

Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) Education Teaching Guidance Consultation



May 2024

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Background

Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood Teaching Guidance Consultation

Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education is an integral part of the health and wellbeing area of the school curriculum in Scotland. This aspect of the curriculum is intended to enable children and young people to build positive relationships as they grow older and should be presented in an objective, balanced and sensitive manner within a framework of sound values and an awareness of the law. Learning about RSHP education begins early on in primary school and continues right up to S4-S6. Schools will equip young people with information on a wide range of issues, depending on their age and stage. Children and young people will be encouraged to discuss these subjects with their peers and parents and carers, to help them gain the knowledge and the skills to become confident in making healthy lifestyle decisions for themselves. It is for schools to decide how they deliver RSHP education, based on the needs of the children or young people in their classroom.

Teaching guidance has been published since 2001 on the conduct of teaching RSHP education. The most current version was published in 2014 and has been recommended for review. The revised RSHP teaching guidance has been in development for some time and is now ready to go out for formal public consultation.

As part of the development process, subgroups were convened to support development of specific guidance which would be the central strands of the revised RSHP teaching guidance. For the consent and healthy relationships section in particular, a young person from the Scottish Youth Parliament contributed to the development of that section. Drafts of the sections and the teaching guidance were also shared with representative organisations such as the Scottish Youth Parliament and LGBT Youth Scotland, giving them the opportunity to further input in development of the revised teaching guidance. The revisions to the guidance have also taken account of the broader views offered by children and young people, including through inputs to the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee's investigation into personal and social education (PSE), targeted engagement by Young Scot as part of that PSE review, and the findings of a Scottish Youth Parliament investigation into PSE.

While the guidance is primarily aimed at teachers, it is freely available and can be viewed by parents and carers as well as children and young people.

As the critical stakeholders in RSHP education, the voice of children and young people must be one of the central components of the consultation process alongside those of parents and carers and teachers, particularly in ensuring the revisions address the issues highlighted through young people's engagement to date.

The consultation asks 12 questions on the revised teaching guidance ranging from the key learning priorities to rights to withdrawal.

Scottish Youth Parliament and Young Scot Proposal

To support the engagement of young people in this consultation, The Scottish Youth Parliament and Young Scot undertook engagement with young people, aged 11-18, to share their views on how RSHP should be delivered in education settings. Details of this can be seen in the Project Delivery section of this report.

Project Delivery

To support the engagement of young people in this consultation, The Scottish Youth Parliament and Young Scot undertook engagement with young people, aged 11-18, to share their views on how RSHP should be delivered in education settings. We delivered this in two ways:

- Delivery of a **consultation survey**, aligned to the wider Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) Education Teaching Guidance Consultation, focused on broad information gathering. This activity was led by Young Scot, supported by Scottish Youth Parliament.
- Facilitation of **in-person focus groups**. This work engaged smaller cohorts of young people and provided opportunities for gathering more in-depth input and exploring some of the questions and emerging themes in more detail. This approach was a change from the original plan due to adverse weather conditions in autumn 2023, which led to the cancellation of the first planned discussion day. Instead, focus groups with different demographic and geographical groups of young people across Scotland aimed at gathering young people's views to provide more in-depth responses to the consultation survey questions. This activity was led by Scottish Youth Parliament, supported by Young Scot.


Given the sensitive nature of some of the subject matter, we considered an age-appropriate approach to the design and delivery of all activity including the themes discussed, how the survey and sessions will be run and the mixing of age-ranges as part of participation activity.

In keeping with the values of each partner organisation, this engagement had a strong focus on ensuing participation was meaningful and provided a positive experience for participating young people.

In order to ensure the consultation process heard from as representative a group of young people as possible, we aimed to engage with at least 300 young people through the survey and focus group activities. We also sought to include a diverse group of young people, striving to include marginalised and seldom heard voices from across broad geographical and demographic communities. In total, we engaged with 321 young people through online survey activities and 49 young people at in-person focus groups.

We engaged young people, through the survey activity and focus group sessions, around the five key sections contained in the revised teaching guidance that will be subject to public consultation. These sections are:

- **Introduction** - explains the guidance applies to everyone delivering RSHP education to young people in Scotland. Explains the need for delivery of RSHP education to be done in a way that encompasses Getting It Right For Every Child as well as reflecting the wider agenda to progressing children's rights in Scotland.
- **RSHP Education** - explains the role of RSHP education within Curriculum for Excellence and sets out expectations of how schools should engage with parents and carers and pupils when developing RSHP content. Explains rights around withdrawal from RSHP lessons, as well as factors that should be considered by both schools and parents when making such decisions.
- **Embedding RSHP education** - sets out the role of RSHP in ensuring the whole school community is welcoming, respectful and inclusive. Highlights particular issues that schools may need to consider in relation to five specific topics when applying a whole school approach: Consent and Healthy Relationships; Faith and Belief; Gender Inclusive Education; Inclusion of understanding about Variations in Sex Characteristics. Differences in Sex Development (DSD) or Intersex; and, LGBT Inclusive Education.
- **Summary of Key Learning Points** - sets out key messages from across the guidance.
- **Policy, Guidance and Resources** - sets out further information on policy, guidance and resources that may sit within RSHP education is included in this guidance.



We wanted to make it very clear that, in line with Scottish Government approaches, our work to support young people’s engagement around the consultation would not be focused on views on the content of RSHP education, but rather whether the teaching guidance provides a sufficient framework to ensure they receive the learning in RSHP education that they seek. Put simply: not the “what” but the “how”.

Overall, our approach to this engagement focused on gathering views of young people on the revised teaching guidance that demonstrates:

- How they think it will help them learn about healthy relationships and personal resilience, including how they or their parents/carers may withdraw from learning should they decide it is not appropriate.
- How they think it will help them learn within a Whole School Approach that focusses on the five key areas contained in the revised guidance; and,
- How they think it will support their teacher to ensure they benefit from the key learning points the revised teaching guidance contains.

Following inception meetings between both partner organisation and The Scottish Government in September 2023, a plan and timeline was created for delivery.

As stated above, Young Scot led on the creation and delivery of the consultation survey and Scottish Youth Parliament led on the in-person consultation activity.

Consultation Survey

Activity and Delivery

Young Scot worked to draft and refine the young people focused consultation survey. This was aligned to the wider Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) Education Teaching Guidance Consultation being delivered by Scottish Government but with a specific focus on presenting it in an engaging, accessible and young people friendly way.

The survey, hosted online, launched on 15th November 2023 and ran until 19th February 2024. It was promoted to young people and via Young Scot and Scottish Youth Parliament channels, including via social media, Young Scot's Membership Platform, and across Young Scot volunteer networks.

The survey received 321 responses.

