



# **Involve us, respect us:**

Engaging young people in  
relationships and sex education

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

**Believe in  
children**  
 **Barnardo's**



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January 2018

*I feel strongly, very strongly, about the way healthy relationships should be delivered in schools in the future, because I was never given the opportunity to understand what abusive relationships could do to a young person like myself. When I was in school I was never taught about the warning signs of grooming nor was I ever taught the importance of healthy relationships. I just went with whatever the TV or other aspects in life took me.*

***I'll give you a little insight into the way I was taught;***

*My PSHE lessons started when I was in year 6, boys and girls were separated and we were made to watch videos about periods and how a woman becomes an adult we were never shown what the boys learnt and the boys were never shown what we learnt that day.*

*After that video that was it until we got into year 7 when it became more about sex, we were never shown the importance of consent and what it actually meant to consent to such a massive thing. It was a sore subject in school many people were immature in these lessons and just laughed but that's purely because we weren't taught in the right way – the delivery of such a lesson shouldn't just be with our teachers it should have someone come in from the outside so we as students see it as something important.*

*We were never taught about same sex relationships. I knew nothing about it until I grew up and learnt for myself. I was never taught the importance of healthy relationships and the warning signs of an unhealthy relationship. If I was I wouldn't have gone down a dark path like I did.*

*Personally in my opinion these lessons are just as important as Maths or English because these lessons impact on the rest of your life. This happened to me without the real education of sex, consent within sex, and healthy relationships. I got involved with the wrong person and thought it was completely fine and normal, it's only through the help of my support worker and the Barnardo's BASE team that I learnt the values of sex, consent within sex, and healthy relationships.*

*If I was even given the opportunity to learn these things and many of my peers, things would be very different and I live with that each and every day.*

*My passion is to help people like me never go through what I did, that's why I'm writing to you today. To stress the importance of a good PSHE lesson, because if it wasn't for Barnardo's and the help I received from them, I would still be in an unhealthy relationship not knowing it was wrong. Barnardo's is very close to my heart. When I was 13-14 Barnardo's came in to support me following a traumatic time in my life.*

*18-year-old young person*

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<sup>1</sup> This is an excerpt from a letter which was sent to Damian Hinds MP by an 18-year-old young person that Barnardo's supports, to congratulate Mr Hinds on his appointment as the Secretary of State for Education in January 2018.



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# Foreword

The introduction of statutory relationships and sex education marks an important step forward. As a former Maths teacher, and a father of four, I know first-hand that good schools provide much more than an academic curriculum. They prepare young people for real life, with all its opportunities and dangers.

Rapid advances in technology mean that children are confronted with new risks at an early age, and too often they're not prepared. From "sexting" to online pornography, children are being exposed to adult content. More worrying still, sexual predators use the cover of online anonymity to "befriend" the young people they wish to groom.

With all these risks, it's more important than ever that young people hear the facts at the right age from qualified professionals in the protective school environment. They need to learn what healthy relationships look like and what to do if they don't feel safe.

At Barnardo's we work with 272,000 children, young people, parents and carers in the UK. We know that some children are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. But in the digital world, any young person can be at risk. They're walking around with a camera crew in their pocket and could be talking to strangers on their tablet in bed at night.

Schools must have the tools they need to deliver high quality relationships and sex education to every pupil. It must be suitable to all young people, regardless of gender and sexuality. It must be accessible to children with special educational needs and disabilities. It must be delivered in partnership with parents, with due regard for cultural sensitivities. Crucially, it must also provide young people with the information and advice they want and need.

This new report draws on the views and experiences of young people we support. We asked them directly what should be taught in Relationships and Sex Education classes and presented their response to the Department for Education to inform the new guidance for schools.

There's no silver bullet for keeping children safe, but high quality relationships and sex education is an important step in the right direction.



Javed Khan  
Chief Executive





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# Executive Summary

***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.<sup>2</sup>***

The Government has announced that Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) will be compulsory in all schools in England from September 2019. This means that all primary school children will be taught about relationships and all secondary school pupils will be taught about relationships and sex. This report is for policy makers who are designing statutory guidance on how RSE should be delivered. It is also for schools, teachers and support workers who deliver RSE to young people – who we refer to as ‘educators’.

Understanding what helps young people engage with RSE will be vital to its success. Past research shows us how certain groups of young people – for example young people with different genders, ages, sexualities, ethnicities, faiths, or those with learning disabilities – have called for RSE that meets their needs and preferences. Our study adds to this knowledge of what helps young people engage with RSE, by exploring the views and concerns of a small sample of young people who are accessing Barnardo’s support services.

In this small-scale qualitative study, we gathered the views of young people accessing Barnardo’s services through five focus groups. These were run within the following services:

- A support service for young people leaving care (three young people)
- A support service for lesbian gay bisexual transgender (LGBT) young people (two groups of three young people )
- A child sexual exploitation support service (four young people)
- A support service for young parents (six young people)

We also supplemented this insight with a survey, which 37 young people completed. They were from the following services.<sup>3</sup> They were from the following services:

- Young parenting services (five young people)
- Support services for LGBT young people (eight young people)
- Child sexual exploitation support services (twelve young people)
- Substance abuse support service (two young people)
- Domestic abuse support services (two young people)
- Sex and relationship projects (three young people)

In total, 56 young people engaged with our research. Our participants had mixed views and concerns in relation to the topics RSE should include and the way it should be delivered. Our methodology also highlights the potential value that can be gained in seeking the views of children and young people when delivering RSE, so educators can address concerns they may have, and engage children and young people with different life experiences and perspectives.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a Barnardo’s young person’s evidence to a session in Parliament (15th 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.

<sup>3</sup> Five of the survey participants did not record the service they were using.

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## **PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS FOR RSE EDUCATORS**

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.
2. When discussing topics in RSE, always consider the potential impact on young people who may have had personal experiences of these issues.
3. Deliver RSE within a holistic Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education programme.
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 topics can be built upon as children grow.
5. Consult young people about whether they have concerns regarding the topics they will be taught, so their concerns can be addressed.
6. 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.
7. Make sure the skills and characteristics of the educator suit young people's preferences. They should be open-minded, relatable, confident, knowledgeable and 'sex-positive' – including when they teach about LGBT relationships and gender identities.
8. Spend enough time on RSE for topics to be explored in detail.
9. Allow time and space for student discussion, debate and peer learning within RSE.





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# Introduction

## Who this report is for

After many years of campaigning in England, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is to become compulsory in all secondary schools, and Relationships Education is to become compulsory in primary schools. This will be implemented from September 2019. In order to help schools to teach consistent, relevant and age-appropriate content the Department for Education will develop guidance for schools. This report has been written to help inform the policy makers tasked with developing the guidance. The report is also for those delivering RSE to young people, including teachers and external specialists, to help them to consider how best to approach the topic. In this report, we refer to them as ‘educators’.

## What this report aims to achieve

Children and young people must engage with RSE in order for it to be a success. When designing the content and delivery of RSE in schools, educators need to understand what children and young people want in order to design RSE that they will engage with.

This research does not aim to investigate or evidence what kind of RSE would influence young people’s behaviour or would have an impact on their lives. Instead, this research aims to add to our knowledge about what young people want RSE to be like.

Much past research has been done on what topics young people want RSE to include, and how they want it to be delivered. Young people are not a homogenous group, and some research has focussed on what specific groups would like from RSE – for example young people with different genders, sexualities, ethnicities, faiths, or those with learning difficulties. This research aims to add to this discussion by gaining the views of young people who use Barnardo’s services.<sup>4</sup>

We gained the views of 19 young people through five focus groups, and a further 37 through a survey. The young people in our sample offer us valuable insight for three reasons:

- They were accessing different types of Barnardo’s services.<sup>5</sup> Some were accessing services for young parents, services for young people leaving care, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) support services, child sexual exploitation support services, substance abuse and domestic abuse support services, and sex and relationship projects. These 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 involve based on what they have learnt from these services, what they have learnt in school, as well as their own life experiences.
- They had different needs, life experiences and identities. They reflected on the RSE they had received (or had not received) in terms of how it made them feel, and whether they thought it met their needs at that time.
- During the focus groups, the young people discussed and debated the topics they wanted RSE to include and the way they wanted it to be delivered. They shared their own knowledge and opinions with each other, and aired their concerns and questions about what RSE will be like in the future. These group discussions vividly illustrate how young people may want to take part in RSE discussions in school, and how some may need their concerns to be addressed before they feel able to engage in RSE lessons.

Our findings demonstrate how important it is for educators to seek the views of children and young people when designing RSE, and for them to keep in mind the different experiences, concerns and opinions that children and young people have.

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<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that for the report only children of secondary school age and young adults took part in our focus groups and survey.

