

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's response to the Draft RSE Statutory Guidance Consultation

Role of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner

The Domestic Abuse Act establishes in law the Office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for the purpose of providing public leadership on domestic abuse issues and to play a key role in overseeing and monitoring the provision of domestic abuse services in England and Wales. The role of the Commissioner is to encourage good practice in preventing domestic abuse and improve the protection and provision of support to people affected by domestic abuse, by holding agencies and Government to account. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales welcomes the opportunity to feedback on the Government consultation on the Draft RSE Statutory Guidance, and would be pleased to discuss the contents of this response further, if requested to do so. This feedback is provided in the context of the Domestic Abuse Act's landmark recognition of children and young people as victims of domestic abuse in their own right.

This response will set out the Commissioner's overarching position and key recommendations for change, before responding in more detail to address the consultation process as a whole, specific issues relating to age-restricted content, and the implications and unintended consequences that the draft guidance currently risks.

Intersectionality

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner understands the need to continually refine an intersectional lens by listening to all victim/survivors of domestic abuse, including children, no matter who they are or where they are located, and encourages Government to take a similar approach.

Domestic abuse does not exist in a single form. It is unique to each person's situation and history. Different forms of domestic abuse, including controlling and coercive behaviours, coexist in most contexts and it is important to understand how power and control manifest in these situations. 'Race'/ethnicity, age, gender, religion, sexuality, socio economic status, immigration status, disability status and other ways in which victims/survivors identify plays a crucial role in their experience of abuse, its impact and their ability to access pathways of support and recovery.

Specialist pathways of support as well as any attempt to understand victim/survivor needs should be responsive to the multiple contexts of oppression and vulnerabilities that they experience. Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberley Crenshaw, is firmly located in Black

women's experiences of racism and multiple forms of oppression, including domestic abuse.¹ This is a powerful lens that enables us to understand victim/survivor experiences as a whole and identify systemic oppression and marginalisation.

Overarching position

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner is deeply concerned by the draft guidance and would strongly recommend that the guidance is overhauled and crucially, the age restrictions on content are removed. In its place, through genuine co-design with specialist organisations and survivors, the Department for Education should provide a clear, evidence-based, framework which sets out how to sequence and order RSE topics. This would help to model what age-appropriate teaching involves, but with added flexibility where necessary to meet the needs of children.

As it stands, the draft guidance will not prevent domestic abuse and other types of violence and against women and girls (VAWG) and will not foster a safe environment for children to disclose their experiences. Moreover, **the guidance as drafted falls extremely short of the previous Government's Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan Commitment**, which promises to:

*'Provide support to teachers delivering the recently refreshed Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSE) curriculum. Experts, including domestic abuse organisations, will together feed into what this support looks like. Ensuring children know about healthy relationships through the RSE curriculum at a young age, as well as challenging poor attitudes towards relationship behaviours, will help to prevent cases of domestic abuse later in life.'*²

The reasons for this view are set out in depth below. **The Commissioner asks that the Department makes note of the strength of the concern with the draft guidance, and commits to a complete overhaul of the guidance and new approach to genuine, in-depth consultation. The Department for Education should set out a framework for how they will make evidence-based changes to the guidance and meaningfully engage with schools, the domestic abuse specialist sector and children, to ensure effective safeguarding and a truly preventative approach to domestic abuse.**

Recommendations for change

The Commissioner understands that this consultation was published by the previous Government, and that the new Government may have a different view on the best approach to the issue of teaching RSE to children and young people. She welcomes the new Government's manifesto commitment to ensure schools address misogyny and teach young

¹ Columbia Law School (2017). *Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later*. [online] [www.law.columbia.edu](https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-more-two-decades-later). Available at: <https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-more-two-decades-later>.

² Home Office (2022). *Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan - Command paper 639 (accessible version)*. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-domestic-abuse-plan/tackling-domestic-abuse-plan-command-paper-639-accessible-version>.

people about healthy relationships and consent, as well as its wider mission to halve VAWG in a decade. She makes the following recommendations, in support of these aims:

Recommendations on the need for a re-draft

Recommendation 1: The guidance must be completely overhauled and drafted again from scratch. Crucially, the notion of age restricted content must be removed, and instead, the guidance should set out a clear framework on how to sequence and order RSE topics. This would help model what age-appropriate teaching involves, but with added flexibility where necessary to meet the needs of children.

Recommendation 2: To complement this overhaul, the Department for Education must set out a clear framework for how the guidance will be developed. The Department for Education must set up a taskforce, which will co-produce the guidance with the Department. This taskforce must include children and young people, teachers, and the specialist domestic abuse and VAWG sector. This taskforce, which will have the benefit of years of knowledge and experience of specialist providers working in schools, will replace the current Review Panel.

Recommendation 3: In addition to the taskforce, Government must also commit to a new 12-week public consultation the overhauled guidance.

Recommendation 4: The Department for Education must create greater transparency in developing the re-drafted RSE curriculum, and set out a protocol for sharing the evidence behind decisions on the content.