Survey Content Overview

The survey included the following themes and questions, agreed in advance, to cover the key elements of the consultation. Full details can be seen in the survey findings.

Consent and healthy relationships.

Q: Does this guidance ensure that children and young people will be informed about the most important issues around online consent - including sharing images online and the laws about this?

Q: Would you like to tell us more about how schools could ensure children and young people are prepared to use social media safely, and what to do if they have negative experience for online threats?

Q: Look at the slide from this lesson on consent (aimed at children in p5-7). Is this slide clear on what consent means for children and young people?



Q: Do you have any other thoughts about the guidance teachers should receive about teaching consent?

Inclusive Education

Q: Will this new guidance make RSHP education more inclusive for LGBT young people?


- Yes
- No
- Don't know / not sure

Q: Would you like to tell us more about how you think schools can provide an environment where LGBT young people feel included in what they learn about in RSHP?

Homophobia is about having a negative attitude or behaviour towards someone just because they are lesbian or gay.

Biphobia is about having a negative attitude or behaviour towards someone just because they are bisexual.

Homophobia and biphobia can include horrible language or



The image above is taken from a lesson plan on homophobic bullying aimed at pupils in S1, S2 and S3. It is here as an example of the kind of learning material schools will use to teach about homophobic bullying.

Q: Will this kind of teaching reduce homophobic bullying?

Q: Would you like to tell us more about your answer?

The Right to RSHP Education

Q: Do you think this guidance is clear about a parent or carers right to withdraw their child or young person from RSHP education?

Q: Would you like to tell us more about your answer?

About You (demographic information)

Our final set of questions were about who respondents are. This help us understand the needs of different groups of people who are answering the survey. All questions included an “I prefer not to say” option for those would not like to respond and all data is anonymous.

Q: How old are you?

Q: Which Local Authority do you live in?

Q: We are interested in finding out if people living in different areas have different experiences. Providing your postcode helps us know what area you live in. This will only be used to help us compare responses from different types of areas, we will not share information on your postcode in our reports. This question is optional and will allow us to find out more about the areas of Scotland that we are reaching by analysing against existing data. You will remain anonymous at all times.

Q: Do you identify as...? (gender), multiple options

Q: Do you have experience of being in care? multiple options

Q: Do you have experience of being a young carer? multiple options

Q: Do you have experience of being a young carer? multiple options

Q: Do you consider yourself to be disabled, or to have a long-term health condition? (This includes mental and physical health conditions, as well as neurodivergence). multiple options

Q: What is your ethnicity? multiple options

Survey Key Findings

Summary

Responses to the survey were received from young people in every local authority in Scotland and across the age range of 11 - 25. The majority of respondents - 66% - were aged 18 and under.

10% of respondents reported having care experience. 32% had experienced being a young carer. 27% considered themselves to be disabled or to have a long-term health condition (including neurodiversity).

The majority (68%) of respondents were White/ White Scottish / White British, with Asian / Asian Scottish / Asian British and White Other both the second most commonly selected at 5%.

71% of those responding to the survey agreed that the revised guidance ensured that children and young people would be informed about the most important issues around online consent. However, 21% were unsure. Comments received in this section highlighted themes including how to teach this material and the need to include information on social media consent at a younger age.

87% of respondents felt that the material on consent was clear. 61% of respondents felt that the new guidance would make RSHP education more LGBT-inclusive. However, 32% were unsure - reflecting concerns about broader inclusion and the potential for education to impact on this.

35% were unsure about the potential for RSHP education to reduce homophobic bullying - again reflecting the concern that while materials and guidance are trying to address this issue, there are limitations to how much change education can create in an area where there is such a significant societal concern.

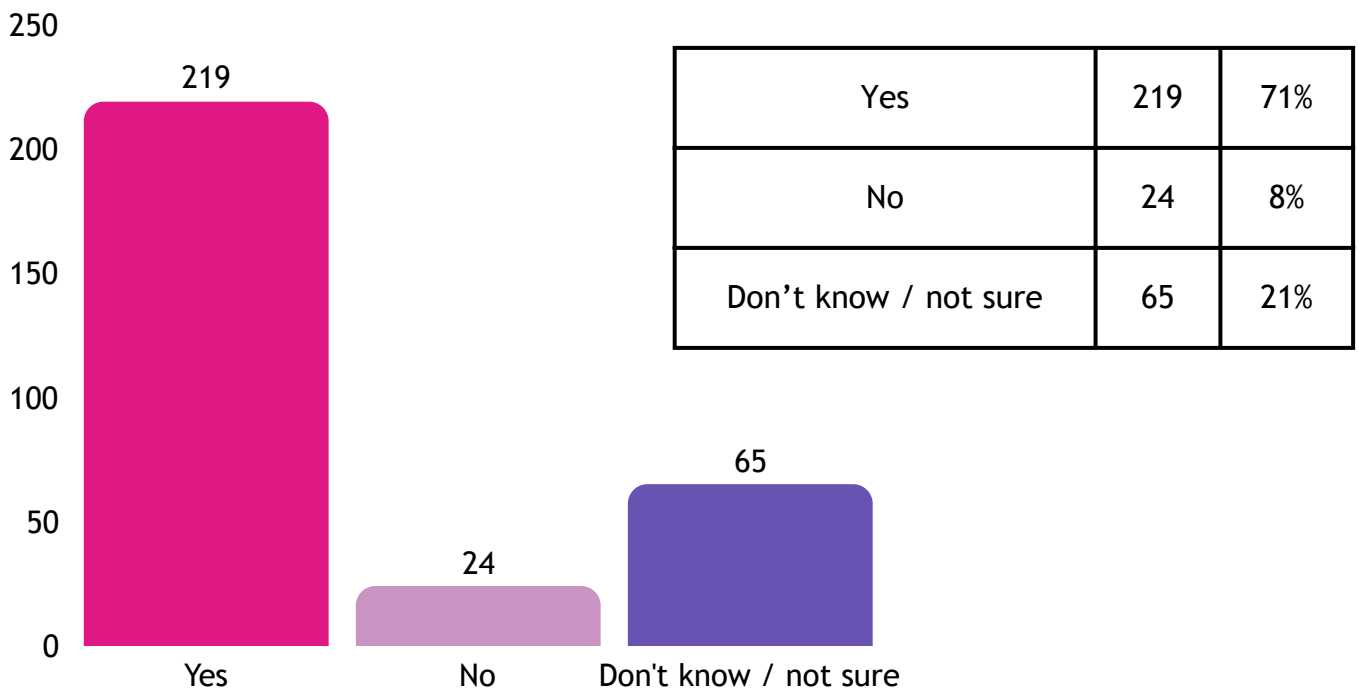
71% felt that the guidance on a parent or carers right to withdraw their child or young person from RSHP education was clear.

