

# The digital environment is fundamental to today's sex education: nearly two decades-old sex and relationship education will be updated, finally!



The Department for Education's [consultation](#) on changes to teaching on sex and relationship education and Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) recently closed. LSE's [Professor Sonia Livingstone](#) and MSc Media Communications Governance student DaYoung Yoo give their view on what the Department should do as it considers how to improve PSHE, arguing that the digital must be a dimension of all teaching.

The Department for Education is [consulting](#) on how to amend the Sex and Relationship guidance to schools. After much [argumentation](#) and campaigning, [the Children and Social Work Act 2017](#) now requires the Secretary of State for Education to establish Relationship Education as a mandatory subject in all primary schools and [Relationship and Sex Education \(RSE\)](#) as a compulsory subject in all secondary schools, whilst ensuring parents' right to withdraw their child(ren) from the sex education within RSE. Under the Act, the Secretary of State also has the power to mandate [Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education \(PSHE\)](#), or elements of the subject, in all schools.

RSE has not been formally revised since 2000, and [this decision](#) recognises that today children are growing up in a world where *the internet* affords both opportunities and risks. So the Department for Education's [consultation survey questionnaire](#) states that it is:

*"particularly interested in understanding ... views on Relationships Education and RSE which are specific to the digital context".*

We strongly support the Department's decision to make RSE compulsory and to address the new challenges posed by digital media. Informed by our recent evidence reviews (on gender-based violence [here](#), on sexual risks and rights [here](#), and on children's online risks [here](#)), we argue that *schools* play a crucial role in educating children about relationship and sex because:

- Parents rely on schools to teach about such matters (both sexual and digital), since they [find it difficult to do it on their own](#) and they specifically [prefer schools](#) to teach internet safety;
- RSE should be state-mandated to ensure that it reaches all children equally; otherwise, it is precisely [the vulnerable \(or 'hard-to reach'\) kids](#) who most need it who may miss out.

We also urge that sex education should begin *earlier* than 11, given that [emerging problems](#) such as [online grooming](#), [sexting](#) and [cyberbullying](#) now affect younger as well as older children as children gain [personalised internet access](#) at ever younger ages. Despite a minimum age of 13, more than half of 11 year-olds and 12 year-olds ([62% and 69% respectively](#)) have a Facebook profile (not to mention the [many other social media platforms](#), often with sexual content and contact that parents may not know about). Research shows that 40% of children [remove privacy settings to attract more friends or followers](#).

More importantly, we assert that the digital must be a dimension of *all* teaching since the risks on digital platforms are increasingly present in children's lives, including when they are learning or seeking information. Such teaching should develop children's [digital resilience, including their critical ability and technical competency](#) rather than taking a predominantly [restrictive approach](#) to online safety (which, too often, results in children becoming secretive about the ['forbidden fruit'](#) adults warn them of).

Digital literacy is essential for children to participate and make informed decisions in the digital world. The Lords Select Committee on Communications emphasises in its [2017 report](#) that

*"schools should teach online responsibilities, social norms and risks as part of mandatory PSHE education."*

We propose these specific topics and issues as vital:

- **RSE and (or) PSHE should recognise and address gender differences.** Girls appear to be [more vulnerable](#) to technologically mediated harassment than boys, building on the cultural assumption "girls and young women's bodies are somehow the property of boys and young men" as [the NSPCC suggests](#), with ["gendered patterns"](#) of pressure and coercion, everyday sexism and the existence of a gendered double standard" operating both online and offline. The sexual conformity and image pressures on boys, too, should be addressed, as should associated problems of [anorexia](#) and [mental health](#), as should the [risk of illegal activities](#).
- **Beyond addressing the risk of harm, PSE and/or PSHE must include strategies for prevention [or coping](#)** in the digital environment, and so [fostering healthy and respectful relationships](#). All such teaching must be ["developmentally appropriate"](#) but the importance of consent can and must be prioritised from the start. This can, even in relation to sexual consent, be broached among [very young children](#) as well as [older ones](#) with wit and sensitivity. Given the [exposure of children](#) to online pornography, [teaching "pornography literacy"](#) is also important.
- **Parents and carers should also be provided with sufficient information about positive and negative aspects of the digital world.** This must include consideration of children's sex and relationship issues and possible solutions. Parents' informed [engagement in their children's digital lives is imperative](#). The majority of parents of children ranging from pre-schoolers to teens [are willing to learn more](#) about how to keep their children safe and supported online.
- **Personal data protection and privacy should be included in both RSE and PSHE.** This is vital so children can protect their personal data and privacy and [avoid risks related to inappropriate sharing](#). It is also necessary to educate children about [the commercial use of their personal data and privacy](#): now that ['data is the new oil'](#), they must understand the business model behind so-called 'free' internet services, as well as how to exercise their rights in relation to [the General Data Protection Regulation](#) which will take effect from May.
- **The relation between RSE/PSHE and a broader media education is also vital.** In relation to the media environment, children need not only (sexual) relationships education but also [media literacy](#) since the digital world (including its harms) is *constituted* of the images, messages, forms of persuasion and networked communication that [media education](#) teaches children to understand and critique. Media education can also teach about positive alternative [forms of representation](#), enlisting children's creativity and motivation, in changing the dominant and often oppressive, misleading, or child-unfriendly media culture.
- **If schools are not part of the solution they may be part of the problem** – given the evidence of [sexual harassment](#) and [bullying or cyberbullying](#), among other problems, in schools. Teaching RSE and PSHE should be embedded in structural and normative actions taken to improve schools as safe, respectful and [gender-sensitive](#) places that support human flourishing and dignity (as particularly advocated by a [rights-based approach](#) to the school community).

In suggesting these improvements, it is striking that we have drawn on evidence of problems, including online risks, but we found little evidence of what works. Specifically, there has been lack of UK independent evaluation of existing and prior initiatives. It has [recently been noted](#) that the Office for Standards in Education's (Ofsted) inspection regime has "fatally neglected" RSE. Yet at a time of fast-changing digital pressures and problems, updated knowledge of effective educational strategies is crucial.

[Almost three-quarters of pupils](#) say they would "be safer if they had age-appropriate RSE in school". We agree, and urge that the process of building up children's sense of security and reinforcing their confidence and competence in utilising digital media to interact with others and building relationships must begin as early as they begin forming relationships and using the internet.

*This text was originally published on the [Media Policy Project Blog](#) and has been re-posted with permission.*

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