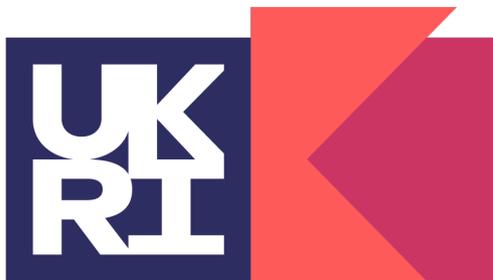


“We are all educating our children” – parent/carer perspectives on RSE in primary schools

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Executive summary

In the lead-up to the government review on Relationships, Sex, and Health Education (RSHE) statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2019), Coram Life Education worked with Cait, a PhD student at Durham University, to survey and interview a range of parents and carers to develop further insight into parents' and carers' perceptions and views on RSE in primary schools.

Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is... "learning about the emotional, social and physical aspects of human development, relationships, sexuality, wellbeing and sexual health" (Sex Education Forum, 2022). In primary schools, Relationships and Health Education is statutory and Sex Education is recommended with some aspects of statutory within some elements of the National Curriculum. RSE is important to support in children and young people making informed decisions, develop critical thinking skills, learn their rights and responsibilities, develop positive relationships based on respect and equality, reduce harmful behaviour and safeguard them from harm (ibid).

WHAT DO WE KNOW ALREADY...?

Young people's experiences of RSE... have often been referred to as 'too little, too late and too biological' (Blake & Aggleto, 2017). Evidence shows that young people are more likely to practice safer sex as a result of school RSE and that RSE works best if it starts before a young person is sexually active and responds to the needs of the pupils as they mature [3]. There is no evidence that RSE hastens first sexual experiences. Young people recognise that their RSE needs are unmet and feel they could deal with more challenging content (Ofsted, 2021).

Parents/carers see RSE as important... and relevant to primary school children and vital to keep children safe (Robinson et al., 2017). Although there is a vocal minority who have concerns about what and how sexuality education is being taught, parents and carers generally want their children to have good knowledge about relationships and sex (ibid). However, there are some challenges for parents/carers such as worries regarding the child's age and their own knowledge around relationships and sex affecting their ability to have these conversations at home.

Prominent narratives and tensions surround RSE such as... whether RSE is age-appropriate, safeguarding and certain topics.

Age-appropriate debates are sparked by narratives of childhood innocence and concerns that children are "too young", particularly in primary schools. However, research highlights children are beginning puberty at ever-earlier stages (Goldman & Coleman, 2013) and being exposed to pornography at very young ages (Children's Commissioner, 2023) and thus indicates the importance of timely RSE.

Safeguarding children from harm is vital but seeing 'protection' as maintaining childhood 'innocence' has been criticised (Zanatta, 2021) as it is often this same 'protection' from exposure to 'sensitive topics' which can lead to misinformation and increased vulnerability due to the lack of factual information (Robinson, 2012). Instead, it is important to give children the knowledge and skills with which they can utilise to protect themselves (Mullen, 2021).

Certain topics such as self-touch, pornography, LGBTQ+ issues and information about sex (Robinson et al., 2017) are cited by parents and carers due to fears they might encourage 'inappropriate' behaviours. It is important to note that many of these topics are not included in RSE in primary school and that parents' held anxieties may be a result of a lack of awareness of what is included in the curriculum (Noorman et al., 2022). Conversely, some parents wanted school RSE to teach open and inclusive views on relationships and sex, particularly around sexuality and gender diversity (Robinson et al., 2017).

Parents/carers believe RSE should be a collaborative joined-up approach... between schools and parents/carers (Robinson et al., 2017). As part of the statutory guidance on RSE (Department for Education, 2019), schools have the responsibility to consult and engage with parents and carers on their RSE policy. Most parents and carers intend to talk with their children about a variety of topics around sex and relationships (Astle, et al., 2022) but many feel they lack the confidence, skills and knowledge to do so (Sex Education Forum, 2022). Positive parent engagement by schools can lead to greater clarity on what and how RSE is being taught and lead to greater coherence between the schools' and parents/carers' messages to children about sex and relationships (Alldred et al., 2016).

WHAT DID WE DO...?

Coram Life Education (CLE) SCARF... offers a comprehensive, fully resourced, progressive PSHE scheme of work for 3-11 year olds (Coram Life Education, 2023). SCARF provides educators with everything they need to meet the Relationships Education and Health Education statutory requirements whilst representing the values for children of Safety, Caring, Achievement, Resilience and Friendship (SCARF). CLE worked with Cait, a PhD student at Durham University, to discover and understand parents' and carers' attitudes towards primary school RSE and highlight good practice in relation to parent/carer engagement and support needs.

An online survey of 71 parents and carers... whose child attends a primary school which works with Coram's SCARF programme was undertaken in July 2023. Parents/carers provided their perceptions on RSE in primary school and the parent/carer engagement process. Due to the time constraints of the research and the small sample size, the research does not seek to be representative of all primary school parents/carers but does provide interesting insights and possible improvements for parent/carer engagement surrounding primary school RSE. Insights will be particularly useful to SCARF schools who work with Coram Life Education.

WHAT DID WE FIND OUT...?

Only 22% of parents/carers disagreed that RSE is beneficial for their child... signalling a belief that their child is "*too young*". 21% neither agreed nor disagreed, yet the majority (57%) believed RSE is beneficial to give children the knowledge and understanding they need to keep safe.

One parent who strongly agreed that RSE is beneficial for their child said "*I think this subject should be covered at any age when it comes up. Children deserve correct information and it is essential for safeguarding as well as creating informed teens and adults*" (Mother of children aged 5 & 9, North West England).

Parents/carers believe RSE should be a joint responsibility... between parents/carers and schools. 77% indicated that a collaborative approach was needed "*because we are all educating our children*" (Mother of child aged 10, Yorkshire & The Humber.) Many believed that parents/carers were ultimately responsible for their child's RSE but recognised that not all children will receive positive RSE at home, highlighting the school's responsibility to ensure RSE is taught with the local contextual safeguarding issues of the entire class in mind.

Having a selection of trusted adults to whom children can talk about these issues would not only provide children with the knowledge of whom they could disclose abuse but also reinforce shared messages surrounding RSE both at school and at home.

Prominent narratives and tensions are often more nuanced... and with multiple meanings. Instead of viewing these narratives as binary and opposing, we could see them as shared

concerns in need of discussion and engagement - though these discussions must be backed up by research and evidence.

Age-appropriate RSE was discussed by parents/carers across a spectrum of perspectives on primary school RSE. Some felt that childhood needed to be protected from a loss of innocence and earlier sexual experiences: *"I don't want them telling too much too soon. Let them be children."* (Parent/carer of child aged 8, No location.) Others felt RSE should provide *"the right information at the most appropriate age"* (Mother of child aged 9, North East.) The importance of starting early or before they learn about sex and relationships in less safe environments, such as on television and online, was highlighted.

Safeguarding and protecting children from harm mattered greatly to parents/carers. Some saw knowledge around relationships and sex as exposure and loss of innocence. RSE should *"not over expos[e] matters my child can't fully grasp"* (Mother of child aged 8, London.) Others saw knowledge as providing children with the understanding and skills needed to be protected from the very same harms. Parents/carers saw RSE as the route to *"providing my child with factual information using the correct terminology to avoid confusion"* (Mother of child aged 6, North East) and noted *"how it could prevent possible abuse"* (Parent/carer of child aged 10, No location.)

Certain Topics such as information about sex, self-touch and masturbation, and LGBTQ+ issues were discussed by parents/carers as needing to be delivered thoughtfully within RSE classes. Most commonly, parents discussed the need for RSE to be open, honest and inclusive and *"delivered in a factual non-judgemental way covering all people/genders/sexualities in an age-appropriate way, focusing on emotions, consent and respect"* (Parent/carer of child aged 7, No location.) Though research supports the importance of inclusive RSE for all young people, a minority of parents/carers deemed certain topics inappropriate. For example, *"I think introducing subjects like different sexual orientation[s] or transgender issues at that young age is unnecessary[...]"* (Mother of child aged 8, London.) However, many fears were around content that is in fact not included in the RSE curriculum - an indication of parents/carers' lack of knowledge of what is being taught in primary school RSE.

What is actually being taught? Only 44% of parents/carers felt they knew what is being taught in primary school RSE. The majority of respondents had not heard of primary schools teaching inappropriate topics (64%). While a couple of parents/carers mentioned specific topics, most simply stated that primary school children were too young for too much detail and did not describe what exactly they deemed inappropriate. Some concerns related to topics that are not in fact included in the RSE curriculum and would not be taught in primary schools. For example, one parent stated: *"no need to sexualise children, children do not need to know about types of sex, sex games and fetishes"* (Parent/carer of child aged 10, No location.) When asked about DfE statutory guidance, parents/carers deemed the content as overall important. Most got their knowledge about inappropriate content from social media and other parents/carers, not from their own direct experiences with their child's school, suggesting that greater engagement with parents/carers about what is actually being taught in their child's school may counteract these inaccurate perceptions.

Most parents/carers were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the engagement... from school around RSE. Those who were satisfied indicated that emails, newsletters, meetings and workshops were the methods of engagement they most appreciated, others felt they had no contact from the school. Many felt they did not get enough information from their school. Lack of clarity on statutory requirements and the limitations of parent/carer engagement - i.e. that it does not grant parents the right to veto content taught - prompted many of parents' misconceptions and fears surrounding RSE. The parents/carers indicated they would appreciate further engagement.

91% of parents/carers had never had a reason to contact the school about RSE-related issues. Some wished to be more engaged but had limited time to do so. Others were not concerned and felt they could trust their school to make decisions without their engagement. Many wished to be more engaged but felt *“time is limited [so] the ability to work with your free time would be helpful. Inviting parents to meetings doesn't always work”* (Mother of child aged 10, London.)

Parents felt equipped to talk about RSE at home but felt further advice and resources could ensure joined-up conversations with their children both at school and at home.

WHAT COULD BE DONE ...?