Survey Results

Safe online friendships

We asked: One of the themes when talking about healthy friendships is looking at safe online friendships. Lesson plans provided for teachers include discussion for younger children about safe online friends. As young people grow older, lessons move onto discussing using social media and other online risks. Does this guidance ensure that children and young people will be informed about the most important issues around online consent - including sharing images online and the laws about this?

The majority of respondents here - 71% - agreed that this guidance would ensure that young people were informed about the most important issues around online consent. 21% were 'not sure', reflecting that this is a complex question.



Responses to: Does this guidance ensure that children and young people will be informed about online consent?

Safe use of social media

We asked: Would you like to tell us more about how schools could ensure children and young people are prepared to use social media safely, and what to do if they have negative experience for online threats?

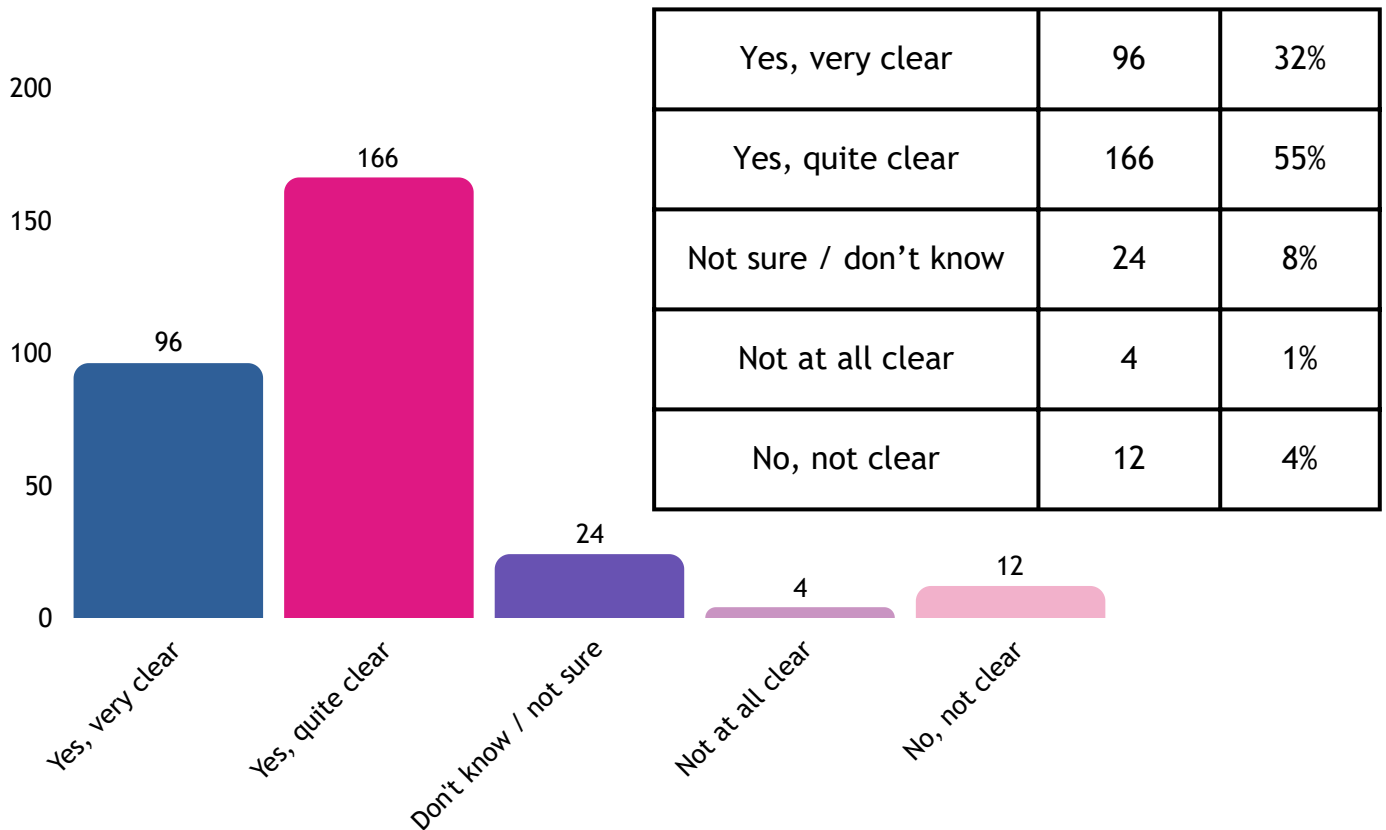
183 comments were received.

Themes here included practical information to be included in teaching materials, such as how to report threats and negative experiences and how to take care of your own personal information. A significant number of comments addressed how to approach teaching this topic in an interesting and effective manner. Finally, many comments stated that as younger children are now using social media this information needs to be shared at a younger age.

Consent

We asked: Consent is an important topic covered in the RSHP curriculum. Teaching materials at all stages include a lesson plan and slide show on consent. An example is here. Look at the slide from this lesson on consent (aimed at children in P5-7). Is this slide clear on what consent means for children and young people?

87% of respondents thought this slide was quite or very clear.



Responses to: Is this slide clear on what consent means for children and young people?

Consent

We asked: Do you have any other thoughts about the guidance teachers should receive about teaching consent?

134 comments were received here, of which 52 were uncategorisable. The majority of those which could be categorised focused on how this subject should be taught (56% of comments) or discussions on the theme of consent (43%).

LGBT inclusive guidance

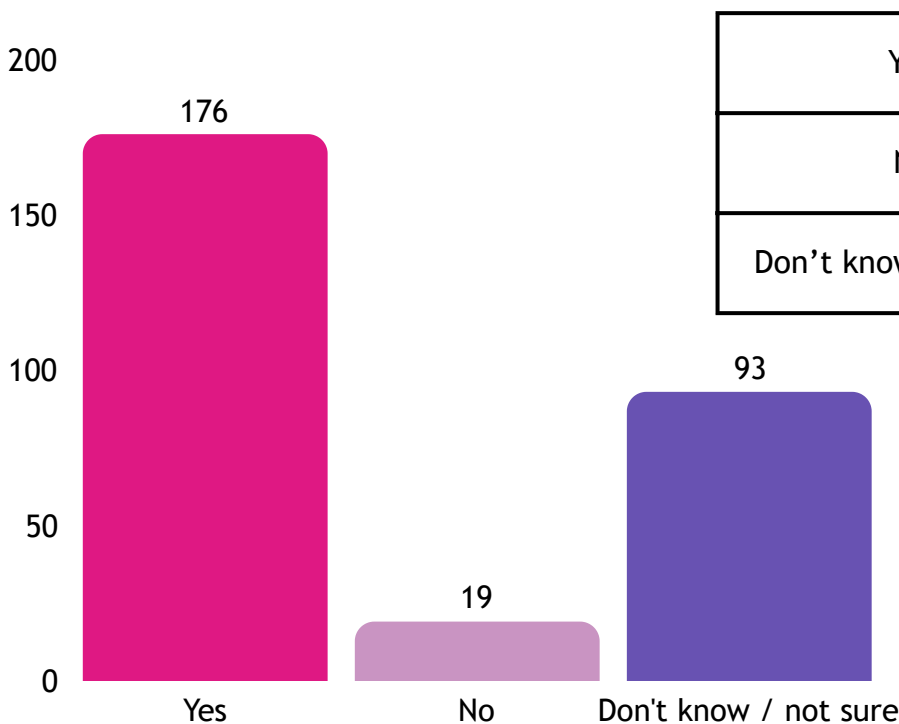
We asked: There are specific sections in the new guidance that are LGBT inclusive and one of these sections states that:

