-informed. This means that it is important to be open and responsive to a potentially healthy and normative interest in learning about sex and relationships (and the different ways that different pupils may express this interest), and not interpret this interest through the value judgement of the educator.

However, some pupils will have safeguarding needs and will require extra support and help. The young people told us that these topics are private and personal, so there shouldn't be expectations on pupils to be open in the classroom setting, and both pupils and educators should respect that. However, classroom-based RSE can create the climate for pupils to feel able to come forward and disclose their experiences of harm and seek support. That is why a non-judgemental and supportive approach to the topics is important. For example, if education about intimate image sharing describes it as wrong and dangerous, and there is a pupil in the classroom who is being blackmailed for images, then this pupil may feel inhibited from coming forward and reporting their experiences.



CONCEPTUALISING THE RSE 'EDUCATOR'

Before even entering the classroom, educators need to practice critical reflexivity. It is unlikely that every educator will be able to connect with every pupil and different educators may not always be well placed to advise about specific lived experiences.

Educators can instead act professionally to provide a framework for pupils to work through the different issues and can give voice to young people's diverse perspectives and lived experiences.

It is not, therefore, a 'free-for-all' but a carefully balanced process of facilitating and moderating discussion and debate, and guiding and signposting pupils to further support, advice and guidance as applicable.

Educators should not judge or seek to impart a particular worldview, but do need to implement and manage the boundaries and ensure that pupils' wellbeing is safeguarded within the classroom and beyond.

Teacher training ideas – discussion questions

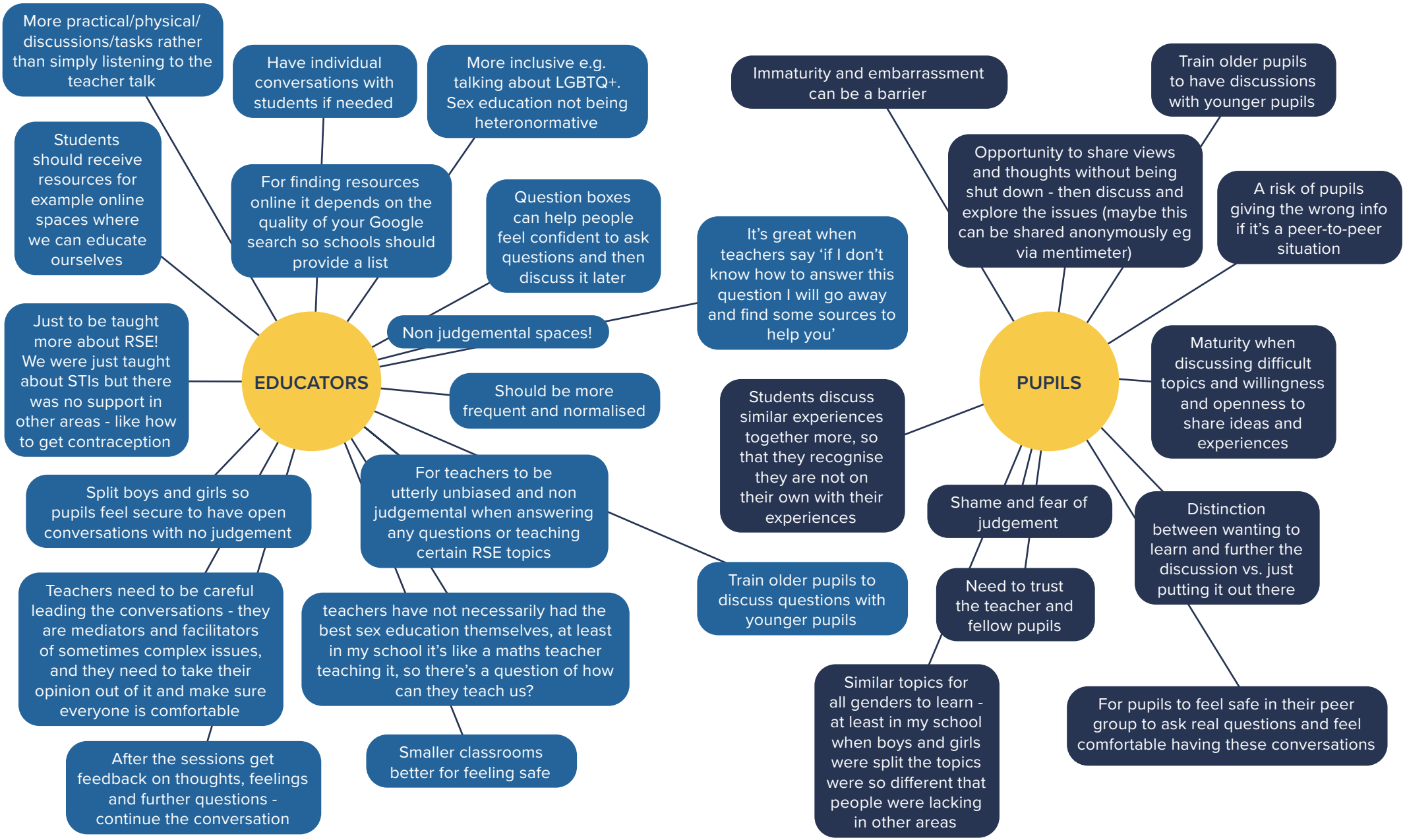
- What makes a 'good' RSE educator?
- What makes a 'bad' RSE educator?