<sup>5</sup> The type of service a young person receives is based on their primary need, as a child may be affected by a number of issues. For example, some young people using our child sexual exploitation support services may also be young parents and/or LGBT.



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# Policy Context

## Background to Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)

In March 2017 the Secretary of State for Education, Justine Greening, announced that the Government intended to introduce Relationships Education in primary schools and Relationships and Sex Education in secondary schools in England. This announcement was a result of years of lobbying by numerous organisations, culminating in campaigning to introduce legislation in the Children and Social Work Bill. The amendment proposed by the Government was to ‘support all young people to stay safe and prepare for life in modern Britain’.<sup>6</sup>

The amendment passed through both the House of Commons and House of Lords with support from numerous Parliamentarians. The proposals changed the wording of the education from ‘Sex and Relationships’ to ‘Relationships and Sex’ to highlight how important it is to teach about relationships.

Until the new RSE is introduced in September 2019, schools will continue to teach sex education based on the current framework. This framework requires maintained schools – not academies or free schools – to teach about reproduction and puberty in primary schools, and to educate on human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) at secondary school. When teaching RSE in schools, teachers must give ‘due regard’ to the Sex and Relationships statutory guidance issued by the Department for Education. However, this guidance was issued in 2000<sup>7</sup>, and is very outdated, particularly in relation to the technology young people now use. Supplementary guidance was developed by three charities in 2014<sup>8</sup> to enable teachers to have more up-to-date information.

In relation to the teaching of SRE outside of the science curriculum, Ofsted found that 60% of the schools they inspected provided good or better education, while 40% required improvement or were inadequate. This shortfall in teaching can have profound negative effects on children. Ofsted stated that ‘in the two fifths of schools where secondary learning was weak, pupils had gaps in their knowledge and skills, most commonly in the serious safeguarding areas of personal safety in relation to sex and relationships, mental health, and alcohol misuse’.<sup>9</sup> Ofsted also found that ‘lack of high-quality, age appropriate SRE in more than a third of schools is a concern as it may leave children and young people vulnerable to inappropriate sexual behaviours and sexual exploitation’.<sup>10</sup>

Ofsted guidance recommends that in secondary schools ‘lessons should prepare young people for adult life by helping them develop positive relationships and an appreciation of the consequences of their choices; an understanding of human sexuality; knowledge of the importance of safe sexual practices; the concept of, and laws relating to, sexual consent, sexual exploitation and abuse; and knowledge of how to access further advice and support’.<sup>11</sup>

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6 Department for Education (2017) Policy statement: Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education, and Personal Social, Health and Economic Education [Online] Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-rse-and-pshe> . Accessed 14.03.18.

7 Department for Education (2000) Sex and Relationship Education Guidance. [Online] Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sex-and-relationship-education>. Accessed 14.03.18.

8 Brook, PSHE Association and Sex Education Forum (2014) Sex and relationship education (SRE) for the 21st Century. [Online] Available at <https://www.brook.org.uk/data/SRE-supplementary-advice.pdf>. Accessed 14.03.18.

9 Ofsted (2013) Not yet good enough: personal, social, health and economic education in schools. Manchester: Ofsted.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

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## Why is RSE so important?

As a provider of services to children and young people throughout the UK, Barnardo's has worked with thousands of children and young people that have been abused – emotionally, physically and sexually. Our interest in this subject is because children tell us that they did not know what was happening to them, who to talk to or how to talk about it. High quality relationships and sex education can play an important role in raising awareness about child sexual abuse and exploitation; giving children a better understanding about healthy and unhealthy relationships. While we often refer to RSE as 'prevention education', recent evaluations of school-based prevention programmes have shown little impact on young people's actual behaviour. However, these programmes have been shown to 'build confidence, increase knowledge and change some attitudes that may legitimise harmful behaviours'.<sup>12</sup> These outcomes can all help children and young people feel better informed about relationships and sex, and more prepared for the future. RSE programmes can also provide information to young people about what behaviours are acceptable and what are not. This is particularly relevant in relation to learning about inappropriate touching, sexual harassment (including 'banter') and harmful sexual behaviour.

Through our work with victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse, Barnardo's is aware of some of the risks that technology can pose for children and young people. We know of the ease with which offenders can target and coerce children and young people into sexual activities, or into sharing information and images that in the 'real world' young people would not normally share.<sup>13,14</sup> While e-safety is already being taught in most schools, e-safety should be specifically included within RSE. This is in recognition that children and young people form and maintain relationships online, including romantic relationships.<sup>15</sup>

The support for RSE is not just from charities working with children and young people, but also from parents and children themselves. Prior to campaigning for the legislation, Barnardo's conducted a poll in December 2016 with nearly 1,000 children<sup>16</sup> aged between 11-15 years old. This found the following:

- 70% of respondents said that the UK Government should make sure that all children receive sex and relationship education in school
- 74% said that all children would be safer if they had sex and relationship education suitable for their age
- 96% of children said that it's important for them to understand the risk and dangers of being online so they can stay safe
- 94% said it's important for them to understand the risk of sharing images of themselves with a stranger online
- 82% said young people would have healthier relationships if they understood why it was important to respect each other

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12 Bovarnick, S. & Scott, S. (2016) Child sexual exploitation prevention education: A rapid evidence assessment. [Online] Available at [http://www.barnardos.org.uk/cse\\_exploitation\\_education\\_rea.pdf](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/cse_exploitation_education_rea.pdf). Accessed 14.03.18.

13 Palmer, T. (2015) Digital Dangers: The impact of technology on the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people. Barkingside: Barnardo's.

14 Fox, C. & Kalkan, G. (2016) Barnardo's survey on online grooming. [Online] Available at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/barnardos-online-grooming-survey-2016.pdf>. Accessed 14.03.18.

15 Hanson, E. & McGreeney, E. (2017) Digital romance: The role of technology in young people's romantic relationships. [Online] Available at [https://www.brook.org.uk/data/DR\\_REPORT\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.brook.org.uk/data/DR_REPORT_FINAL.pdf). Accessed 14.03.18.

16 Children in the general public, not children who access Barnardo's service. Weale, S. (2017, January 11) Polls find majority of schoolchildren want sex education. The Guardian. Retrieved from [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)



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- 43% of children said they are worried about strangers contacting them when they go online
  - 25% said they had either not received lessons on RSE or that the lessons they had received were bad.

In another poll, this time with parents, 87% believed that age-appropriate lessons on RSE undertaken in July 2016, would help keep children safer. Other polls have shown that the vast majority of parents want primary schools to teach children about safe and unwanted touching, how to speak up if they are treated inappropriately and what to do if they find online images showing private body parts.<sup>17</sup> While parents want schools to deliver RSE, schools must ensure they communicate what they are teaching to parents and carers so that the messages can be discussed and reinforced at home. However, it must also be recognised that not all parents and carers are willing to discuss RSE at home, or may actually be perpetrating sexual abuse and/or domestic abuse within the household.

International and national research indicates that good quality sex and relationship education can help children and young people feel more equipped to navigate relationships, choose when to first have sex and feel more confident in their understanding around sexual consent.<sup>18</sup> Findings from a survey carried out with 2,000 young people by the Sex Education Forum in 2016 found that:<sup>19</sup>

- Half of the young people did not learn how to get help if they had been abused
- 53% did not recognise the signs of grooming for sexual exploitation
- More than 4 in 10 had not learnt about healthy or abusive relationships
- 34% had not learnt about sexual consent.

It is within this context that RSE is being introduced. Considering the need and support for RSE, and what we know from our work with children and young people, it is now vital that what is actually taught in schools, and how RSE is delivered, is shaped around the views and experiences of children and young people. We need to understand what children and young people want, in order to design RSE that they will engage with.

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17 Sex Education Forum (2014) Parents support sex and relationships education at primary school [Press release] Retrieved from <http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/policy-campaigns/parents-want-sre.aspx>

18 Sex Education Forum (2015) SRE - the evidence. [Online] Available from <http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/media/28306/SRE-the-evidence-March-2015.pdf> Accessed 14.03.18.

19 Sex Education Forum (2016) Gaps in sex and relationship education leave too many children at risk. [Press release] Retrieved from <http://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/policy-campaigns/gaps-in-sre-leave-children-at-risk.aspx>



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# Literature Review:

## Young people's views on what topics should be included in RSE and how it should be delivered

Much past research has explored what young people think RSE should be like. This literature review<sup>20</sup> is a summary of the findings of large-scale comprehensive reviews of past research, as well as past surveys undertaken with young people. It focusses on research, mainly from the UK, that has explored what topics young people would like to be included in RSE and how they would like RSE to be delivered.<sup>21</sup>

This literature review will also highlight how young people with different ages, genders, sexualities, ethnicities and faiths, as well as those with learning difficulties, have called for RSE that meets their needs and preferences. It helps us to compare our participants' views to what young people have been found to want from previous research. It will also help us to demonstrate how our own research adds to this knowledge.