“When RSHP education is inclusive of LGBT young people, LGBT young people are more likely to feel included and accepted within the school community. When young people see themselves reflected in what they learn, it helps them feel like they belong and that who they are is not wrong, therefore increasing their engagement in learning. It also supports all young people to understand equalities and rights, and to recognise the impact of prejudice and stereotypes.”

Will this new guidance make RSHP education more inclusive for LGBT young people?

288 responses were received to this question. 61% agreed that the guidance would make RSHP education more inclusive. 32% selected ‘don’t know’ or ‘not sure’.

Based on the comments received the relatively high level of ‘don’t know / not sure’ responses may indicate that people are unsure about the impact the guidance will make rather than being a comment on the clarity of the guidance.



Yes	176	61%
No	19	7%
Don't know / not sure	93	32%

Responses to: Will this new guidance make RSHP education more inclusive for LGBT young people?

We asked: Would you like to tell us more about how you think schools can provide an environment where LGBT young people feel included in what they learn about in RSHP

135 comments received here reflecting the wide range of views on this topic.

Homophobic Bullying

We asked: The image below is taken from a lesson plan on homophobic bullying aimed at pupils in S1, S2 and S3. It is here as an example of the kind of learning material schools will use to teach about homophobic bullying. Will this kind of teaching reduce homophobic bullying?

Will this kind of teaching reduce homophobic bullying?

The 35% response rate here of ‘don’t know / not sure’ is relatively high. Based on the comments received from young people this may indicate that respondents were unsure about the impact which revised guidance material can make in this area rather than being a comment on the clarity of the guidance.


153 comments were received to this question.

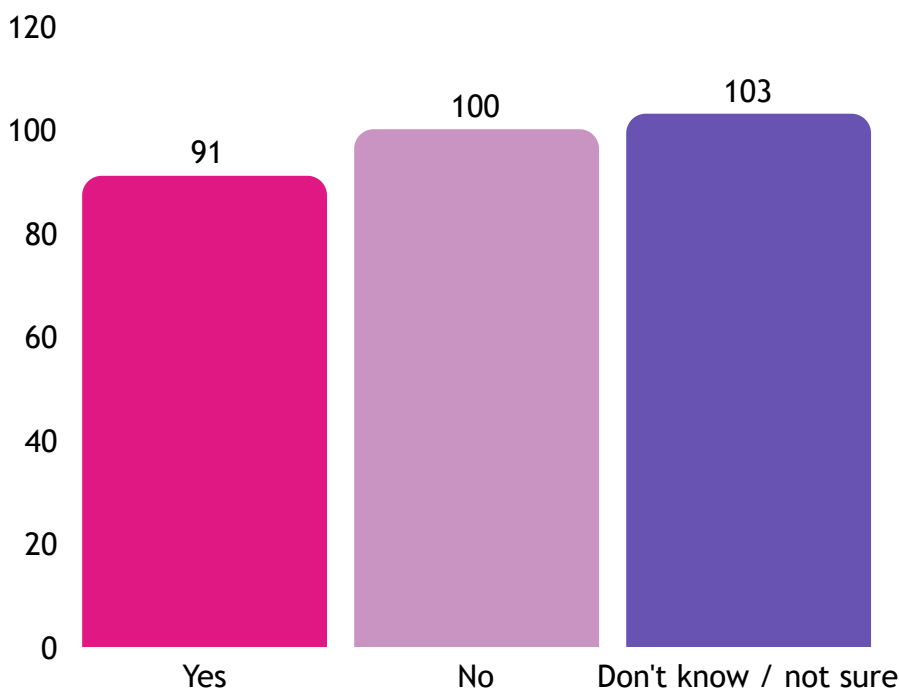
Some common themes are the societal nature of homophobia and the limitations of school in overcoming this.

Homophobia is about having a negative attitude or behaviour towards someone just because they are lesbian or gay.

Biphobia is about having a negative attitude or behaviour towards someone just because they are bisexual.

Homophobia and biphobia can include horrible language or





Yes	91	31%
No	100	34%
Don't know / not sure	103	35%

Responses to: Will this kind of teaching reduce homophobic bullying?

Right to withdraw from RSHP Education

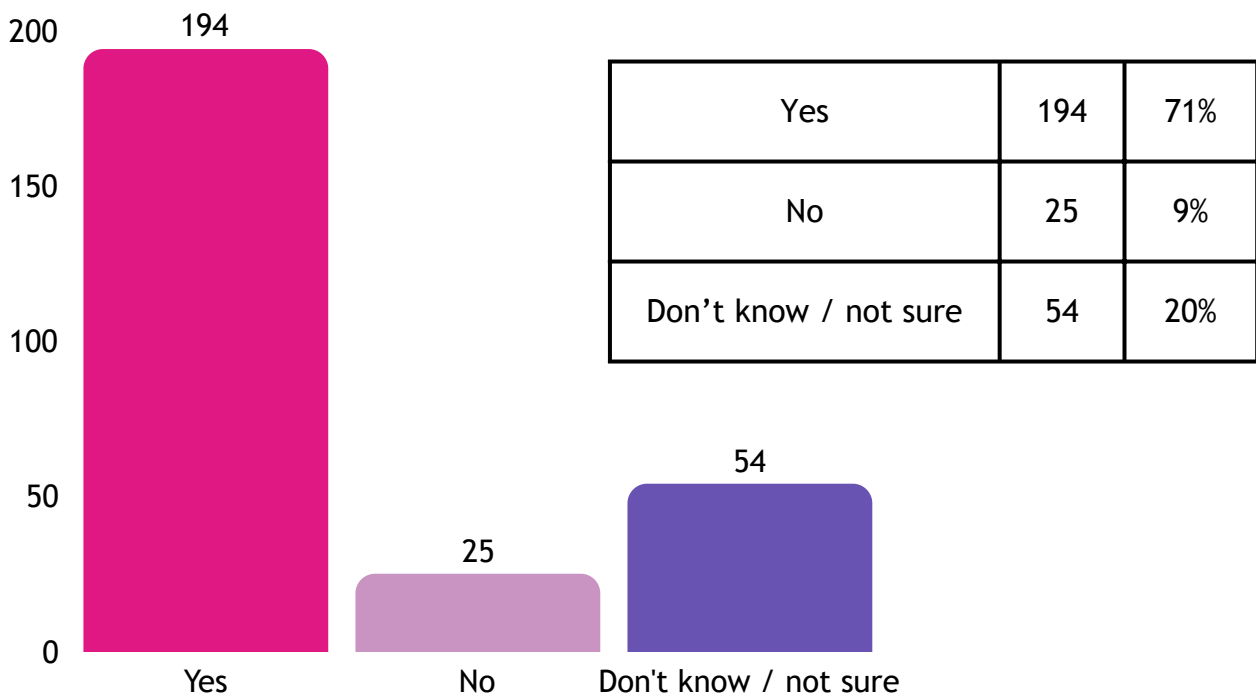
We asked: The new guidance sets out the right of each child and young person to learn about their own growing bodies, relationships, sexuality, sexual health and parenthood.