Recommendations on content

Recommendation 5: The development of the re-drafted RSE curriculum must be based on robust evidence of what works. The Commissioner recommends that the Department for Education considers two pieces of research in developing the new content:

- *Preventing domestic abuse for children and young people: A review of school-based interventions.*³ This is a systemic review which discusses the factors which make RSE more effective, including support for children who disclose abuse.
- *What makes for effectiveness when starting early – Learning from an integrated school-based violence and abuse prevention programme for children under 12.*⁴ This is an evaluation of 'Speak out Stay Safe', the evaluation details the differences in the impact of RSE based on age and gender, and the importance of context and school readiness.

³ Stanley, N. *et al.* (2015) 'Preventing domestic abuse for children and young people: A review of school-based interventions', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 59(59), pp. 120–131. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2015.10.018>

⁴ Stanley, N., Devaney, J., Kurdi, Z., Ozdemir, U., Barter, C., Monks, C., Edwards, R.T., Batool, F., Charles, J., Farrelly, N., Hayes, D., Millar, A., Thompson, T., Winrow, E. and Radford, L. (2023). What makes for effectiveness when starting early – Learning from an integrated school-based violence and abuse prevention programme for children under 12. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 139, p.106109. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106109>

Recommendation 6: The re-drafted guidance must be clear that learning about healthy relationships must begin from primary school and address the harm that children are already experiencing, to ensure they grow up with healthy expectations about relationships and free from harmful attitudes.

Recommendation 7: The re-drafted RSE guidance must include a clear understanding of how gender inequality and power and control dynamics underpin domestic abuse, and challenge harmful gender norms.

Recommendations on implementation

For RSE to work as a preventative tool and be transformational in the response to domestic abuse, it must be embedded into a 'Whole School Approach' to preventing domestic abuse and VAWG. There is little point in having strengthened RSE guidance if the wider school culture and behaviour policies do not prioritise the prevention and early identification of domestic abuse and other types of VAWG. Strengthened RSE guidance must be the first step in a preventative approach to domestic abuse and VAWG, and the first step to keeping children safe in education. **The Government must commit to a full suite of reform, and support for educators, through embedding a Whole School Approach.**⁵

Recommendation 8: RSE must be embedded into a 'Whole School Approach' to preventing domestic abuse and other types of VAWG.⁶ The Whole school approach includes, but is not limited to:

- Promoting gender equality and challenging stereotypes across the whole curriculum
- Mapping and working with local specialist services
- Strong child protection policies with specific references to domestic abuse and VAWG
- A zero-tolerance behaviour policy to VAWG
- Buy-in from senior management teams
- Working with parents and carers who play a key role in changing attitudes and beliefs.

Recommendation 9: Parental engagement on the RSE curriculum must be framed positively, with an emphasis on understanding the need and importance of the topics covered, and working together to keep children safe. The Department for Education must develop tools and information for parents explaining the curriculum content, and see the positive involvement of parents as an integral part of the Whole School Approach.

Recommendation 10: All staff delivering RSE must be comprehensively trained to do so. This training must include content on domestic abuse and coercive control and handling disclosures of abuse. The Department for Education must properly fund this training and ensure it includes input from the specialist VAWG sector.

⁵ EVAW. (2023) It's #AboutTime A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls. Available at: <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/FINAL-About-Time-WSA-report-140723.pdf>

⁶ EVAW. (2023) It's #AboutTime A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls. Available at: <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/FINAL-About-Time-WSA-report-140723.pdf>

Recommendation 11: Alongside co-producing the re-drafted guidance, the value that external specialist services can add to the delivery of RSE must also be recognised locally. The guidance must include guidelines for strengthening partnerships between schools and specialist services to ensure children are being taught sensitive topics by experts, and understand where to seek support.

Recommendation 12: To create consistency between schools, the guidance must recommend that domestic abuse leads in local authorities coordinate with schools in the local area to deliver effective RSE content on domestic abuse, with input from local specialist services. The strength of this joint strategic approach to effective RSE and preventing domestic abuse should be assessed by Ofsted in inspections, as this is a significant lever in improving safeguarding.

Recommendation 13: The re-drafted guidance must stipulate that any education fora must have a focus on RSE and domestic abuse, including but not limited to, Heads groups, LSCPs, SENCO meetings, School Pastoral Support Teams and leadership groups. Again, this must be inspected by Ofsted.

Recommendation on data

Recommendation 14: The ONS prioritises the work to implement a prevalence survey of child abuse in the UK, building on the feasibility study published in June 2024, so that the effectiveness of RSE provision and other interventions to prevent abuse can be measured over time.

Response

1) The Consultation Process

For Government policy changes to be effective it is imperative that they are rooted in the experiences of frontline practitioners who will deliver the policy in practice, and in the views of the people which the policy will serve and impact. The Commissioner notes with concern that there has been a distinct lack of communication from the Department for Education in updating key stakeholders, including her Office, on the progress of this guidance since the first announcement of an update in March 2023.