### Topics young people commonly want to be taught

One of the key messages in the existing literature is that although young people want to learn about the biological side of sex and growing up they also want a holistic curriculum that goes beyond this. Young people want to learn about the social and emotional side of sex and relationships, and they want RSE to be relevant to the way young people now use technology to communicate. Past research has found young people want RSE to include:

- Relationships, body confidence, love, virginity, sexual attraction, how to respond to peer pressure, and how to treat a boyfriend or girlfriend<sup>22</sup>
- Consent, sexting, cyberbullying, online safety, sexual exploitation and sexual coercion<sup>23</sup>, a range of sexual activities (not just heterosexual intercourse), and they want RSE to challenge gender stereotypes<sup>24</sup>
- Refusal skills and how to become confident in sexual negotiation<sup>25</sup>
- Recognition of the emotions and feelings that accompany sexual activity<sup>26</sup>
- Recognition of same-sex relationships and LGBT identities.<sup>27</sup>

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20 It was conducted by searching Google Scholar in December 2017.

21 This literature review mainly focused on the views of secondary school children or older teenagers. It did not focus on the views of primary school children.

22 Brook (2011) *Sex and Relationships Education Fit for the 21st Century: We need it now*, Brook: London.

23 Pound, P., Denford, S., Shucksmith, J., Tanton, C., Johnson, A. M., Owen, J., ... & Campbell, R. (2017). What is best practice in sex and relationship education? A synthesis of evidence, including stakeholders' views. *BMJ open*, 7(5), e014791. From their consultation with 55 young people.

24 Ibid. From their qualitative synthesis of 48 studies.

25 Ibid. From their qualitative synthesis of 48 studies.

26 Ibid. From their qualitative synthesis of 48 studies and their Natsal-3 analysis of their National Survey of Sexual Attitudes.

27 Ibid. From their qualitative synthesis and Natsal-3 analysis.

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## Topics specific groups of young people want to be taught

Different groups of young people have asked for RSE to suit their own preferences and needs.

- Focus groups with LGBT young people found they wanted LGBT identities and relationships to be more visible in RSE.<sup>28</sup>
- Interviews with young people with intellectual disabilities found they wanted to learn about finding, forming and maintaining relationships. Those consulted reported having problems with these issues due to lack of experience and skills.<sup>29</sup>
- Young people with different ethnicities and faiths have reported that RSE can sometimes be culturally insensitive. Nevertheless, those consulted valued RSE because sex may not have been discussed within their families and/or because it challenged the information they received at home.<sup>30</sup>

## Who young people want to teach RSE

### **Being taught RSE by school teachers: Most young people feel it is awkward, but some students may prefer it**

It is common for young people to feel being taught RSE by a school teacher is awkward. This is because young people often feel that it is difficult to protect their confidentiality, privacy and boundaries with their teachers during RSE.<sup>31</sup>

However, not all young people feel this way. It is possible some would prefer familiar teachers to teach RSE. For example, during consultation with 55 young people, primary school pupils were more likely than senior school pupils to want RSE to be taught by a familiar teacher.<sup>32</sup>

### **Young people appreciate being taught RSE by specialist external educators**

Young people often feel more comfortable being taught RSE by someone from outside of their school, for example a specialist external visitor. They find it is less embarrassing, it provides greater confidentiality<sup>33</sup>, and it can result in a higher quality of delivery.<sup>34</sup> Young people also find being taught by peer educators less embarrassing, as they have mutually respectful relationships and a sense of affinity with them.<sup>35,36</sup>

### **Young people want RSE educators to have certain characteristics**

Young people believe that good relationship and sex educators have certain

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28 Formby, E. (2011) Sex and relationships education, sexual health, and lesbian, gay and bisexual sexual cultures: views from young people, *Sex education*, 11(3), p255-266.

29 Schaafsma, D., Kok, G., Stoffelen, J.M.T, & Curfs, L.M.G., (2007) People with intellectual disabilities talk about sexuality: implications for the development of sex education, *Sexuality and Disability*, 35(1), p21-38.

30 Pound, P., et al. (2017) op cit. From their qualitative synthesis of 48 studies.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid. From their consultation with 55 young people.

33 Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2014), *Young people, sex and relationships: the new norms*, IPPR: London. Accessed online December 2017: <https://www.ippr.org/publications/young-people-sex-and-relationships-the-new-norms> They conducted a survey with a representative sample of 500 18 year olds.

34 Pound, P. et al. (2017) op cit From their case study analysis.

35 Ibid. From their qualitative synthesis.

36 Although some young people in their qualitative synthesis felt the credibility of peer educators could be undermined by youth or lack of knowledge.

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characteristics. Good educators are:<sup>37</sup>

- Enthusiastic about teaching RSE
- Experienced and comfortable with their own sexuality
- Experienced at talking about sex and sexual health
- Confident and not embarrassed
- Straightforward and use everyday language
- Non-judgemental
- Trustworthy and able to maintain confidentiality
- Approachable
- Respectful of young people and their autonomy and treat young people as equals
- Accepting of the fact that young people may be sexually active. They have a 'sex positive' approach (with open, tolerant and progressive attitude towards sex and sexuality) and do not emphasise abstinence
- Specifically trained in RSE
- Professional
- Good at controlling the class.

## Characteristics of good RSE lessons

### Young people want timely RSE

Young people want to learn about topics at the right time. For example, young people have reported that in primary schools there is too much emphasis placed on friendships and relationships and not enough on puberty, including the physical and emotional changes people experience. This can leave pupils feeling ill prepared, as many begin to experience puberty before they reach secondary school.<sup>38</sup>

### Young people want RSE to be taught regularly

Young people often describe receiving 'too little' RSE<sup>39</sup> and some have called for refresher sessions to make sure they keep RSE messages in mind as they grow up.<sup>40</sup> However, we do not know exactly how regularly young people want to be taught RSE.

### Young people want RSE to be engaging and interactive, and to involve discussion

Young people appreciate dynamic teaching techniques such as group discussions, skills-based lessons, demonstrations and diverse activities.<sup>41</sup> Young people want to watch videos, have open or anonymous Q&A sessions, and to hear from external speakers.<sup>42</sup>

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37 Pound, P., et al. (2017) op cit From their qualitative synthesis of 48 studies.

38 Ofsted (2013). Op cit. From their inspection of 50 schools and survey of 178 young people (11-18 year olds).

39 Brook (2015) Position statement – relationships and sex education. [Online] Available at <https://www.brook.org.uk/about-brook/brook-position-statement-relationships-and-sex-education>. Accessed 14.03.18.

40 Barter, C. & Berridge, D. (eds.) (2011) *Children behaving badly?: peer violence between children and young people*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

41 Pound, P. et al. (2017) Op cit. From their qualitative synthesis of 48 studies.

42 Brook (2011) Op cit.

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Consultations with young people of different faiths have found that young people want to learn about other people's views and opinions.<sup>43</sup>

**The majority of young people want mixed-gender classes, but young women are more likely to want divided classes**

Only a minority of young people would like RSE classes to be divided by gender (33% according to Brook 2011).<sup>44</sup> However, comparing the views of different genders reveals a more mixed picture. Some studies have found that young men are more likely to want mixed classes than young women<sup>45</sup>, as girls are more likely to feel safer and more comfortable in divided classes.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusions from the literature review

In summary, past reviews and survey findings demonstrate that:

- Young people want to learn about the social and emotional sides of sex and relationships, and they want RSE to include discussions of the technology that young people now use to communicate
- Young people can find it awkward to be taught RSE by their school teachers, and may prefer to be taught by an external educator
- Young people want RSE educators to have certain characteristics – such as experience, confidence, trustworthiness, and a 'sex positive' approach
- Young people want RSE to be taught regularly – but we do not know exactly how regularly
- Young people want RSE to be timely, engaging and interactive
- Young people are not a homogenous group. Young people with different ages, genders, sexualities, ethnicities and faiths, as well as those with intellectual disabilities, have called for RSE that meets their needs and preferences.

## Gaps in past research

Although past research does show us how the views of certain groups of young people can vary, there is limited past research exploring the views and concerns of young people from specific groups, for example, young parents, those who have experience of being in care, or those with experience of domestic violence or sexual exploitation. Young people with these experiences may have valuable perspectives on what topics RSE should include and how RSE should be delivered.

We aim to add to previous research knowledge by presenting extracts from the focus group discussions we held with young people who use Barnardo's services, which we supplemented with responses from a small-scale survey.

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43 Blake, S. & Katrak, Z. (2002) *Faith, Values and Sex and Relationships Education*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

44 Brook (2011) Op cit.

45 Strange, V. et al (2003) Mixed-sex or single-sex sex education: how would young people like their sex education and why? *Gender and Education*, 15 (2) 201-214. Their survey of 3355 young people aged 15-16 found the majority of girls and about one third of boys would prefer single sex classes.