The following are important aspects of the role of the educator:

- Facilitator of open discussion and consideration of the issues, not ' impartial expert' or 'neutral conveyor of facts';
- Reflexive and critical – before entering the classroom, think about pre-existing beliefs, attitudes and values and how this may impact teaching. Try to put these to one side when acting as 'facilitator' and engendering comprehensive and holistic discussion about the topics;
- Curious and interested in hearing about the views and experiences of pupils, and then seeking to explore these. Not uncritical and unaccepting of what pupils say, but also not immediately problematising or disregarding what they say;
- A role model for pupils for sitting with their own and one another's ideas and perspectives that may be confusing or difficult to cope with;
- Synthesise and consolidate the different perspectives and identify opportunities for learning and personal growth, while acknowledging the lack of straightforward solutions and facts-based answers;
- Challenge rather than reinforce taken-for-granted ideas and attitudes that may be expressed and deconstruct where particular values and feelings come from; and,
- Signpost to appropriate places and people for further support and help.

Classroom-based RSE can be the launchpad for further exploration and consideration of the issues. It can also create a climate in which pupils feel able to both report harm/abuse and seek further support and advice as required.

When asked, the young people shared the following about what is needed from educators and pupils for effective RSE:



Some educators may find it more or less easy to be reflexive and self-aware when preparing for and delivering RSE lessons.

Tips for doing so and encouraging others to do so:

- It is not about having no values or personal beliefs but instead trying to make sure that they don't cloud what and how you teach and engage with pupils;
- Before each lesson, think about the topics: what is your gut reaction? What would you ideally like pupils to think and feel? How would you like them to act? What values and biases might be driving your perspectives? How else could you think about the topics?
- Don't worry that you have to know extensive detail about all cultures and backgrounds; awareness needs to be balanced with an open-minded and inquisitive approach that does not generalise or make assumptions but conceives of pupils as individuals (rather than representatives of particular groups and, therefore, likely to have particular outlooks);
- Be aware of how powerful you are as a role model. Young people are attuned to what they see as hypocrisy or value judgements from adults. It will serve you in the long run to create a climate of openness and lack of judgement because it can help open and maintain the dialogue;
- Pause and absorb what you see or hear from pupils before reacting or trying to intervene. Rather than immediately offering solutions or ideas, ask questions and explore their perspectives, and problem solve together;
- Be honest with yourself. Sex and relationships are hard at all ages, so there is no ideal standard that adults can impose on young people. Lessen the expectations on both yourself and the pupils, and be open to exploring the complex realities of sex and relationships. It can be alienating for pupils to listen to decontextualised lectures on the topics that do not connect with the challenges of negotiating and navigating sex and relationships in their daily lives;
- But at the same time, celebrate the value that sex and relationships – in all their forms – can bring to individuals, groups and society. Offer an empowered and enlightened view of sex and relationships, with all the complexities and uncertainties involved, in order to inspire pupils to think positively for themselves and others.
- Be mindful of how the realities of sex and relationships differ for different people. Be aware of any privilege that you may bring and be accountable and non-defensive about this. Think about privilege in a fluid way. It's not that a person is or is not inherently privileged. It's that different topics and issues affect different people differently. Just because something seems simple or unimportant to you, doesn't mean that it is the same for others.
- Don't make too many assumptions about who would make a 'good' RSE teacher. Sometimes it's assumed that younger, more recently qualified teachers may be better able to connect with pupils and may be less embarrassed and judgemental, but this isn't automatically true. Likewise, older staff members may have more experience facilitating safe discussions. As the ecosystem demonstrates, young people benefit from exposure to a range of perspectives. Diversity, including in terms of age, ethnicity, gender etc., can be valuable.

BITESIZE BRIEFING

- Don't let your values cloud teaching
- Explore topics in advance
- Remain open minded and inquisitive
- Be aware of your power as a role model
- Pause and absorb before reacting
- Lessen expectations on yourself and pupils
- Celebrate the value of sex and relationships
- Ask questions instead of offering solutions
- Don't assume what makes a 'good' RSE teacher
- Be accountable for any privilege you may bring
- Recognise that there is no ideal standard that you can impose on pupils

CONCEPTUALISING 'PUPILS' IN RSE

Pupils in RSE are typically seen as holding incomplete or inaccurate knowledge, as having tendencies toward risk-taking and poor decision-making, and as being in need of guidance and direction from adults.