Compounded by the lack of the communication as to when to expect the consultation, the Commissioner is equally concerned by the shortened response period, especially given the length of the draft guidance and the complexity of the issues. This consultation has given the public 8 weeks to respond, as opposed to the usual 12-week response period, which is widely considered best practice amongst policy professionals and Government officials. This consultation response will be of key importance for teachers and those in school settings, but also those in the specialist VAWG sector who work in schools to deliver bespoke RSE lessons, and understand the power of effective prevention with children and young people.

Practitioners in both of these sectors have incredibly high workloads, huge demands on capacity and operate in high pressured environments. For those working in these demanding roles, it is only right that they are given the full response time that is usually allocated in order

to convey their views and give an in-depth and meaningful response to the consultation. For example, the Business Rates Avoidance and Evasion Consultation, which ran from July 6th 2023 until 28th September 2023 was open for 12 weeks.⁷ Business leaders will have paid employees who are expert and engage on exactly this topic as part of their day to day role. It is therefore disappointing that the 12-week period was not given for this consultation exercise. I am also concerned that the consultation is that in name only, given references to other pieces of guidance which are supposedly out for consultation and being re-considered on that basis.

Giving a platform to and listening to the voices of key stakeholders is imperative to good policy making and unfortunately, many opportunities for this have been missed. One of the key messages from the Commissioner's own engagement with children and young people, through the pilot of her 'Tell Nicole' Framework has been the importance of including children's voices on issues that affect them. It is vital that this is done properly in developing the RSE curriculum. **Going forward, the views of children and young people must be sought as a priority, and policy officials must be able to evidence that the guidance is rooted in what children and young people told them it would be useful to learn in order to keep safe.**

In addition to overhauling this guidance, the new Government must commit to a clear framework for how the new guidance will be developed and engagement prioritised. First and foremost, the Department must commit to and set out their plans for robust and in-depth stakeholder engagement on the guidance, and a new, 12 week public consultation on the overhauled guidance. In addition to this, the Department for Education should set up a taskforce, which will co-produce the guidance with the Department. This taskforce must have the knowledge and expertise of those who work directly with children and young people, and understand their needs and experiences, to ensure the realities of their experiences are not misjudged. This would include at a minimum:

- Children and young people,
- Frontline practitioners and educators
- the specialist domestic abuse and VAWG sector.

This taskforce would replace the current Review Panel, and ensure that the guidance is evidence based and rooted in the genuine experiences of children and young people. The Department for Education must create greater transparency in developing the re-drafted RSE curriculum, and set out a protocol for sharing the evidence behind decisions on the content. Moreover, the Taskforce would review the guidance every 3 years to ensure that changes will be made where needed as society develops, but not so often that changes become confusing for schools and teachers delivering the content.

2) The Age Restricted Content

This main section of the Commissioner's feedback relates to the content of the guidance, specifically the age restricted content and the implications for delivery and overall impact on

⁷ GOV.UK. (2023). *Business Rates Avoidance and Evasion: Consultation*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/business-rates-avoidance-and-evasion-consultation>.

children and young people's relationships and sex education. **It is absolutely paramount that the Department for Education notes the high level of concern with the guidance and commits to a complete overhaul of the guidance and new approach to consultation.** In its current form, the draft guidance will not be the effective prevention tool which the Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan commits it to being, and may even negatively impact on a child or young person's ability to disclose their harmful experiences and access much needed specialist support.

First and foremost, for the guidance to be effective, it must be child-led and genuinely reflect the realities of children's lives and experiences. At present, the guidance fails to do this as content is restricted until children reach a certain age, despite the stark reality that many children and young people will have already experienced the harms covered in those topics before that age. This will be evidenced below.

The Acorns Project⁸ offer a range of services to families affected by domestic abuse in North Tyneside and Northumberland. The Acorns Youth Panel recently submitted their 'Frequently Asked Questions' document to the DAC Office via our Tell Nicole Framework. Their document includes a section on prevention and awareness around domestic abuse and toxic relationships, where the youth panel emphasised the following as important:

- Educating children on consent from a young age,
- Providing discussion and activity-based workshops on relationships within schools.
- Those working with young people needing to take the time to update their knowledge about young people's relationships.
- Schools needing to pay more attention to young people's relationships and provide opportunities to explore the topic with safe trusted adults.
- Talking to young people about healthy boundaries, and their rights and responsibilities within relationships.
- Avoiding victim blaming by balancing education on avoiding abusive relationships with an emphasis helping to prevent harmful behaviours.
- Making sure strategies are relevant and inclusive and that boys are included.

Moreover, in a recent Sex Education Forum poll, children and young people set out where they felt RSE lessons needed to go further:

- 58% wanted to know about power imbalances in relationships,
- 58% wanted to learn more about pornography,
- 57% wanted to understand culture and faith based perspectives,
- 54% wanted LGBTQ+ relevant information,
- 55% wanted to learn more about the attitudes and behaviour of boys and men towards women and girls,
- 54% wanted to understand more about online relationships.⁹

⁸Acorns Project. [online] Acorns Project. Available at: <https://www.acornsproject.org.uk/>

⁹ Sex Education Forum (2023). *Working together for quality relationships and sex education Young People's RSE Poll 2022*. [online] Available at: <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/Young%20Peoples%20RSE%20Poll%202022-%20-%20Report.pdf>

Research from SafeLives has also found that children and young people want to see more open discussions in RSE.¹⁰ Research from EAW found that 80% of girls think schools need to do more to support young people's sex and relationships education.¹¹

Unfortunately, the draft guidance falls short of what children have asked for. Below, the Commissioner sets out evidence as to why the age restrictions suggested are set too high and therefore fail to target the right audience. The guidance as drafted risks prioritising idealistic perceptions of childhood innocence over the lived realities of children's experiences and what they are already exposed to, making it an ineffective tool to change behaviour and prevent harm.