The guidance states that parents and carers should be given the chance to see teaching materials in advance, and to ask questions about any aspect of the RSHP education programme.

Parents can decide to withdraw their children from participation in the sexual health elements, such as learning about where to go to get medical advice on sexual health, of RSHP education. This option should be made known to parents and carers and their views respected. Parents and carers should be provided with sufficient information on which to base a decision about choosing this option. The option of withdrawal should be balanced with the child's right to education.

Do you think this guidance is clear about a parent or carers right to withdraw their child or young person from RSHP education?

71% of respondents felt this guidance was clear.



Responses to: Do you think this guidance is clear about a parent or carers right to withdraw their child or young person from RSHP education?

110 comments were received to this question giving a broad range of opinion. The comments reflect the difficulty in some conflicts between parents' rights to decide what children should be taught and children's rights to access education. There are also some detailed comments giving nuanced views on the ages of some topics being taught in the classroom and of the role of religion in these decisions.

Focus Groups

Activity and Delivery

Between October 2023 and March 2024, six focus groups were carried out with 49 young people. These sessions took place with groups in:

- Aberdeen - 7 participants.
- Dumfries - 3 participants.
- Girlguiding Edinburgh - 14 participants.
- LGBT Youth Scotland (Edinburgh) - 11 participants.
- Stirling - 6 participants.
- Shetland - 8 participants.

Of those who responded to the demographics survey (44 respondents), which participants were invited to complete at the end of each focus group:

- 18% were aged 12-13, 39% were aged 14-15, 18% were aged 16-17, and 25% were aged 18 or over.
- 70% were female, 23% were male, and 7% were non-binary.
- 51% identify as LGBTQIA+.
- 11% identify as transgender.
- 93% are in full time or part time education.
- 81% currently attend a non-denominational state school, 11.6% attend college, 4.7% attend a non-denominational private school, and 2.3% attend a denominational state school. Comments made during the focus groups suggest some of those no longer attending school had previously attended a denominational school.
- 16% described themselves as belonging to a religious denomination. The majority of these identified as Christian, Protestant, or Catholic, with one respondent identifying as Pagan.

Whilst focus groups were carried out in two phases, similar questions were asked in both phases, with the findings from phase one used to inform the questions asked in phase two. As such, there was some overlap between the results from each phase, and therefore the findings in the following section are presented by theme rather than by phase.

Young People's Experiences of RHSP Education

In five focus groups, young people were asked to write words on post-it notes to describe their experiences of RSHPE. Participants were then supported to sort these words into **content** and **delivery**. These words were used to frame the discussions that followed.

Content of RHSP Education

Whilst the focus of this research was on the delivery of RSHPE, rather than the content, young people in all focus groups shared examples of RSHPE content they had experienced at school. The word cloud below shows a summary of the words young people used to describe the content of RSHPE they had experienced.



Word cloud showing key words young people used when describing the content of RSHPE Education they had experienced.

While one young person said RSHPE content was “sometimes helpful”, the majority of responses were less positive, with young people using words such as ‘boring’, ‘vague’, ‘irrelevant’, ‘censored’, and ‘lacking’ to describe RSHPE content.

Where specific examples of RSHPE content were shared, the majority referred to education about puberty, sex, and parenthood. Some also mentioned learning about drug and alcohol use.

Of particular note, in two focus groups young people discussed ‘flour babies’ or fake doll babies, which they or older students had been required to look after for a week to learn about parenting. Feedback about this activity was broadly positive, although some young people were sceptical about whether they had actually learned anything about the realities of parenting.

Young people told us:

“Make sure they know we really really want fake doll babies. It would be fun, but if I think it would be fun now and decided to have a child, and hadn’t had the experience of waking up in the middle of the night and had the baby, how would I know [if it would really be fun] if I didn’t have the doll? Right now, I really want a child but I’m so young, but there’s nothing stopping me.”

“We did stuff in science [about reproduction], but just about how it works, in biology. We did more about how plants reproduce.”

“We were taught about ‘god’s loving plan’ - it doesn’t tell you anything useful. It’s incredibly vague and not helpful”

“Why did we watch the Mean Girls movie?”

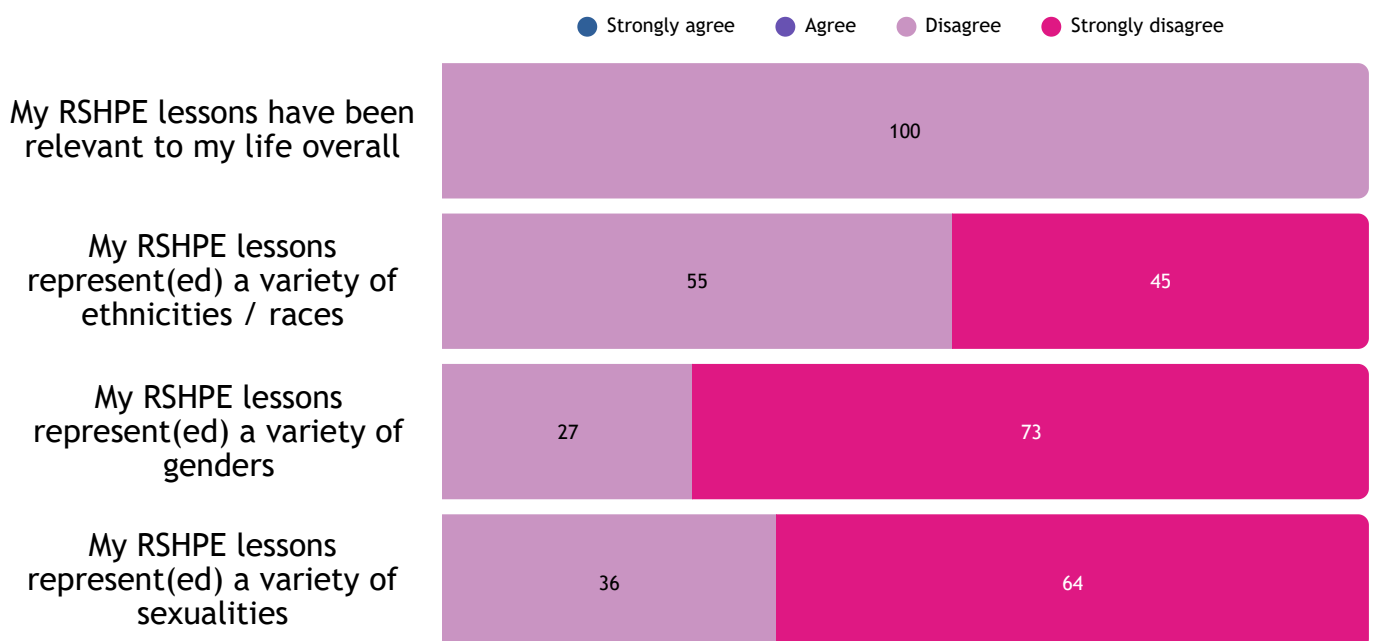
“We had one lesson on LGBT relationships during Pride month”