There may be some truth to this, but assumptions that pupils are inherently inferior in the dynamic can be alienating and lead to missed opportunities to connect RSE with the realities of young people's lives.

Instead, the role of pupils could involve:

- Conceptualising pupils as having the best insight into the realities of their day-to-day life regarding sex and relationships. We might not like or approve of what they say and do, but it is important to take the world 'as it is' not as we would like it to be. This means positioning pupils as having an important perspective to share;
- Encouraging pupils to conceive of their own and one another's perspectives as valid and worthy, albeit not always the same;
- Learning from pupils about the nature of contemporary life. It may be possible for both educator and pupil to leave the classroom with new ideas and insights;
- Recognising that pupils are different. Their social positions and roles will impact on their self-concepts and how they treat and are treated by others. Pupils also have different personality types and levels of engagement, and will vary in how and the extent to which they wish to contribute and explore the issues. Pre-existing peer dynamics can play out in the classroom and can hinder open and constructive discussion. It is important to give pupils the opportunity to learn about, develop and practice the skills they need for talking about sex and relationships outside of substantive lessons as well as during the lessons themselves;
- 'Peer-delivered' RSE can be effective, but is not inherently better than more traditional teacher-delivered RSE and there can be issues with quality and sustainability. In lieu of a formal peer-delivered programme or element of RSE, it may be beneficial to conceive of peer-delivered RSE more broadly.
- Providing opportunities (anonymous and otherwise) for pupils to share their perspectives and 'set the agenda' both before, during and after dedicated RSE sessions can help center young people in the educational process and ensure that their perspectives are driving it.

Teacher training ideas – discussion questions

- What is the role that pupils play in RSE?
- What role would we ideally like them to play?

THINKING CRITICALLY AND DEEPLY IN RSE

Facilitating critical and deep discussion, and empowering all pupils to participate or benefit from such discussion, can be challenging but is not impossible. Many of the topics connected to sex and relationships are complex and contested, and often lack easy answers.

Tips for encouraging deep and critical thinking:

- Canvass and map out a range of different ideas and perspectives (see below for methods of doing so);
- Take nothing for granted, challenge fatalism and normalised harmful and abusive behaviours;
- Explore the contexts in which judgement and shame, and risk and harm, arises. Ask;
  - What is shameful or risky?
  - For whom is it shameful or risky?
  - Why?
  - What are some of the double standards and inequalities at play?
  - Are these inevitable?
  - What social or cultural change is needed to challenge them?
  - How might everyone benefit if change happens?
- Avoid just offering individual-level solutions to harmful or problematic situations, instead:
  - discuss differences in levels of exposure to risk and why risk can be more or less likely to lead to harm for different young people;
  - explore the costs and burdens of having to always show 'resilience' or 'strength' in the face of difficult experiences, and of having to take responsibility for harms perpetuated by others;
  - raise pupils' awareness of their responsibilities toward one another as well as themselves, and promote 'allyship'; and,
  - critically discuss whether individual-level solutions will 'work', or are just or fair, when the causes of risk and harm are often social and cultural in nature and not experienced equally across different young people.

Teacher training ideas – discussion questions

- What are the barriers to critical and in-depth RSE?
- How can or could these be overcome?

- Discuss how personal insecurities and vulnerabilities might sit behind judgemental or harmful behaviour. Encourage pupils to think about:
  - Why do I feel interested in, concerned about or threatened by other people's choices, identities, appearance and actions?
  - How does judging them help or hinder me and my peers?
  - Do I really have the right to question or scrutinise what others are doing? How can I instead respect personal boundaries and privacy, even when these may differ to my own?
- Encourage 'allyship':
  - Explore how judgement, shame, risk and harm can be connected to wider inequalities and injustices in which, in the words of one young person, "we're praising and condemning the same actions for different people".
  - How, instead, can we learn to sit with difference? How can we cope with the feelings of insecurity and vulnerability that can be triggered by others, without resorting to judgement, shame or abuse?
  - Practice active listening.
  - Respect difference while upholding equity and equality

EXPLORING THE ECOSYSTEM:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE 'INCLUSIVE' AND 'CULTURALLY SENSITIVE'?

Young people want to be able to explore and make connections between what they see and experience connected to sex and relationships across the ecosystem within RSE.

Pupils and educators cannot control everything that happens in the ecosystem but they can talk about it. The wider issues may still exist but pupils will be more aware and reflective, which will help them in figuring out how they feel and how they want to act (toward themselves and one another).

It is important not to discuss examples just in abstract terms. Pupils need opportunities to look at what is happening more widely in society and then connect it to their day-to-day lives and what they see going on around them in their local peer and school cultures. This can help them to identify the potentially harmful or problematic attitudes and behaviours that need to change. By exploring wider examples, students would not be criticising each other which may be less divisive and more constructive. Talking about the interconnections between the spheres of the ecosystem can also help to normalise discussions and create a climate of openness within the school.

