

Research with Young People for the Development of Impactful Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE). UWE Vice Chancellor Challenge Fund Grant | 2021-2023

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Collaborators: Five secondary schools in the South West region, 62 young people from these schools.

We extend our thanks and gratitude to these schools and the young people for giving their time to this project, without which this report and findings would not be possible. To the young people in particular, thank you for inviting us into your world view on this important subject.

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Recommendations

- Be prepared to have critical conversations with young people about contentious areas such as challenging harmful gender norms, and pornography. The impact of these contentious areas for young people cannot be ignored.
- Focus RSHE content principally on relationships to include the signs of unhealthy relationships and how to respond to these, with an emphasis on positive, healthy relationships.
- Focus upon the real-life complexities of enacting consent in more depth; beyond yes or no. Explore boundary setting, and different types of behaviour which can occur within ‘non-consensual’ scenarios.
- Act as if sexual abuse and harassment are occurring within your school whether you think this is the case or not, so that these topics are included within RSHE discussions.
- Help young people to be discerning in their online engagement. Do not assume young people’s prior digital knowledge or critical awareness.
- Prioritise RSHE with more regular, specific time in the curriculum ringfenced for this purpose.
- Integrate aspects of RSHE across wider curriculum content. For example, English Literature could integrate relevant content, as could History.

- Use a non-gender segregated approach to RSHE. Where schools are single-gender, deliver content which pays attention to all genders.
- Integrate diverse sexuality and gender, with LGBTQ+ issues being taught alongside heterosexual content to all students.
- Support those delivering RSHE to be confident, open, respectful and adaptable.
- Balance in-school provisions with outside support where it is beneficial or students request this.
- Integrate multiple, relatable ways to deliver RSHE. This might include different sorts of media similar to [‘DARE’](#), and material that facilitates open discussion, such as the quote activity about the impact of pornography employed in our study, or conversational openers such as witness or testimonial statements, for example [‘Everyone’s Invited’](#) testimonies.
- Offer young people anonymous ways to ask questions, for example, a sealed box in tutor groups, or online anonymous question forums; follow up these questions in RSHE content.
- Consult with young people about all aspects of RSHE including content, recommendations and how and by whom RSHE should be delivered, to foster enabling environments which increase students’ own agency.

Project Overview

The Context of Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools

The [Women and Equalities Committee inquiry \(2016\)](#), found sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools to be widespread, facilitated by access to online pornography. UK research found most children have seen pornography by 16, with 75% reporting that pornography did not teach about positive relationships ([Martellozzo et al., 2017](#)).

Ofsted conducted a rapid review of sexual abuse in schools ([Ofsted, 2021](#)), finding serious areas of concern surrounding sexual abuse in school has arisen in the context of child-on-child or peer-on-peer abuse ([DFE, 2022](#); [Ofsted, 2021](#)). [‘Everyone’s Invited’](#) website forum for survivors of sexual abuse testifies to this.

The Context of Statutory Guidance and RSHE in Schools

UK statutory guidance ([DFE, 2019](#)) introduced new mandates around Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE), making this compulsory in secondary schools in England from late

2020. Guidance states that on completing secondary school pupils should know: 'Pornography presents a distorted picture of sexual behaviours' and understand 'the concepts of, and laws relating to, sexual consent, sexual exploitation, abuse, grooming, and coercion' (DFE, 2019: 28-29). RSHE is mandated to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+. Schools have been struggling to facilitate this learning (DFE, 2019: 28-29). Against a backdrop of concern regarding prevalence of sexual abuse in education settings, Ofsted were asked by Government to carry out a rapid review on sexual abuse in schools and colleges in England. The review included visits to 32 schools and colleges, speaking to over 900 children and young people about the prevalence of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence, identifying peer-on-peer sexual abuse as including:

sexual violence, such as rape, assault by penetration and sexual assault, sexual harassment, such as sexual comments, remarks, jokes and online sexual harassment, which may be stand-alone or part of a broader pattern of abuse, upskirting, which typically involves taking a picture under a person's clothing without them knowing, with the intention of viewing their genitals or buttocks to obtain sexual gratification, or to cause the victim humiliation, distress or alarm, sexting (also known as 'youth-produced sexual imagery' (Ofsted, 2021: 10).

The report found that RSHE was inadequate or 'too little, too late' (Ofsted, 2021: 6) and not in touch with the reality of young people's lives. Whilst half of the schools that Ofsted visited for the review had developed RSHE provision with examples of strong curriculum, placing emphasis upon respect, consent and healthy relationships; a number of issues were identified. These related to the quality of RSHE provision such as: finding time in the timetable, gaps in curriculum coverage, and a lack of training or resources particularly in areas such as consent, healthy relationships and image sharing. This has resulted in some schools still overly focussed on the 'mechanics of reproduction' (Ofsted, 2021: 38). In some schools RSHE was taught only in science or in tutor time where teachers did not feel they had received sufficient training. Some schools did not integrate LGBTQ+ areas, prioritising heterosexual content only. There was in-school and between school variability in quality of delivery of RSHE. Overall feedback from the children and young people noted in the report was that they: were seldom positive about their RSHE and PSHE lessons. They felt that the quality of the input varied according to who was teaching them and that the lessons were not relevant to their daily experiences and the reality of their lives (Ofsted, 2021: 38).

The new mandates regarding RSHE provision, together with these findings highlight the need for more concerted action to ensure that RSHE is relevant to young people's needs and is delivered effectively. Our current study aimed to inform future action in this area.

During our analysis of the findings from our study a new report was released relevant to the work - [Equimundo \(2022\)](#) *The State of UK Boys: Understanding and Transforming Gender in the Lives of UK Boys*. Washington, DC: Equimundo. The report conducted an extensive literature review and interviews with 15 experts (informants) on gender, masculinity and boyhood:

Our informants, like the literature, encourage the view that young people are both willing and able to change with appropriate support. They also, however, noted that adults underestimate what is happening for young people and fear trying to address it ([Equimundo, 2022](#): 35).