46 Pound, P. et al. (2017) Op cit. Found in their qualitative synthesis.







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# Methodology

We gathered the views of young people who use Barnardo's services through two methods:

- Five focus groups were run with 19 young people<sup>47</sup>
- A survey was completed by 37 young people

The focus groups and survey asked young people about the RSE they had received in the past and what they hope RSE will be like in the future.

The research was approved by Barnardo's Research Ethics Committee and was conducted by two researchers.

## Young people using different Barnardo's services

These young people were using the following types of Barnardo's services:

- Young parenting services
- Services for young people leaving care
- Services for LGBT young people
- Child sexual exploitation support services
- Substance abuse support services
- Domestic abuse support services
- Sex and relationship projects

Many of these young people had received support and education around sex and/or relationships from Barnardo's. This meant that their views on RSE had been shaped by the support they received at Barnardo's and other support services, as well as the education they had received at school. Our participants reflected on what they hope RSE lessons will include, based on what they had (or had not) learnt elsewhere.

## Focus group discussions<sup>48</sup>

The age of focus group participants ranged from early teens to 24. The focus groups included a mix of genders, but the majority of participants (about three quarters) were female.

The focus groups allowed young people to discuss and debate what they thought should be included in RSE, and to explain their personal views and concerns. Individuals' views varied within groups, and the young people explored different topics and shared their own learning with each other.

Using this method provided us with useful insight as to what educators should consider when designing RSE for young people who will be learning in groups of individuals with different opinions, experiences and concerns. These focus groups demonstrated how young people may want to engage in RSE discussions in school, and how some may need their concerns to be addressed before they feel able to engage.

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<sup>47</sup> A practitioner also discussed the survey questions with three young people, and sent us their views.

<sup>48</sup> We held two focus groups in LGBT support services (included two groups of three participants), one in a young parent support service (included six young people), one in a child sexual exploitation support service (included four young people), and one in a service for young people leaving care (included three young people).

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## Survey

We used a survey to supplement the insight from the focus groups. Thirty seven young people answered our survey<sup>49</sup>, which was available both online and offline. It asked young people some closed questions about what they thought RSE should be like in school, by asking them to 'agree' or 'disagree' with topics and delivery methods we suggested to them.

The survey also asked young people some open questions about what topics they would like to be included and how they would like RSE to be delivered. These open questions allowed young people to give their personal views in a way that was not constrained by closed survey questions.

Survey participants ranged from 12-25 years old, and a high proportion (15 out of 37) were between 14-15 years old. The majority of survey participants (26 out of 37) identified as female. Four survey participants identified as other than male or female.

The survey allowed us to compare the views of our small survey sample with our focus group findings.

### Limitations of our research

Our sample is small and does not represent the views of all young people with similar life experiences and characteristics.<sup>50</sup>

Our sample does not consider the views of primary school children – only teenagers and young adults, and it does not explore the views of young people with learning difficulties. It is important for policy makers and educators to consult primary school children and children with learning difficulties about what they would like RSE to look like in order to create a comfortable and engaging environment for them.

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49 This included twelve young peoples from child sexual exploitation support services, eight from LGBT support services, five from young parent support services, two from substance abuse support services, two from domestic abuse support services, three from sex and relationship projects, and five from unknown services.

50 That is, all young people using young parent, LGBT, leaving care, substance abuse, domestic abuse or child sexual exploitation support services, or sex and relationship projects.

the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are aged 65 and over has increased from 10.5 million to 13.5 million, and the number of people aged 75 and over has increased from 4.5 million to 6.5 million (Office for National Statistics 2000).

There is a growing awareness of the need to address the needs of older people, and the need to ensure that the health care system is able to meet the needs of older people. The Department of Health (2000) has set out a strategy for the health care system to meet the needs of older people. The strategy is based on the following principles:

- To ensure that older people have access to the same range of health care services as younger people.
- To ensure that older people are able to live independently for as long as possible.
- To ensure that older people are able to participate in decisions about their care.
- To ensure that older people are able to live in their own homes for as long as possible.

The strategy also sets out a number of key objectives for the health care system to meet the needs of older people. These objectives are:

- To reduce the number of older people who are admitted to hospital.
- To reduce the length of stay of older people in hospital.
- To reduce the number of older people who are admitted to care homes.
- To reduce the number of older people who are admitted to residential care.

The strategy also sets out a number of key actions for the health care system to meet the needs of older people. These actions are:

- To improve the quality of care for older people.
- To improve the safety of care for older people.
- To improve the access to care for older people.
- To improve the experience of care for older people.

The strategy also sets out a number of key indicators for the health care system to meet the needs of older people. These indicators are:

- The number of older people who are admitted to hospital.
- The length of stay of older people in hospital.
- The number of older people who are admitted to care homes.
- The number of older people who are admitted to residential care.



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# Findings

## Participants wanted to be taught about a wide range of topics

Our participants' views echoed the past literature, which found that young people want RSE to include a wide-ranging curriculum.

The majority of survey participants agreed that RSE should include all of the topics we suggested to them.<sup>51</sup> Also, many focus group and survey participants from different support services criticised their past RSE in school for not teaching them all of the topics they thought were important—specifically the topics of LGBT relationships and gender identities, abuse, assault, sexual exploitation, contraception, sexual health and consent.

### Lack of information about all types of relationships and gender identities

*Transgender invisibility, sexism, homosexual invisibility.  
(Survey participant, LGBT support service)*

*I think like, relationships, like gay relationships, should be taught throughout. But obviously sex education should be year 6/7. Like safe relationships, that relationships is any kind of relationship if you know what I mean, it's not just between a woman and a man. So from an early age.  
(Sophia<sup>52</sup>, focus group, young parent support service)*

### Lack of information on abuse and assault

*What I think should be taught is how to spot domestic violence. 'Cause there's lots of signs of domestic violence that do not get taught about... so you can spot the signs ... The control. The constantly telling you what you can and can't wear. You should learn about stuff like that, and how to spot domestic violence. And where you should go if it's happening...  
(Lukas, focus group, LGBT support service)*

*[They should teach] issues around sexual assault and where to go for support.  
(Survey participant, child sexual exploitation support service)*

### Lack of information on contraception and sexual health

When the researchers first asked focus groups what RSE they had received in the past, the majority of groups reported that learning about contraception only involved 'putting a condom on a banana'.

Participants in different services also criticised their RSE for not giving them information on how LGBT young people can have safe sex.

*You get taught to put a condom on, which he needs but I don't... Yeah, you don't get taught how to use a femidom.  
(Sami, focus group, LGBT support service)*

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<sup>51</sup> Thirty three people answered this question. The list we presented survey participants included 'healthy relationships/friendships', 'gender', 'sexuality and LGBT issues', 'pregnancy', 'birth control', 'sexual health', 'sexual consent', 'pornography', 'where to find more information on relationships and sex', 'child abuse' and 'online relationships/friendships'.

<sup>52</sup> All names used throughout this report have been changed to protect the identity of the young person.

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*I feel like they should talk about [LGBT relationships] more. It must be quite hard for 'em. You know like sexual health and going about sex, and all that. They never ever go on about that. It's always heterosexual sex. And I feel it's a bit outdated.*

*(Lena, focus group, young parent support service)*

### **Lack of information on rape and consent**

Participants wanted the topics of rape to be included in RSE, including the issue of male rape.

*Yeah, there's not much going around about girls raping boys. Because people say 'oh how can it happen?' But it can happen quite easy. It can happen, really, really easy.*

*(Lukas, focus group, LGBT support service)*

Participants believed that learning about consent would make it easier for young people to identify and report abuse. For this reason, they believed that even young children in primary school should learn about sexual consent, as well as older children.

*Sophia: Because they wouldn't have a clue what [sexual abuse] is, but if they're taught at a young age about sex and about consent and abuse and stuff like that, maybe they'll tell their parents, or maybe they'll tell someone around them, rather than bottling it up their whole life.*

*Lena: What if they're told what parts of the body is appropriate to be touched. Sort of – maybe not going into detail – but sort of if they touch an area that's not right – if they touch there that's not right. Maybe not going into detail, but to say they are their private parts and stuff like that.*

*(Focus group, young parent support service)*

Participants from different types of support services asked for topics to be taught to everyone. They wanted all young people to learn about a wide range of topics that affect young people in general.

### **Participants wanted RSE to discuss young people's use of technology**

Similar to past literature, our focus group and survey participants wanted RSE to include topics such as online safety, cyberbullying and sexting.<sup>53</sup> Our participants wanted RSE to be relevant to young people today, particularly in light of the access young people have to digital devices and social media.