The 'CCTV footage from Matt Hancock's office' is an interesting example. The group of young people spoke about how this situation goes beyond just the politics of it and both represents and reveals something about our attitudes to sex and relationships regarding privacy, publicity, intimacy and faithfulness, as well as gender constructs.

Educators could use examples like this to explore boundaries and personal privacy, and ask pupils to reflect on whether and in what ways boundaries and privacy are and are not respected within young people's peer cultures.

Asking pupils for examples of sex and relationships that they think are important to explore will create further opportunities. Educators themselves can identify examples and share them with pupils, including examples that convey the diversity and complexity of sex and relationships for different people, which can help tackle the idea that there are 'normal' or 'standard' ways to develop, feel and behave.

In the classroom and also beyond, where do you encounter sex and relationships?

FACILITATING SAFE, INCLUSIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE RSE

It can be difficult to facilitate safe, inclusive and constructive discussion and debate among all types of people, not just young people. It can be very difficult for educators to facilitate this effectively and ensure that the discussions are meaningful and inclusive of all perspectives, whilst being safe for pupils both during and after the lessons.

Often, 'inclusivity' and 'cultural sensitivity' are terms used when thinking about RSE. Essentially, it is considered important to ensure that all pupils in the classroom feel that RSE is relevant and meaningful to them and that they feel able to participate and learn. It is also important that pupils get to learn about different perspectives and experiences. Young people would like educators to be aware of the differences that may exist between pupils and be respectful of these differences and to reflect difference in their RSE teaching.

That being said, there can be risks of homogenising or making assumptions about pupils based on their perceived or actual characteristics, backgrounds and cultures. Likewise, there can be a tendency to attribute a person's perspective to their characteristics, background or culture and make generalisations or and draw simplistic and stereotypical conclusions about difference.

Teacher training ideas – discussion questions

- what skills do pupils need to participate in discussion and debate?
- What is and is not okay when debating and discussing complex issues?

Instead, RSE educators need to conceive of pupils as individuals. Each pupil will be affected by various intersecting factors (see the sphere of influence) and they will all be active in negotiating, giving meaning to and internalising what they see. RSE can give pupils the opportunity to express how they make sense of the world but in a way that makes clear that this is their perspective and experience, and encourages them to recognise their agency and accountability in how they think, feel and act towards themselves and one another. This means that RSE lessons need to encompass a diverse range of perspectives and crucially give pupils the critical tools to understand the fluidity and complexity of identity.

The skills required for participating in constructive debate and discussion about these complexities include perspective-taking, critical thinking, self-reflection, listening, openness and a willingness to think in shades of grey rather than in binary terms. It is important for all to enter with a spirit of inquiry and goodwill, in which students can develop and apply analytical thinking while validating each other's feelings and experiences.

It cannot be a 'free-for-all', however, and the discussions and debates need to be carefully facilitated. Personal attacks and abusive statements should be seen as unacceptable, but it is also important that perspectives are not marginalised or shut down without exploration.