The report notes the normalisation of violence against women and girls and that this is endemic, under-reported and inadequately addressed. The report in particular notes the

centrality of schools which can reproduce or challenge specific identities which sustain gendered violence. The report notes the enduring importance of the peer group with Olivia Dickinson, one of the experts called upon in the report, noting ‘when all boys are together, you’ve got to be quite a brave boy not to conform’ ([Equimundo, 2022](#): 21). Schools have a place in empowering boys to challenge peer expectations of traditional masculinist gender norms and Katherine Gilmour, another expert called upon in the report, notes the importance of teachers challenging harmful gendered behaviour. This can be considered an important backdrop to any RSHE teaching and part of a ‘whole school’ approach to role modelling healthy relationships. Research is emerging which demonstrates children and young people, even of primary school age, are much more able than is given credit to understand, comprehend and explore complex gender messages ([Hall, 2020](#), in [Equimundo, 2022](#): 22). This challenges prevailing discourses of children as innocent ([Morgan and Taylor, 2019](#); [Johnson, 2022](#); [Atkinson et al., 2022](#), in [Equimundo, 2022](#): 21) and opens up potential new and wider ways of introducing topics, in age-appropriate ways, which are relevant to RSHE at secondary level. Reports such as [Equimundo \(2022\)](#) which draw upon expert testimony and extensive literature reviews, alongside school based Reports such as [Ofsted \(2021\)](#) and polls conducted with young people ([Sex Education Forum, 2023](#)¹) offer balance to current calls to review RSHE ([Adu and Adams, 2023](#)). It is not our intention within this report to engage in debates regarding media reporting of this area (e.g. [Hinsliff, 2023](#)), instead we acknowledge the difficult circumstances that schools operate within. Our study and its recommendations should be considered within this context of emerging knowledge.

The Research Study

This current study was developed to facilitate understanding of what young people want to learn about in RSHE and their views on how topics such as consent and coercion, navigation of the online environment and the impact of pornography should be taught.

Developing a Digital Resource: Dare

The current study emerged from earlier work conducted by two members of the research team ([Jo White](#) and [Liz Banks](#)) which resulted in the production of a short film to be used in RSHE in secondary schools. Jo White, and a team of teenagers (‘peer researchers’) interviewed 15 young people aged 16-18 to find out their early experiences of intimate relationships. Findings included the influence of pornography on behaviour, and the impact of coercive behaviour on teenage relationships. These findings were turned into a collaborative creative output. The film [Dare](#) has been used in our research described below, to elicit young people’s views on its potential application within RSHE and the relevance of narrative film-based approaches to exploring key issues.

¹ A survey of 1,002 young people aged 16-17 in England carried out by Censuswide between 2 and 13 December 2022, and commissioned by the Sex Education Forum.

Research Questions

Our research questions were as follows:

1. What do young people want to learn about consent and pornography in schools?
2. How do young people want to learn about consent and pornography in schools?
3. What kind of RSHE resources and activities can empower young people to forge healthy relationships in their daily lives?

Methods

Five schools and 62 year 9 students took part in this study, which used a focus group approach.

The Schools and Participants: Demographics

The characteristics of each school based on the last full Ofsted/Compliance Inspection Report are:

- **School one:** Suburban school, 11-19 academy rated 'Good', just over 1000 pupils on roll. Majority of pupils white British backgrounds. Proportion of pupils known to be eligible for pupil premium below national average. Proportion of pupils with special educational needs or disability (SEND) who receive support is in line with the national average.
- **School two:** Suburban school, 11-19 academy rated 'Good' with just over 1100 pupils on roll. Majority of pupils white British backgrounds. Proportion of pupils known to be eligible for pupil premium is broadly in line with the national average. Proportion of pupils with SEND who receive support is above the national average.
- **School three:** Suburban school, 11-19 secondary rated 'Good' with just under 1000 pupils on roll. Majority of pupils white British backgrounds. Proportion of pupils known to be eligible for pupil premium is well below the national average. Proportion of pupils with SEND and who receive support is broadly in line with the national average.
- **School four:** Independent school, 7-18, with just over 700 pupils on roll. Pupils are from a range of backgrounds, with a majority white British, 13 % of pupils are identified with SEND.
- **School five:** City school, 11-16 secondary rated 'Good' with just over 700 pupils on roll. Proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is well above the national average, as is the proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language. Over half the pupils in the school are known to be eligible for pupil premium, which is much higher than the national average. Proportion of pupils with SEND and who receive support is above the national average.²

² For school pupil characteristic averages, please see latest government statistics 2021 [here](#).

The study represents various school types and participant characteristics, including Independent, Academy, and Local Authority schools, schools with various number of pupils on roll, and schools in remote, suburban and city locations. Our school sample also represents schools with pupil premium and SEND pupils at, below and above the national average. The sample of schools are predominantly white British; with one school having minority ethnic representation which is above the national average. A good balance of both female and male participation was achieved, with a slightly higher percentage of males taking part (40% female, 55% male). In terms of gender outside of the female/male binary we did not achieve a diverse mix (5% outside of the gender binary). Ethnic diversity was achieved in the sample at 23% which is reflective of higher than the national average. The school sample and the participant sample achieved approximate representation of national statistics [2021 census data](#). Therefore, the study results may be generalisable to other schools and students. For a full table breakdown of the schools and demographics please see Appendix.

Focus Groups

We conducted one or two focus groups over a one-day visit in each school (total focus groups n=9). Each focus group lasted up to two hours with breaks between activities. Just over 12 hours of focus group data was collected in total. Each focus group was composed of a group (n=4 to n=10) of year 9 students. Total number of participants across the 9 focus groups and 5 schools was 62. See Tables in Appendix for a comprehensive list of participant characteristics. The focus groups were facilitated by one or two of the research team members who all had current DBS checks and had undergone NSPCC safeguarding training. Teachers were not present, but were available nearby should any safeguarding issues arise. All focus groups were audio recorded.

Consent

Consent forms (see Appendix) and participant information sheets were shared with young people, parents/carers, and schools³. All participating schools provided signed consents and all participants who took part had signed consents in place from parents, and their own personal signed consents. These were stored on password protected one drive.

Facilitation

Researchers started focus groups with a request to ask students to write down on Post-it notes what they thought young people needed to know about in RSHE. Researchers then looked at these responses, collating them into similar categories, and asked the group questions about them, which led into a discussion. See Appendix for some examples of these post-it note extracts.

³ We have only included young person forms in Appendix due to length of these forms. Participant information sheets noted participant rights to withdraw, confidentiality, anonymity and limits to this, and provided online support contacts should material trigger participants. Safeguarding information was also included.

Film Activity

Participants watched the 14-minute film [‘DARE’](#). Participants were asked questions about the film and its effectiveness or relevance to young people’s lives and its potential use as a resource in RSHE for their age group.

Quote Activity

Each group was then asked to self-divide into two separate subgroups⁴. Where groups were smaller overall, and through discussion with participants, these were kept as one group. This resulted in some larger and smaller self-split subgroups (ranging from n=2 to n=6). In these subgroups, participants were asked to look at and discuss a collection of quotes regarding the impact of pornography on young people’s lives⁵. See Appendix for quotes and examples of the way that participants ranked quotes.