Sexual Harassment/Harmful sexual behaviour – The review panel has imposed a ban on *'what constitutes sexual behaviour and why, and that such behaviour is unacceptable, emphasising that it is never the fault of the person experiencing it'* until year 7. Also included in this ban is *'the concepts and laws relating to harmful sexual behaviour, including sexual harassment, revenge porn, upskirting and taking/sharing intimate sexual photographs without consent, public sexual harassment, and unsolicited sexual language / attention / touching.'*

Children face harassment at an alarming scale. Research by the University of Suffolk found that 1 in 6 participants reported that their first experience of sexual harassment occurred when they were aged 10 or younger – 3.7% were aged 0–5 and 13.1% were aged 6–10.¹² The same research found that female participants encountered a wide range of behaviours which constitute sexual harassment. These included unwanted touching (43.8%), unwanted kissing (34.7%), indecent exposure (23.5%), having pictures taken of them (23.1%) and being sent unsolicited nudes or sexual images (21.1%).¹³ These data show that unfortunately, children begin to first encounter sexual harassment before year 7, so imposing this limit on the concept of sexual harassment comes far too late, as 1 in 6 participants have already experienced this type of harm.

The volume of evidence relating to young girls facing sexual harassment at school recorded on the Everyone's Invited website, triggered the Ofsted Review into Sexual Harassment into Schools and Colleges.¹⁴ In addition to this:

¹⁰ SafeLives. (2023). *Exploring relationships and sex education in schools*. [online] Available at: <https://safelives.org.uk/research-policy-library/i-love-it-but-wish-it-were-taken-more-seriously/> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2024].

¹¹ EAW (2023). *Sexual harassment at school: new film co-created with young people supported by latest data*. [online] End Violence Against Women. Available at: <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/new-campaign-film-its-about-time-things-changed/>

¹² Maitra, D., Allen, K., Hermolle, M. and Adisa, O. (2023). *Sexual Harassment in Public Spaces: Communicating Harms and Challenging Perpetration*. [online] Available at: <https://crimestoppers-uk.org/getmedia/f311d0cc-667f-41aa-9a04-192b2e06301f/Crimestoppers-REPORT.pdf>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ OFSTED (2021). *Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges*. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>.

- A recent survey conducted by the End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW) found that nearly one-third of girls surveyed don't feel safe from sexual harassment in school.¹⁵
- Nearly a quarter (24%) of girls in mixed sex schools said they had experiences of unwanted sexual touching in school.¹⁶
- Nine in ten girls and young women in schools surveyed by Rape Crisis UK reported that sexist name-calling and being sent unwanted 'dick pics' or other images of a sexual nature happens to them or other girls and young women their age.¹⁷

The prevalence of these harmful behaviours underlines the need for a Whole School Approach¹⁸ to ending VAWG. Children and young people need to see these behaviours being taken seriously and acted upon. This can only be done if they are taught what constitutes harmful sexual behaviour and sexual harassment, there are safe spaces with trained professionals for them to disclose, and there are effective policies and procedures to ensure robust, appropriate action taken in response.

Sexual Violence and abuse – The draft guidance permits teaching '*the concepts and laws related to sexual violence, including rape and sexual assault from year 7*', but places an age limit on this being taught in a '*sexually explicit way*' before year 9.

In order to have a preventative curriculum where children and young people have clarity on what constitutes sexual abuse and violence, teachers must provide relevant information at a level that a child can understand, in a way that is suited to their age, so that they can recognise risk and harm, as done in the NSPCC's well established 'PANTS' campaign.¹⁹ By placing a limit on rape and sexual assault being discussed in a '*sexually explicit way*' until year 9, it hinders a child's ability to understand and recognise sexual abuse, increasing stigma and fear around these important topics. Unfortunately, children in years below year 9 do experience sexual abuse and must be given the tools and resources to understand and identify what has happened to them.

Reports of sexual abuse in schools continue to increase, with a Women and Equalities Select Committee report citing that one child in school is raped on every school day, and in primary

¹⁵ EVAW. (2023) It's #AboutTime A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls. Available at: <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/FINAL-About-Time-WSA-report-140723.pdf>

¹⁶ EVAW (2023). *Sexual harassment at school: new film co-created with young people supported by latest data*. [online] End Violence Against Women. Available at: <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/new-campaign-film-its-about-time-things-changed/>

¹⁷ Rape Crisis England and Wales (2023). *Statistics about Sexual Violence and Abuse*. [online] Rape Crisis England & Wales. Available at: <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/statistics-sexual-violence/>.