Encouraging engagement with all parents/carers... through an accessible and diverse range of engagement methods. While emails, newsletters and parent/carer meetings were appreciated by parents/carers, these needed to be on an ongoing and frequent basis, both prior to and after teaching RSE lessons; not just a one-off. The following engagement methods might be useful:

- Dedicated meetings
- One-to-one sessions
- RSE stand at parents' evening
- Questionnaires/surveys
- Focus groups
- School website
- Social Media accounts
- Monthly newsletter
- Termly letter

However, it should be made clear to parents/carers what to expect from the engagement process, for example, that consultation does not provide a parental veto on curriculum content.

Parents/carers requested additional information such as... printed materials and information sheets which informed them of what will be taught and when, as outlined in the DfE guidance. Additionally, parents/carers suggested providing them with more details about content and language used in the classroom and summaries of discussions that arise during RSE lessons which would help them to pick up discussions at home.

Narratives and tensions surrounding RSE could be tackled through... improved engagement with parents and carers. Most parents/carers believe RSE is beneficial. Engagement is about working together to achieve better RSE for their child. In this sense, we should not be afraid of having discussions. It ensures parents/carers are getting correct information directly from school communication and trusted relationships between parents/carers and schools are being built.

We need to recognise shared goals and work together to safeguard children and ensure joined-up messages at home and school. Parents/carers may have different interpretations and understanding of narratives surrounding age-appropriateness, safeguarding and certain topics. However, most parents/carers and educators share the same goals for RSE. These goals are to deliver RSE which is appropriate for our children's needs and development, and which safeguards them from harm. As one parent put it: *“We are all educating our children”* (Mother of child aged 10, Yorkshire.)

Listening to children and young people... is vital. Children's and young people's views should be fed into school RSE planning and, as requested by respondents, their thoughts and questions could be shared anonymously with parents. To do this, adults need to recognise children's capacity to understand, and strengthen their skills to ask for what they need from their RSE; not pursue protection at the expense of meaningful and inclusive participation. Children's questions provide an opportunity for adults to tailor these discussions to their specific needs. In summary: if children are brave enough to ask, adults should be brave enough to answer.

Introduction

Little research in the UK has focused on parents' perceptions of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in primary schools. In the lead-up to the government review on Relationships, Sex, and Health Education (RSHE) statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2019), Coram Life Education worked with Cait, a PhD student at Durham University, to survey and interview a range of parents and carers to develop further insight into parents' and carers' perceptions and views on RSE in primary schools.

This report will first provide context and background around RSE in primary schools; discussing what we already know about children and young people's experiences, parents'/carers' perceptions, prominent narratives and tensions and schools' engagement with parents/carers regarding primary school RSE. After describing the research process, the report will highlight key findings regarding the above topics and provide recommendations for enhanced parent/carer engagement surrounding primary school RSE.

BACKGROUND

What is RSE?

Relationships and sex education (RSE) has been defined by the Sex Education Forum (2022) as "learning about the emotional, social and physical aspects of human development, relationships, sexuality, wellbeing and sexual health". In primary schools, Relationships and Health Education is statutory and therefore must be taught. It is recommended to also have a programme of Sex Education in order to lay the foundations for further sex education in secondary school.

Why is RSE important?

According to Sex Education Forum (2022), RSE aims to:

- Support children and young people to **make informed decisions** about their physical health;
- Improve children's **emotional well-being and mental health**;
- **Develop critical thinking skills**, including around gender equity, power dynamics in relationships and digital literacies;
- Inform children and young people of their **rights and responsibilities** in society;
- **Reduce harmful behaviour**, including sexual violence and relationship abuse, stigma and discrimination, both online and offline;
- **Safeguard children and young people** by supporting them to report harmful behaviour, both online and offline;
- Support children and young people to **develop positive relationships** with themselves and others based on **respect and equality**.

According to a review of evidence by UNESCO (2018) in 2016, young people are more likely to practice safer sex and have improved health outcomes such as preventing unintended pregnancies and STIs, as a result of RSE in schools. Evidence shows that RSE works best if it starts before a young person is sexually active and responds to the needs of the pupils as they mature. There is no evidence that RSE hastens first sexual experiences, in fact, RSE contributes to reduced risk-taking and does not increase sexual activity.

At primary level, knowledge around relationships, sex and health is important to ensure basic factual and scientific accuracy and to provide children with the language to report abuse and therefore, encourage improved safeguarding, empowerment and the removal of shame and stigma. This

scaffolded learning applies the foundation upon which children can build on when learning about more complex understandings later in school (Sex Education Forum, 2022).

Coram Life Education and SCARF

Coram Life Education & SCARF (2023) offers a comprehensive, fully resourced, progressive PSHE scheme of work for 3-11 year olds. RSHE education should develop young people's knowledge, skills, and attitudes as part of a values-based approach, reflected across the ethos of the whole school. For this whole-school approach to wellbeing and Mental Health, SCARF includes high-quality, educator-led workshops for pupils and a host of free and low-cost staff training, supporting over 50,000 teachers and reaching over 600,000 pupils every year. SCARF provides educators with everything they need to meet the new Relationships Education and Health Education statutory requirements whilst representing our values for children of Safety, Caring, Achievement, Resilience and Friendship (SCARF).

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

Aims and objectives

This timely study seeks to understand parents' and carers' perceptions of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in primary schools. Through surveying parents and carers whose child attends a primary school which works with Coram's SCARF programme, the research aimed to discover and understand parents' and carers' attitudes towards primary school RSE and highlight good practice in relation to parent/carer engagement and support needs.

Our research questions were:

- What is the nature of parents' and carers' attitudes towards primary school RSE?
- What has been parents' and carers' experiences of school engagement surrounding primary school RSE?
- What narratives are used when talking about primary school RSE?

RSHE statutory guidance review

The current statutory Relationships, Sex, and Health Education (RSHE) guidance was published in June 2019, made statutory from September 2021, and is due to be reviewed in September 2023, in line with the promised three-year review cycle. A review is welcomed by Coram Life Education & SCARF to ensure up-to-date evidence-based guidance and RSHE provision based on the wants and needs of children and young people. Undertaken in the summer before the review, this research provides evidence that the majority of parents see RSE as beneficial for their child but believe they do not receive enough information during the parent/carer engagement process.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ALREADY...?

...about children and young people's experiences of RSE?

Whilst the perspectives of parents are the focus of this research, it is important to note that further research and consultation should focus on amplifying the voices of children and young people themselves. As part of the consultation on the content of statutory RSE guidance, there was a call for responses from young people. However, young people made only 2% of consultation responses and, while it is positive that young people were included at all, there is evidence that many of these responses were not actually submitted by young people (Setty & Dobson, 2022).

Experiences of RSE by children and young people are commonly referred to as 'too little, too late and too biological' (Blake & Aggleto, 2017). Research suggests that young people are dissatisfied

with school RSE due to its poor quality and lack of inclusivity (Sex Education Forum, 2022). It is quite common for children and young people to experience the bodily changes of puberty without understanding what they are. In 2018, Sex Education Forum surveyed over 1,000 young people in one area of London and, of those respondents who identified as having periods, 27% had not learned about them before they started (Sex Education Forum, 2019). Most young people report insufficient knowledge when they felt ready for their first sexual experience (Tanton, C. et al., 2015). Young people recognise that their RSE needs are not being met (Pound, et al., 2017) and wish to be taught from a younger age about subjects such as healthy relationships, abuse, including online harms, and consent (Ringrose, et al., 2021). In a government review of sexual abuse in schools in 2021 (Ofsted, 2021), young people were asked about the implementation of the new RSHE curriculum. Children and young people reported concern that the curriculum did not take account of their level of maturity and felt that they could deal with more challenging content. Young people also said, in the Sex Education Forum’s 2021 poll, that they would prefer to have open conversations with parents and carers about these topics from a younger age (Sex Education Forum, 2022).

WHAT DO WE KNOW ALREADY...?

...about parents' and carers' perspectives on primary school RSE?

There is little recent research which focuses solely on the experiences of parents and carers in the UK. Instead, research often focuses on the communication between parents and their children (Noorman et al., 2022). However, national and international research indicates that the majority of parents believe that sexuality education (the international term for RSE) is relevant and important to primary school children (Robinson et al., 2017). Research with Australian parents of primary school-aged children found that, although there is a vocal minority who have concerns about what and how sexuality education is being taught, parents and carers generally want their children to have good knowledge about relationships and sex (Robinson et al., 2017). The research listed many reasons parents believed sexuality education was important for young children such as to keep children safe and reduce their risk-taking behaviours as they grow up; to build children’s understanding about respect around intimacy and relationships; to develop children’s media literacy to counteract dominant sexual narratives; to correct misinformation from alternative sources and peers; to counter shame and stigma; and as a matter of children’s rights.

A systematic review of European research with parents highlighted parents would ideally like to see RSE which centred trust, open conversations and honesty (Noorman et al., 2022). However, there were challenges and concerns such as worries about the child’s age and parents’ limited knowledge which meant, in reality, parents tended to avoid discussing these topics or only talk about sexual issues when their children initiated the conversation. A study of parents with primary school-aged children in southern England found that, when children did approach their parents about issues related to sexuality, parents felt unprepared to respond and often deflected the question or missed out important messages (Stone, et al., 2012). Other studies indicated that children generally did not go to parents/carers for advice on relationships and sex but instead obtained information from other sources (Noorman et al., 2022).

WHAT DO WE KNOW ALREADY...?

...about prominent narratives and tensions surrounding primary school RSE?

Tensions and controversies continue to be pervasive within public discussions on relationships and sex education. Whilst these discussions are valuable and insightful, the focus on distorted or inaccurate assumptions can distract from the positive learning that RSE offers children and young

people, and effective parent/carer engagement by schools. This report will touch briefly on three prominent tensions: age-appropriateness, safeguarding and certain topics.

'Age-appropriate'

Despite the majority of parents in the Australian study supporting RSE being taught in primary school, those who were hesitant cited fears around the age of their child and that they were 'too young' to be able to handle this knowledge appropriately (Robinson et al., 2017). Parents stated they wanted "kids to remain kids" and didn't want them to lose their childhood innocence.

Throughout the 2019 statutory guidance on RSHE (Department for Education, 2019), teaching in an 'age-appropriate' way is encouraged. The Sex Education Forum has cited the lack of clarity on what defines content as 'age-appropriate' (Emmerson, 2018). Although some have advocated for age restrictions on RSE resources (Murphy, 2023.), research highlights that parents are concerned about differing maturity rates amongst children (Robinson et al., 2017), children are beginning puberty at ever-earlier stages (Goldman & Coleman, 2013), and being exposed to pornography at very young ages (Children's Commissioner, 2023) and young people indicate that RSE is happening too little and too late. This suggests that RSE should move away from 'age-appropriate' to 'timely' (Mullen, 2021).