Analysis

Analysis was conducted through thematic analysis ([Braun, Clarke & Hayfield, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2019](#)). Findings developed in two-ways: (1) those that we expected to find and which helped to answer the research questions, and (2) those that were less expected and gave insights into areas which emerged outside of our initial research questions.

Findings

Research Question One: What do Young People want to Learn about Consent and Pornography in Schools?

Focus on Relationships

Young people want a higher focus on relationships and their various facets. A selection of the written answers received from participants on Post-it-notes demonstrates this desire for relationships to be prioritised and for learning to focus on interactions within relationships and how to forge healthy relationships. For example: ‘How to know when your partner is getting abusive’; ‘How a relationship is a two-way process’; ‘How to set boundaries’; ‘How to recognise abuse’; ‘That a relationship isn’t just about sexual desires’; ‘How to form relationships with friends and others’; ‘How do you know when things in a relationship are getting bad?’ These Post-it-note extracts speak to a need for greater understanding of what constitutes a healthy dynamic within relationships and how to establish this through setting boundaries and recognising and responding to signs of abuse. The [Sex Education Forum, 2023](#) Poll of over 1000 young people’s views of RSHE provision found that ‘54% learnt not

⁴ We chose this approach as early on in data collection, participants told the research team they did not like to be split into groups decided by teachers when talking about RSHE.

⁵ These quotes emanated from previous research with 18+-year-olds who were asked in an online qualitative survey about the impact of exposure to pornography upon them. This research was conducted by one member of this RSHE project team ([Lucey and Malson, 2021](#)).

enough or nothing about 'how to tell if a relationship is healthy (including online)' (6). Our research suggests young people want more time to discuss what healthy relationships are.

The question in Post-it-Note responses 'What can you do in our age relationship?' raises the need to understand the legal framework around early teens' sexual relationships and its implications for those aged under 16. The comments 'Include LGBTQ themes' and 'I think sexuality should be talked about more as teens struggle with sexuality' highlight how RSHE about relationships should not be founded on hetero-normativity.

We also ran a word frequency search across the focus group transcripts, displayed in the table below. It is clear from this table that the areas discussed loosely collected around: (1) relationships, (2) consent, (3) sexuality, and (4) pornography and online material. These were more frequently discussed by the young people than the more biological concepts under (5), namely STIs, contraception and protection. This is in line with findings from research which suggests young people want to spend less time talking about biology and more time talking about relationships, consent, and sexuality, and areas that have a major impact in their lives such as the online environment and exposure to pornography ([Pound et al., 2016](#); [Pound et al., 2017](#)). Additionally, it adds further support to the [Ofsted \(2021\)](#) findings and [Sex Education Forum \(2022\)](#) poll regarding issues identified in RSHE provision which were often related to an over-emphasis upon biology and a lack of training and confidence to deliver content outside of this.

Word Frequency Result Table

	(1) Relationships; healthy; toxic; peer pressure	(2) Consent; Boundaries; manipulation	(3) Sexuality; gender; LGBTQ+; LGBT; Same- Sex	(4) Pornography; online Nudes	(5) STIs; contraception; protection; STDs; diseases; safe-sex
Focus group 1	155	27	41	54	3
Focus group 2	85	51	89	86	7
Focus group 3	42	52	73	80	6
Focus group 4	35	29	38	27	0
Focus group 5	68	31	46	42	0
Focus group 6	58	19	28	20	7
Focus group 7	43	14	45	39	8
Focus group 8	24	41	23	53	0
Focus group 9	33	22	48	47	1
Totals	543	286	431	448	32

Some of the young people in our study demonstrated that their experiences with RSHE in schools focussed upon biology over relationships. We found instances of this across all of the focus groups, for example:

MP⁶: I find what we really learn at school is just about sex and stuff, but we never really learn much about a relationship and how to have a healthy relationship.

⁶ MP denotes male participant.

FP⁷: It was mainly talking about people's bodies rather than stuff like the relationships themselves.

MP: I'd say relationships in general aren't covered, it's mostly stuff about consent, diseases, all that stuff, but not about the actual relationships

FP: Well they teach us about consent and how to say no and all that stuff but they don't really teach you other than that how to set boundaries...They just skip over the whole relationships part and go straight to sex and sexual health. Obviously at this age a lot of people start getting into relationships and they just don't know what to do, and I don't think the school really offers any advice.

It was also noted that while some content on relationships may be provided, it can be too late:

FP: I think obviously eventually we get taught about relationships and that's too late, it's after things like that could start happening. And I think the earlier you teach about relationships the more people are going to be aware about it.

The research overall demonstrated that some young people are receiving RSHE content on healthy relationships, but that this is variable. Our findings here align with [Ofsted findings \(2019: 39\)](#) that there is 'variation in the consistency of how RSHE was delivered'.

Consent in Depth

Overall young people who participated in the focus groups seemed to be receiving knowledge regarding consent and said that this topic was covered in their RSHE lessons. Young people stated that they wanted a greater depth of focus on consent due to its relevance to their daily lives:

FP: I think that thinking about consent and stuff like that, I think that you start thinking about it at this age [13-14], and I think you should start being taught about it in the correct way, cause if we're not taught about it people will have different ideas on it, and at the moment we've covered six weeks of pure talking about taxes. And of course, yeah, that's important, but that's not going to be relevant to us for a few years, and the stuff that is going to be most relevant is sort of ignored.

FP: I think, consent, it's a big topic and one lesson isn't enough to cover it all.

MP: I think that you should do consent over a span, every couple of terms you should do at least a week.

MP: I think consent should be briefly brought up when you're young and then when you get older you're taught about it, instead of just brought up on occasions.

⁷ FP denotes female participant.

The [Ofsted \(2021: 39\)](#) report noted some schools were 'unaware that children and young people were not getting the rich discussion required to fully understand complex concepts, such as consent'. This aspect was also raised in the focus groups:

MP: Teachers just think, consent, it's just a yes or no but really it's not.

FP: Some teachers just skip past consent completely, like they think we should know it already.

Good examples of teaching about consent were noted by participants as when teachers used examples of consent that were discussed openly afterwards. The following example combines both consent and relationships:

MP: When Teachers had different examples of a relationship, there were examples of what happens in a relationship. And we then had to decide in our pairs, talk it over and stuff, if we thought it was consent or if they gave consent or if they hadn't. And then we talked it over, with the whole class so that was good.

The [Sex Education Forum \(2022\)](#) found that 63% of poll respondents 'learnt all they needed to about 'understanding sexual consent' (17). This is a good percentage and amongst the highest in the poll findings, however it means that a significant percentage did not learn all they needed. Whilst we did not poll for percentages in our study it seemed from responses that consent was being covered in many instances, but that more depth was needed.