¹⁸ EVAW. (2023) It's #AboutTime A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls. Available at: <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/FINAL-About-Time-WSA-report-140723.pdf>

¹⁹ NSPCC (2021). *Talk PANTS*. [online] NSPCC. Available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/pants-underwear-rule/>.

schools alone three sexual assaults are reported to the police every school day.²⁰ Other evidence includes:

- Barter's 2009 study of 13 to 17 year olds found that 1 in 3 girls (31%) and 16% of boys reported some form of sexual abuse within their relationship.²¹
- The 2019 Crime Survey for England and Wales asked a representative sample of adults aged 18-74 about their experiences of child sexual abuse, including peer abuse, before the age of 16. The survey found that 7.5% of adults experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16-years (3.5% of men and 11.5% of women).²²
- Similarly, the European Agency for Fundamental Rights' 'Violence Against Women' survey 2014 asked a sample of around 1,500 women in the UK aged 18-74 about experiences of child sexual abuse before the age of 15, and 18% of women said they had experienced any form of sexual abuse (this did not include sexual abuse by peers).²³
- Despite what is known about the underreporting of sexual abuse, there are still increasingly high rates of sexual offences against children under 16 being recorded by the police. In 2022/23, 59,502 sexual offences against children were recorded in England, meaning that 33% of all sexual offences recorded are committed against children.²⁴

It is important that policy is based on accurate and reliable data. Police data can only represent crimes reported to the police and therefore underestimates the actual number of offences. We need to understand the full extent of child abuse, including sexual offences and exposure to domestic abuse, to be able to tackle the problem. The World Health Organisation recognises that accurate prevalence data is needed to monitor trends in child abuse over time, to develop effective prevention strategies and appropriate support for those who have experienced abuse²⁵. As the last UK based prevalence study of abuse experienced during childhood was held in 2011, it is critical that the ONS continues the work to develop a

²⁰ House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools Third Report of Session 2016-17 Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report by authority of the House of Commons. (2016). Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/91/91.pdf>.

²¹ Barter, C., Mccarry, M., Berridge, D. and Evans, K. (2009). *Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships* Barter et al *Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships Acknowledgements*. [online] Available at: <https://ethikinstitut.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/2009PartnerExploitationViolenceTeenageIntimateRelationshipsReport.pdf> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2024].

²² British Psychological Society. (n.d.). *Incidence and prevalence of sexual abuse* | BPS - British Psychological Society. [online] Available at: [https://explore.bps.org.uk/content/report-guideline/bpsrep.2023.inf258b/chapter/bpsrep.2023.inf258b.5#:~:text=The%20CSEW%20\(ONS%2C%202019\)](https://explore.bps.org.uk/content/report-guideline/bpsrep.2023.inf258b/chapter/bpsrep.2023.inf258b.5#:~:text=The%20CSEW%20(ONS%2C%202019).).

²³ Kelly, L. and Karsna, K. (2017). *Measuring the scale and changing nature of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation Scoping report* *Measuring the scale and changing nature of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation: Scoping report* Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse. [online] Available at: <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/10/CSA-Scale-and-Nature-full-report-2018.pdf>.

²⁴ NSPCC (2024). *Statistics Briefing Child Sexual Abuse* *Statistics briefing: Child Sexual Abuse*. [online] Available at: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/jwhpwojz/statistics-briefing-child-sexual-abuse.pdf>.

²⁵World Health Organization (2006). *Preventing child maltreatment: a guide to taking action and generating evidence*. [online] [www.who.int](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/preventing-child-maltreatment-a-guide-to-taking-action-and-generating-evidence). Available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/preventing-child-maltreatment-a-guide-to-taking-action-and-generating-evidence>.

prevalence study for the UK²⁶ so that the effectiveness of RSE and other interventions to prevent abuse during childhood can be measured.

If children are not informed in full about sexual abuse, they are far less likely to access help and support to stop this from happening. Children should be equipped with the skills and knowledge to know who to tell so that they can be protected, kept safe and supported.

Turning to peer on peer abuse, Barter's work highlighting the prevalence of sexual abuse within young people's intimate relationships, showed the need for effective RSE to prevent harmful sexual behaviour/abuse committed by children and young people. Radford et al's 2011 study of child maltreatment in the UK found that 65.9% of contact sexual abuse reported by under 18-year-olds was carried out by other children and young people under the age of 18.²⁷ Similarly, Gewirtz-Meydan and Finkelhor's 2020 study of sexual abuse and assault of children and adolescents in the USA found that other children and young people were responsible for 76.7% of recorded sexual abuse and assault offences against boys and 70.1% of recorded sexual abuse and assault offences against girls.²⁸ Moreover, in 2022/23, the helpline Childline delivered over 600 counselling sessions about child-on-child sexual abuse.²⁹ RSE is a key opportunity to prevent abuse from happening in the first place, and through a well-structured prevention programme, sexual abuse between children can be reduced. Without an explanation as to what consent and inappropriate sexual activity is prior to year 9, children cannot be taught about the prevention of sexual abuse and what type of behaviour constitutes abuse, putting children at significant risk.