Safeguarding

The narrative of 'age-appropriate' RSE fits into wider protective framing of children which may result in adults' moral panic around children's innocence (ibid). While children's safeguarding from harm is vital, seeing 'protection' as maintaining childhood 'innocence' has been criticised (Zanatta, 2021). It is often this very same 'protection' from exposure to 'sensitive topics' that can lead to children and young people's misinformation and increased vulnerability due to the lack of access to factual information (Robinson, 2012). Instead, it is important to give children the knowledge that they can utilise to protect themselves. An uninformed child is a vulnerable child.

For primary-aged children, there is strong evidence for teaching about bodily autonomy and communication as part of child sexual abuse prevention (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). The Cochrane review in 2015 (Walsh, et al., 2015) found that children who are taught these topics at school are more likely to tell an adult if they experienced sexual abuse. RSE in primary leads to increased knowledge of a trusted adult to whom children could disclose abuse as well as improved parent-child communication about sex and relationships (Sex Education Forum, 2022).

Certain topics

Several European studies ask parents what topics should be included in school-based RSE (Noorman et al., 2022). Some parents expressed concerns over topics such as masturbation, pornography and sex work for fears they would encourage inappropriate behaviours. Two areas in which parents were most concerned were those relating to LGBTQ+ issues and information about sex (Robinson, et al., 2017). For these parents, sexuality knowledge was tied to morals and values, and they did not want schools to dictate morals which they felt clashed with religious, cultural and moral concerns held within their individual family unit. It is important to note that many of these topics are not included in RSE in primary school and that parents' held anxieties may be a result of a lack of awareness of what is included in the curriculum (Noorman et al., 2022).

There were also contradicting views held by parents who wanted schools to engage with these more sensitive topics as they felt they needed to be addressed (Noorman et al., 2022). Concern that RSE might undermine morals taught at home were not solely expressed by parents and carers with more traditional views but also by those who wanted their children to have open and inclusive views on relationships and sex, particularly around sexuality and gender diversity. These parents/carers were

nervous about schools reinforcing negative opinions and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ identities (Robinson et al., 2017).

WHAT DO WE KNOW ALREADY...?

...about parent and carer engagement in primary school RSE?

While the statutory guidance sees parents and carers as the primary educators of RSE, only one-third of parents in the Australian study saw RSE as their responsibility alone (Robinson et al., 2017). Instead, the majority of parents indicated that RSE should be a shared process between home and school. The Sex Education Forum (2022) highlights that a collaborative joined-up approach between schools, parents, carers and local health services is vital to ensure RSE meets the needs of all children and young people. Various studies suggest that parents view schools as having an important role for RSE but that they felt they should have at least some input (Noorman et al., 2022). However, research found that, when invited, few parents engaged with school consultations (Buston, et al., 2001).

As part of the statutory guidance on RSE (Department for Education, 2019), schools have the responsibility to consult and engage with parents and carers on their RSE policy. According to the guidance, parents/carers should be told what will be taught and when, their right to request that their child be withdrawn from some or all of sex education and the opportunity to understand and ask questions about the purpose and content of RSE. It is important to note here that Relationships Education and Health Education is statutory and, therefore, parents/carers cannot request to withdraw their children from these subjects. Inviting parents and carers to have conversations about how and when RSE content will be taught can provide increased transparency about what is taught, increased trust and confidence in schools' delivery of RSE, and improved confidence in providing RSE at home (Alldred et al., 2016).

As already noted, the majority of parents intend to talk with their children about a variety of topics around sex and relationships (Astle, et al., 2022). Children and young people would also like to talk to their parents and carers about these issues, but many parents feel they lack the confidence, skills and knowledge to do so (Sex Education Forum, 2022) with some even feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable (Alldred et al., 2016). Greater support is therefore needed for both parents/carers and teachers to enable them to access suitable resources and develop confidence in this subject (Robinson et al., 2017). Parents point to the role of other institutions such as schools and third-party organisations in supporting and strengthening teachers' and parents/carers' capabilities in this way (Noorman et al., 2022). Creating a safe setting for parents/carers and teachers to exchange experiences (Wire, 2021), such as through inviting them into school to familiarise themselves with materials, can lead to greater clarity on what and how RSE is being taught and lead to greater coherence between the school's and parent/carer messages to children about sex and relationships (Alldred et al., 2016).

WHAT DID WE DO?

Online Survey

Coram Life Education launched an online survey in July 2023 collecting 71 responses from parents/carers whose children attended primary schools who have worked with SCARF CLE. An email was sent to schools that had previously attended our RSE courses on parent engagement/consultation asking them to share the link to the anonymous survey and further information about the research with their parent and carer body.

The anonymous survey consisted of two sections: the first section asked parents and carers about their general thoughts on relationships and sex education in primary school; the second asked more specifically for opinions and experiences of parental engagement around relationships and sex education in primary school.

Data analysis of the survey was conducted in August 2023. All quantitative analysis was completed in Qualtrics, and qualitative analysis, including thematic analysis of open response, was conducted in NViVO 14. Codes or themes were created iteratively during the thematic analysis process. This report presents the results of this analysis. Quotes from open responses are used to provide context and parent/carers' voices.

Sample

The survey consisted of 71 responses from parents with primary school-aged children, whose school staff members had previously attended an RSE course on parent engagement through Coram Life Education SCARF.

All respondents confirmed they had at least one child who was currently attending primary school and provided the age of their child. Ages ranged from 4 and under to 13 with most children being aged between 7 and 10 years (Figure 1). As you can see below, some parents reported having both primary school-aged and older children. While this research focuses on primary schools, any differences and similarities in perspectives by those parents who solely have primary school children and those who have older children have been noted in this report.

Figure 1 – Age of Respondents' Child(ren)

Age of Child(ren)	Count	Percent (%)
4 and under	2	2.8%
5-6	23	32.4%
7-8	27	38.0%
9-10	27	38.0%
11-12	7	9.9%
13+	2	2.8%
<i>Total</i>	<i>88</i>	

Respondents were not required to answer all questions in the survey. As a result, not all respondents provided demographical data. However, of the 62% (n=44) who provided demographical information (Figure 2), the majority of respondents identified as women, were from white ethnic groups, and lived in the North East of England, South East of England or London. While 52% of respondents did not report having religious beliefs, 10% of those who were religious reported being Muslim and 86% reported having Christian faith.

Figure 2 – Demographics of Respondents

Characteristic	Count	Percent (%)
Gender		
Man	2	4.5%
Woman	41	93.2%
Prefer not to say	1	2.3%
<i>Total</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>100.0%</i>
Sexuality		

Straight/Heterosexual	41	93.2%
Bisexual/ Multi-orientation	2	4.5%
Prefer not to say	1	2.3%
<i>Total</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>100.0%</i>
Trans Identity?		
No	43	97.7%
Prefer not to say	1	2.3%
<i>Total</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>100.0%</i>
Location		
North East England	14	31.8%
London	12	27.3%
South East	9	20.5%
North West England	5	11.4%
Yorkshire & The Humber	2	4.5%
South West	1	2.3%
West Midlands	1	2.3%
<i>Total</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>100.0%</i>
Ethnicity		
White/White British	35	79.5%
Asian/Asian British	2	4.50%
Other/ Prefer not to say	7	16.00%
<i>Total</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>100.0%</i>
Religion		
Christianity	18	40.9%
Islam	2	4.5%
No religion (Atheist)	17	38.6%
Agnostic	1	2.3%
Other Religion/ Prefer not to say	6	13.60%
<i>Total</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>100.0%</i>

Limitations

There are some limitations to this research due to the short timescale of the authors' placement with Coram Life Education. Whilst the timing of this research is timely, having been undertaken in the summer before the RSHE statutory guidance review, data collection took place at the end of the summer term meaning that many school staff members and parents/carers may not have had the time to take part in this research. This, alongside the short length of time the survey was live, may explain the small sample size of this study. As a result, the sample lacks diversity in respondents' characteristics. As such, this research is not representative of all primary school parents/carers but does indicate consistent views and further insights for parent/carer engagement in primary school RSE. Insights will be particularly useful to SCARF schools who work with Coram Life Education.

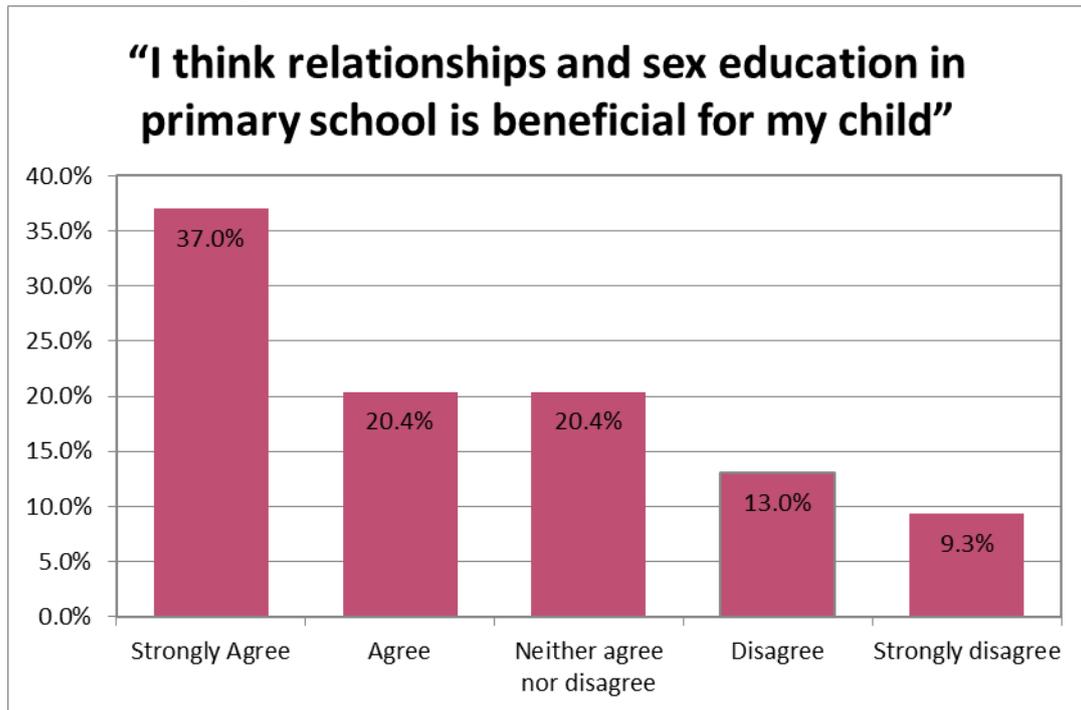
WHAT DID WE FIND OUT...?