Integrate Diverse Sexuality and Gender

In the focus groups we asked about RSHE and its potential for stronger emphasis on sexuality, gender and LGBTQ+ relationships. The main messages were that there was inconsistency in delivery and often sexuality and LGBTQ+ content was a 'bolt on', rather than integrated within teaching about heterosexuality:

FP: LGBT issues are covered, but they don't really cover it with relationships and stuff.

FP: It's always different-sex relationships.

MP: It's not recognised, it's maybe like, oh it's LGBTQ Month and then it's completely forgotten. Even though a whole month is dedicated to it.

Participants gave strong support to integrate LGBTQ+ content:

MP: People who are in the LGBT community learn about heterosexual relationships - why don't heterosexuals learn about LGBTQ relationships?

MP: I feel like it's definitely very important that the LGBT community is spoken about more.

MP: I think LGBT should be normalised and kind of integrated into school life more.

FP: I think LGBT is being talked about more now but maybe not as much as it should. I think it gets brushed over quite quickly.

UK statutory guidance ([DFE, 2019](#)) recommends that diverse sexuality be integrated into delivery of RSHE. Our findings suggest that this is happening, but is inconsistent. In the [Sex Education Forum \(2022\)](#) poll 26 % of those polled said they 'learnt nothing at all about sexual orientation, and 34% learnt nothing at all about gender identity' (17).

Do not Ignore Pornography

The young people who participated in our focus groups were often reluctant to talk about pornography as it seemed they did not want to be seen as accessing this, however once initial barriers were overcome they became a lot more open in their discussions. They discussed knowledge regarding misinformation online which can lead to unrealistic expectations of sex and relationships behaviour. Participants also discussed having no outlets to talk about pornography:

FP: I think there's a lot of misinformation about porn

MP: I think pornography can make people think that sex works in a certain way even though more often than not that's not how it is and it's not usually how it goes. It's quite different to what it shows online.

FP: This (porn) isn't usually something we talk about in PSHE. **MP:** Or in school or anything.

FP: I mean, you might talk about porn with your friends but like it's not something you'd talk to an adult about!

FP: Even when you talk about it with your friends, or if you do, it's not in like a serious manner really.

The [Sex Education Forum \(2022\)](#) poll found that the areas which showed greatest neglect in RSHE were 'topics such as pornography, power imbalances in relationships and sexual pleasure' (6). The poll notes this may be because 'these topics require most specialist skill to teach with confidence' (6).

The pornography quote activity that we introduced within our focus groups was generally well received as a medium for delivery:

FP: I think the porn quotes are helpful because this is important to talk about.

FP: The activity, it's been quite eye-opening I think.

FP: Actually, this activity felt better than PSHE lessons would be to discuss this.

FP: The Activity, it's definitely a step up cause we don't learn about it at all.

MP: Yeah, the activity was useful doing it on our own, cause then you feel like you're being confident, independent, more than relying on a teacher's help. There's not really a wrong or right answer in it.

MP: The activity was in a small group of us, it's much better than being spread out like thirty of us in a classroom.

MP: The activity helped you to see what's the worrying kind of action of sexual experiences.

Our research findings corroborate those of the [Sex Education Forum \(2022\)](#) which found that pornography was a neglected subject area. The young people in our study were very engaged with the pornography quote activity. In each instance that we delivered this, participants started off slowly and by the end of the activity there were vibrant discussions taking place in each group regarding the relevance of the quotes and how to rank them. In many cases the participants discussed that all quotes were relevant.

MP: All the quotes are really important and relevant, there's just a fine margin separating them.

MP: It's just that some quotes we view higher than others.

Overall the consensus amongst the groups was that the quotes were important to consider:

FP: The thing is with the quotes, this isn't saying that's important and that's not. It's just saying like it's all important.

MP: But just cause a quote is low down in the list it doesn't mean we don't agree with them. We still think they're important.

FP: I think the quotes are helpful because some people may agree with them and this is important to talk about.

Film as Entry Point for Discussing a Range of Topics

Similarly to the positive response to the pornography quote activity we delivered, the response to the film [DARE](#) confirmed that it was a helpful entry point for discussing sensitive and specialist areas such as pornography, consent and coercion. The effective presentation of real-life experience prompted reflections about behaviour:

FP: It (the film) kind of shows you that you should ignore messages like that and well eventually we should tell someone about it, if not straight away.

FP: It was very realistic (the film), it wasn't like, you know sometimes you get these films where it doesn't make them feel like it's real-life?

FP: I think another good thing about today it's very different from a PSHE lesson because you've also got, like with the film, that was from someone's perspective where it actually happened to them and this is what other people actually said. And also, just talking in our different groups today and having someone who knows about this stuff come in and talk to us about it.

FP: I think it (the film) kind of like shows how people can feel pressured to give what their partner wants in a relationship, cause although she didn't want it I think she kind of pretended that she did just to try and keep the relationship going, even though she knew it wasn't working. It can lead into an interesting discussion about how people may feel.

MP: It (the film) definitely does get to the point in how we should treat people, whether that be men or women. I think it's a very strong video and it shows the point we should respect, we should treat others the way that we want to be treated, so I think it's a very strong topic to talk about.

FP3: It's good to represent examples of a manipulative relationship so people can see and differentiate that from a normal one.

Our findings demonstrate that the young people we spoke to were, in the main, able to handle a range of content related to consent in a mature and meaningful way.⁸ The Ofsted report considered the area of maturity:

Children and young people were generally concerned that the curriculum did not take account of their level of maturity. They felt that they could deal with more challenging content than teachers realised. This was particularly raised as an issue in the teaching of issues around consent. Older children and young people accepted that teaching about consent through analogies made sense in younger years. But this became jarring and patronising for them when the same or similar content was repeated in their later years of school ([Ofsted 2021: 39](#)).

We contend that the young people in our study wanted material that was challenging in content and enabled them to discuss the complexity of their lives – including consent - and of the online environment they were navigating - including pornography - and the issues it raised. The [Equimundo \(2022\)](#) report is clear that because young people spend increasing amounts of time online, making distinctions between the online and offline world is increasingly irrelevant, and 'children and childhood can no longer be conceptualised as separate from the digital world' (26). The report also notes that exposure to the online environment is happening as young as 10 and below, with girls being solicited for nudes and sent nudes, and boys being harassed with, in many cases, unwanted pornography that can lead to distress. The impact of pornography on male expectations of intimate relationships was also acknowledged by our study participants.

⁸ Although some participants shared that levels of maturity within RSHE classes sometimes affected learning, with less mature boys joking about serious topics and distracting the class. This was considered a challenge for some teachers to manage effectively.