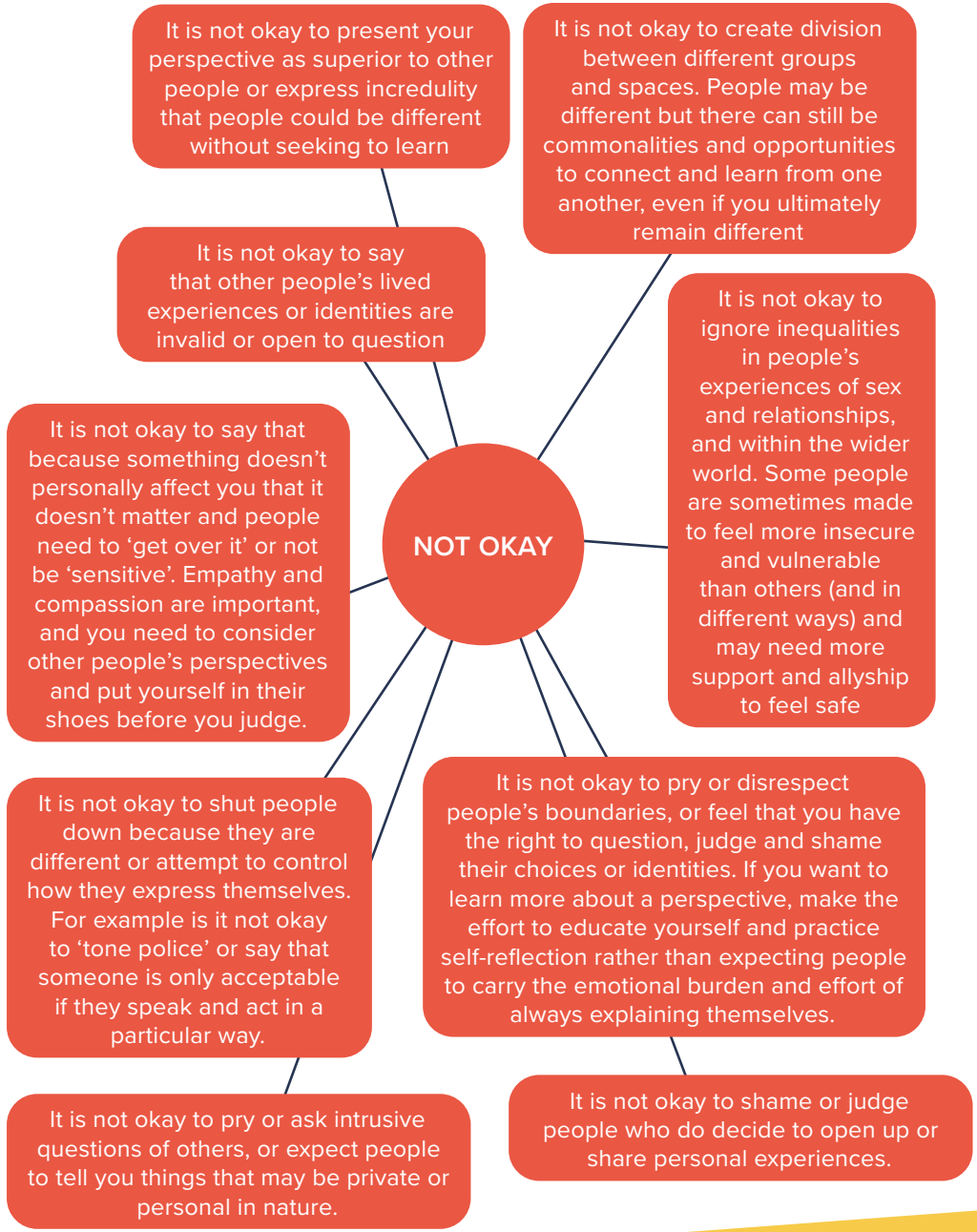
A key distinction needs to be drawn between the right to ask questions and have discussions about different perspectives and experiences, versus questioning and debating the very essence of someone's identity or existence.

Prior to commencing RSE lessons on substantive topics, consider holding a session about expectations and standards for debate and discussion, perhaps using the 'okay' and 'not okay' examples in the table below. The consent castle model (below) may also help. From this, collaboratively set boundaries and group agreements with pupils about how safe and inclusive discussion and debate can be maintained. Review the agreement at regular points in the RSE curriculum programme. Also be clear about routes and options for pupils to pursue if they require further support or guidance about the topics.

Educating about 'logical fallacies' may help as part of engendering and facilitating effective debate and discussion. This resource may help both pupils and educators be able to identify and resist the tendency to engage in logical fallacies:

https://thebestschools.org/magazine/15-logical-fallacies-know

Some examples of what is okay and not okay in RSE discussions



APPLYING THE 'CONSENT CASTLE' TO FACILITATING DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

A helpful way of conceptualising how to facilitate and participate in safe, inclusive and meaningful debate is the 'consent castle' approach

Originally developed as a way of educating about sexual consent, it could be used for ensuring that consent on the part of all pupils in the lesson underlies how the discussion unfolds. It conceptualises consent as an ongoing process that progressively builds as understanding of the self and others as the dynamic increases over time. The original 'comic' can be found here: robot-hugs.com/comic/consent-castle

For classroom-based RSE, it may be helpful to think about the Consent Castle in the following way:

People live, act and interact with one another in different settings – sometimes it may be with people they are comfortable with and feel connected to and, therefore, feel safe to speak and act candidly and with less censure.

Sometimes the topics themselves may also feel relatively 'uncontroversial' and different opinions and ideas can be more easily coped with.

Other times, people, or the topics being discussed, may feel less familiar or safe. The topics may be more contested and people's experiences may be different. It may feel challenging to reconcile and explore the different perspectives without the discourse deteriorating and division arising.

In RSE lessons, the class may comprise friends, acquaintances and more distant others. The topics may be more or less complex and/or personally-relevant to different pupils. Some pupils may feel more vulnerable than others, for example if they have already been harassed, abused or ostracised for who they are or what they think and feel.

In the 'Consent Castle' approach, we have to start by laying the foundations for in-depth and constructive learning and discussion. Just as if we were building a castle, we have to get the structure secure.

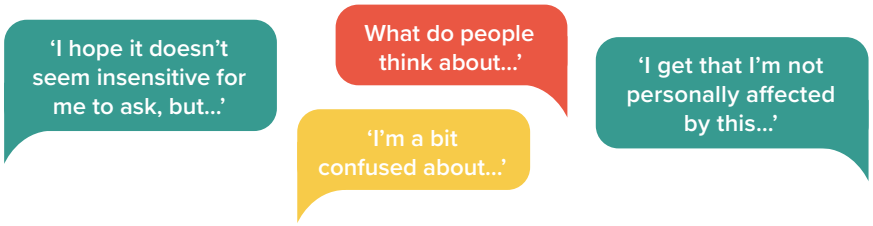
This means that "being really careful" is needed at the beginning, in which everyone is mindful that some people may feel unsure or uncertain about participating. Everyone needs to be sensitive and mindful of how other people might be feeling.

