

Short Summary of Research with Young People for the Development of Impactful Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE).

(Full report available by contacting lead author or accessing their UWE [website](#)).

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

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Context

This current study was developed to facilitate understanding of what young people want to learn about in relationships, sex and health Education (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.

It takes place in the context of Ofsted findings identified in a rapid review of sexual abuse in schools ([Ofsted, 2021](#)). Ofsted found areas of serious concern surrounding sexual abuse in school have arisen in the context of child-on-child or peer-on-peer abuse. Additionally, the thousands of testimonies from survivors of sexual abuse within school and education contexts in the forum '[Everyone's Invited](#)' further demonstrate that this is an area of urgent concern. This is amongst other research such as The [Women and Equalities Committee inquiry \(2016\)](#), which similarly found sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools to be widespread. The current study also takes place in the context of changes to UK statutory guidance ([DFE, 2019](#)) which introduced new mandates around RSHE, making this compulsory in secondary schools in England from late 2020. For a fuller review of the context, please see the full report.

Research Questions

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 range of workshop activities, film screening and focus group discussion.

Post-it Note Activity and Focus Group Discussions

Researchers started focus groups with a request to 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 generated discussion by asking students group questions about the issues they had raised in their post-it notes.

Film Activity

Participants watched a 14-minute film [‘DARE’](#), which was made with young people by two of the research team, and considers the influence of pornography on behaviour, and the impact of coercive behaviour on teenage relationships. Participants were asked to discuss 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.

Quotes Activity

Each group was then asked to self-divide into smaller groups to look at and discuss a collection of quotes regarding the impact of pornography on young people’s lives. These quotes emanated from previous research, by one of the research team, with young adults who had been asked in an online qualitative survey about the impact of exposure to pornography on them ([Lucey and Malson, 2021](#)).

Recommendations.

- Be prepared to have critical conversations with young people about contentious areas such as challenging harmful gender norms, and pornography. Understand the impact of these areas for young people.
- 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.

The main themes emerging from our research

1. Focus on Relationships

Young people want a higher focus on relationships and their various facets, rather than an over emphasis on biology and mechanics of sex.

2. Consider Consent in Depth

Overall, young people who participated in the focus groups said that consent was covered in their RSHE lessons, however they wanted a greater depth of focus on consent to allow discussion of 'grey' areas and of complex situations.

3. Integrate Diverse Sexualities and Genders

Participants told us that there was inconsistency in delivery regarding sexuality and LGBTQ+ content, and that this was often a 'bolt on', rather than integrated within teaching.

4. Do not Ignore Pornography

The young people who participated in our focus groups discussed knowledge regarding misinformation online which can lead to unrealistic expectations of sex and relationships behaviour. Participants discussed having little or no outlets to talk about pornography and that it was important for them to be able to do this in a supportive, respectful and knowledgeable, environment.

5. Use Innovative Entry Points for Discussing a Range of RSHE Topics

Responses to the quote activity used and the film [DARE](#) confirmed that these were a helpful entry point for discussing sensitive and specialist areas such as pornography, consent and coercion. The effective presentation of real-life experience was highlighted as important.

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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. Respect was an important aspect from teachers to pupils and pupils to teachers and to one another.

9. Enabling Environments and Critical Conversations

This may mean a shift in positioning of teachers during RSHE delivery from teacher being seen as the 'authority figure', to teacher being in the capacity of 'facilitator'; handing power over to students to lead the way. 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.

Some Concluding Thoughts

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 their lived contexts, and to start early in children and young people's learning. RSHE content development is a continuous process and at the forefront of this, understandings of the contexts in which individual schools operate is important to acknowledge. Regular consultation with young people, which enables content that is responsive to the lived reality of their lives will support this contextual understanding between schools and pupils. 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. Watching the film [DARE](#), which was made with the involvement of young people for young people and based on real life scenarios, encouraged conversational openers leading to 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. Students worked together to consider complex issues such as body image, power, discrimination, sexual abuse and harassment, gender and sexuality, relationship complexities, and the impact of the online environment; across these resources and

activities. The participants' responses to these activities demonstrate how carefully chosen activities can prompt considered, awareness-raising and critical reflections from young people. These approaches might be replicated, developed or expanded in schools. Students would ideally be consulted upon this.

The young people in our study had surprisingly mature conversations about the impact of pornography. Additionally, it is unrealistic in a digitally diverse environment to expect young people not to be impacted in some way by this environment which likely includes greater exposure to pornography. Therefore, ignoring pornography in school provision of RSHE is not a useful approach. Our research demonstrates the capacity of young people to handle difficult and contentious areas when given facilitative support to do so.

We consider that using testimonies from young people that have been sensitively and anonymously gathered or using forums and material such as 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. [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. We advocate an approach that is led by consultation with young people. The young people in our study were largely in favour of more consultation too. Listening to young people about what they need to know about in RSHE was a focus that emerged from this research.

Quotes and examples from the research can be found in the full report, available [here](#).

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.