Schools and teachers need to be enabled to use learning approaches that assist young people and their families in navigating their current environment towards healthy and respectful interactions. We understand that this can be a difficult area to cover, particularly in relation to bringing parents on board and we have no quick answers to address this. However, [Ofsted, \(2021: 40\)](#) note the importance of schools working with families in their RSHE provision and that in their curriculum planning for RSHE 'it is essential that schools work closely with parents and carers to talk them through areas covered, address any gaps in their understanding and equip them with the confidence to be able to have open discussions with their children'. We would advocate this joined up approach.

Research Question Two: How do Young People want to Learn about Consent and Pornography in Schools?

Allow Time and Prioritise RSHE

Overall the idea that RSHE should be given more time and be a higher priority in the curriculum emerged within our discussions, supporting the findings of [\(Ofsted, 2021\)](#), and emphasised the need for more regular learning opportunities. For example:

FP: So, we only have three sex education lessons in the whole PSHE.

FP: We started like once a week, didn't we?

FP: Yeah, we used to have like two every fortnight.

FP: I think two is better than one, which sort of happens now, because it's like once every other week, which isn't very good I don't think. I think we should have a bit more knowledge on it and understanding.

FP: Yeah, I think it's easier to forget things when it's just once every other week.

MP: I feel like three lessons isn't enough to cover sex education in general. I think we need a lot more.

MP: I personally think it should be twice a fortnight, so every two weeks you should have at least two lessons.

Finding time for RSHE delivery within the busy curriculum was noted as a particular issue within the [Ofsted \(2021\)](#) Report, with school leaders noting that it was difficult to find the space in the curriculum. [Ofsted \(2021\)](#) also found that the time set aside for delivery of RSHE often did not meet requirements and was minimal and this resulted in teachers struggling to cover RSHE in the detail needed. Some of the children and young people in the Ofsted Report, similar to our own findings, noted that time set aside for RSHE was not always prioritised, and was sometimes 'taken for other things'. This was particularly the case for those who faced other pressures, such as exam revision or catch-up interventions [Ofsted \(2021: 40\)](#). Whilst all of the teachers that we worked with on this study held RSHE in high regard, the challenges of a packed curriculum remain and need to be acknowledged in policy.

Learning across Genders

A varied response emerged when participants discussed delivery of RSHE in mixed or gender segregated groups, but overall support for delivery in mixed gender groups emerged:

MP: I think we need to know what girls go through and what boys go through. If you're a girl you should know what a boy goes through, if you're a boy you should know what a girl goes through. Cause you've got a better understanding.

FP: I found it weird when we did it in primary school cause they separated us between boys and girls.

FP: I think we should do a mixed gender group.

We would suggest that gender-segregated approaches have little utility today; where possible both the gender and sexuality spectrum should be considered in all delivery of RSHE. This encompasses an 'inclusive by default' approach, so that young people can learn that acknowledging the limits of gender and sexual binaries benefits all ([Equimundo, 2022, 32](#)). Delivery in gender-segregated groups may be less likely to facilitate this approach. The young people in our study were generally positive about learning together in a way that acknowledges and integrates different lived experiences of gender.

Indeed, in the exercise discussing quotes in relation to pornography, in one of the focus group discussions a male participant who was in a group with female participants shared how insightful the conversations had been as they had exposed him to female experiences related to objectification and body image which he might never have been exposed to

In the case of single-gender schools, we recommend the perspective of all genders should be discussed.

Confidence, Openness, Respect and Adaptability of those Delivering RSHE

Although there were differences of opinion from the young people on whether teachers or outside professionals should deliver RSHE; there was consensus regarding the need for adults to have confidence in delivering the subject and an approachable attitude, as well as students feeling comfortable with and confident in those delivering it:

FP: I think we all feel comfortable with different teachers, you know, like some teachers we might find really discomfoting and some we might talk more to.

MP: Yeah, and I guess also the type of teacher it is, cause if it was someone that's quite strict and sticks to the rules you wouldn't want to talk to them in a personal way.

FP: With you [the researchers] doing this, it's just like a lot more open, cause obviously you're not a teacher to us, we don't know you. We'll never know you so we can talk a bit more.

FP: I think it would definitely help, if your teacher doesn't know much about the subject, to have someone who does to talk about it. Cause if they don't really know what they're talking about they might project their own feelings into it or they might have a lot of misinformation which could confuse children even more.

The [Ofsted \(2021: 40\)](#) report considers different approaches used by schools and to include, alongside the provision by teachers within school, inviting 'trusted external speakers with specialist knowledge to talk to children and young people' to deliver some aspects of the curriculum. Overall the young people emphasised how important it was to have respect inform the delivery of RSHE:

FP: Respect is listening to people's ideas and not judging them by the way they think. Like if someone is gay and you don't prefer that, then maybe you should keep those ideas to yourself and teach your lesson, instead of being disrespectful and going uugh, what are you talking about, that's not what we learn in here.

MP: I think schools should teach respecting other people's beliefs or ethnicities or gender...it should be a big thing in PSHE that we should learn about other people's genders respectfully.

FP: As long as whoever delivers it are very respectful. And aware that the situation might be uncomfortable for some people.

FP: PSHE teachers are really good cause they're always just respectful and they understand the topics.

MP: There's got to be that understanding and respect, like for matters that's uncomfortable to some people.

Research Question 3: What Kind of RSHE Resources and Activities can Empower Young People to Forge Healthy Relationships in their Daily Lives?

Enabling Environments

We have begun to answer this question by previously demonstrating that the participants appreciated both the film activity and the quotes related to pornography activity used in this current study. Given the support expressed for these activities, it is fair to assume that

using different media in some way may be a useful entry point, as may using quotes from prior research to open up discussion and debate. Participants talked in depth about the importance of reliability and the relevance of resources used.

[Cense \(2019, 272\)](#) argues for a necessary change in sexuality education which stimulates critical consciousness in students through enabling environments. This may mean a shift in positioning of teachers during RSHE delivery from teacher as 'authority figure', to teacher as 'facilitator'; handing power over to students to lead the way. Teachers feeling comfortable to give up 'responsibility for knowing' ([Haggis and Mullholland, 2014, 63](#)) and exploring learning alongside young people would be required. The young people in this study told us they did not want to be taught by structured PowerPoint or worksheet and that questions and time for questions should be prioritised:

MP: Teachers have a PowerPoint they have to follow, but if they just had a vague idea of what they were going to do in that lesson then they could let it go around however the questions led it, and that'd probably be better.

MP: Worksheets are not consent-driven, like this video was so much more helpful.