Our participants were of different ages. Older participants (like those in the leaving care service, who were young adults) reflected that children today need different RSE from the RSE they needed when they were growing up – as they did not use technology to find out information and to communicate, like children do today. The group at the leaving care service believed children's use of social media can affect their self-esteem, which needs to be discussed in RSE.

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<sup>53</sup> Ofcom (2017) Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report. [Online] Available at [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/108182/children-parents-media-use-attitudes-2017.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/108182/children-parents-media-use-attitudes-2017.pdf). Accessed 14.03.18.

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Participants wanted education on online safety to include discussing the risks associated with meeting people online.

*I used to speak to someone online. And I was convinced it was my boyfriend. And I have no idea who they were. And I was in year 7. But because I hadn't been taught about anything I thought he was a friend, and at that age you just think 'yeah he can be my boyfriend'... And then now obviously I realise, and I think 'Jesus Christ what was I doing?' I was so young I just didn't have a clue. But I think it should be year 5. Because loads of kids are running around, they've got Facebook, and they don't have a clue really.  
(Sophia, focus group, young parent support service)*

Participants also wanted education on online safety to include how to avoid seeing inappropriate content online. Participants believed that having schools teach students how to judge online content could help to prevent young people becoming upset by what they see. This young person spoke about an online experience that had upset her, which she believed could have been avoided if she had been taught online safety at school.

*Because with all the new technology out, you're getting younger and younger people going online and meeting everybody else. I know because I game a lot, and I meet a lot of 9 and 10 year olds [online]...And so, technology is getting much more simple, so younger generations are learning how to get online and how to see everything. And I don't want my 3 year old baby brother [to] go through YouTube and whatnot. And I don't want my brother accidentally going on some videos ... But I think they should [be taught online safety]. I've had a horrible experience with it. Once when I was like – a year after I was introduced to the internet – I saw there were different coloured foods. And I searched into google 'blue waffles'.<sup>54</sup> And that was a horrible experience.  
(Afi, focus group, LGBT support service)*

One survey participant believed their past lessons about online safety should have acknowledged the positive aspects of the internet:

*It got tiring and boring... They made it like the internet is too bad, so they also need to talk about the good things.  
(Survey participant, child sexual exploitation support service)*

Similar to our focus group findings, the majority of survey participants believed that online safety should include all the topics we presented to them, which included 'meeting people online', 'meeting someone in person that they have met online', 'sending and receiving sexual images', and 'cyberbullying'.<sup>55</sup>

***Consideration: 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.***

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<sup>54</sup> 'Blue waffles' is a fake sexually transmitted disease that is used as 'click bait' on the internet. People use fake graphic images to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page.

<sup>55</sup> Thirty people answered this question.

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## Participants' views on what RSE should be like were based on their past experiences of RSE and how it made them feel

Many survey and focus group participants reflected on the RSE they had received in the past. They reflected on their own needs and identities at the time, whether RSE had met their needs, and how it made them feel.

### Group at LGBT support service

Survey and focus group participants who were attending our LGBT support services wanted RSE to include learning about non-heterosexual sex, relationships and identities, and homophobia. They felt marginalised when their past RSE did not include these discussions.

*Researcher: What do you think should have been included [in your RSE in the past]?*

*Sami: The whole topic of [LGBT relationships and gender identities] to be honest...*

*Lukas: I think it's just ignorance really though, because if you're not taught about it, you're not going to accept it more easily ... See, it shows people how to be ignorant. If they're not taught that homophobia is wrong, they're not taught to understand gay [people]...*

*Sami: And 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. [Not teaching about LGBT people] is just ignorance really.*

*Sami: It's really ignorant*

*Lukas: The reason they don't teach [about LGBT relationships and gender identities] – it's disrespectful to us.  
(Focus group, LGBT support service)*

### Group at child sexual exploitation support service

The focus group at the child sexual exploitation support service wanted topics such as sexual health, contraception and pregnancy to be taught to primary school students – unlike participants in the other focus groups who were more likely to believe these topics would be inappropriate for primary school students. Also, survey participants accessing child sexual exploitation support services asked for RSE to include learning about sexual exploitation and grooming, rather than these topics being a 'taboo'.

*Signs of grooming, what to do in those situations, how to keep yourself safe.  
(Survey participant, child sexual exploitation support service)*

*I think they need to teach the signs of grooming. They need to be more in-depth about the topics and have discussion and ensure they take it in. Don't act like it's 'taboo' or that it doesn't happen ...  
(Survey participant, child sexual exploitation support service)*



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### Group at young parent support service

The focus group of young parents was the most vocal about the need for schools to teach about contraceptives, as they wished they had had contraception that was more tailored to their needs.

*Medeina: I never learned [about contraception at school] ... All [my mum] did was take me and put me on the pill, and that didn't make any difference because I didn't take it. I think there should be more on contraception though. I didn't know.*

*Researcher: So this kind of information, does it come from doctors if you go to the doctors?*

*Medeina: No, my doctors didn't tell me about [the different contraception options there are]*

*Researcher: And do you think it should come from schools?*

*Medeina: It should be brought up a little in schools ... Because if they go and they talk to someone about it, they're not going to be as scared, because they'll know bits that's happening.*

*(Focus group, young parent support service)*

Participants' views on the topics RSE should include were based on their past experiences of RSE (or lack of RSE) and how it made them feel. Some felt that the RSE they had received in the past did not meet their needs at that time, or did not reflect their own personal experiences or identities.

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

### Participants also wanted RSE to discuss confidence, self-esteem, how to treat others, and personal finances

As has been found in previous research, our survey and focus group participants wanted RSE to include a holistic range of topics – including the social and emotional aspects too. Our participants not only wanted RSE to include learning about sex and healthy relationships but also about self-esteem, confidence, how to treat others, and personal finances. They also believed that many 'RSE topics' were interlinked with more general topics about growing up.

Focus group and survey participants believed that learning about sexual consent should be linked to learning about self-confidence:

*I would like to of learned about [how] to say no within relationships and being confident about doing this.*

*(Survey participant, domestic abuse service)*

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*Sami: Like, let's say a 14-year-old lass [doesn't want to have sex]. And she doesn't have the choice to say 'no', 'cause she can't be big and [confident] enough to say 'no', 'cause ... we get taught to say it but we don't have the courage to say it.*

*Lukas: They don't teach you how to say it. They just tell you 'say no', but they don't tell you how...*  
(Focus group, LGBT support service)

Focus group participants wanted RSE to include discussions of bullying, including how to treat other people:

*Aisha: Bullying [should be included in RSE]. I made that mistake once.*

*Researcher: And what about 'bullying' do you think should be taught?*

*Aisha: Not to do it. It's not nice. I've bullied people before and it weren't nice ... People bully people because of what [the bullies are] going through. I had no one to take it out on so I took it out on someone who was vulnerable. I ended up going through something, and I had no one to take it out on, so I saw someone vulnerable and took it out on them instead... They need to teach you more about [bullying], definitely.*  
(Focus group, child sexual exploitation support service)

Focus group participants also believed that learning about relationships and sex should include learning about self-esteem. For example, two participants at the support service for young people leaving care believed the impact of digital technology on children and young people needs to be discussed in RSE. They believed it affects young people's self-esteem, including body confidence.

*Tom: I feel like this vanity and this – what do you call it – 'selfie age', ought to stop. Not quite stop, but I think young people need to detach themselves from social media and be given a sense of self-esteem by something external, you know. It doesn't need to be the internet, it doesn't need to be other friends. You need to find worth in yourself.*

*Mia: You need to connect yourself to other people, is that what you're saying?*

*Tom: In a way ... [RSE] should also constitute something that can make young people appreciate themselves. You know, because ... in secondary school I had zero confidence. Back when sexual desire and appearance [was such an important] thing, I thought nothing of myself physically – throughout secondary school and for a few years afterwards. But had I known that I am special and I am unique during school ... I would have been happier, and I feel that young people nowadays could definitely do with some of that... The self-esteem thing... it is just the most important thing I feel.*

*Mia: Confidence in your body, you should be able to accept who you are. No one is trying to be too skinny, that perfect version, stuff like that.*  
(Focus group, support service for young people leaving care)

Focus group participants also wanted schools to teach topics that will help young people to become independent when they leave school and leave home.

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*I went to school and I took business studies – I thought it was going to teach me to pay my bills and that. I swear to god school teachers teach you algebra but I still don't know how to handle my bills.*

*(Sami, focus group, LGBT support service)*

*I have seen people struggling here [at the service]. We are about 20 to 25 [people here]. Most of them, we have problems. They do not know how to pay bills, [and] because of that, they are losing their house, they are losing a lot of stuff. They don't know what to do ... they don't understand fully if they don't [pay their bills] will happen next ... The consequences. They don't understand.*

*(Jakub, focus group, service for young people leaving care)*

Although the young people did not specifically request to be taught Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education, the topics they wanted schools to teach would be the type of subjects covered by PSHE. While we did not ask our participants about PSHE, our participants wanted children and young people to be taught skills to help them develop as happy, social and responsible adults.

