



Involve us, respect us:

Engaging young people in
relationships and sex education

Summary of Practice Considerations
based on a small-scale research study with young
people who use Barnardo's services

Believe in
children
 Barnardo's

“To me good quality RSE should be taught by a professional and explained in detail and to talk about the law about having sex and the right age and that both couple should be ready and be comfortable before doing anything. They should also teach that it is ok to like the same sex and it’s ok to like both male and female because in my opinion, young people will struggle to open up because they are not being taught that it is ok to be in a relationship with the same sex.”¹

Why we did this research

The Government has announced that all schools in England must deliver Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) from September 2019. We at Barnardo's believe that for RSE to be a success, young people must feel comfortable and interested in their RSE lessons.

Past research suggests that young people in the UK have different preferences and concerns about their RSE lessons. Young people's views often vary based on their gender, age, learning difficulties, sexuality, and ethnic or religious background. By seeking the views of young people who use Barnardo's services, we wanted to learn more about what will help young people, who have different identities and experiences, to participate in RSE at school.

The methods we used

In this small-scale research project, we gathered the views of 19 young people through five focus group discussions. We also gathered the views of 37 young people through a survey. Those who participated in our focus groups and survey were aged 12-25, and roughly two thirds identified as female. They were using different Barnardo's services, which included:

- Support services for young people leaving care
- Support services for lesbian gay bisexual transgender (LGBT) young people
- Child sexual exploitation support services
- Support services for young parents
- Substance abuse support services
- Domestic abuse support services
- Sex and relationship projects

We asked these young people what topics RSE should include and how they would like it to be delivered.

The young people were likely to have received relationship and/or sex education support from Barnardo's or from other support services. They were able to reflect on what RSE should be like based on what they learnt from these services, as well what they learnt from school and from their own life experiences.

Who our Practice Considerations were for

We formed Practice Considerations based on the young people's views. We wrote these Practice Considerations for the Government, to inform their guidance for delivering RSE in schools. RSE educators may also find our Practice Considerations helpful when planning how to teach RSE to children and young people with different life experiences, preferences, identities and sexualities.

Our research shows how important it is to consult children and young people before delivering RSE, to address any concerns they may have.

¹ This is a Barnardo's young person's evidence to a session in Parliament (15 November 2017) hosted by Sarah Champion MP and Maria Miller MP on what young people want RSE to include, and what it means to them.

Practice Consideration 1

Teach a wide-ranging RSE curriculum to all young people. Don't assume that topics (such as abuse, grooming, LGBT relationships and gender identities, consent, and pregnancy) don't need to be discussed if they are not known to be relevant to anyone in the class at that time.

Participants wanted all topics within RSE to be taught to everyone. They did not want anyone to 'miss out' on learning something that might be relevant to them.

“What I think should be taught is... how to spot domestic violence, and where you should go if it's happening.”

(Lukas, focus group, LGBT support service)

Practice Consideration 2

When discussing topics in RSE, always consider the potential impact on young people who may have had personal experiences of these issues.

Participants felt that the RSE they had received in the past did not meet their needs, or did not reflect their own personal experiences or identities. Some even felt marginalised and offended by their RSE in school.

Sami: “[If RSE doesn't include teaching about LGBT relationships and identities], you go through school and you think ‘oh well everyone's straight’”...

Lukas: “See it's always there, you know it's there, but you're just trying to hide it because [you think] everyone else is straight. And you're scared... The [fact] they don't teach [that LGBT sex and relationships are normal] – it's disrespectful to us.”

(Focus group, LGBT support service)

Practice Consideration 3

Deliver RSE within a holistic Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education programme.

Participants wanted RSE to discuss confidence, self-esteem, how to treat others, and personal finances. They wanted school to help them to prepare for adult life.

“[Some young people] don’t know how to pay bills, [and] because of that, they are losing their house, they are losing a lot of stuff... they don’t understand fully, if they don’t [pay their bills], what will happen next... the consequences.”

(Jakub, focus group, leaving care support service)

Practice Consideration 4

Teach topics (such as first menstruation, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or sexual intercourse) early enough so young people feel prepared for the future, and so topics can be built upon as children grow.

Participants wanted students to learn RSE topics at the right time.

“My friend was absolutely distraught and she was crying to the teachers. And they rang her mum, and her mum had like never explained [menstruation] to her. So like she didn’t know what was happening... She went hysterical.”

(Zoe, focus group, LGBT support service)

Practice Consideration 5

Spend enough time on RSE for topics to be explored in detail.

Participants wanted RSE to be taught often enough for young people to fully understand topics.

“I had [RSE in year 8 only]. I think young people need to be educated more often, once a week or monthly... will definitely be more effective.”

(Survey participant, unknown service)

Practice Consideration 6

Consult young people about whether they have concerns regarding the topics they will be taught, so their concerns can be addressed.

Participants were concerned that RSE would not be taught in an age-appropriate way, or in a way that was sensitive to young people's different religious backgrounds. The researchers were able to lessen their concerns by clarifying what RSE might include.

Researcher: "What age should [RSE] topics be taught?"

Afi: "I reckon there should be less [RSE] in primary school. More in high school. Because primary school will just traumatise the poor bairns."

Researcher: "So they're going to start doing Relationships Education in primary school... so more about being nice to your friends, not bullying... It could be about healthy relationships in the family or about child abuse..."

Zoe: "Yeah that would help if they taught stuff like that... Some of those [topics] would have to be taught in primary school..."

(Focus group, LGBT support service)

Practice Consideration 7

Consult young people about whether they have concerns regarding mixed-gender RSE classes, so their concerns can be addressed. It may be necessary for educators to communicate to young people why certain topics are useful for different genders to learn about.

Participants feared certain topics would not be relevant to all, or thought that mixed-gender RSE would be embarrassing for young people.

"I think [different genders] should be taught separately ... [Girls] might have questions that [guys] will not relate to ... I mean girls [are] less willing to ask such questions around guys."

(Tom, focus group, leaving care support service)

Practice Consideration 8

Make sure the skills and characteristics of the educator suit young people's preferences. Educators should be open-minded, relatable, confident, knowledgeable and 'sex-positive' – including when they teach about LGBT relationships and gender identities.

Participants believed that it is crucial for RSE educators to have the right skills, characteristics and attitudes.

Sami: “I think it matters who [teaches RSE]. Because if you get a homophobic person teaching it they're not going to talk about gay [people] are they?”

Lukas: “And people need to be more open-minded these days, teachers and school nurses have to be open-minded, they can't really be homophobic.... [RSE teachers] can't be someone who's homophobic 'cause it's just not going to work.”

(Focus group, LGBT support service)

Practice Consideration 9

Allow time and space for student discussion, debate and peer learning within RSE.

Participants wanted RSE to be interactive and engaging.

Also, the young people who participated in our focus groups wanted to debate issues and share their views on RSE with each other. In schools, young people may want to take part in similar group discussions.

“I mean, [RSE should include] like a group session, like all kids being able to be around a table like this. Being able to talk about feelings... That's what schools need now, to be able to talk about it. Everyone's got their own opinions.”

(Hayley, focus group, young parent support service)

Many thanks to all the young people who spent time telling us their thoughts and opinions.

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All names used throughout this report have been changed to protect the identity of the young people.

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