... about parents'/carers' perspectives on RSE in primary school?

Most parents/carers agree that RSE in primary school is beneficial.

The majority of parents/carers (57%) agreed that RSE in primary school is beneficial to their child. While some were unsure (21%), only 22% disagreed (Figure 3). This supports findings of previous research that, despite moral panics surrounding RSE found in the media (Ringrose, 2016), most parents/carers are supportive of school-based RSE.

Figure 3 – Agreement with the statement “I think relationships and sex education in primary school is beneficial for my child”



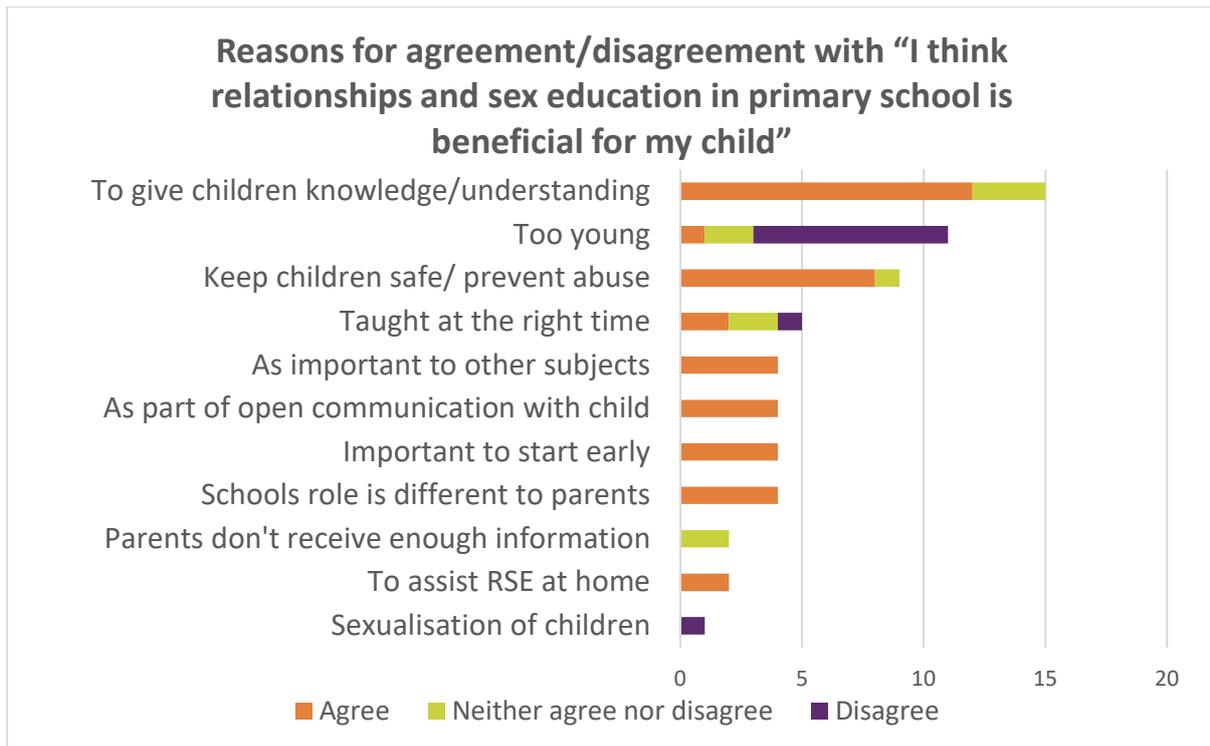
There were many reasons provided for agreeing that RSE is beneficial for their child (Figure 4). However, the most common reasons were to give children knowledge and understanding and to keep children safe. As one parent, who strongly agreed that RSE is beneficial for their child, said:

"I think this subject should be covered at any age when it comes up. Children deserve correct information and it is essential for safeguarding as well as creating informed teens and adults."

(Mother of children aged 5 & 9, North West England)

Conversely, the most common reason provided for disagreeing that RSE is beneficial was the belief that their child was “too young” or “too early for them to start thinking about it” (Mother of children aged 9 & 11, London.)

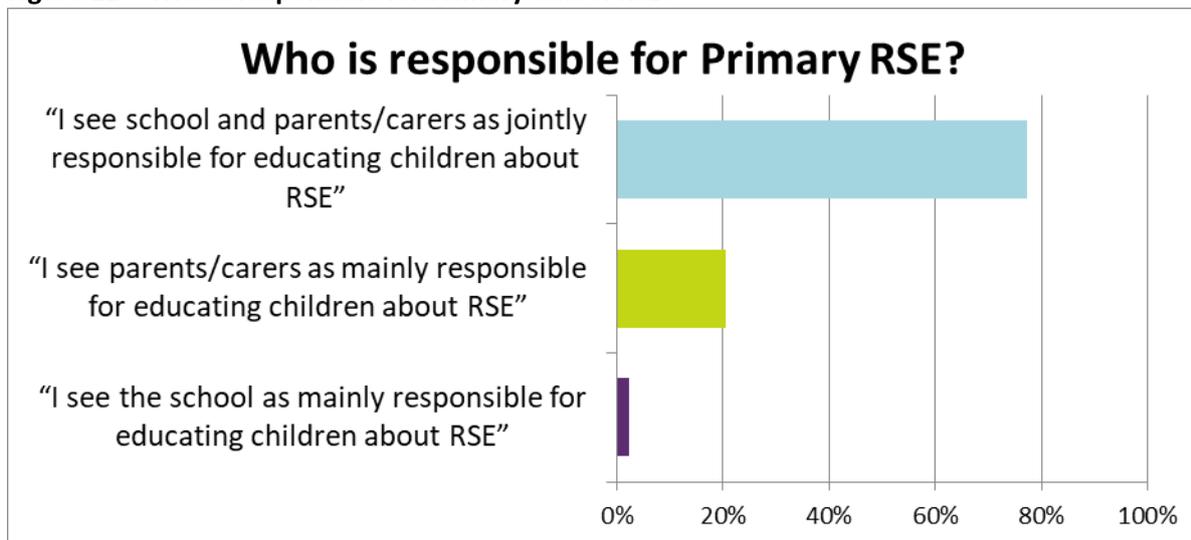
Figure 4 - Reasons for agreement/disagreement with “I think relationships and sex education in primary school is beneficial for my child”



Who should be responsible for primary school RSE?

The following results are consistent with other research (Robinson et al., 2017) which found that most parents/carers (77%) see schools as jointly responsible for educating their children about RSE (Figure 11). Respondents indicated that a collaborative approach was needed “because we are all educating our children” (Mother of child aged 10, Yorkshire & The Humber) and others believed RSE “is no different from any other school topic” (Mother of children aged 5, 8 & 10, London).

Figure 11 – Who is responsible for Primary school RSE?



Despite agreeing that a joint approach to RSE between schools and parents/carers is needed, many indicated that parents/carers continue to be primary educators as stated in the DfE statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2019). Some recognised that not all children will receive positive RSE at home and highlighted the school’s responsibility to ensure RSE is taught to the entire class. As one parent states:

“Although I think parents are ultimately responsible for teaching children about relationships, some households may not be able to provide that to the children. Therefore, I think the education should be reinforced in schools so all children receive the same level of education no matter what their home scenario is.” (Mother of child aged 8, North East.)

Schools also have the resources and contextual knowledge surrounding the specific needs of children and their class based on local contextual safeguarding issues (Firmin, 2017) and national trends that parents may not be aware of. A few parents recognise this role of schools, for example:

“I think it is important for school to have discussions with the children based on the knowledge they have been taught as well as knowing my child's peers and how they are towards my child on a day-to-day basis.” (Mother of child aged 5, North East.)

Parents/carers highlighted the importance of a child having a selection of trusted adults to talk about relationships and sex with as well as increased knowledge of trusted adults to whom children could disclose abuse (Walsh, et al., 2015). While some parents felt their child would be more comfortable talking to them, others felt that *“children listen more to the teachers regarding topics like this”* (Mother of children aged 7 & 13, London.) Overall, respondents emphasise the potential for a joined-up approach for reinforcing shared messages surrounding RSE both at school and at home.

“I have covered these topics as it has come up with my children and great that it gets reinforced from school and probably taught slightly differently so any areas of misunderstanding or interpretation cleared” (Mother of children aged 5 & 9, North West England.)

WHAT DID WE FIND OUT...?

