

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION: MINI INQUIRY INTO RSE

Response from Northern Ireland Humanists,
October 2024



ABOUT NORTHERN IRELAND HUMANISTS

Northern Ireland Humanists is part of Humanists UK. At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted to promote humanism by 130,000 members and supporters and around 100 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

4. The Committee for Education would like your permission to publish your response as part of the survey results. Please indicate your preference.

Publish response.

6. Do you know what is meant by the term Relationship and Sex Education?

Yes.

8. PRIMARY SCHOOL: Do you think these topics should be:

Mandatory.

9. PRIMARY SCHOOL: Do you think these topics should be taught in a way which is age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate?

Yes.

10. SECONDARY SCHOOL: Do you think these topics should be:

Mandatory.

11. SECONDARY SCHOOL: Do you think these topics should be taught in a way which is age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate?

Yes.

25. Do you believe that parents should be able to opt out of their children being taught RSE in schools?

No.



26. Do you believe there is a safeguarding risk for pupils who are withdrawn from Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)?

Yes.

28. The UK Government then made compulsory in the NI curriculum scientifically accurate, age appropriate and comprehensive Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) including prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion. Do you agree that this should be compulsory?

Yes.

29. The Department provided for parents to withdraw their child from this “compulsory” component. Do you agree that there should be a right to withdraw from this specific component?

No.

31. Do you believe consent education is an important element of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) ? If so, why?

Yes.

We strongly believe that every child should be entitled to relationship and sexuality education (RSE) that will keep them healthy, happy, and safe regardless of their background or the type of school they attend. Consent education is important for teaching young people about boundaries and healthy relationships, and for preventing sexual harassment and relationship abuse. It can help people make informed choices about their sexual health and relationships, and understand how to show respect and communicate boundaries. An education in consent is a vital part of RSE, and this is why we welcomed its inclusion as a compulsory element in RSE in 2022.¹

There are many benefits of consent education which we have outlined below:

- **Awareness and understanding:** Consent education helps individuals recognise what consent actually means, emphasising that it must be clear, enthusiastic, and ongoing. This understanding challenges misconceptions and harmful stereotypes about relationships.
- **Empowerment:** By teaching individuals about their rights to make choices about their bodies and relationships, consent education empowers both women and girls to assert their boundaries and advocate for themselves.

¹ Humanists UK (2022), ‘Lessons on abortion, contraception, and consent to become compulsory in Northern Ireland’, <https://humanists.uk/2023/06/07/lessons-on-abortion-contraception-and-consent-to-become-compulsory-in-northern-ireland/>



- **Cultural change:** By promoting conversations about consent and healthy relationships, consent education can contribute to shifting societal norms that often perpetuate violence against women and girls. This cultural change is essential for long-term prevention.

Effective consent education should be inclusive, addressing diverse experiences related to gender, sexuality, and cultural backgrounds. This makes sure that all individuals understand and respect consent in various contexts. There should also be no provision for a parent to withdraw their child.

Overall, consent education is vital for promoting a culture of respect and equality.

32. Would you be concerned if consent education was not part of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)?

Yes.

33. What role do you believe consent education can play in ending violence against women and girls?

Consent education can play a significant role in ending violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the following ways:

- **Preventing violence:** Comprehensive consent education can reduce the incidence of sexual violence by instilling respect for personal boundaries from an early age. It encourages people to engage in healthy relationships and to communicate openly about desires and limits.
- **Promoting confidence to intervene:** Education can equip individuals with the skills to intervene when they witness potentially harmful situations, fostering a culture that actively discourages violence.
- **Supporting survivors:** Consent education can also address the stigma surrounding victims of violence, encouraging a supportive environment that validates their experiences and promotes healing.

Quality relationships and sexuality education based on consent and equality is a crucial part of preventing VAWG and gives young people the knowledge and skills to navigate romantic relationships in a healthy and respectful way. For these reasons we support the compulsory teaching of consent education as part of an unbiased, evidence-led RSE and believe there should be no provision for a parent to withdraw their child.

34. Do you think there is a need for reform of RSE here?

Yes.

35. If yes, please share your ideas with us.

The principal purpose of RSE is to prepare children and young people to have healthy, happy, and safe relationships as children, as adolescents, and later as adults. If they are to be prepared,



therefore, they must be introduced to a whole range of concepts, issues, and information before they encounter them. Failing to do that can only serve to limit the benefits of RSE, and may well put children at risk. There is overwhelming evidence that by giving them the support, skills and knowledge they need to navigate the world they live in, quality RSE helps protect children's rights and freedoms to a childhood free from abuse. Independent research from a wide range of academic sources in the UK and further afield found that young people who receive RSE are: more likely to seek help or speak out; to practise safe sex and have improved health outcomes; and to have consented to first sex. Young people were also found to be more likely to have an understanding of digital safety in regard to relationships and sex; be more knowledgeable and aware of discrimination, gender equity and sexual rights; and be less likely to be a victim or perpetrator of sexual violence.² We therefore believe that RSE should be taught in an unbiased, standardised, and evidence-led manner, and with no provision for parents to request withdrawing their child. By making sure that the subject is inclusive, evidence-based, and age-appropriate, we are not only preparing our youth for the realities of life but also fostering a society that values respect and informed consent.

The religious ethos of a school or religious background of a pupil and their family more generally should not deprive children of their entitlement to comprehensive, evidence-based, and age-appropriate teaching in this area. While RSE is compulsory and schools have 'statutory responsibility to deliver the minimum curriculum content', the Department of Education also states that they 'have autonomy over when, how and who is involved in curriculum delivery, aligned with the ethos of the school'.³ On this basis, issues such as abortion and LGBT rights may be considered from a religious perspective, with teachers allowed to discuss and comment on the 'moral, ethical or spiritual issues' which may arise in relation to matters taught in RSE. Given that almost all schools in Northern Ireland are religious in nature, this poses a significant barrier and many children will continue to receive a faith-based RSE. We urge the Northern Ireland Executive to remove this provision and make sure RSE is unbiased and evidence-led. Only then will the subject be able to truly ensure that every child is able to grow up healthy, happy, and above all, safe.

For more details, information, and evidence, contact Northern Ireland Humanists:

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² Sex Education Forum (2022), 'Relationships and Sex Education: The Evidence', <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/RSE%20The%20Evidence%20-%20One%20page%20summary.pdf>

³ Department for Education (2024), 'Guidance on amendments to the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Curriculum Content', <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Circular%202024-1%20-%20Guidance%20on%20Amendments%20to%20the%20Relationships%20and%20Sexuality%20Education.pdf>