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

## **Participants wanted to learn topics at the right time, so they feel prepared**

Focus group participants believed that topics should be taught before all children need them, and even if they are not immediately useful to all young people at that age. They thought that if a topic is only taught when it is relevant to all children, then a minority of children who develop earlier than others may feel unprepared.

Below, participants thought that the topics of first menstruation, sexual intercourse, STIs and sexting need to be discussed in schools before they are relevant to all young people.

*Because my friend was absolutely distraught and she was crying to the teachers. And they rang her mum and her mum had like never explained it [menstruation] to her. So like she didn't know what the fuck was happening. It's like something off the film Carrie. It was almost like that. She went hysterical. (Zoe, focus group, LGBT support service)*

*I had friends who started losing their virginity in year 7, and they had no idea about STDs until year 8, year 9. And they weren't aware of any of that, they just thought, 'we could get pregnant and that's the worst that could happen'. So they need to start learning about STDs and stuff like that a lot younger. (Sophia, focus group, young parent support service).*

*Talk about sending and receiving sexual images. I feel like teachers aren't comfortable talking about this. Teachers think we are not mature enough but I think it would be useful earlier.*

*(Survey participant, unknown service)*

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Participants also believed that RSE should start when children are young, and that topics should be built upon and developed as children grow, which will help them to learn and retain information.

*Tam: I think [small children] would eventually get used to [RSE] because if you did more lessons on it they could ease them into it. So they're not just dropping them in the deep end ...*

*Afi: I think they should be taught [about genitalia] in primary school as well. Because I mean kids start discovering that at 2 or 3. Have you not noticed that 2 or 3 year olds are wondering 'what's that?' ...*

*Tam: Plus the younger you are, the more – not impressionable – like the more you have the chance to understand as you get older. So, like, if you understand when you're young, then you'll be able to understand [more] when you're older, 'cause you [will be able to] take in a lot more.  
(Focus group, LGTB support service)*

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

## Participants had concerns about including certain topics in RSE

During the focus groups, participants mainly agreed that all of the topics we suggested to them should be taught in RSE. However, focus group participants also had concerns that particular topics would be inappropriate for young people to learn in the school setting, that RSE would be insensitive to some young people's religious backgrounds, or that some topics would be too 'shocking' for young children to learn about.

Focus group participants' concerns over certain topics often stemmed from the fact that they did not understand exactly how and why these topics would be taught. The extracts below show how it often helped when the researchers clarified what RSE might include.

In this example, a participant was concerned that some content could be inappropriate for young children.<sup>56</sup>

*Researcher: What age should these topics [on our list] be taught? Primary school or secondary school?*

*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 (clarifying): So they're going to start doing relationship education in primary school... so more about being nice to your friends, not bullying...*

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<sup>56</sup> Our focus group participants generally agreed that puberty, periods, consent, child abuse, non-sexual healthy relationships and friendships, and e-safety were all appropriate topics for both primary and secondary school pupils. However, some focus group participants were concerned that learning about pregnancy, contraception, sexual health, and pornography would be too 'shocking' for primary school children to learn about.

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*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  
on the list] would have to be taught in primary school...  
(Focus group, LGBT support service)*

In this example, a young person was concerned that teaching young people about the legal age of consent could be insensitive to some students' religious backgrounds. This young person misunderstood what to 'teach' young people about the age of consent means. He was initially concerned that teachers would advocate for young people to have sex at sixteen, rather than explain that it is legal for people to have sex at this age.

*Jakub: I have got a question that comes into my mind, for example, if someone asks, 'what age can I have sex?', [what will the young person be told]?*

*Researcher: Sixteen*

*Jakub: Sixteen? You see, England now, we're a cultural city – what do you call it – multi-cultural ... For example, [people from religious backgrounds are taught] they are going to have sex when they get married... The family are not going to accept [that they can have sex at sixteen].*

*Researcher (clarifying): But the government isn't going to say you have to have sex at sixteen... [young people will be taught that] if it's before you're sixteen you could be prosecuted.  
(Focus group, leaving care support service)*

There was a similar example from another young person who did not want LGBT subject matters to be 'taught' in school as "to teach, it is to say 'go on, be gay'". However, the researcher clarified that LGBT and gender identities would not be 'taught' in this way; teachers will not comment on whether young people 'should' or 'should not' be LGBT.

In this example, a young person was concerned that teaching about pornography would be inappropriate for the school setting.

*Researcher: And the last thing on our list is 'pornography'. Do you think this should be discussed at school? ...*

*Sahil: No, let them find out [themselves] ... They [will learn] about it from their mates ...*

*Lena: What do you mean by 'pornography'?*

*Researcher (clarifying): Well, not showing it ... Laws around pornography. But also being able to discuss pornography. Like whether it's 'real' [sex]. What young people see online ... So, you don't think they need to discuss it at school?*

*Hayley: [Young people's] friends will probably be trying to big it up, and [saying] that it's all this really really good stuff.*

*Sophia: And saying all this stuff about 'that's how a girl should act', when really – when actually – girls aren't confident and might just do whatever. So [young people] might just have an unrealistic view of sex.*

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*Sahil: So maybe we need to address that side of it [during RSE]. Like, it's not real.*

*(Focus group, young parent support service)*

These extracts show that young people can have different concerns, for different reasons, about the content of RSE. Their concerns may stem from the fact that they are not confident that topics will be taught in an age-appropriate way, a way that is appropriate for the schools setting, or a way that is sensitive to their religious background.

This demonstrates the importance of addressing young people's concerns before educators teach them RSE – which will help young people to engage in RSE.

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

## **Participants had mixed views about mixed-gender RSE lessons**

### **Some wanted RSE lessons to be mixed-gender**

None of the focus group participants said that 'it didn't matter' whether lessons were divided or not. Similarly, most of the survey participants had an opinion about whether to split sessions by gender.<sup>57</sup> This suggests that our sample believed the gender make-up of RSE classes affects how students engage with RSE.

In line with previous research, the majority of our survey participants said they thought RSE lessons should be mixed-gender.<sup>58</sup>

Some focus group participants also wanted RSE lessons to be mixed, and they gave many different reasons for this. They believed separating students by gender is 'artificial' and 'wrong', and they believed that teaching mixed classes will help young people to learn about the issues faced by different genders.

*I think it's wrong to separate people... I don't think they should be separated at any point. Because it's good to know on both sides – like how both function and things like that.*

*(Zoe, focus group, LGBT support service)*

*If the boys are with the girls sat in there, they'll probably engage more. And if they know about contraception for girls as well, then when they're older they can ask [their partners about it].*

*(Sophia, focus group, young parent support service)*

*[If RSE classes are divided by gender] Teaching young people who are 'gender orientated' [who are considering their subjective view of their own gender] could lead to confusion with trans students.*

*(Survey participant, child sexual exploitation support service)*

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<sup>57</sup> Thirty people answered this question.

<sup>58</sup> Thirty people answered this question.

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*Researcher: Should RSE be mixed-gender or separate?*

*Sami: Mixed-gender. Every time, mixed-gender.*

*Lukas: Because I think every man needs to learn about puberty.*

*Sami: And every girl needs to know about boys and every boy needs to learn about girls ...*

*Lukas: Teach boys about it.*

*Sami: Just put'em all in one room and teach'em.*

*(Focus group, LGBT support service)*

### **Others had concerns about mixed-gender lessons**

Some focus group and survey participants were concerned that RSE classes would be mixed-gender; they wanted them to be divided. Their concerns often stemmed from their negative experiences of sex education in school in the past. These participants wanted divided RSE lessons for similar reasons to those found in previous research, as participants believed that learning RSE in mixed-gender groups would be too embarrassing. Participants also feared that certain students would disrupt the class, or that certain topics would not be relevant to everyone.

*In sex ed, in my school, females were more mature than the males. The lads were just making up jokes and that. They were being disrespectful of the teacher ... and they think that's funny. But the lasses actually take it in a bit more.*  
*(Tam, focus group, LGBT support service)*

*Some might have questions that are uncomfortable to ask around these immature kiddy jokey guys.*  
*(Tom, focus group, leaving care support service)*

*I think doing [RSE] in same-gender [groups] is best because when the boys are learning about the girls they all giggle and when the girls are learning about the boys they don't really want to [be] in the same room because it would just make them feel awkward.*  
*(Survey participant, child sexual exploitation support service)*

*Researchers: Do you think different genders should be taught together or should be taught separately?*

*Tom: I think they should be taught separately.*

*Mia: In my opinion, it depends.*

*Tom... [Girls] might have questions that [guys] will not relate to ... . I mean girls [are] less willing to ask such questions around guys... Some might have questions that are uncomfortable to ask around these immature kiddy jokey guys.*  
*(Focus group, leaving care support service)*

*Researcher: So, what if, in RSE, they were talking about periods? Should classes be mixed*

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*Aisha: [No] that's woman stuff.  
(Focus group, child sexual exploitation support service)*

Our participants believed the gender make-up of RSE classes affects whether students engage with RSE. Our participants had different preferences and concerns, and some feared specific topics would not be relevant to all, or that mixed-gender RSE would be embarrassing or disruptive.