People should raise ideas and suggestions but do so carefully – check to see how others are reacting and acknowledge that the issues may be sensitive for some people. Ask questions and be honest about uncertainty and confusion. Do so in the spirit of wanting to learn and hear about what others think, rather than trying to antagonise or invalidate people.

Listen carefully, actively and genuinely, and acknowledge different perspectives. At first, this is likely to require careful attention to body language, eye contact and other signs that people may feel uncomfortable. Skills in awareness, empathy and perspective taking can be developed through this process.

A video explaining how we have adapted the consent castle for RSE can be found here: youtu.be/_b3BpGL187A

Examples of tentative statements include:



The educator needs to make sure that different voices are heard. This will involve paying attention to the dynamics: who is able to speak? Who is dominating? Who is silent or being silenced?

Providing different opportunities for exchanging ideas can help (e.g. splitting pupils into different groups or taking anonymous contributions).

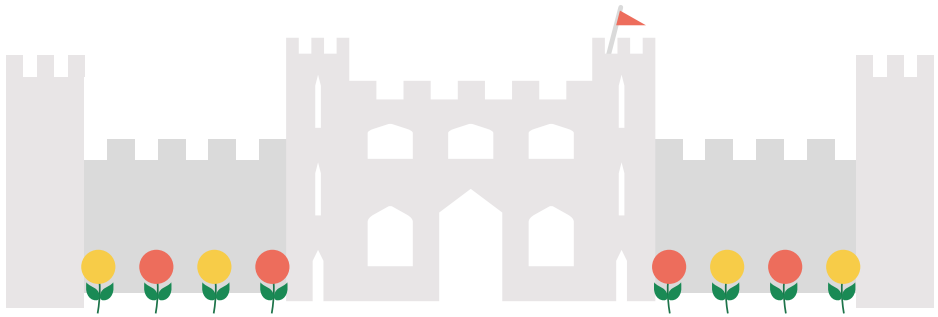
Once the foundations have been set and pupils feel comfortable interacting and exchanging ideas without fear of offensive or abusive contributions, the discussions can be more 'natural' and part of the culture of the classroom.

Just as across different situations and with different people we feel increasingly comfortable and natural over time, classroom discussions can become more lively and people can be bolder with their contributions because the classroom has become "a safe, comfortable, familiar space".

Pupils may even feel able to share their experiences from which others can learn (anonymously or not).

But, just as a castle isn't build in a day, this classroom culture needs to be built from the ground up. It requires strong foundations – a sense that everyone in the room can be trusted and is participating in good faith (i.e. in the spirit of genuinely wanting to learn and explore different ideas).

Even once the foundations are built, everyone needs to take care and keep being respectful. Just as a castle needs maintenance and things can sometimes go wrong, the same applies to the classroom. This means checking in and creating an atmosphere where everyone feels free to communicate how they are feeling or what they want to do or not do.



Maybe someone goes too far and says something insensitive. At such points it is important not to get defensive but to listen to how others are feeling and decide what could be done differently next time.

This can help pupils develop maturity and emotional intelligence, in which they can cope with disagreement and difference and learn how to consider other perspectives and experiences. Pupils can learn to be open minded and interested in learning from others.

The 'Consent Castle' approach to RSE rests upon a positive vision for debate and discussion in which everyone should feel able to explore different perspectives and ideas but that doesn't mean that it's a free-for-all.

The only way to learn, develop and progress – as individuals and a society – is for a constructive and healthy exchange of ideas and perspectives. But it's about how things are discussed: it needs to be done respectfully, sensitively and with the goal of genuinely learning and developing. It will not necessarily feel easy - sometimes pupils (and educators) may have to listen to ideas and perspectives that they find difficult or that they haven't considered before. It is only through doing so that learning and progress can happen.

FACILITATING PUPIL PARTICIPATION AND VOICE

For RSE to be meaningful, pupils need to play an active role in 'setting the agenda' and in the discussions that unfold in the classroom. The content and nature of the teaching needs to align with the specific needs and desires of the pupils.

Before and beyond RSE lessons, there needs to be opportunities – and a wider culture within the school – of young people being able to express their perspectives and ideas about different issues and to identify priorities for RSE. This needs to be provided in different formats so that different pupils feel able and willing to contribute their comments in response to both open and closed questions.