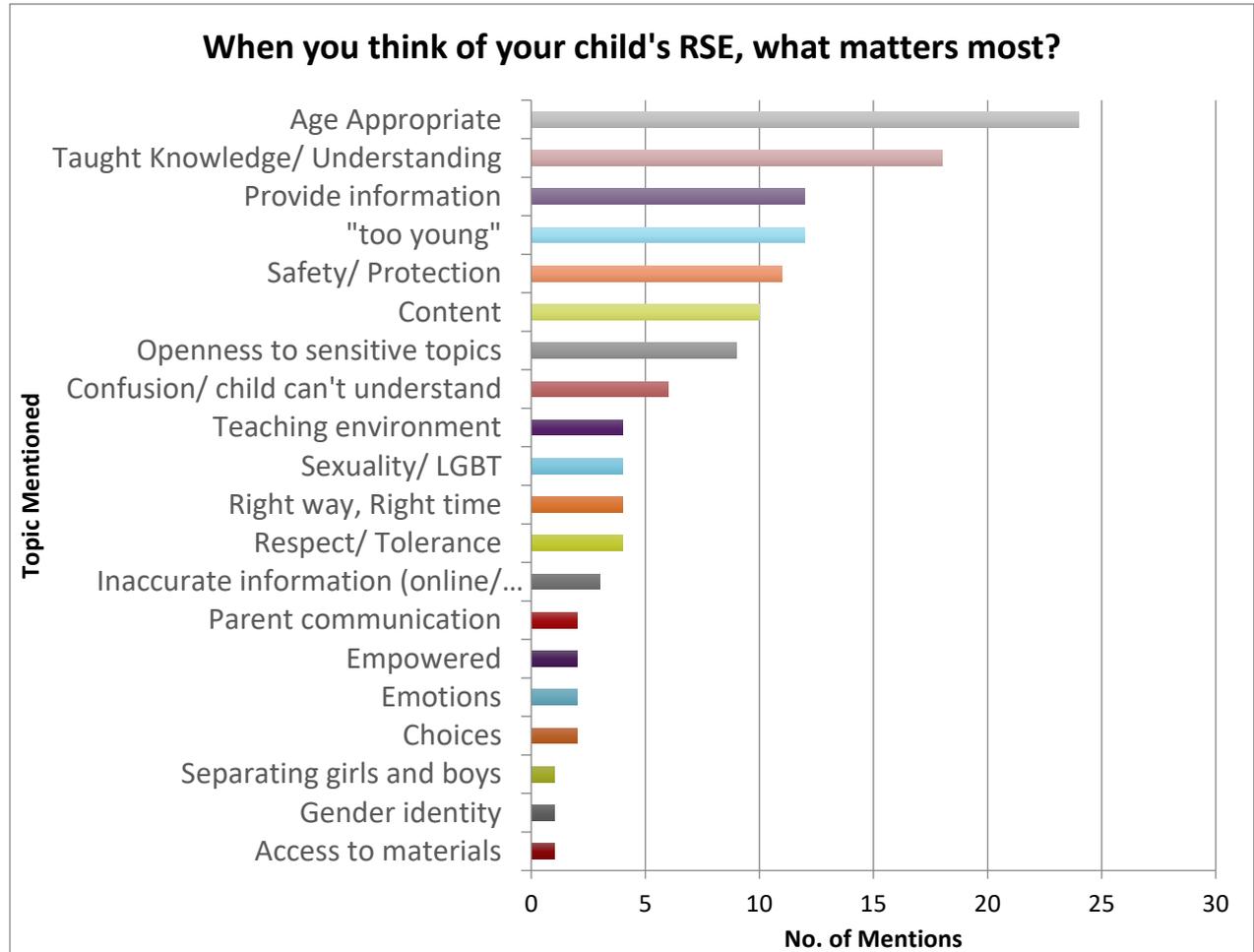
...about prominent narratives and tensions surrounding primary school RSE?

What matters most?

The first question parents were asked was “When you think of your child’s RSE, what matters most?” (Figure 5). Parents' and carers' responses were, unsurprisingly, similar to their reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with RSE being beneficial for their child. Ensuring that their child’s RSE is age-appropriate was mentioned most, followed by the need for RSE to provide their children with knowledge and understanding often to keep them safe.

Interestingly, parent/carer communication and engagement were rarely mentioned as something that matters most. Mentions of sensitive topics were minimal and often about the need for RSE to be open to discussing them. That is not to say that these issues were not important to respondents, these topics appeared in other sections of the survey, as will be discussed later on in this report, but it is interesting to note that they did not often come up as something that mattered most when no other prompts were given.

Figure 5 – Responses to “When you think of your child’s RSE, what matters most?”



It is important to reiterate that the majority of respondents agreed that RSE was beneficial to their child (57%). In this sense, many of the negative perspectives may not be held by the majority of parents/carers but any resistance to RSE must be analysed to provide learnings which may support the parent/carer engagement process and implementation of RSE.

Whether respondents agreed or disagreed that RSE was beneficial to their child, many of the same narratives of age-appropriateness, safeguarding and certain topics appeared in open responses. For each of these narratives, it seemed that parents/carers interpreted the meanings of these phrases in nuanced and differing ways.

Age-appropriateness

As already noted, the RSE statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2019) encourages teaching about ‘the facts and the law about sex, sexuality, sexual health and gender identity in an age-appropriate and inclusive way’ (p.26). There is a lack of clarity to the meaning of this term and, due to ongoing debates around what is “appropriate” for young people to learn and discuss, ‘age-appropriateness’ is open to interpretation.

It was clear that many parents/carers thought about their children being “too young” to learn about sex and relationships. Respondents felt that childhood needed to be preserved or protected for fear of loss of innocence. For example, one parent states: *“I don’t want them telling too much too soon. Let them be children”* (Parent/carer of child aged 8, No location.)

Others fear that teaching about relationships and sex may encourage earlier sexual experiences. One respondent hoped that their child *“doesn't think by learning about it at a young age prior to the consensual age that it's ok to do anyway”* (Parent/carer of child aged 9, No location.)

Whilst there is no evidence that RSE hastens sexual experiences (Kirby, 2007) and indeed reduces risk-taking amongst young people (UNESCO, 2018), it is evidently a concern for many parents and therefore these narratives need to be engaged with. In fact, for many parents/carers who agreed RSE was beneficial for their primary school child, it was important that RSE was age-appropriate. However, this was discussed in terms of being taught at the ‘right time’, such as *“getting the right information at the most appropriate age”* (Mother of child aged 9, North East.)

The ‘right time’ was often highlighted as needing to start early or before they learn about sex and relationships in less safe environments such as on television and online. As one parent put it:

“I want there to be sex education and relationship education as it's important for understanding the world. They see things on TV/ in the real world/ on their phones so it's needed.” (Mother of child aged 10, Yorkshire & Humber.)

Here we can see that the term ‘age-appropriate’ has contested, and sometimes vague, meanings but is used by parents/carers across a spectrum of perspectives on primary school RSE to ensure the safety of their child is protected.

Safeguarding

As indicated above, safety and protection mattered greatly to parents/carers. According to the Sex Education Forum (2022), safeguarding is a key aim of RSE. Despite agreeing that safeguarding is a key aspect, some see knowledge around relationships and sex as exposure and loss of innocence, and others see knowledge as providing children with the understanding and skills needed to be protected from the very same harms that some parents/carers seek to prevent exposure to.

Parents/carers who perceived teaching around relationships and sex as exposure often feared their child may not be able to understand or may be confused by the topics being discussed. For example, one parent argued RSE should *“not over expos(e) matters my child can't fully grasp”* (Mother of child aged 8, London) and another worried RSE might be *“confusing kids”* (Mother of child aged 8, London.) Whilst this is understandable, young people have indicated that the curriculum did not take into account their level of maturity and felt that they could deal with more challenging content (Ofsted, 2021).

The majority of parents/carers discussing safeguarding saw RSE as the route to *“providing my child with factual information using the correct terminology to avoid confusion”* (Mother of child aged 6, North East) and *“how it could prevent possible abuse”* (Parent/carer of child aged 10, No location.) Many highlighted how accurate and factual information could counter inaccurate information found elsewhere, *“giving them opportunities to talk and explore and feel safe to do so”* (Parent/carer of child aged 6, No location.). In line with research that indicates the need for RSE to teach skills as well as knowledge (Hirst, 2012), few respondents discussed the need for children to *“feel empowered to make the right choices”* (Mother of child aged 10, London.)

Age appropriateness and safeguarding are both discussed by parents/carers across a spectrum of perspectives on primary school RSE. Instead of viewing these narratives as opposing, we could see them as shared concerns in need of discussion and engagement - though it is important these discussions are backed up by research and evidence.

Certain topics

Similarly, certain topics were discussed by parents/carers as needing to be delivered thoughtfully within RSE classes. Topics such as information about sex, self-touch and masturbation, and LGBTQ+ issues were specifically mentioned by respondents.

Mentions of these topics, however, were commonly focused on the need for RSE to be open, honest and inclusive. For example, RSE should be... *“delivered in a factual non-judgemental way covering all people/genders /sexualities in an age-appropriate way, focusing on emotions, consent and respect”* (Parent/carer of child aged 7, No location.) Another parent stated that it was important *“that school doesn't shy away from delivering the more sensitive lessons”* (Mother of child aged 11, South East.)

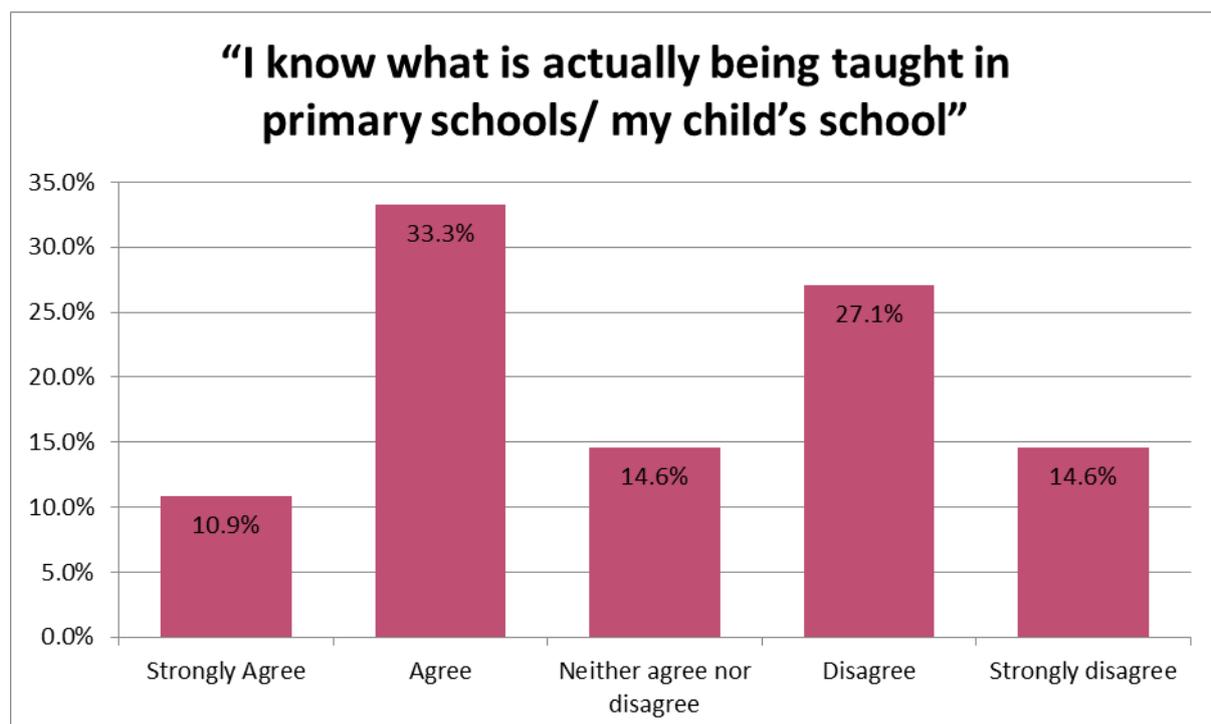
As previously discussed, a minority of parents/carers expressed concerns their child may not be able to understand certain topics that they deem inappropriate. For example, *“I think introducing subjects like different sexual orientation or transgender issues at that young age is unnecessary because kids don't understand it and it only confuses them”* (Mother of child aged 8, London). However, research indicates that providing opportunities for young people to learn about diversity is useful for all young people (Ryan, et al., 2022).