Pornography – The guidance states that '*viewing harmful content, such as pornography, that represents a distorted picture of sexual behaviours, and can affect how people behave towards sexual partners*' can be discussed from year 7. However, the details of the sexual acts cannot be discussed before year 9.

This separation is not feasible and does not enable an effective discussion where children can understand and differentiate between harmful, and normal sexual acts. Pornography often normalises violent sexual acts and without discussion of sexual acts, children will not understand the unacceptability of violence and necessity of consent. If this is unchanged, children will continue to access violent pornography, without any understanding as to what is safe and legal.

²⁶ www.ons.gov.uk. (n.d.). *Exploring the feasibility of a survey measuring child abuse in the UK* - Office for National Statistics. [online] Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/exploringthefeasibilityofasurveymeasuringchildabuseintheuk/june2024#research-aims> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2024].

²⁷ Radford, L., Corral, S., Bradley, C., Fisher, H., Bassett, C., Howat, N. and Collishaw, S. (2011). *Child abuse and neglect in the UK today*. [online] Available at:

https://www.blackpoolsafeguarding.org.uk/assets/uploads/resources/Children/child_abuse_neglect_research_PD_F_wdf84181.pdf.

²⁸ Gewirtz-Meydan, A. and Finkelhor, D. (2019). Sexual Abuse and Assault in a Large National Sample of Children and Adolescents. *Child Maltreatment*, 25(2), p.107755951987397. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559519873975>

²⁹ NSPCC (2022). *Thousands of children disclose abuse for the first time when speaking to Childline*. [online] NSPCC. Available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2022/thousands-children-disclose-abuse-first-time-childline/>.

The age limits that have been placed on this content are not reflective of children's realities, and a sensitive discussion of harmful pornography should take place for year groups below year 7, as the reality is that children are already accessing this content. Advancements in technology have made pornography more accessible to young people. There is also evidence that links viewing extreme or violent pornography with violent or abusive behaviour in young men.³⁰ A report by Women's Aid found that 24% of young people surveyed had been exposed to pornography in KS2, and 35% by KS3.³¹ Similarly, a report by the Children's Commissioner found that substantial proportions of young people surveyed had viewed pornography at a much younger age than 13 – 27% by age 11 and 10% by the age of 9.³²

The same report highlighted the links between accessing harmful pornography and the subsequent impacts on behaviours and attitudes. Of young people surveyed:

- Almost half, 47%, of respondents aged 16–21 stated that girls expect sex to involve physical aggression (compared to 39% who stated that boys expect sex to involve aggression).³³
- A further 42% of respondents stated that girls enjoy physically aggressive sex acts (compared to 37% who stated that boys enjoy aggressive sex).³⁴

Moreover, the Angiolini Inquiry – established to investigate how an off-duty police officer was able to abduct, rape and murder a member of the public – found that Wayne Couzens (the police officer who committed these crimes) had a "preference for violent and extreme pornography and [a] history of alleged sexual offending."³⁵

Access to pornography or sexually explicit content puts children at greater risk of developing unrealistic attitudes about sex and consent, and more negative or harmful attitudes about gender roles and identities in relationships.³⁶ The RSE curriculum must work to challenge these harmful beliefs and attitudes in order to serve as an effective preventative tool. The imposition of age restrictions on this type of content means that vital lessons are learnt too late, harmful beliefs are engrained and for some children, given the reported prevalence, sexual abuse may have already taken place amongst peers.

Online sexual abuse – The guidance states that '*children should be taught the laws around the distribution of naked images/sexual images of a person under 18, the serious*

³⁰ Children's Commissioner (2023). 'A lot of it is actually just abuse'. (2023). Available at: <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>.

³¹ Women's Aid (2023). 'Influencers and Attitudes: How will the next generation understand domestic abuse?'. Available at: [Influencers and Attitudes: How will the next generation understand domestic abuse? \(womensaid.org.uk\)](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/resources-reports/influencers-and-attitudes-how-will-the-next-generation-understand-domestic-abuse/).

³² Children's Commissioner (2023). 'A lot of it is actually just abuse'. (2023). Available at: <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Home Office (2024) *Angiolini Inquiry Part 1 Report*, GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/angiolini-inquiry-part-1-report>.

³⁶ Children's Commissioner (2023). 'A lot of it is actually just abuse'. (2023). Available at: <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>.

consequences and potential criminal charges for asking for sexual images and the use of AI generated imagery should not be taught before year 7.'

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner believes that the age restriction of year 7 on online sexual abuse is not preventative nor reflective of the realities of children's experiences. Moreover, this restriction makes little sense – as highlighted in the above section, a ban has been imposed on discussing sexually explicit abuse until year 9, yet image-based abuse is a form of explicit sexual abuse. With bans on parts of the conversation, children may fail to fully understand the nuances of online sexual abuse.

