

Department for Education Draft Review of Relationships, Sex and Health Education Guidance

Place2Be response. July 2024

Key Messages.

1. We welcome the introduction of greater content relating to mental health and wellbeing.

By embedding mental health in the curriculum, we can give every young person the tools to support their wellbeing. By teaching children how to understand their emotions and feelings, they can learn how to self-manage them and prevent issues from escalating. When mental health is included in school, we can normalise this and reduce stigma. Similarly, by knowing what is normal and when they need further support, we can encourage more young people to seek help earlier. This is also beneficial for young people so they can support their peers.

Furthermore, by including this in the curriculum, this upholds one of the core principles of a whole school approach to mental health support, as supported by DfE and NICE guidance.

2. The guidance is misguided in banning normal conversations about development, relationships, health, sex, and identity. This can harm children's mental health and wellbeing.

It is normal and healthy for children and young people to explore, question and be curious about the world around them, including questioning topics like gender, sexual orientation, sexual activity and their bodies. Part of growing up includes exploring one's identity, which can be an enjoyable process for many, though for others may be challenging. It is vital that young people can access support during this time to navigate and understand their feelings.

The guidance would ban RSHE lessons from covering "concepts that children may not have the maturity to grasp, or which may be distressing." But by forbidding teachers from allowing conversations about identity, relationships, bodies and sex, within the safety of RSHE lessons, young people are unable to access trusted information. This further stigmatises and gives a taboo to these issues. Some children and young people experience disapproval, bullying or oppression because of who they are. This may come from a lack of understanding by their peers about different identities.

As such by providing information and support within a safe and familiar setting such as school, we can encourage tolerance and acceptance. Conversely, by banning conversations about gender identity, this may further lead to ostracizing and bullying within schools, and beyond. According to Mind, certain experiences related to being LGBTQIA+ are more likely to lead to poor mental health, and because of this, LGBTQIA+ people are more likely to have mental health problems.

Children need to be taught that different bodies, identities, orientations, and beliefs are normal. Children cannot be 'led' towards a certain gender identity, and the guidance places de facto preference on being cisgender. Many of these characteristics are protected in law, meaning the guidance could

create a hostile environment within school settings for many LGBTQIA+ staff and young people, and those with family, friends, parents and carers with these identities. By banning the mention of same-sex relationships in primary schools, this teaches young people that they, their parents, and loved ones, are not 'normal', contributing to further stigma or discrimination.

Schools are places of learning, for children to explore different identities, concepts, beliefs and hear about the world. Children are capable of learning about and understanding difference, as in any other lesson about culture or religion.

The guidance imposes excessive caution, and does not reflect the realities of young people and their development. Banning discussions of sex, identity and relationships does not prevent young people from wanting to learn about them. Without access to reputable information in school, young people will seek advice and support elsewhere, which may not be accurate or helpful. Without access to support and information, provided by a trusted adult, this could negatively affect children's mental health.

3. The guidance does not give adequate consideration to safeguarding

Relationships, Sex and Health Education is a vital resource for schools to use to support safeguarding. We do not believe that these lessons normally cause adverse harm to young people, but instead give children the information to understand what is healthy or what is harmful in their lives.

Abuse and harm can occur at any age, including sexual abuse, access to inappropriate materials such as pornography, grooming and FGM, and domestic abuse and violence. Children are not always protected from these issues, and banning conversations about them will not stop them from "being introduced to them too early" as the guidance intends. RSHE gives children the tools and understanding to learn how to recognise risk and harm, keep themselves safe, and be able to disclose concerns about what is happening to them. This is a necessary process, supported in RSHE lessons.

We also oppose the guidance banning discussions or references to self-harm and suicide before Year 8 (age 12-13). Children can struggle with their mental health at any age, and around half of mental health conditions develop before age 14. It is vital that children are taught how to recognise their emotions, understand what is normal and when they need further support. By restricting discussions on serious mental health issues, we are unable to provide the right support for young people who are struggling. School staff, parents and children should be able to have open conversations about mental health including suicide, so that young people feel safe to reach out when they need to.

By placing rigid restrictions on schools, staff cannot confidently support their unique school community or meet the needs of their pupils. When flexibility will be permitted under the guidance, this is only in certain circumstances where harm has already been caused. Instead, schools should be able to provide information proactively, to better protect young people.

4. The guidance will be difficult to implement and will affect staff wellbeing.

While the guidance applies only to the RSHE curriculum content, we are concerned that wider school staff may be affected. School staff need the confidence and tools to manage children's questions in and outside of the RSHE lessons. The guidance does not give clarity on how school staff will be supported in answering these questions, and staff may be concerned about the consequences of not following the guidance properly. This may lead to unnecessary caution and stress, affecting staff wellbeing. If a child asks about gender identity, or same-sex relationships in primary schools, this puts staff in a challenging and unfair position. This is especially relevant for school-based staff who identify as non-binary or otherwise LGBTQIA+, whose own identity is challenged by the guidance.

We are also concerned about third-parties and non-educational staff following the guidance within schools. As an external provider of school-based mental health services, many children use our counselling sessions to discuss feelings, questions and issues around their identity. Our child counsellors support young people through this normal process. We are concerned that they may be prevented from doing so under the new guidance, since they operate under the school's roof.

The guidance places restrictions on third parties who provide information on RSHE topics. As such, we are concerned that schools may be forced to develop their own resources within the narrow scope of the guidance, leading to a compromise in quality. When children have questions, by signposting to trusted, specialist support and/or information, we can ensure they know where to find reputable resources to further explore these issues and have conversations to help them navigate any challenges they face.

The guidance intends to ban "concepts that children may not have the maturity to grasp, or which may be distressing... or may inadvertently give the message that they should be engaging in or exploring adult activities." However, age restrictions are an ineffective way of doing this, because developmental stage is not solely tied to age. Experiences of children, including of puberty, cannot be defined by law, as each child is independent and has unique backgrounds. This guidance should not impose strict limits in an attempt to not 'expose children' to these issues. Instead, it should allow for schools to inform every child in a way that is most relevant to them. This should be done by allowing a range of information, delivered in a safe, trusted environment, that enables children to explore the issues they are curious about.

Summary and conclusion

In conclusion, this guidance should not progress in its current form. While school staff welcome information and clarity to help guide their RSHE lessons, this guidance causes more harm than benefit.

By imposing strict bans and restrictions on content taught to young people, this does not reflect the normal child development. This also affects safeguarding by not teaching children early how to understand what is happening to them.

By banning conversations about identity, this affects children's wider understanding of the world, their peers and themselves. This can lead to greater hostility, bullying and negative mental health.

This guidance will disproportionately affect children, families and staff who identify as LGBTQIA+.