FP: Yeah, you get given kind of what I'd call like a flat worksheet. It didn't show the wrong and rights of what happens.

FP: A worksheet doesn't really tell you about the grey lines or the grey areas in it, it's just like do this, don't do this and don't do this!

[Ofsted \(2021\)](#) noted that in approximately half of the schools they visited, teachers were not given adequate formal training to deliver RSHE, they were expected to deliver content, often in tutor time, and that resources were sent late, meaning they could not look at them before teaching took place; this could lead to resentment and reluctance to teach the subject. [Ofsted \(2021, p.39\)](#) also found that the children and young people were aware of this:

It's like a task that teachers have to do, they don't take it seriously, so it's not a good environment to learn about it. How can any of us take it seriously if they don't? You can tell they don't want to do the PowerPoint. It's always stuff we've done before anyway.

This could have the result that young people feel less able to talk to teachers about sensitive issues because young people were 'unsure what the reactions of less confident teachers would be' ([Ofsted, 2021, p.39](#)).

In many of the focus groups participants talked about not being picked on to answer things in RSHE, which they sometimes referred to as 'cold calling':

FP: I think probably at least not picking random people to answer questions if they don't want to, if they're not comfortable with answering the question they shouldn't have to.

FP: Some people won't want to talk about things like that in front of the whole class... If you put your hand up it's sort of like you're really keen to answer the question. But if you're just picked on then you've just got to answer it really.

FP: I think it can definitely make people feel really anxious and probably dread going to your class if you just pick people at random cause you'll be scared that they're going to pick you and you won't know, and sometimes you get told off for not knowing. So, it can be quite scary.

When we asked about whether cold calling happened a lot, students said that it did, and when we asked if it should happen during delivery of sensitive subjects such as RSHE, they said:

FP: No. Cause if your hand's not up then you're not comfortable with answering the question, or you don't know the answer.

In some of the focus groups participants talked about offering choices to ask questions anonymously that would be covered later:

FP: We did a sex education lesson and there was a box that our tutor had that we could put questions in and he'd answer them every other tutor time or something.

MP: Yeah, doing that you could ask pretty much whatever you wanted and it was anonymous.

FP: I think also with the anonymous questions in a box helps, cause some people might have a question they really want to ask but they don't feel comfortable putting their hand up and then everyone knowing in the class that they were the ones that asked it.

FP: I think maybe we should have like an anonymous box for example or something, where people can get their questions answered. Cause like we only have three lessons on that topic until we move on and so it's not that much time to ask your questions and get them answered if you have them.

Where the opportunity to ask anonymous questions was being offered in schools, it was identified as a good thing by the young people in the study:

MP: I remember when Miss [Name] set up like an anonymous website thing where she'll get things posted in and then she'll try and answer them to the best of her ability. So, questions like I know somebody did ask 'How do I know if I'm gay?'

Others discussed about surveying young people so that their ideas were at the forefront of delivery:

MP: Have a questionnaire or something at the start of the year.

MP: You could say about what you wanted then.

MP: Get a questionnaire round so people can actually say what they want to have in a lesson and what they want to talk about.

A whole school approach to delivery of RSHE has already been recommended ([Ofsted, 2021](#); [Equimundo, 2022](#)). We contend that a whole school approach should centre young people's voices and their expressed information and support needs. [Ofsted \(2021: 31\)](#) highlighted the importance of listening to children and young people, noting good practice in a school that 'held 'listening events' to enable children and young people share worries and speak to adults in a safe environment. They noted another school which was using 'an anonymous questionnaire to ask children and young people what the issues for their age group were and what language they used when discussing sexual harassment and online sexual abuse' (31). The responses to this were reported back in staff training and this is noted as helping to 'build a culture where children and young people, leaders and teachers had a shared understanding of what sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, were' (31). We advocate a similar school approach, which includes designing elements of the RSHE curriculum with children and young people and developing a shared understanding through this process.

Young people in our study were also clear about having RSHE delivered in small groups and with peers that they felt comfortable with; friends seemed important here if possible, and gender was again identified as less important than groups that you were comfortable with:

MP: As long as I'm doing it with one of my mates I'd be good.

FP: We talked about having groups like by gender, I think, just groups you feel comfortable with.

MP: RSHE should be in small groups with people around you that you can trust. It feels a bit awkward with people that you don't exactly know too well.

FP: I feel like it's good to talk about things but I expect sometimes that people get nervous in a large group of people you don't really know to speak up and talk about things. So I think it would be better if you do it in like smaller groups of people who know you all so you feel comfortable.

FP: If you did it in small groups, because otherwise it's kind of awkward if it's a big class discussion, you probably don't want to talk to everyone in the class about it.

Generally, there was the view that smaller groups could then join with bigger groups to extend discussion. Some of the young people also discussed that level of maturity was important in groups, as some students were more mature than others.

Critical Conversations

Changes to how RSHE is delivered and the development of content that is relevant to young people's lives will take time. It will take a willingness to consider sensitive and contentious subjects within its lived context, and to start early in children and young people's learning. RSHE content development is a continuous process and at the forefront of this should be greater understandings of the contexts in which individual schools operate. Regular consultation with young people, which enables content that is responsive to their lived reality of their lives will support this. The schools in our study were keen to facilitate this as is demonstrated by the positive ways in which they worked with us to enable this study.

In our study, asking the young people to first write down what they needed to know about in RSHE on Post-it-Notes allowed them to be very much in control of the conversation and to use language and issues that were relevant and relatable to them. In then watching the film [DARE](#), which was made with the involvement of young people for young people and based on real life scenarios, encouraged open debate. Finally, in providing the young people with quotes considering the impact of pornography upon young people and allowing them to talk about these quotes in their groups, critical conversations occurred quite spontaneously. These experiences exemplify how carefully chosen activities can prompt considered, awareness-raising and critical reflections from young people. These approaches might be replicated.

For example, we think that quotes such as the following extracts from our data could be used as critical conversation starters within RSHE. The first quotes centre around stereotypical gender norms that can be harmful to all genders:

MP: I think using 'being a girl' as an insult is a bad thing because it kind of blends in with toxic masculinity, where some people who might not be as masculine think that they need to act more this way.

MP: I don't like the term 'more masculine' or 'less masculine'. I'd argue that men shouldn't have to feel like they have to behave in a certain way.

MP: Girls get to hold hands...Why can't boys do it, why do they get classed as gay if they do?

FP: What I find really weird though is when boys have sex with people the boys like you more but when girls have it (a lot of sex) they get called slags and everything.

FP: In society people want women to be submissive.