Options include:

- Anonymous 'question boxes' where pupils can physically record and submit comments
- Anonymous digital formats (e.g. PollEverywhere, Mentimeter, Padlet or Google Jamboard) where pupils can digitally record and submit comments
- Focus groups for more detailed feedback
- Public visual/physical displays, e.g. murals, where pupils can use post-its (or similar) to record and share comments anonymously
- Pupil-led workshops and talks for pupils to raise issues that are important to them (e.g. facilitated by older pupils or particular pupil groups in the school).

These consultation mechanisms need to be perceived as inclusive and credible, and there needs to be clear lines of accountability and responsiveness from educators. A pupil leadership group could oversee and facilitate the process, but it is important that any grouping of this kind is not biased and does not end up inadvertently reflecting or perpetuating existing divisions and hierarchies in the school. Instead, the wide-ranging forms of pupil consultation and the pupil leadership can act as checks and balances on one another. The issues that emerge from on-going consultation can then be explored in classroom-based RSE.

Prior to and during lessons, pupils can be offered similar opportunities to share pre-existing ideas, knowledge and experiences connected to the topics. These can be reviewed by the teacher in advance so that the teacher knows where the pupils are at with regard to the different topics and the dynamics and perspectives that need to be explored in the classroom.

These contributions can be moderated as necessary and then shared within the classroom, with consent, in order to stimulate discussion and debate. For example, the range of perspectives could be mapped out and explored.

In 'real time' during lessons, pupils could be given opportunities to share and discuss their ideas and perspectives in different ways, e.g.:

- Small 'friendship' groups of their choosing as 'safe spaces' and with sufficient flexibility around questions and issues to discuss in connection with the topics
- Small allocated groups to encourage diversity and perspective taking
- Larger whole-class discussions where contributions from different groups are taken without pressure on any one individual
- Anonymous expression of ideas and opinions e.g. using PollEverywhere, Mentimeter, Padlet or Google Jamboard, submitted by groups or individuals which can be moderated by the educator and then discussed with the pupils

Facilitating pupil participation and voice (continued)

It may also be worthwhile to collect thoughts and reflections (again perhaps anonymously) after each lesson, in order to gain insight into what pupils have learnt and identify areas requiring more work.

These insights can also be shared with teachers in other curriculum subjects so that opportunities for bringing to life the topics connected to sex and relationships can be identified and capitalised upon.

Important throughout the process is to:

Respect rights to silence and choice within the classroom. There may be various reasons why a pupil (for example connected to personality, individual experience regarding the topic) may not contribute and they may nevertheless be absorbing and reflecting on what is being said

Manage pupils who dominate discussions and create an environment in which all could, in principle, feel able to contribute. This is where anonymity and a mix of different discussion arrangements (friendship groups, small mixed groups etc.) can help provide a range of opportunities for pupils to contribute in the way they feel comfortable to do so.

Use humour! Don't make it too serious and give pupils space to laugh and joke about the issues (so long as any jokes are respectful). It can be a way for pupils to 'let off steam' when the discussion gets heavy and should not automatically be interpreted as poor behaviour, so long as the 'jokes' are not abusive about particular individuals or identities.

Point on moderation

It is important that pupils are safeguarded but moderation should not be done in a way that unfairly silences or harms particular students. Sometimes it is those with more cultural and social capital within the school whose voices are more influential or perceived as more credible to pupils (and staff), but this can in itself uphold privilege because judgements of credibility may not always be made equally or fairly, and so all voices need to be heard. It is also important that individual pupils are not burdened with the responsibility of articulating a particular perspective just because they are seen as doing it in the 'right way' or as being 'better' at expressing themselves and connecting with people. Instead, all young people should be able to contribute, albeit potentially in different ways.

There may also be a preference for private mechanisms rather than, for example, public murals or other physical displays. The latter may come with risks such as bullying, but these risks are not created by the public display itself and may reveal issues that need addressing.

Tips for consultation and moderation:

- Designate a 'link teacher' who is trusted and perceived as credible among pupils who can oversee pupil consultation processes.
- This teacher can work with the pupil leadership group to decide what pupils should be consulted about and to manage moderation.
- This link teacher and leadership group could be rotated now and then.
- Pupils' contributions should not be excessively censored, but it will be necessary to remove:
  - any contributions that target an individual or class of individuals for abuse;
  - explicit or abusive language;
  - content that indicates a safeguarding risk.
- The following should not automatically be censored:
  - contributions that are poorly phrased or expressed;
  - contributions that demonstrate ignorance or confusion but are not abusive or cruel in nature;
  - jokey or humorous content (such content may look like the pupil is not taking it seriously but may be revealing about how they think and feel).
- Lines of accountability and action need to be clear. Pupils' perspectives can be shared and should be acted upon. The democratising process will build in effectiveness over time. Levels of trust and credibility will increase as the process becomes embedded within the culture of the school.

PUPIL-LED RESPONSES AND BYSTANDER CULTURE

Pupils need to play an active role in responding to and acting on the issues in their lives and peer cultures (ranging from broader, more normalised issues, to incidents that occur). The consultation process should include pupils sharing their views on solutions and actions that need to be taken. These solutions and actions can be explored and identified in RSE.