Many respondents requested further information, highlighting the possibility that they do not feel they know what is being taught. For example, *“as parents, we don't receive enough information and I'm not sure what is my child learning at school on the topic”* (Mother of child aged 8, London.) Comments surrounding fears of inappropriate content which is not included in the RSE curriculum are further indications of parents/carers' lack of knowledge of what is being taught in primary school RSE.

What is actually being taught in primary school RSE?

When asked if parents/carers knew what is actually being taught in primary school RSE, overall only 44% agreed and 41% disagreed. Interestingly, few respondents strongly agreed (10.9%).

Figure 6 – Agreement with the statement “I know what is actually being taught in primary schools/ my child’s school”

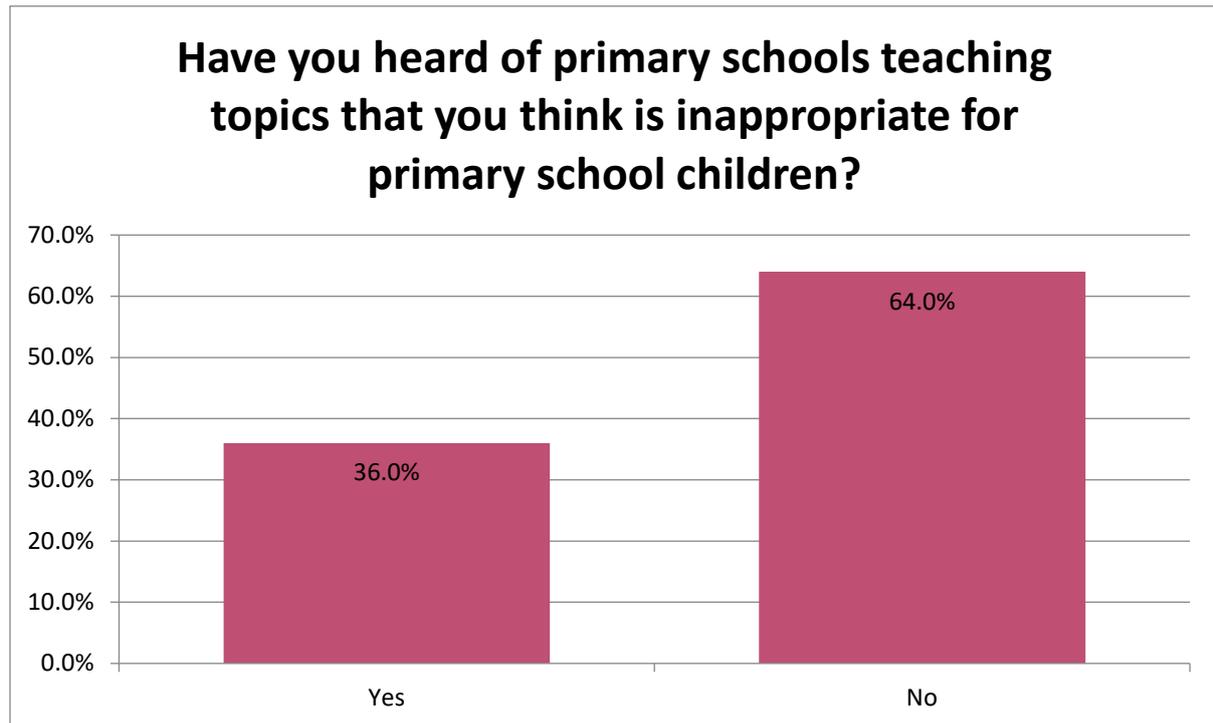


There is a statistically significant relationship between having an older child (as well as their primary school-aged child) and agreeing that they know what is being taught ($\chi^2 = 7.56, P=0.023$). This suggests that parents are receiving less information or are less confident about what is being taught at primary school level.

Inappropriate topics

Parents/carers' were then asked if they had heard of inappropriate topics being taught in primary school RSE. 64% of parents/carers had not heard of any (Figure 7).

Figure 7 – Have you heard of primary schools teaching topics that you think are inappropriate for primary school children?



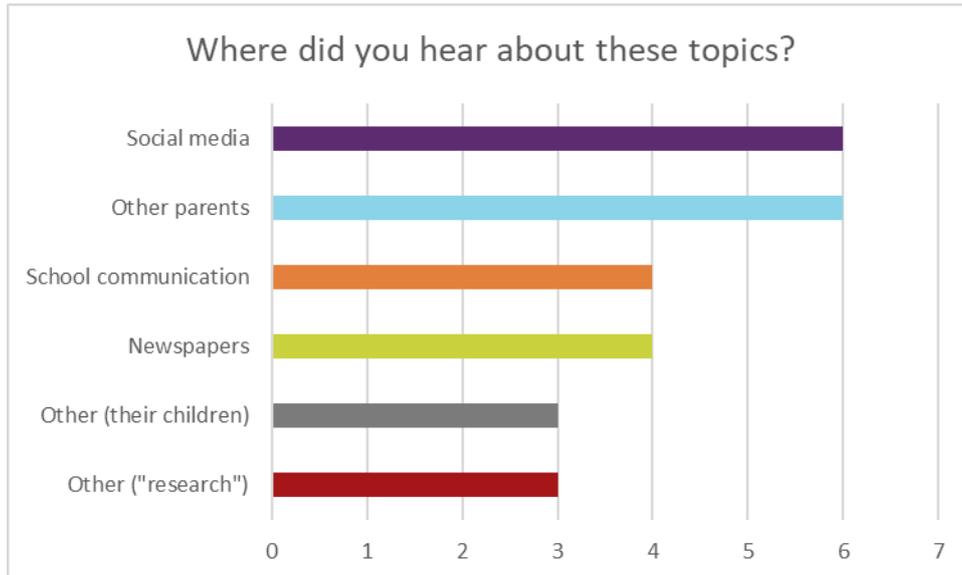
There was a strong statistically significant relationship between believing inappropriate topics are being taught and disagreeing with RSE being beneficial for their child ($\chi^2 = 13.8, P=0.001$). Of those who had heard of topics they thought were inappropriate, 73% disagreed that RSE was beneficial.

While a couple of parents/carers mentioned specific topics such as gender identity and sexuality, sex techniques and masturbation, most simply stated that primary school children were too young for too much detail and did not describe exactly what topics they think are too young or too detailed. For some, concerns were regarding topics that are not included in the RSE curriculum. For example, one parent stated: *“no need to sexualise children, children do not need to know about types of sex, sex games and fetishes”* (Parent/carer of child aged 10, No location). This suggests that engagement with parents about what is and is not included in primary school RSE could allay fears.

It is important to note that only 18 people responded to this question so, whilst equally important to understand, these are likely to be the voices of a vocal minority. Similarly, it’s important to note that the majority got their knowledge about inappropriate content from social media and other parents, not from their own direct experiences (Figure 8). Only 4 respondents said they heard about these topics being taught through school communication.

Figure 8 – Where did parents/carers hear about the above topics?