“Classes focused on a singular idea of wellbeing, like stress.”

“I was taught the basics - conception, periods, genitals - but I had to learn the rest like sexual health, birth control, safe-sex, and LGBT+ people from my parents.”

“I was taught if AFAB [assigned female at birth] “you will get pregnant and should keep it”. There was nothing about not wanting kids.”

Older young people, in two focus groups (13 participants), were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements relating to diversity and representation within RSHPE, using an online survey tool (mentimeter). The results, shown below, support the feedback from focus group participants which suggests many have not had positive experiences of RSHPE.



The extent to which older young people agreed or disagreed with a series of statements relating to diversity and representation within RSHPE (percentage - %)

In particular, all participants disagreed that their RSHPE lessons have been relevant to their lives, and all disagreed or strongly disagreed that a variety of races / ethnicities, genders, and sexualities were represented in their RSHPE lessons.

In discussions, older young people indicated that they felt RSHPE was not inclusive, was heteronormative, and was too gender-specific, which some felt was unsafe and not adequately preparing them for the future. Some participants spoke about gender-specific sessions, in which boys and girls were separated into separate groups by perceived gender. Many participants felt that they or their peers had not learned about the experiences of other genders. This was also reflected in feedback from younger participants, who suggested their experiences were also 'too gender specific'.

Young people told us:

“They split pupils into perceived binaries and only split into separate groups.”

“There is little, in my case no, inclusivity in sex education, and there is need to be some.”

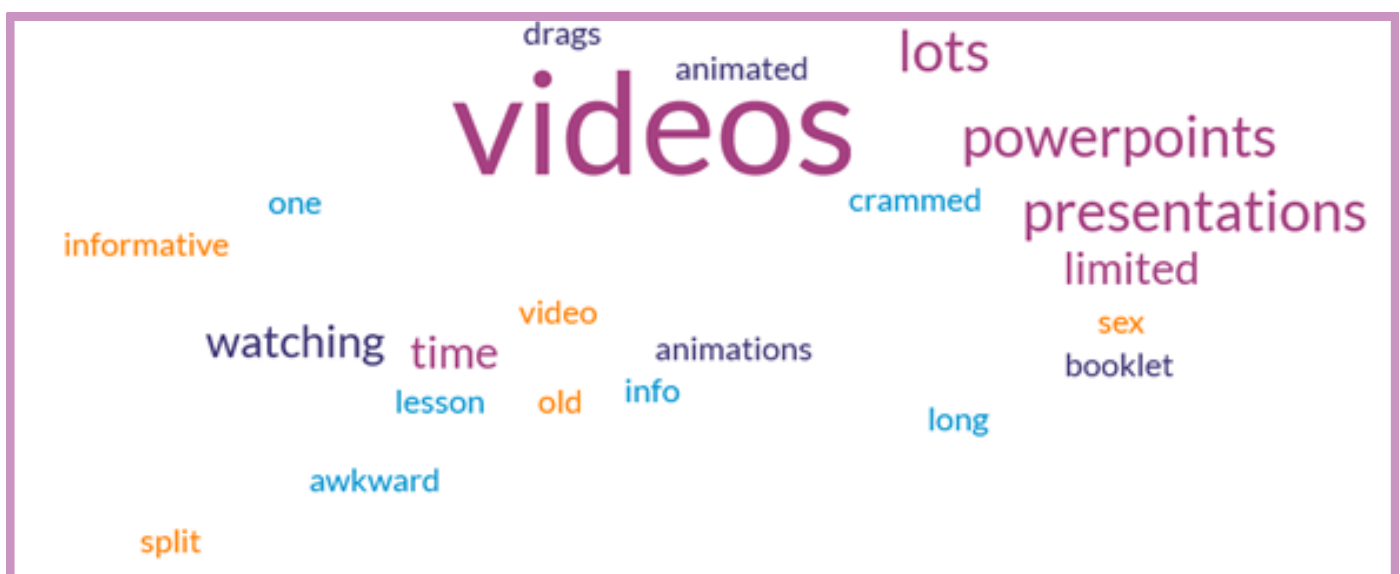
“There is a need for more information on safety, such as contraception / condoms, even if it is against the religion. Maybe this could be optional in Christian schools?”

“Boys and people who are AMAB [Assigned male at birth] are not taught about periods etc”

“I think giving [LGBT-inclusive] lessons is a good idea as it informs students and gives a greater understanding, it makes the topic normal so it's like taking the power away, as it's not seen as weird or different. They need to not split us more than we already are though. Involve everyone in normal lessons and conversations.”

Delivery of RHSP Education

Young people in all focus groups also shared their experiences of RSHPE delivery in schools. Many used words such as 'awkward', 'funny', 'boring', 'uncomfortable', and 'cringe' to describe RSHPE delivery.



Word cloud showing key words young people used when describing the delivery of RSHPE Education they had experienced.

While some young people referred to practical activities, such as “putting a condom on a banana” and looking after flour babies (as previously discussed), the majority of participants in every focus group said RSHPE was usually delivered through PowerPoint presentations, booklets, and videos, some of which felt outdated and irrelevant.

Some young people said they felt RSHPE wasn’t very engaging because there was “lots of watching” and “lots of information crammed into one lesson”. Meanwhile, others said there was limited time allocated to RSHPE, that RSHPE wasn’t treated as a priority, or that they hadn’t had any RSHPE lessons at all (particularly in younger age groups).