The below quotes took place in the context of masculinity expectations and also revolved around a need to discuss various sexualities including asexuality:

MP: In class if I say I've never masturbated they'll be like, what?! What?! They'll be surprised that I haven't.

FP: I think some people definitely feel as though they are not straight or they identify as something else and they don't realise it, because sometimes it can be really confusing to try and understand.

The impact of peer pressure came up a lot in the young people's discussions, these are just two quotes that came up and that might be useful conversational openers:

FP: Peer pressure can be where they're not pressuring you sexually, but because they're doing it and everyone else is doing it you want to do it anyway, even though it's not something you'd usually do.

MP: Peer pressure is something that you experience in all forms of life but especially in school. I mean, you can't escape it.

The young people in our study had surprisingly mature conversations about the impact of pornography. Therefore, ignoring pornography in school provision of RSHE is not a useful approach. Our research also demonstrates the capacity of young people to handle difficult and contentious areas. The following quotes could be useful entry points through which to facilitate discussion in sensitive subjects. However, using quotes like this would require confident, open, respectful and adaptable teachers who were well trained and well-resourced and who felt confident that their school would support them in exploring these conversations with young people. It would also require consultation with parents about the delivery of content such as this. Quotes like this would potentially need integrating into a holistic approach and students would need to be well supported with follow up to these discussion activities to answer questions and to deal with misinformation that could emerge:

FP: I think pornography can make people think that sex works in a certain way even though more often than not that's not how it is and it's not usually how it goes. It's quite different to what it shows online.

FP: Cause there's obviously different types of porn. I don't know, something like Only Fans for example, it's the person that's doing it is consenting to it and the people that they're with are fully consenting to it. Whereas sites like, I don't know, Pornhub, most people aren't consenting to it, or they consent once and then they're just forced to do whatever the producers want, so that the producers get the money.

FP: I think there's different types of porn, like most people don't seek ethically sourced porn.

FP: And if boys our age are watching porn they're going to think, oh they're going to have that body, I want a girl with that body, whereas we're still growing, we don't have those kind of bodies.

FP: Like, at a young age boys would expect us to look like what girls look like on porn, when they're fully developed, and we can't even look like that cause they've probably had plastic surgery and they're actresses.

FP: In porn, it just happens, they don't ask for consent or anything, and I think if people are watching it at such a young age sometimes they might not really understand consent, or they might be confused.

This final statement set below is an oversimplification but would be useful in opening up conversations with young people about the role of schools in challenging harmful gender norms:

FP: I think school should just teach more about sex ed. **FP:** Yeah. **FP:** And then kids wouldn't have to search it up and get the wrong idea of women and men, like how they should act or how they should look.

We also think that using testimonies from the ['Everyone's Invited'](#) website might provide a relevant and relatable way to open up critical conversations in RSHE. However, this would also need a sensitive approach and consultation with children, young people and their families/carers as many of the testimonials are very challenging. We looked at the ['Everyone's Invited'](#) website and considered giving examples of testimonies to use, but decided this is a matter for schools to consider after consulting (in age-appropriate ways) with children, young people and their parents/carers. However, we end this section noting [Ofsted \(2021, 31\)](#) were in favour of such approaches to critical conversations that we are suggesting here, 'In some schools, leaders were reflecting on the testimonies on the Everyone's Invited website to critically evaluate and strengthen their processes'. Ofsted also noted another school using an approach called 'changing the narrative' pupil group. Within this group the school was gathering information from its students to understand what they wanted to know more about in RSHE, and this was fed back to leaders in the school. These approaches are in line with our recommendations which highlight innovative critical approaches through consultation with young people to produce relevant and relatable resources for RSHE delivery.

Study Limitations

We acknowledge a potential school bias in the sample in that all schools that took part were schools inspected by Ofsted/compliance reports as 'Good'. We also acknowledge that those students who agreed to take part may have been more invested in the subject that we were researching, and that the parents and carers who consented to their participation may have been more open and responsive in terms of the subject under research. This may have skewed some of our findings to a slightly more informed participant sample.

Appendix Demographics of Participants

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Focus Group 1	8 participants. 3 females. 5 males. All white British.	5 participants. 4 females. 1 male. 4 white British. 1 Caribbean male.	7 participants. 2 females. 5 males. All white British.	6 participants. 6 males. 2 white British. 2 Chinese. 2 Indian.	9 participants. 4 females. 5 males. 2 white British females. 2 white British males. 1 African/Black British female. 1 Black/African Female. 1 prefer not to say male. 1 mixed ethnic group male. 1 Black/African Caribbean male.
Focus group 2	8 participants. 4 females. 4 males. All white British.	5 participants. 2 females. 3 males. 3 white British. 1 other female. 1 Polish male.	10 participants. 6 females. 3 males. 1 gender fluid. 8 white British. 1 no ethnic definition. 1 multiple ethnicity.	4 participants. 2 males. 1 transgender. 1 prefer not to say. 4 white British.	N.A. only one focus group.
Totals: Focus Group 1 and 2	16 Participants. 7 females. 9 males. 16 white British.	10 participants. 6 females. 4 males. 7 white British. 1 other ethnicity female. 1 Caribbean male. 1 Polish male.	17 participants. 8 females. 8 males. 1 gender fluid. 15 white British. 1 no ethnic definition male. 1 multiple ethnicity male.	10 Participants. 8 males. 1 transgender. 1 prefer not to say. 6 white British. 2 Chinese males. 2 Indian males.	9 participants. 4 females. 5 males. 2 white British females. 2 white British males. 1 African/Black British female. 1 Black/African female. 1 prefer not to say male. 1 mixed ethnic group male. 1 Black/African Caribbean male.

Totals of Schools and Participants

Totals for All Schools and All Focus Groups
5 schools.
9 focus groups.
62 participants.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 25 females. 34 males.• 1 gender fluid.• 1 transgender.• 1 prefer not to say.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 48 white British.• 1 other ethnicity female.• 1 African/Black British female.• 1 Black/African female.• 1 Caribbean male.• 1 polish male.• 1 no ethnicity noted male.• 1 prefer not to say male.• 1 mixed ethnic group male.• 1 multiple ethnicity male.• 1 Black/African Caribbean male.• 2 Chinese males.• 2 Indian males.



Consent Form

Young Person Consent Form

Research Title: What and how do young people want to learn about relationship and sex education in school and how can this inform resource development?

This consent form will have been given to you with the Participant Information Sheet. Please ensure that you have read and understood the information contained in the Participant Information Sheet and asked any questions before you sign this form. If you have any questions please contact a member of the research team, whose details are set out on the Participant Information Sheet.

