

## Executive Summary

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## **Executive Summary: Young People's Voices: Relationships, Health and Sex Education**

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**2024**

This report outlines the feedback from a number of steering groups of young people in response to relationships, sex and health education (RSHE). In response to the Department for Education (DfE) planning the best approach of how to engage with young people, and bring their voices into the process, the DfE welcomed an offer from Brook to convene young people's perspectives to inform the draft RSHE guidance. Brook then coordinated a range of stakeholders to carry out steering groups, these included young people from Brook's own participation forum, schools, Sexpression:UK, Girlguiding and SafeLives. Across all of these groups a range of 27 young people aged 10-25 were spoken to about their experiences of RSHE to gain insight and steer from them to outline what is important to young people that needs to be included in RSHE and to provide insight into the important factors that need consideration in relation to the new draft guidance for RSHE. The secondary data from the steering group responses were then analysed by King-Hill using thematic content analysis. Whilst the number of young people taking part in the study is minimal it provides a vital perspective on what young people need and are experiencing in relation to RSHE.

It is important to note that the themes that emerged from the steering groups strongly reflect and align with a vast amount of robust research findings, from a range of fields, that set out what young people need from RSHE to provide them with the information required to support their well-being and to keep them healthy and safe. Research studies in this area also highlights the importance of listening to young people when considering what is required for adequate RSHE.

### **Aim**

To gain insight from a range of young people, via a number of steering groups, on relationships, sex and health education (RHSE) and what more needs to be considered for the new draft guidance to fully address the needs of young people.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of the steering groups were to understand:

- 1) What are young people's experiences of RSHE to date.

- 2) What are the enablers for effective RSHE.
- 3) What are the barriers to effective RSHE.
- 4) What more can be done to ensure that RSHE is meeting the needs of young people.

## Findings

- **RSHE is boring:** The steering groups feedback indicated that the delivery of was 'boring' and the young people were treated as passive learners in the pedagogical process rather than active participants that were experts in their world.
- **RSHE is one-sided:** RSHE experiences were 'one-sided'. On many occasions the young people were told what they can and can't do in relation to sex and relationships and little consideration was given to their own specific and contextual needs and experiences.
- **The importance of the educator:** Successful RSHE is dependent upon the skills, knowledge and approach of the educator/teacher. This is a key component in successful and effective RSHE sessions.
- **Shame:** There was a large element of shame to RSHE which inhibited learning and reinforced the position that sex, especially, is something to be embarrassed about. With RSHE fostering awkwardness around sex.
- **Lack of RSHE provision:** Many of the young people indicated that they could not comment on RSHE as they had not received any teaching on this in their educational experiences and that RSHE was self-taught from varied sources that did not include school/college.
- **Lack of diversity in RSHE:** There was a lack of diversity in RSHE teaching approaches that the young people had received which inhibited learning.
- **Lack of participatory teaching styles:** Linking to a lack of confident and effective teachers. Those that had RSHE found that is instructional and not participatory which fostered shame due to the awkwardness felt by many educators which translated to the young peoples perspectives on relationships and sex. Additionally, some of the young people totally lacked any RSHE throughout their educational journey.
- **Practical sessions and the importance of educator skill:** Practical sessions were memorable both positively and negatively and dependent on how they were framed and taught.
- **RSHE is heteronormative:** The heteronormative nature of the RSHE the young people received was highlighted on numerous occasions. Any sessions offered on LGBTQ+ were perceived as an add on, rather than integrated within incremental teaching on RSHE.

- **Lacking LGBTQ+ (including gender) education:** The young people indicated that they want more of this education at a much younger age. It was felt that this should be incremental and build throughout the school journey. Some of the responses indicated that sexuality was taught but gender was omitted. They felt that this would have been a useful component of RSHE.
- **Sexism:** Examples of sexism in RSHE were given in the steering groups (i.e only teaching about male masturbation for example and framing boys as perpetrators and girls as victims without further explorations of the nuances of the issue of VAWG). Additionally, It was highlighted that boys and girls were often split to learn about different aspect of RSHE and that this was counterproductive and fosters divides and reinforces gender as binary.
- **Too little, too late:** RSHE has to start from a young age and be incremental for it to be effective. It was highlighted that many aspects of RSHE should be taught before exposure to the internet. RSHE did not incrementally develop with them and they were taught the same things each year. The young people indicated that in many instances they were being taught what they already know.
- **Pleasure:** RSHE was not found to be contextualised within personal pleasure and that many sessions were geared around fear and putting young people off relationships and sexual activity. This again fosters shame and awkwardness around sex and relationships and inhibits key conversations on the various topics in relation to this and individual sexual well-being.
- **Period Education:** Period education being too late was a key theme that emerged from the reposes. Many of the young people felt that this was often after young people had started their periods, which was counter-productive and compounded the shame and taboo around periods..
- **A lack of young person input into RSHE:** The majority of young people on the steering groups had never been asked what should be included in the RSHE that they were receiving. A key element running through the responses was the eagerness of the young people to contribute and support the design of good RSHE.
- **Safe spaces:** Good RSHE provision provides safe spaces whereby young people can explore the issues around RSHE that concern them.

## Recommendations

- **Listen to young people:** Young people need to contribute to RSHE for it to be effective.

- **Early RSHE:** RSHE has to start from a young age and be incremental for it to be effective.
- **The importance of diverse teaching methods in RSHE:** Diverse teaching methods and approaches has to underpin RSHE to enhance successful outcomes and positively impact upon the lives of young people.
- **LGBTQ+ inclusive:** all RSHE needs to include information about LGBTQ+ people..
- **Gender inclusive:** all RSHE needs to include information and education on different genders.
- **RSHE needs to be taken seriously:** RSHE has to be on a par with other subjects so that it gains credibility.

**Teacher/educator training:** Educators in RSHE, whether from a school/college or an outside agency, have to be fully trained, knowledgeable and approachable.

## Summary

From the responses the young people highlighted that they want safe, unbiased, inclusive spaces to be created in which they can learn about RSHE. RSHE needs to start earlier and be led by the young people and be designed and based around what they need. They indicated the need for good educators that are skilled in RSHE education, whether that be outside agencies or in house teaching staff with specific skills and training in RSHE. The responses to this discussion also highlighted the need for LGBTQ+ education (including gender) to be mandatory and woven into RSHE rather than a stand-alone component. They also indicated that they want more, not less, LGBTQ+ education. Pleasure was indicated to be a vital component that is missing in many sessions, as is the choice not to have sex. They also indicated a need for there to be more focus upon relationships from an early age. The responses also demonstrated that the young people felt that RSHE needs to be taken as seriously as other subjects and that they should be taught in mixed gender classes. They specified that sessions for parents and carers would be helpful to align school with home. The responses also indicated that young people want good RSHE to keep them safe and to support them in negotiating the world around them.