**Consideration: 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 wanted to receive RSE from reliable sources

Our focus group and survey participants got their RSE information from multiple sources. This included family, friends, websites, support workers, school nurses and books. One participant mentioned learning about different sexualities whilst online gaming.

*Online. So social media. This is when I'm online gaming. I meet people overseas and what not. And they explain to me what everything was, and that's how I know everything I know. And I'm still learning now actually. I've learned there's a 'pansexual'. So that's what I've learned.  
(Afi, focus group, LGBT support service)*

Focus group participants believed that it can be risky to get information from inaccurate sources.

*Researcher: and when you don't get information from school, where do young people get their information from?*

*Aisha: Internet.*

*Researcher: do you think that's a good thing?*

*Aisha: No because sometimes it lies.  
(Focus group, child sexual exploitation support service)*

Although some young people said they prefer to get information from their parents, others said they found it embarrassing to talk to their parents about sex and relationships. Some participants said their parents did not give them the information they needed, or that their schools did not teach them certain topics out of fear of upsetting parents.

*I wouldn't [talk to] parents. Because imagine if your parents are showing you [a diagram about sex], and you're like 'yeah, now I'm traumatised'.  
(Tam, focus group, LGBT support service)*

*Lukas: Because [teachers are] scared. [That's]the reason they don't teach [about LGBT relationships and gender identities] – it's disrespectful to us. But they say*



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*[not teaching about LGBT relationships and gender identities is] respectful to parents, so that their young, their children, don't learn about homosexuality.*

*Sami: It should be taught in schools as some parents don't accept it.  
(Focus group, LGBT support service)*

## **Participants felt learning RSE from a school teacher could be 'embarrassing'**

There were mixed views as to whether school teachers should teach RSE. Some participants felt that having a form tutor teach RSE could be helpful, as the form meets regularly and the teacher would be around afterwards to answer any questions.

However, previous research suggests that young people appreciate being taught RSE by external specialists, and that being taught RSE from school teachers can feel 'inappropriate'. Some focus group participants also thought this, as they believed that being taught RSE by their school teachers would feel too 'awkward'. This was also the case with our survey participants, who were more likely to want someone from outside their school to teach them RSE than someone from inside their school.<sup>59</sup>

Below is an example of a participant who would feel more comfortable learning from external educators.

*No, I think [having a school teacher teach RSE] makes it awkward. Say if someone comes in – they had a sexual health person come in – after, I [could speak] to her about something personal. But if I had something wrong I wouldn't speak to my teacher about it. I'd just feel like, uncomfortable... Maybe a sexual health person, like Barnardo's. Just not a teacher.  
(Sophia, focus group, young parent support service)*

Some participants made suggestions as to who could teach RSE, as alternatives to school teachers.

*Might be good to have young people as ambassadors to also help teach in lessons – more relatable then.  
(Survey participant, unknown service)*

*What about adults, young adults, like us, a young person who comes from a university or college, or like, who works in sexual health. They could come in for a talk.  
(Mia, focus group, leaving care support service)*

## **Participants believed the skills and characteristics of the RSE educator are important**

Some focus group and survey participants placed more value on the individual characteristics of the RSE educator than on what their job role was or whether they were from inside or outside of their school.

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<sup>59</sup> Twenty nine people answered this question.

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*It doesn't matter who's delivering it, as long as they are more experienced.  
(Survey participant, domestic abuse support service)  
Lukas: Anyone with an open mind [can teach RSE].*

*Sami: Anyone who doesn't mind talking about [sex and relationships to young people]. So they need to be certain that they're able to talk.  
(Focus group, LGBT support service)*

Focus group and survey participants explained the characteristics they believed good RSE educators should have, which were similar to those found in previous research. They wanted RSE educators to be:

- Engaging
- Experienced, knowledgeable and able to answer questions
- Confident and not embarrassed
- Open and honest
- Non-judgemental
- Approachable
- Respectful of young people
- 'Sex-positive' (with an open, tolerant and progressive attitude towards sex and sexuality)
- Suitably trained
- Able to explain things thoroughly and to check that the class has understood
- Able to discipline and control the class.

Our focus group participants believed that it was particularly important for RSE teachers to have these characteristics when discussing LGBT relationships and gender identities.

*In school like, you know how they have textbooks and everything. I was in year 7, and there were textbooks, and there was a picture of a man and woman, and someone had asked in the classroom 'what about a man and man?' And [the teacher] said 'no, it's supposed to be a man and woman'. But [I knew that's not true].  
(Zoe, focus group, LGBT support service)*

*Sami: I think it matters who talks about it. 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)*

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

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## Participants wanted RSE to be taught regularly and in enough detail

Similar to past literature, our participants wanted RSE to be taught regularly in schools. The overwhelming view amongst focus group participants was that they wanted RSE to be taught more often than once a year.

Some focus group and survey participants believed their past RSE in school was poor because they did not receive enough sessions or because their sessions did not cover topics in enough detail.

*I only had three sessions.  
(Survey participant, LGBT support service)*

*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)*

*Lessons are rushed and not in detail, i.e. topics may take 2-3 lessons but [we] completed [them] in one [session] using a worksheet.  
(Survey participant, unknown service)*

However, focus group and survey participants held mixed views about exactly how often RSE should be delivered.

In this example, focus group participants wanted RSE to be taught around once a year.

*Researcher: How often should RSE be taught?*

*Lena: I think it needs to be done more often. At least once a year. So it's not novelty ...*

*Sophia: Umm. Probably like once a year. 'Cause if it's once a month then people will be like 'oh no not this again!' 'Cause I'd get bored hearing about it all the time.  
(Focus group, young parent support service)*

In the following example, a focus group participant wanted RSE to be taught once every three months.

*Researcher: How often do you think [RSE] should be taught?*

*Aisha: Often. Not the same ... but different classes. Not the same [content and don't be repetitive], as they'll get bored.*

*Researcher: ... Would that be a 'once a year' thing?*

*Aisha: No. Once every 3 months  
(Focus group, child sexual exploitation support service)*

Our participants wanted RSE to be taught regularly, although they had mixed views about exactly how often sessions need to be run. They wanted RSE to be taught in enough depth for young people to fully understand topics. They also wanted RSE to be stimulating and to avoid repetition, to help young people stay engaged.

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

## **Participants wanted RSE to be engaging and interactive, and to involve student discussion and debate**

As has been found in previous research, our participants asked for RSE to include engaging activities, such as:

- Student discussion
- Watching videos and looking at pictures
- Learning about real-life stories
- Q&A sessions.

The majority of survey participants felt that students should have lots of discussion during RSE sessions.<sup>60</sup> Focus group participants also emphasised the importance of letting students discuss topics amongst themselves, in order to learn from each other.

*I mean, 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)*

*It should be more tactile, because younger kids are more tactile, more active. Because I'm a tactile learner. I learn by doing things. I don't just learn by sitting around listening to a teacher.  
(Lukas, focus group, LGBT support service)*

## **Our focus groups demonstrated the type of discussions that students could have during RSE**

The extracts from focus groups throughout this report show that our participants actively engaged with topics related to RSE. Our participants had different views, experiences, and levels of knowledge regarding different topics – and they were eager to share their perspectives with others. These group discussions vividly illustrate how young people may want to take part in RSE discussions in school.

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

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<sup>60</sup> Twenty nine people answered this question.





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# Conclusion

Young people want to learn about relationships and sex – two aspects of life that will have an impact on their development, safety and happiness as they grow into adults. Although our sample was small and our findings cannot be generalised to all young people from the different groups we spoke to, our research demonstrates how important it is, when designing RSE, to recognise that young people have different preferences and concerns. If educators want to design RSE that successfully engages and supports young people, it is vital to seek the views of young people themselves and to address any concerns they have.

## Considerations for practice

The following considerations are based on what our participants told us, as well as our review of past research on young people's views. They point to a RSE curriculum that is wide-ranging and all-encompassing, but is delivered in a way that is sensitive to the diversity of the student population. Children are individuals and although this should be taken into account, educators must cater for the needs of all children. Every effort should be made to ensure children do not feel marginalised or singled-out while being taught about issues that are central to their safety, well-being and emotional development.