- If you are happy to take part in the discussion group please sign and date the form. You can return this form to us by emailing helen2.bovill@uwe.ac.uk. Or you may return it via your school.
- I have read and understood the information in the Participant Information Sheet which I have been given to read before being asked to sign this form;
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study;
- I have had my questions answered satisfactorily by the research team;
- I understand that the discussions will be recorded and that anonymised quotes may be used in the final Report of this study;
- I understand that participation is voluntary and that consent can be withdrawn at any time, without giving a reason;
- I understand the limits to withdrawing data once data collection has taken place which have been explained to me in the participant information sheet;
- I agree to take part in the research.

Name (Printed).....

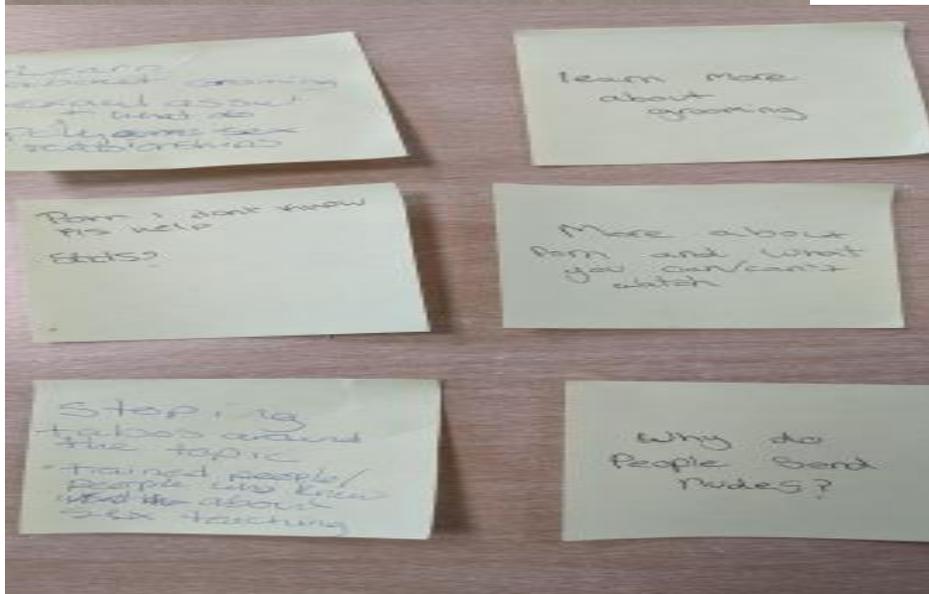
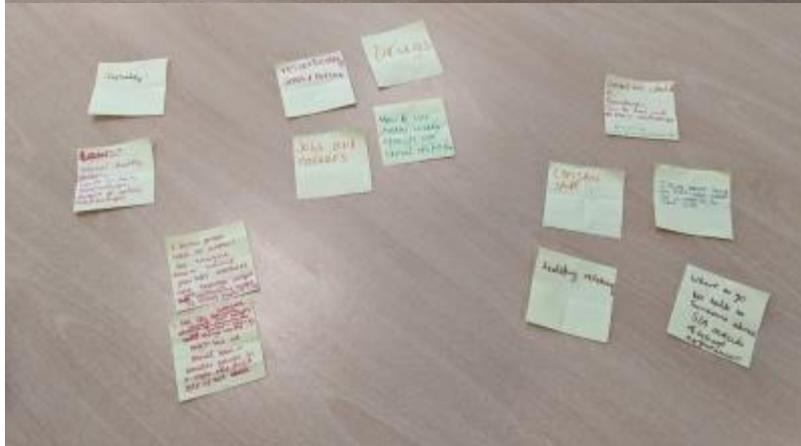
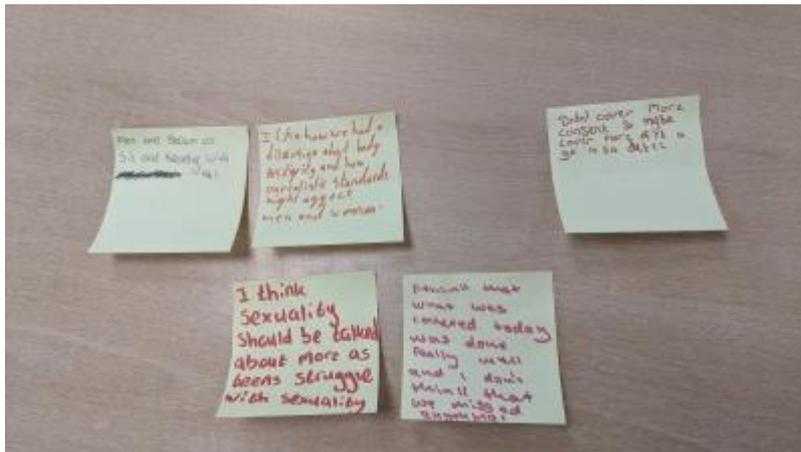
Signature..... Date.....

You do not have to answer the questions below, they are asked to help us to describe the groups of students who take part in our study. We know that this will not include all students.

1. What gender do you identify with (please circle or add own definition):
Female Male Non-Binary Transgender Prefer Not to Say I Self define as.....

2. What ethnicity do you identify with (please circle or add own definition):
White British Multiple Ethnic Group Asian/Asian British
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British Chinese Indian Pakistani Other Ethnic Group
Prefer Not to Say I Self Define as

Post-it Note Activity Response Examples



Quotes Used

QUOTES ON PORNOGRAPHY FROM LUCEY & MALSON (2021)

"Porn could be useful in answering questions that could be embarrassing to ask and that aren't covered in the school curriculum"

"I believe it (porn) makes women out to be like objects and to be viewed as sexual things instead of a woman who may also enjoy sex herself"

"Some of the messages in porn make me upset"

"It (porn) definitely presents the wrong ideas of women, especially to those who may be younger and more impressionable. It presents the idea that all women are basically just sex machines and that they all look perfect, only make the right noises, and constantly look sexy and act sexy"

"Porn absolutely impacted how I see my own body. I feel as if unless I'm clean shaven, toned, and curvy in the right places I'm not living up to expectation"

"Porn allowed me to explore my sexuality as a teenager"

"Black women are only really seen as sexy if they are lighter skinned, have a round bum and huge boobs."

"I think porn can cause issues around consent... Consent is often a blurred line and violence is accepted"

"Porn puts out the message that women want to be forced - women want to be raped - that no really means yes"

"I put pressure on myself to act a certain way during sex. I would say that I'm not confident at all, even with a long-term partner, and I think this is connected to porn as well as other things"

"Lesbian porn is unrealistic and very stage managed... and just portrays what men would want to see"

Quote Ranking Activity Examples

