

Proposed sex education guidance in England goes against evidence and may well lead to harm

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The UK government has released [new plans](#) for relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) in primary and secondary schools in England. This would see age parameters introduced for key issues in sex education, with no education on sex at all for children under the age of 9.

A [consultation on these plans](#) has been launched. If adopted, this [guidance](#) will diminish years of progress in how young people are educated about sex and relationships—education that keeps them safe. The recommendations set out in the policy are in direct conflict with many years of research in this area of education.

The age limits in the [new draft guidance](#) set out that puberty should not be taught before year four, when pupils are aged 8 and 9. Sex education, which should be in line with what children learn in science about conception and birth—the "factual description of conception in the science curriculum"—shouldn't be taught before year five, when children are 9 and 10.

Issues regarding sexual harassment shouldn't be taught before year seven—the first year of secondary school, when children are 11 and 12. No direct references to suicide should be taught before year eight. No explicit discussion of sexual acts should take place before year nine, when children are aged 13 and 14.

Having strict parameters around the ages children can be taught specific information will restrict teachers from delivering potentially crucial education adapted to their pupils' needs.

For instance, puberty may start any time from [8 years old](#) with some

young people starting their periods at 9. Before this happens, incremental education to prepare children needs to have taken place.

The guidance states that there can be flexibility on what is taught at what age if there is a safeguarding risk to children—for instance, if pornographic material is circulating among children at a primary school.

But the problem is that children and young people may be experiencing something like this without the school knowing about it. Research with teenagers found that just 2% reported receiving an unwanted sexual image to their school.

A [NSPCC survey](#) found that one in 25 [primary school](#) children had been shown or sent a naked or semi-naked image by an adult. That's the equivalent of one child in every class. But under this guidance, children wouldn't learn about specifically [sexual harassment](#) like this until they are in secondary school.

[A survey](#) by the Children's Commissioner for England found that 10% of children had seen pornography by age 9, and the average age children see pornography is age 13. This means many children will have seen footage of sexual acts before the age their school would be permitted to teach them about this.

[Research has found](#) that women who received inadequate [sex education](#) as children were more likely to have experienced childhood sexual abuse. And [evidence suggests](#) that children who have received education aimed at preventing sexual abuse may more likely to tell an adult if they experience abuse.

A [great deal](#) of [research](#) also tells us that young people are more likely to delay sex the more information that they have about it.

What's more, there are clear conflicts between what the new draft guidance includes and what children and young people consistently say they want and need.

What young people want

I [carried out research](#) with children and young people to hear their views on sex and relationships education—research that the Department of Education wanted and welcomed, to help inform this draft guidance. The young people said they wanted more, not less, RSHE.

They stated that the education they already receive is too little, too late and that they are being taught things they already know. They want safe spaces to talk about the issues that surround them.

My [findings](#) echo a [plethora of research in this area](#) about [what is needed](#) in RSHE. Children and young people need more, better sex education to inform them and keep them safe.

The draft guidance also states that while young people should learn the law about gender reassignment, "schools should not teach about the broader concept of gender identity." The result of this will be that young people receive less information about LGBTQ+ identities.

Again, this conflicts with what young people say they want from RSHE. Young people say that they want a [more diverse](#) RSHE education that encompasses differing [identities and LGBTQ+ knowledge](#).

[Research has found](#) that all young people benefit from [inclusive RSHE](#): comprehensive sex education improves the school environment for all students, making it welcoming and creating a better environment for learning.

Teaching RSHE is a challenge. It throws up moral issues that teachers may feel uncomfortable with, often as a result of our society's perceptions about sexual development and what children should know about sex. This means that teaching staff and schools need more evidence-based training and resources on how to teach about sex and relationships, not guidance that may leave them fearful about doing or saying the wrong thing.

The new proposals conflict with many years of robust evidence in this field. In my view these guidelines are naive when considering access to the internet and current social contexts. When considering the wealth of evidence in the field they are nothing short of dangerous. This guidance poses a serious risk to the psychological and physical health and well-being of children and [young people](#).

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