**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 from the different Barnardo's services involved in the research thought that all young people should be taught a wide-range of subjects within RSE, ranging from child abuse to sexual consent. This should also include teaching online safety, including issues like sexting and cyberbullying.

Although it will help to consult young people about whether they have any concerns regarding their RSE curriculum, RSE must include wide-ranging topics that may not be directly relevant to all young people.

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

Participants' views on what topics RSE should include were based on their past experiences of RSE – or lack of RSE – and how it made them feel. Some felt that the RSE they had received in the past did not meet their needs at that time, or did not reflect their own experiences or identities. Educators need to be aware that young people may have personal experiences of the issues that will be discussed during RSE, so they need to consider how young people may be affected by this content.

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

Relationships and sex are an important part of a child or young person's life. Right from birth, children are developing relationships with their parents, family, friends and peers. These relationships continue when a child starts school, and can become more complicated as a young person starts having intimate, sexual relationships. However, this is only one part of a young person's life.

Our participants wanted schools to deliver sessions that can influence their own emotional and mental well-being, such as self-esteem, confidence and how to treat others. They also believed these topics were often interrelated with topics related to relationships or sex. A number of young people also wished they had received an education around personal finances. These subjects are currently recommended within a PSHE curriculum, so our findings support the call for RSE to be embedded within a PSHE programme.

We would like to see the Government make PSHE statutory, so that it becomes a vehicle to support the delivery of high quality RSE. We hope this will help raise the standards of RSE by making cross-curriculum links between PSHE and RSE, leading to a more well-rounded education for young people. By embedding RSE within PSHE, children can receive a holistic education that can help them develop into happy and responsible adults.

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

Participants believed that the RSE they had received in the past had been 'too late' for some students; they felt it should be taught at a younger age. Many noted that they, or their friends, had received education about growing up after they had experienced certain events, such as their first menstruation or sexual intercourse. They believed it is important to teach RSE at the right time. Educators should teach about these events before any young person experiences them, rather than when the majority of young people in that age-group have already experienced them.

Participants also felt that the teaching of certain topics should start when children are very young. They felt that primary school children's education should be more about relationships between peers, being kind and respectful, and understanding issues such as consent. Although participants were concerned that some topics that related to sex would not be appropriate for primary school children to learn about, they believed that it was particularly necessary for children to learn about child abuse and consent from a young age. They felt this should include educating children about 'good touch and bad touch', and where and how to ask for help.

There was a view among our participants that if a child is taught a subject when they are young then more sensitive aspects of that subject are easier to talk about when the child gets older. They felt that if they already have a foundation of knowledge on a sensitive issue, they will be more comfortable talking about that issue. They believed the education a child receives should become more advanced as the child becomes more mature, and should build upon what has already been taught. This is sometimes



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referred to as a 'spiral curriculum'.<sup>61</sup> This may also help educators feel more confident in discussing RSE as they are able to build upon the work that has already been taught instead of launching into complicated and sensitive subjects, unsure of what children already know.

**Consult young people about whether they have concerns regarding the topics they will be taught, so their concerns can be addressed. It may be necessary for educators to communicate to young people that topics will be taught in an age-appropriate and sensitive way.**

Our participants had different concerns about the topics that may be covered in RSE, including those delivered in primary school. Their concerns stemmed from the fact that they were not confident that these topics will be taught in an age-appropriate and sensitive way.

Children and young people should be consulted before topics are delivered to them, but it should not affect what is going to be taught. Consulting children and young people before delivering RSE should aim to ensure that the young people know what they will be taught. It will also provide the opportunity for the educator to address any concerns children and young people may have. It is particularly relevant to address the concerns of young people if the content of a session could potentially be upsetting to them or might make them feel uncomfortable. This consultation can also help educators assess the level of knowledge the children and young people already have, and whether any of those in the class would like to contribute to the session.

**Consult young people about whether they have concerns regarding mixed-gender RSE classes, so their concerns can be addressed.**

Many participants felt that RSE should be taught in mixed-gender classes, and that everyone should learn about puberty and aspects of growing up that affect different genders. Additionally, participants felt that by teaching all children and young people in a mixed-gender group, this can help young people who do not identify as a specific gender to feel comfortable.

However, others had concerns about mixed-gender classes. Some participants thought that certain topics are 'not relevant to boys' or 'not relevant to girls', and some thought that boys are 'too immature' to have RSE lessons in mixed-gender groups.

At the same time as talking to children and young people about the topics that will be delivered, educator can also talk to the young people about how they want RSE to be taught. Some young people may not feel comfortable discussing personal issues in a mixed-gender group. Educators can acknowledge this while consulting young people, and sessions can be developed based on the outcome of the discussion. If sessions are broken into single-gender groups, then ensure that everyone is taught the same content. This may help children to feel more comfortable but will also enable them to get the information they need on issues that affect different genders.

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<sup>61</sup> A spiral curriculum can be defined as a course of study in which students will see the same topics throughout their school career, with each encounter increasing in complexity and reinforcing previous learning. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/spiral-curriculum-definition-example.html> (accessed January 2018)

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

Who teaches children and young people, particularly at secondary school, was discussed widely with our participants. They believed that the skills and characteristics of an RSE educator are paramount. The characteristics that they particularly valued, which were similar to those found in previous research, included being open-minded, knowledgeable, confident, having personal experiences of issues, and having a 'sex positive' approach (with open, tolerant and progressive attitude towards sex and sexuality).

There was no consensus between our participants as to whether RSE should be taught by school teachers or from someone outside of their school. Some felt that having a form tutor teach RSE could be helpful, as the form meets regularly and the teacher would be around afterwards to answer any questions. However, others thought being taught by their teacher would be 'embarrassing'. These participants wanted RSE to be taught by someone else, and they believed that they would feel more comfortable asking external educators questions, than they would feel asking school teachers.

If RSE is to be taught from a young age, then elements of RSE could be taught by teachers within the school, such as a PSHE teacher. We hope this will make it easier for schools to make RSE regular and embedded. Embedding the subject within any school helps make the subject part of a whole school approach,<sup>62</sup> where all staff within the school are able to respond to basic issues relating to relationships and sex, particularly if a child discloses a concern to them.

Other aspects of RSE – for example more 'embarrassing' or 'sensitive' topics – could be taught by specialist external educators, who are not school teachers. External educators may also be better placed to deliver more complex or potentially upsetting subjects, such as sexual exploitation or the negative effects of pornography. Young people may also find it less embarrassing to learn certain topics from external educators than they would from school teachers. Therefore, having a combination of school teachers and qualified external educators could help ensure that children receive information that is appropriate and engaging.

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

Participants wanted RSE to be taught regularly – although their opinions on how regular varied greatly. Some felt once a year would be good, while others thought being taught for a few minutes during their regular form class would be better. They all agreed that RSE should be taught more regularly than they were taught at school – if it was taught at all. Many participants said they only received one RSE lesson, usually in year 7 or 8, which only covered puberty and how to use a condom. They believed that RSE needs to be taught more often in order for young people to be able to fully understand topics and to remember what they learn. Participants believed lessons should be stimulating and should avoid repetition in order to keep young people engaged.

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<sup>62</sup> A whole school approach is cohesive, collective and collaboration action in and by a school community that has been strategically constructed to improve learning, behaviour and wellbeing, and the conditions that support these. Government of Western Australia Department of Education (2009) Whole school approach. [Online] Available at <http://det.wa.edu.au/policies/detcms/policy-planning-and-accountability/policies-framework/definitions/whole-school-approach.en> Accessed 14.03.18.

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RSE could be incorporated into regular teaching, starting in the first year of primary school. If RSE is regular, schools will no longer have dedicated days to teaching the subject, but can deliver it in smaller time-slots.

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

Participants wanted RSE to be interactive. Our focus group discussions were engaging, informative and clearly showed how interested young people can be in the range of topics that make up RSE.

Participants shared their views and knowledge with each other. This could also happen in schools. Educators could develop lessons that not only provide facts but also allow time for group discussions, debates, peer-learning, and questions. By having such conversations in schools, the educator can help clarify issues that young people are uncertain about, verify facts and do ‘myth busting’.

From our research, we know that children get their RSE information from various sources. We believe that young people should learn RSE from different places (particularly from parents and carers), but RSE in schools can provide consistent, sound advice while giving children the space to ask questions in a safe environment.



**Many thanks to the services who took part in the research, colleagues for reviewing the work, but most importantly to the young people who spent time telling us their thoughts and opinions.**

**Involve us, respect us:**

Engaging young people  
in relationships and sex education

Fox, C & Le Blanc, O

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Barnardo House, Tanners Lane, Barkingside,  
Ilford, Essex IG6 1QG Tel: 020 8550 8822

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