As online misogyny is a more recent form of VAWG, there are limited numbers of interventions and conceptual discussions to combat the exponentially growing issue. Online misogyny poses “distinct challenges because it has no national boundaries and because it challenges traditional notions of public and private space.”³⁷ The prevalence of online sexual abuse is alarming:

- Nine in 10 girls and half of boys told Ofsted that they or their peers were regularly exposed to unwanted explicit images or videos.³⁸
- The 2022 Girlguiding's Attitudes survey noted that 71% of girls had experienced some form of harmful online content in the last year.³⁹

Given the prevalence of this type of abuse, it is important that this is taught early to prevent this from happening in future, and shift attitudes and behaviours. An evaluation of InCtrl, a service which aims to help protect children and young people from technology assisted child sexual abuse found a clear rationale for needing to work with primary aged children, given their increased access to mobile phones, but also as due to their age they are more receptive to adopting productive coping strategies.⁴⁰ Children must be taught about the life-changing impacts and potential legal consequences of circulating nude images at a primary school age. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 made it illegal to threaten to share intimate images and children must be aware that this is a criminal offence from a young age.⁴¹ The Ofsted Review found that where children had access to technology, the sharing of inappropriate images and videos was also a problem in primary schools.⁴² Incidents included 'viewing pornography, requests to look up pornography websites and viewing inappropriate images on social media, there were examples of children in Years 6 and 7 sending nudes.'⁴³

³⁷ Lewis, R. (2018). Misogyny Online: extending the boundaries of hate crime. *Journal of gender-based violence*, [online] (3), pp.519–536. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1332/239868018X15375304472635>

³⁸ OFSTED (2021). *Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges*. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>.

³⁹ About the Girls' Attitudes Survey. (2022). Available at: <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/fundraising-and-partnerships/uk-snapshot-gas-2022.pdf>.

⁴⁰ McConnell, N., Thomas, E., Johnston, S., Zambartas, E., Pirrie, E., Pritchard, C. and Belton, E. (2020). *Increasing safety and the resilience of children at risk of technology-assisted child sexual abuse Implementation Evaluation for InCtrl*. [online] Available at: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2433/implementation-evaluation-inctrl.pdf>.

⁴¹ Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/17/part/6/crossheading/disclosure-of-private-sexual-photographs-and-films/enacted>.

⁴² OFSTED (2021). *Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges*. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>.

⁴³ Ibid.

Domestic abuse – The guidance makes clear that in secondary school, students should learn the laws and concepts of domestic abuse, but should ‘*not teach the details of violent abuse before year 9 as it is important that pupils are not introduced to distressing concepts when they are too young to understand them.*’

Sadly, domestic abuse is part of many children’s lives. The most recent prevalence estimate found that 1 in 5 children have experienced domestic abuse.⁴⁴ Domestic abuse is the most common adverse background factor in children deemed ‘in need’ of support from children’s social care and is recorded in around 50% of all children’s social care assessments.⁴⁵ Children are within situations where domestic abuse has the most extreme consequences. Domestic abuse was also the most common family characteristic found within Serious Case Reviews, which concerned the most extreme and grievous failures to protect children from harm.⁴⁶ In over half of cases analysed in the recent HALT thematic analysis of Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) recommendations for children’s services⁴⁷, there were children under 18 living in the home. The average age of children reported in the DHRs was 7 years old, with the most common age category being between 4 and 8 years old.

Moreover, the prevalence of children experiencing domestic abuse in their own intimate relationships or having worrying attitudes about abusive behaviour is also extremely high:

- A study of 13 to 17 year olds by NSPCC found that a quarter (25%) of girls and 18% of boys reported having experienced some form of physical violence from an intimate partner.⁴⁸
- 49% of boys and 33% of girls aged 13 – 14 thought that hitting a partner would be ‘okay’ in at least one of twelve scenarios they were presented with.⁴⁹
- One study of 74,908 school students aged 11–16, found that 18% of girls and 16% of boys reported instigating emotional dating violence⁵⁰.
- Additionally, one in three girls (31%) and 16% of boys reported some form of sexual abuse within their relationships.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Radford, L., Corral, S., Bradley, C., Fisher, H., Bassett, C., Howat, N. and Collishaw, S. (2011). *Child abuse and neglect in the UK today*. [online] Available at: https://www.blackpoolsafeguarding.org.uk/assets/uploads/resources/Children/child_abuse_neglect_research_PDF_wdf84181.pdf.

⁴⁵ Department for Education (2022). Characteristics of Children in Need. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need>.

⁴⁶ Dickens, J., Taylor, J., Cook, L., Cossar, J., Garstang, J., Hallett, N., Molloy, E., Rennolds, N., Rimmer, J., Sorensen, P. and Wate, R. (2022). *Learning for the future: final analysis of serious case reviews*. [online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6396fdf8e90e077c33497013/Learning_for_the_future_-_final_analysis_of_serious_case_reviews_2017_to_2019.pdf.