Young people told us:

“Make sure it’s actually being taught in schools. We’ve been here two years and haven’t done it [RSHPE]. We only learned about drugs and alcohol, it’s really boring.”

“We had very limited teaching and it was only taught in primary, not in high school”

In every focus group, young people spoke about the teachers who delivered RSHPE lessons.

Some participants reported having difficult relationships with staff teaching RSPHE, limiting their participation and engagement in the lesson. One young person said they found it hard to take RSHPE lessons seriously because their P7 teacher was pregnant, while another said their teacher compared everything to his own life.

Some young people said their RSHPE teachers weren’t specialists, while others said they often had substitute teachers covering RSHPE classes, which made it feel that RSHPE wasn’t seen as a priority within the school. One young person (16-17-year-old) suggested “an external adult could be brought into deliver the lesson, someone with experience in youth engagement, like a youth worker.”

Some young people felt that RSHPE lessons are often delivered from the point of view of adult teaching staff and more effort should be made to make it relevant to young people and their lives. This could be achieved by pupils taking a more active role in interpreting and finding information.

Young people told us:

“Our teacher compares literally everything to his own life”

“We keep getting substitute teachers, so we don’t do anything most weeks”

“Not a specialist teacher, it was just taught by whoever was free - this can be improved”

Older young people, in two focus groups (13 participants), were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement “I would prefer to have a guest specialist teach RSHPE than a regular teacher”, using an online survey tool (mentimeter). 91.0% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

On the other hand, younger focus group participants felt RSHPE should be taught by pupil support teachers or “teachers you feel comfortable with”. It was generally considered important that RSHPE is taught by a staff member who young people feel they know well and can trust.

Meaningful participation in RSHPE design and delivery

In all focus groups, young people felt it was important that students were involved in RSHPE design and delivery, and participants were asked to consider how teachers should involve them in planning and delivering RSHPE lessons.

Young people said teachers should ask students what they want to do, recognising that some people might not want to speak in front of their peers, so they should find different ways to involve everyone. Additionally, some participants suggested RSHPE should be led by pupils, which would help students feel they have a stake in the lesson and to learn from their peers.

Creating a safe, comfortable, and inclusive environment for RSHPE

Young people were asked to consider what they need to feel safe and comfortable in the classroom, and what they need to feel included in the classroom. This activity asked them to consider each of the five senses, before then asking them to consider what they need and want to feel safe and included. Keywords from this activity are shown in the word cloud below.



Word cloud showing key words young people used when describing what they need and want in order to feel safe and included in RSHPE Education.

What do we need to feel safe and included?

Welcoming environment.

To be listened to.

To trust people around us.

Less serious, and more focus on a positive and healthy approach to RSHPE.

Patient, understanding and supportive teacher.

Confidence in the teacher's expertise and knowledge.

No pressure.

More discussion and interactive activities, and less listening to the teacher talking.

Clear boundaries about respect, and a space that is free from discrimination and abuse from peers and teaching staff.

Smaller groups.

More inclusivity and active challenging of stigmas.

Informative and concise sessions and resources, which young people can trust is correct.

Consideration of the different experiences in the room.

Trigger warnings.

Opportunities to ask questions, with an anonymity option, and to be able to speak to the teacher separately.

What do we want to feel safe and included?

Knowing someone there, like a friend or having familiar faces.

To have comfy seats and cushions or beanbags.

To have the opportunity to speak about our opinions or thoughts.

Hot tea or coffee.

Being allowed to wear headphones.

New tech to enhance the experience.

Mindfulness.

In four focus groups (30 participants), young people were asked to imagine they were designing an RSHPE lesson plan. In small groups, they were tasked with planning a lesson on relationships. This lesson aimed to teach pupils about different types of relationships including LGBT+, and different types of families.

In this, they were invited to consider new ways of creating a safe space where all pupils could participate in the lesson, ask questions, and feel included in discussions. They were also asked to consider how they would address two scenarios. The table below shows a summary of their suggestions for creating a safe space and the activities they would deliver. Their responses to the two scenarios are discussed elsewhere in this report.

Creating a safe space

Prompt questions:

- What will you do to the physical space to make it safe for the lesson?
- How will you set up the classroom?
- What will the classroom look like?
- Is the classroom the only space you will use?

Participants said they would deliver RSHPE in a small space within the school - a more personal space with soft furnishings e.g., bean bags, cushions, and comfy chairs - which is easily identifiable as the RSHPE classroom. This space should be somewhere pupils feel comfortable and relaxed, and is identifiably different to other classrooms. Some students suggested the library or outside would be more appropriate spaces for RSHPE. Regardless, participants felt RSHPE lessons should be held in the same classroom or other space every time, to contribute to the feeling of safety and comfort.

As well as soft furnishings, the RSHPE learning space should be quiet and calm. Many participants felt it was important to have natural lighting, fresh air, and calming pastel-coloured walls. Some suggested they would like fairy lights and candles to help them feel more relaxed, and that they would like snacks and drinks to be available to help the space feel less formal and overwhelming.

Tables should be organised so both large and small group discussions can be held, although students said it was important that people can choose where to sit, including on the floor if this is where they feel most comfortable. Some suggested the door to the classroom should be left open, and that it should be easy for students to leave the room and go to another quiet room if they needed to take a break.

Participants want to be able to sit and discuss with their friends, but also have an opportunity to submit anonymous questions through (for example) a question box or online form.

The space should have relevant sources of information as posters on the wall, but not be overloaded with information - these sources should be selected by staff members with students to ensure they are accessible and relevant sources of information.

Activities young people would deliver

Prompt questions:

- What learning activities do you want pupils to participate in?
- Are you going to make the activities interactive and creative?
- What activities can you do to help ensure everyone is comfortable and joining in?

Participants believed that RSHPE lessons are often delivered from the point of view of adult teaching staff and more effort should be made to make it relevant to young people and their lives. This could be achieved by pupils taking a more active role in interpreting and finding information. Additionally, an external adult could be brought into deliver the lesson, someone with experience in youth engagement e.g., youth worker.

Participants highlighted the importance of RSHPE being presented from a positive point of view, rather than a negative or 'scary' position. Content should be informative but not 'boring and uncomfortable'. Content warnings were also seen as an important aspect of all RSHPE activities. Participants also highlighted the importance of language used in RSHPE, and the potential discrimination or stigma that could arise from inappropriate use of labelling or misrepresentation of communities. Students want to feel their views and experiences are valid, and that they are not going to be singled out or judged for feeling or acting a certain way, or for asking questions.