DfE



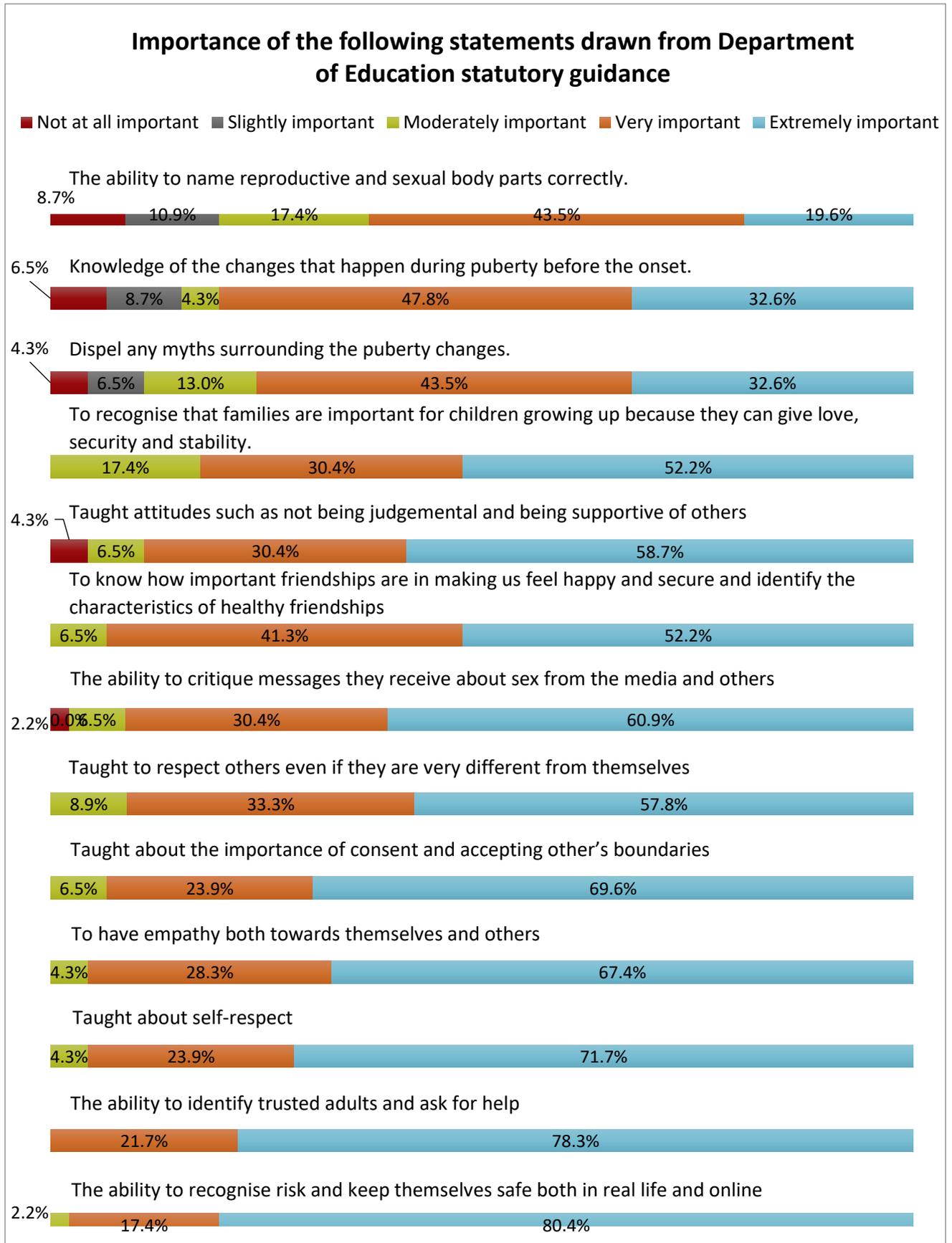
Statutory RSE Guidance

Having taken the following statements (Figure 9) from DfE statutory guidance for primary school RSE (Department for Education, 2019, p. 19), we asked parents/carers how important the statutory RSE content was. All statements were deemed overall important by respondents. The most important was about recognising risk, keeping children safe and asking for help from trusted adults and the least important was about knowledge of puberty and naming body parts correctly (Figure 9).

There is nothing about sex techniques or sex games in the government guidance and, despite previous comments regarding including recognition of diverse sexuality and gender identities, no respondent believed that being ‘taught to respect others even if they are very different from themselves’ was not important.

This suggests that parents/carers agree with most content included in the statutory RSE guidance and, therefore, that greater engagement with parents/carers about what is actually being taught in their child’s school may counteract inaccurate information shared on social media and amongst parents.

Figure 9 – Importance of statements drawn from DfE statutory guidance



WHAT DID WE FIND OUT...?

...about parent and carer engagement in primary school RSE?

What is engagement?

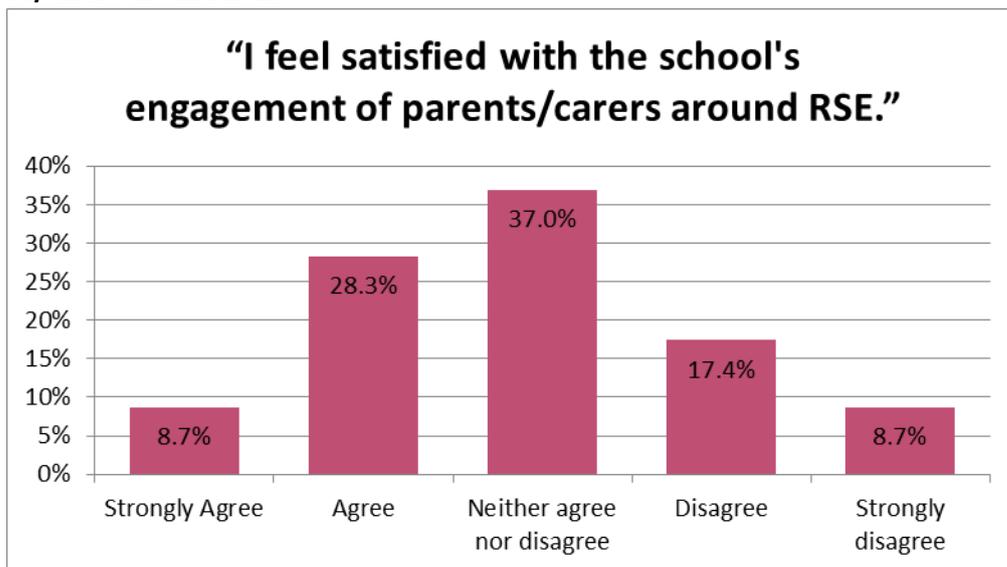
Schools should work closely with parents when planning and delivering RSE. According to the DfE Statutory guidance, “Schools should ensure that parents know what will be taught and when, and clearly communicate the fact that parents have the right to request that their child be withdrawn from some or all of sex education delivered as part of statutory RSE”.

Engagement is about ensuring parents are consulted, examples of resources are shared and relevant policies are published online. The DfE makes it clear, however, that consultation does not provide a parental veto on curriculum content (PSHE Association, 2019).

What went well?

Most parents/carers were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with engagement from school around RSE (Figure 10). Unsurprisingly, there is a strong significant relationship between satisfaction with engagement and both believing RSE is beneficial for their child ($\chi^2 = 12.0, P=0.017$) and knowing what is taught ($\chi^2 = 15.7, P=0.003$). This may indicate the importance of positive parent/carers engagement.

Figure 10 – Agreement with the statement “I feel satisfied with the school's engagement of parents/carers around RSE.”



Those who were satisfied with their engagement indicated that emails, newsletters, meetings and workshops were the methods of engagement they most appreciated from their school. In fact, 83% of those who indicated that they had attended a meeting regarding RSE agreed that RSE is beneficial for their child. Positive experiences included providing overviews of content and topics covered, giving notice of when RSE is being taught, and sharing further information on RSE both at school and home. A few respondents indicated they didn't feel consultation was necessary for them. For example, one parent stated: “I wasn't interested in how they do it at school. I trust them completely” (Mother of child aged 7, West Midlands).

What could be better?

Ensuring a trustful partnership between schools and parents/carers is important. For some, this trust could be broken down through a lack of engagement and not enough information, particularly with

those parents / carers of younger children who, according to this research, felt less confident about what is being taught at primary school level. This is highlighted by one parent’s frustration: *“If my child gets it more detailed I don’t understand why it can’t be sent to the parent as well”* (Parent of child aged 7, London).

Further engagement

When asked what further engagement parents/carers would appreciate, 21% believed they had no engagement from the school and 40% felt they did not receive enough information.

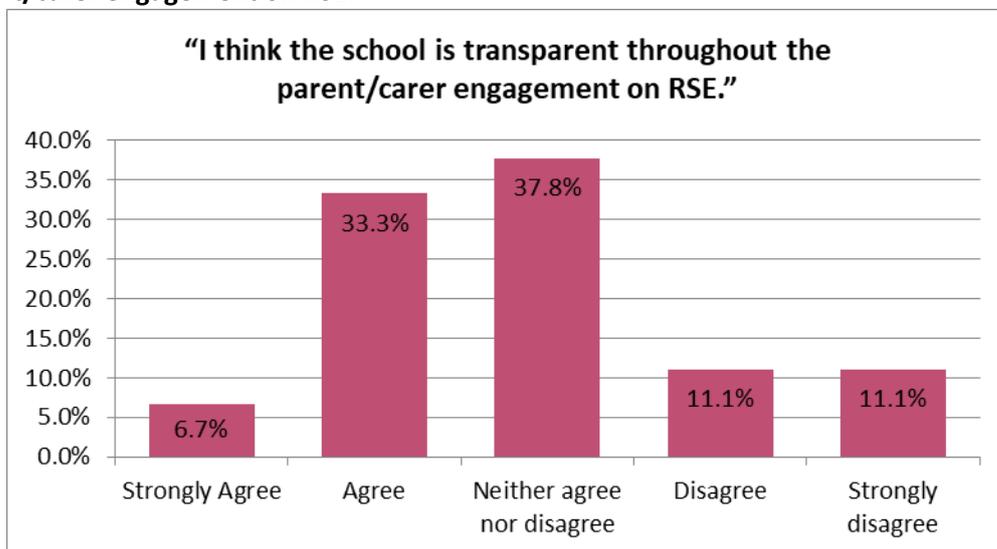
Whilst some parents/carers were happy to receive a brief overview of the content, many wished to view more detailed or exact materials as indicated in the above quote. Respondents stated they would feel more prepared if engagement took place both in advance of and after teaching. For example, *“I’d like a summary after the lesson via email of topics that came up so I am prepared for questions”* (Mother of children aged 11 and 12, South West.)

Despite the DfE guidance making it clear that parents do not have the ability to veto content, some parents/carers requested for schools to *“send the content for approval or disapproval before teaching”* (Parent of child aged 8, London.) This suggests that the limitations of consultation and engagement need to be reinforced with some parents.

Transparency

The majority of parents/carers either agreed that the parent/carer engagement process was transparent or had no strong opinion either way (Figure 11). There is a strong significant relationship between believing the parent/carer engagement process is transparent and both believing RSE is beneficial for their child ($\chi^2 = 11.6, P=0.020$) and knowing what is taught ($\chi^2 = 15.5, P=0.004$).

Figure 11 – Agreement with the statement “I think the school is transparent throughout the parent/carer engagement on RSE.”

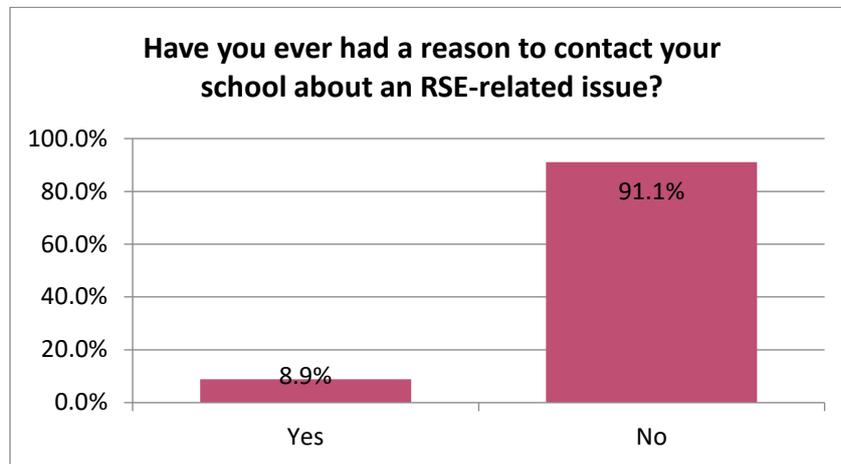


Whilst only 22% felt the school’s parent/carer engagement was not transparent, it seemed some were misinformed or lacked clarity on what aspects of RSE can and cannot be withdrawn from. For example, one parent indicated their school was not transparent because *“if someone gives a no consent they do not accept it. And don’t make it easy for the child to refuse to such content”* (Mother of child aged 9 and 11, London). This was the experience of a minority of parents/carers.