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Educators should remember that peers and informal rules and expectations are often much more influential over each other's behaviours and choices than teachers' (and other adults') instructions and formal rules. Adult-administered rules and punishments can also have counterproductive effects in which they encourage detection and punishment avoidance rather than genuine behaviour change and, as such, push issues 'underground'.

Teacher training ideas – discussion questions

- What is the role of bystanders?
- What are the barriers and facilitators to playing a positive bystander – or upstander – role?

The role of bystanders and creating a culture of prosocial bystander intervention can be explored in RSE, covering:

- why people join in or do nothing when harmful or abusive behaviours unfold or attitudes are expressed;
- the complexities of bystander intervention – 'calling out' behaviours or attitudes may not always feel easy and may end up just feeding into division and disagreement;
- the subtleties of bystander behaviour – what and who gets rewarded and punished in the peer group, and how does this shape what people decide to do and how they treat one another? Are there ways to change this?
- who gets to decide what is harmful or abusive? Reflecting on the different perspectives shared through the consultation processes before and during RSE may help pupils understand the impacts and effects of different behaviours and attitudes, as well as how lots of people may disagree with taken-for-granted and normalised issues and want them to change;
- how 'calling in' – based on empathy, compassion and perspective-taking – may be better than 'calling out'; and,
- examples of change that has occurred in history to challenge fatalistic attitudes and inspire pupils that progress can happen.

Often the issues that take place in young people's peer cultures occur beyond the purview of educators and other adults. While it is vitally important that educators challenge cultures of harm and abuse in RSE (and beyond), they will not be able to solve it themselves. Through their role as 'facilitators' educators can instead help young people break down the underlying causes of the issues and play their part in creating change.

Hollaback's bystander intervention resource may be helpful to use: ihollaback.org/bystander-resources

REMEMBER: harmful and abusive attitudes and expectations are shaped by different parts of the ecosystem. Pupils and educators do not have full control over the ecosystem. RSE can help raise pupils' awareness of the different issues and can help them to practice discussing the issues and encourage them to take responsibility for how they treat themselves and one another – kindly, respectfully and with compassion.

LIST OF ONLINE RESOURCES

Given that classroom-based RSE is only one part of the ecosystem of young people's socio-sexual lives and development, it is important that educators feel able and willing to signpost pupils to different sources of further support and information.

The table of benefits and risks of the different spheres of the ecosystem Page 12 and 13 may help in exploring with pupils which sources may be helpful and reliable in different situations.

Young people also consistently say that they want opportunities for private and self-directed learning and guidance. This can be disconcerting for adults, who worry about who young people are communicating with and what information they are encountering.

People and information online can be variable in quality and reliability, and of course there are risks of exploitation and misinformation. However, there is also a wealth of reliable, accessible information to support and empower young people. Like it or not, young people are consulting the internet for educational purposes and so there is a need to help them do so safely.

YouTubers:

Hannah Witton **youtube.com/user/hannahgirasol**

Ash Hardell **youtube.com/channel/UCXwXB7a3cq9AERiWF4-dK9g**

Support for harmful content online:

Internet Watch Foundation - **iwf.org.uk**

CEOP - **ceop.police.uk/Safety-Centre**

Report Harmful Content - **reportharmfulcontent.com**

Some recommended sources include:

fumble.org.uk - Inclusive and relatable content on sex, relationships, identity and mental health created by young people, for young people. (Award winning, registered UK RSE charity.)

School of Sexuality Education - an award winning charity providing inclusive and comprehensive RSE to schools, colleges, and universities in the UK. Teacher training, free resources and advice available on their website.

scarleteen.com - Inclusive, comprehensive and supportive sexuality and relationships information for teens and emerging adults

bishuk.com - A guide to sex, love and you for over 14s

amaze.org - Real info about sex, your body and relationships in fun, animated videos

youngmenshealthsite.org - A website for guys and young men with up-to-date health information

youngwomenshealth.org - An award-winning health website for young women

youngminds.org.uk - Mental health support for young people

nationaldahelpline.org.uk - Advice, helpline and resources for domestic abuse

themix.org.uk - Support for under 25s

childline.org.uk - Support for under 18s

mindout.org.uk - Mental health charity for LGBTQIA+ people

rapecrisis.org.uk/get-help - Support for girls aged 13+ who survived any type of sexual violence (including online)

survivorsuk.org - Support for men, boys, and non-binary survivors of sexual violence aged 13+

galop.org.uk - Support for LGBTQIA+ people surviving abuse aged 13+

respond.org.uk - Support survivors of sexual violence with a learning disability aged 13+

teaandintimacy.com - Six Minute Sex Ed podcast

schoolofsexed.org/blog-articles/2019/11/4/what-is-sex-positivity - Blog: What is sex positivity?

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