Participants would like more interactive activities in addition to desk-based learning - participants believed that some aspects of RSHPE would be best delivered as desk-based learning, but that more interactive activities would enable pupils to access information that is most relevant to their lives. Suggestions for interactive activities included Kahoot and online quizzes, group discussions, booklets and worksheets, icebreaker games and activities, and activities which relate RSHPE topics to current social media / TV / film / music etc. While some participants recognised the benefits of videos, they felt these should be relevant and up to date and show a variety of different lives and experiences.

Many participants felt the option for anonymity is important, and suggested there should be a space to submit anonymous questions, and options for young people to participate independently if they do not feel comfortable speaking out in public. However, they also highlighted the importance of being able to have open and honest conversations with their friends and peers, with more informal group discussion-based activities included in RSHPE lessons. Some participants want teachers to speak less during RSHPE lessons, so young people can explore the content together.

Right to withdraw from RSHPE

Young people in two focus groups (19 participants) were asked ‘Why might young people want to opt out of RSHPE?’

In the younger age group (12-13-year-olds), participants suggested young people might feel uncomfortable or awkward taking part in RSHPE, and should have the option to leave the classroom if they felt this way. One young person noted that students might be “sensitive to certain topics for personal reasons” while another suggested students might “feel they don’t need to learn it”.

While young people in the older age group (18+ year olds) also suggested discomfort and embarrassment might be a reason for young people to opt out of RSHPE, this age group gave a broader range of reasons to opt out of RSHPE, including:

- Religious reasons.
- Pressure from peers within the classroom or from parents.
- Trauma and not feeling safe discussing topics openly, particularly topics relating to gender-specific experiences (eg, periods), sex, and sexuality.
- Fear of discrimination or -phobic comments being unchallenged.

Although this specific question was only asked in two focus groups, young people in other sessions suggested it shouldn’t matter why young people want to leave RSHPE, but that they should be allowed to leave for any reason. Additionally, young people suggested RSHPE should be presented as optional, but every effort should be made to ensure they understand the importance of the subject to their lives, and that support is available in the form of signposting to other resources and opportunities to speak confidentially to a trusted adult about related issues.

Young people told us:

“They might think it’s not for them, or they might feel uncomfortable”

“You should have an out if you want to leave a lesson for whatever reason”

“Pressure from parents - parents might think it is pointless or inappropriate or is going to turn their child gay”

“Forced outing as LGBT if having to request LGBT-specific education”

“They’ve watched porn and think that they know everything.”

As previously discussed, in four focus groups (30 participants), participants were asked to imagine they were designing an RSHPE lesson plan. In this, they were invited to consider the space, the activities, and how they would address two scenarios. The following table shows a summary of young people's responses to scenario 1:

Scenario 1: 'A pupil does not want to participate in the lesson as they believe it is not relevant to them and their life.'

Participants believed it was important to ensure that attendance in this case was not compulsory, suggesting instead to present it as optional whilst reminding students of the importance of RSHPE to their life and the lives of the people around them. They were particularly concerned about the importance of respecting the student's right to choose whether or not to participate.

Participants said they would offer a private conversation to explore why they do not want to participate, recognising that there may be something else going on in their lives which is making them feel this way.

They would work with the student to seek alternatives to help them learn the content in a different way, including offering resources if the student doesn't feel comfortable talking or participating in the lesson.

LGBT-inclusive education

The following table shows a summary of young people's responses to scenario 2:

Scenario 2: 'A pupil comes up to you after the lesson to ask for more information about LGBT relationships.'

Participants said they would signpost the young person to appropriate sources of information which are accurate and reliable, such as websites and pamphlets, which are youth friendly and tailored to their needs. Where possible, they would try to have a pre-prepared set of resources, so they could provide this information straight away.

They said they would also offer one to one support and a follow up meeting to ensure the young person accessed the suitable and appropriate information. They would give the young person space to ask questions, making sure there was sufficient time for discussion, not rushing the conversation quickly after class or between classes. They also said they would plan to include this topic in future lessons in case other students have similar questions.

Two focus groups were carried out specifically with LGBT youth groups (14 participants).

Of these, two-thirds (63.6%) agreed with the statement ‘Incorporating anti-bullying lessons is likely to reduce instances of bullying’, while one third (36.4%) disagreed with this statement.

When asked what measures they felt could be taken to reduce (transphobic, racial, homophobic) bullying through RSHPE, young people noted it is important not to restrict learning about topics such as LGBT+ experiences and race / racism solely to RSHPE. Instead, young people felt these topics should be integrated across the school curriculum.

Young people told us:

“Lessons should be taught for other goals than anti-bullying”

“Normalising LGBT / anti-racist / other content in other courses (eg, Maths / English) not just RSHPE”

“Having one separate lesson dedicated to LGBT makes it feel taboo - it should be integrated everywhere relevant”


“RSHPE inclusive topics should overlap with teaching queer histories.”

Consent and healthy relationships

Focus group participants were asked what consent means to them. Key words in their responses are shown in the word cloud below.



Word cloud showing key words young people used when describing what consent means to them



On the whole, young people understood consent to be:

- Mutual agreement and understanding of what will happen.
- Continual and can be withdrawn at any time.
- An enthusiastic yes.
- Mutual respect, and key to a healthy relationship.
- Not just sexual.
- Not given under pressure or coercion.

Young people told us:

“Consent to me is about mutual respect and understanding. It’s about everyone involved willingly agreeing to something without pressure or coercion.”

“Agreeing to something another person wants to do with you, whether it be touch, sex, a hug, giving them something you have, etc. It doesn’t have to be sexual, because consent does not equal sex.”

“Consent is continual, and can be withdrawn at any time.”

Young people were also asked what online consent looks like. The majority of respondents focused on consent in relation to sharing images online and/or via private messages, although a small number gave broader examples.

Young people told us:

“It’s all about clearly communicating and respecting boundaries in the digital world, meaning getting explicit permission before engaging in any online activity.”

“Even when texting making sure the other person wants to be having that conversation, especially if it’s sexual. If you share a photo or sexts with someone, knowing if they may keep it or share with anyone else.”

“Asking someone permission before sharing something involving them with others over the internet.”

When asked at what age children and young people should learn about online consent, the overwhelming majority of participants said they should learn about this as young as possible, and no later than their early teens.

Recommendations and Outcomes

This report will be published on both partner organisations websites and has been shared directly with young people involved in the process to complete the feedback loop.

Our hope is that this report will be considered as a critical component of the consultation process for the revised teaching guidance and will ensure the views and experiences of young people will inform decision making and implementation of this wider work going forward.

In line with discussions with Scottish Government throughout this process, our ask is that this report will be considered in conjunction with the responses to the formal public consultation to ensure the final version of the revised teaching guidance is fit for purpose.

We also ask that Scottish Government commits to informing young people how their responses have been listened to and taken forward in parity with the contributions of the other groups consulted (teachers, parents/carers etc).