Engaging parents

91% of parents/carers indicated they had never had a reason to contact their school regarding an RSE-related issue (Figure 11). Only four respondents had contacted the school for this reason suggesting few parents/carers have been concerned enough to get in touch with their child’s school.

Figure 11 – Have you ever contacted your school about an RSE-related issue?



These small number of parents indicated what they felt were negative experiences of either being unable to withdraw their child from RSE or feeling their concerns were dismissed or ignored by the school. Whilst this is, of course, not representative of parents/carers’ experiences of contacting school they are important lessons to learn.

Encouraging engagement of all parents/carers

Few parents/carers noted that, although they had opportunities to engage, they had not utilised them. Reasons for this ranged from being “not concerned” (Mother of children aged 5 and 9, North West England) to not being able to attend the time of the meetings. For example, one parent explained that “there was a meeting in school but it was during school hours so not everyone as able to attend” (Mother of child aged 8, London.)

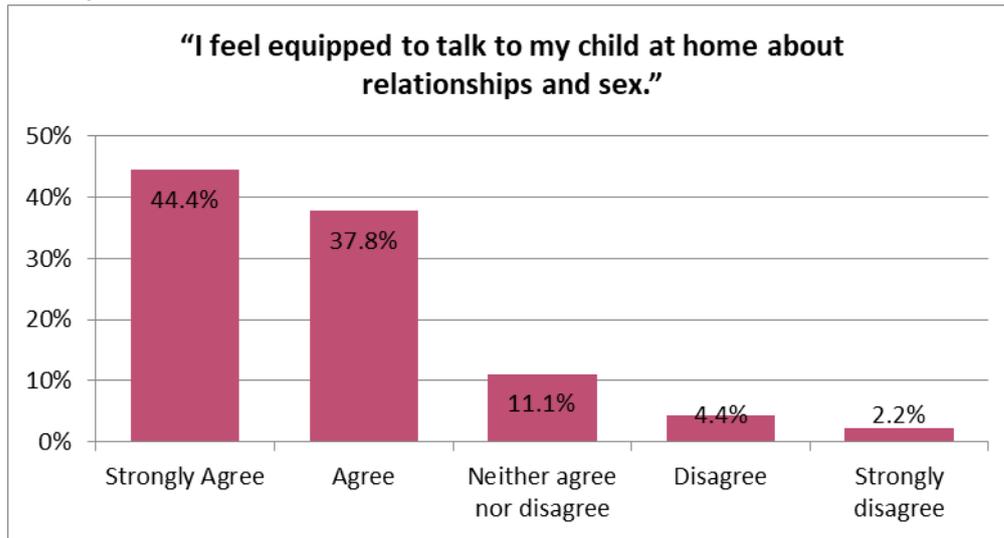
Parents/carers wished to be more engaged around RSE. Though some felt they “need to be more proactive” (Mother of child aged 10, London), the DfE guidance states that it is important for schools ‘to reach out to all parents, recognising that a range of approaches may be needed for doing so’ (Department for Education, 2019). While scheduling parent/carer meetings at different times might be useful, “as time is limited the ability to work with your free time would be helpful. Inviting parents to meetings doesn't always work” (Mother of child aged 10, London.) Many parents/carers suggested catch-up material for those who could not attend meetings or “couldn't digest everything in the one meeting” (Mother of child aged 5, London.) Instead, parents/carers “would like to have the ability to view content online at (their) leisure” (Mother of child aged 10, London.) Respondents felt this would not just support them with knowing what is being taught but “would help greatly with continuity between home and school” (Mother of child aged 10, South East.)

RSE at home

Research highlights the importance of joined-up conversations between home and school around RSE. As one parent stated: “I hope parents will become more and more confident to discuss RSHE related things with their children... If our children know they can talk to their parents about this, they will hopefully come for help/info if they need it the most” (Parent of child aged 10, South East.)

Despite research suggesting parents do not feel confident in talking to their children about relationships and sex, 82% of parents/carers felt equipped to talk to their children about these issues. Although this is positive to see, this may reflect the demographic of parents willing to take this survey and is, potentially, an indication of self-perception rather than actions. It also may support research that indicates that the majority of parents/carers intend to have these discussions with their children but, in practice, lack the knowledge and skills to do so confidently (Astle, et al., 2022).

Figure 12 – Agreement with the statement: “I feel equipped to talk to my child at home about relationships and sex”



How could schools support RSE at home?

Many parents felt they did not need any extra support as they were already comfortable having these discussions at home. However, some recognised the role of schools in both sparking discussions at home and having expertise regarding making sure RSE is happening at the right time for their children. For example, one parent stated: *“It is good for the child to bring this topic home to begin an open discussion, especially when parents are not always sure when the right time is”* (Mother of child aged 5, North East England). Other parents/carers felt they would be more equipped to do RSE at home through better communication from schools and *“knowing what is happening in school”* (Mother of child aged 10, Yorkshire & The Humber). Advice on resources such as useful books and websites would be appreciated, particularly around helping parents/carers assess what is ‘age-appropriate’ for their child and any contextual issues that may be important. This is highlighted by one parent’s response:

“If the school have additional information they can provide to support, this would be appreciated. More so relating to the life stage my child would be at, what is deemed necessary at that point. It is good to remain up to date with any concerns the schools are keeping a current eye out (for example, social media trends to avoid, etc.).” (Mother of child aged 5, North East England.)

Conclusions and recommendations

WHAT COULD BE DONE ...?

...to improve parent and carer engagement in primary school RSE?

Encouraging engagement

As noted, not all parents/carers were able to attend parent/carers consultation meetings, especially during school times, and some of those who did attend felt there was too much information to take in at once. Schools are encouraged to engage all parents and, to do so, school engagement processes need to be accessible and reflect the needs of a diverse parent/carers community. However, it should be made clear to parents/carers what to expect from the engagement process, for example, that consultation does not provide a parental veto on curriculum content. There is value in engaging with parents of younger children who, according to this research, felt less confident about what is being taught at primary school level. Early engagement helps build trust and confidence year on year, and simultaneously helps to dispel myths around what is and isn't being taught in the curriculum.

What information?

Parents/carers reported a preference for printed materials and information sheets which informed them what will be taught and when, as outlined in the DfE guidance. Additionally, parents/carers suggested providing them with more detail about content and language used in the classroom and summaries of discussions that arise during RSE lessons which would help them to pick up discussions at home. Respondents indicated this would aid shared messages being reinforced both at home and school. The research indicates that parents/carers would appreciate being given time and space for discussion and greater clarity of the expectations and limitations of the parent/carers engagement process. This could be done through hosting information on the school website, workshops and a range of engagement methods listed below.

Engagement methods

While emails, newsletters and parent/carers meetings were appreciated by respondents, these needed to be on an ongoing and frequent basis, not a one-off, both prior to and after teaching RSE lessons. It is important to engage all parents/carers and therefore a range of engagement methods might be useful, such as:

- Dedicated meetings
- Questionnaires/surveys
- Social Media accounts
- One-to-one sessions
- Focus groups
- Monthly newsletter
- RSE stand at parents' evening
- School website
- Termly letter

...to tackle prominent narratives and tensions surrounding primary school RSE?

Recognise shared goals and work together to safeguard children

Although parents/carers, may have different interpretations and understandings of narratives surrounding age-appropriateness, safeguarding and certain topics, the research highlights shared goals of delivering RSE that is appropriate for our children's needs and development and which safeguards them from harm. As one parent put it: "We are all educating our children" (Mother of child aged 10, Yorkshire & The Humber.)

These shared goals can be achieved by working together and sharing the growing evidence that highlights that 'we protect children because they have vulnerabilities' (Lamb, et al., 2019) and, therefore, the focus should be on protection from harms in the adult world rather than loss of

innocence. As indicated by Keeping Children Safe in Education (2023), RSHE provides an opportunity to teach safeguarding. Engaging with parents can support greater confidence and trust between parents/carers and their child's school leading to a more joined-up approach to safeguarding children and young people.

Improved engagement leads to greater transparency

Firstly, it is important to remember that the majority of parents/carers believe RSE is important and beneficial for their child. Therefore, engagement is not about getting parents 'on board' but about working together to achieve better RSE for their child. In this sense, we should not be afraid of having these discussions. Discussions help dispel myths spread by the media and inadvertently by members of the parent body. It ensures parents/carers are getting correct information directly from school communication and not from elsewhere. In this way, engagement needs to be not just on a one-off occasion but ongoing. One email might not allay a worry or fear held by parents/carers but building up a trusted relationship with the school over time might.

...to improve children's and young people's experiences of RSE?

Ensure joined-up messages at home and school

Better partnership between home and school will create a more positive environment, ensuring parents/carers want their children to receive RSE, are able to feed views into engagement and consultation more effectively, and feel more confident, prepared and informed to discuss the topics at home.

It also supports children's development and well-being by linking learning at school and home. As we can see from the Sex Education Forum's practical guide (Emmerson, 2013), 'when schools work together with parents on RSE they often find other benefits too, e.g. parents get more involved in children's learning in other subjects'. As a result, children and young people will have a greater selection of trusted adults which can safeguard children and young people by enabling them to report harmful behaviour. Children may also gain better experiences of RSE which are open, honest and inclusive. This can counter the shame, stigma and embarrassment surrounding these issues (Sex Education Forum, 2022).

Listening to children and young people

Just as joined-up conversations between schools and parents/carers are vital, listening to the voices of children and young people ensures that RSE meets their needs. Children and young people's views should be fed into school RSE planning and, as requested by respondents, their thoughts and questions could be shared anonymously with parents. This would inform parents/carers of what their child and/or child's peers already know and understand and have questions about.

Engagement with parents/carers can develop a greater understanding of their child's needs. To do this, adults need to recognise and strengthen children's ability to know about and ask for what they need to know and not pursue protection at the expense of meaningful and inclusive participation (Jerome & Starkey, 2022). Children's questions provide an opportunity for adults to tailor these discussions to their specific needs. In summary: if children are brave enough to ask, adults should be brave enough to answer.

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