⁴⁷ Chantler, K. Baker, V., Heyes, K., Gunby, C., (2023). Briefing Paper: Summary Domestic Homicide Oversight Mechanism for Children’s Services. Available at: [Briefing-Paper-Childrens-Services-Domestic-Homicide-Oversight-Mechanism-2023.pdf \(domesticabusecommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.domesticabusecommissioner.gov.uk/assets/uploads/2023/07/Briefing-Paper-Childrens-Services-Domestic-Homicide-Oversight-Mechanism-2023.pdf)

⁴⁸ Barter, C., Mccarry, M., Berridge, D. and Evans, K. (2009). *Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships* Barter et al *Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships Acknowledgements*. [online] Available at: <https://ethikinstitut.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/2009PartnerExploitationViolenceTeenageIntimateRelationshipsReport.pdf> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2024].

⁴⁹ Safelives. (2022). Safe Young Lives: Young People and Domestic Abuse. Available at: [Untitled \(safelives.org.uk\)](https://www.safelives.org.uk)

⁵⁰ NSPCC. (2019). How Safe are our Children? An overview of data on child abuse online. Available at: [How safe are our children? 2019 \(nspcc.org.uk\)](https://www.nspcc.org.uk)

⁵¹ Safelives. (2022). Safe Young Lives: Young People and Domestic Abuse. Available at: [Untitled \(safelives.org.uk\)](https://www.safelives.org.uk)

It is not learning about domestic abuse that is harmful for children, it is living with and experiencing domestic abuse. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner is aware of a number of organisations that provide specialist RSE lessons in both primary and secondary schools to teach content about domestic abuse in a way that is appropriate, but also enables children to understand domestic abuse, identify abusive behaviour and seek support where needed. Such programmes create a safe space for disclosure and opportunities for children to recognise and voice what they are experiencing. The HALT research highlighted the pervasive impact of domestic abuse on a child's day to day wellbeing through this account of one young person's feelings of responsibility and guilt about constantly needing to manage the perpetrator's behaviour at home:

The following morning when the son was leaving the house for school he did not immediately wave goodbye to [perpetrator]. When he turned to wave, [perpetrator] was gone and the son had missed his chance to wave. The son worried about this all day, very concerned that there would be repercussions of his forgetting to wave in time. He was worried that [perpetrator] would become paranoid and take things out on his mother. Some time that morning [perpetrator] murdered [victim]. She died as a result of wounds inflicted by blunt force trauma. [perpetrator] then killed himself. (DHR166, p23).⁵²

Moreover, the distinction between 'violent abuse' and other forms of domestic abuse is unhelpful, impractical and does not enable content to be taught in a sequenced way. Attempts to segregate 'violent abuse' from 'other forms' in this way undermines the progress that has been made over recent years to recognise that violence and abuse exist on a continuum and all forms are interconnected, including the importance and severity of coercive and controlling behaviours.

FGM – The guidance states that that 'the laws relating to, and physical and emotional damage caused by FGM should not be taught before year 9', with the caveat that it can be taught where schools have identified a risk of FGM at an earlier age, or have pupils who have been affected by FGM and need support.

This age restriction is extremely concerning and fails to prevent FGM practices, or to equip potential victims with the knowledge of this type of abuse before it occurs. The World Health Organisation makes clear that FGM is mostly carried out on young girls between infancy and age 15.⁵³ Looking at the UK context, NHS Digital found that girls aged 5-9 were at the greatest risk of FGM, with 40% of cases in the UK occurring during this time.⁵⁴ By restricting content until year 9, this flies in the face of prevention activity, as sadly, most victims will already have been targeted by this point. It is absolutely key that children are given the necessary

⁵² Chantler, K. Baker, V., Heyes, K., Gunby, C., (2023). Briefing Paper: Summary Domestic Homicide Oversight Mechanism for Children's Services. Available at: [Briefing-Paper-Childrens-Services-Domestic-Homicide-Oversight-Mechanism-2023.pdf](https://www.domesticabusecommissioner.uk/Briefing-Paper-Childrens-Services-Domestic-Homicide-Oversight-Mechanism-2023.pdf) (domesticabusecommissioner.uk)

⁵³ World Health Organisation. (2023). *Female Genital Mutilation*. [online] Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation#:~:text=FGM%20is%20mostly%20carried%20out.>

⁵⁴ Female Genital Mutilation [FGM] (as seen by NHS services in England). (2015). Available at: [https://files.digital.nhs.uk/64/84E57F/FGM%202020%20Annual%20Report%20-%20One%20Page%20Summary.pdf.](https://files.digital.nhs.uk/64/84E57F/FGM%202020%20Annual%20Report%20-%20One%20Page%20Summary.pdf)

knowledge and information that they need to recognise the harm, and disclose concerns to a trusted adult.

Moreover, the guidance recommends that information on where to get help for FGM should be restricted until year 9, meaning that children at risk are not given information about support services, or how to seek help. Whilst the Commissioner acknowledges the caveat that FGM can be taught at an earlier age where schools have identified a risk, it is simply not possible to ensure that risk has been accurately assessed for every individual child, meaning some children will inevitably fall through the cracks.

In summary

For RSE to work, it is the strong view of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner that the guidance is overhauled and crucially, the age restrictions on content are removed. Instead, the guidance would benefit from a clear framework which sets out how to sequence and order RSE topics. This would help model what age-appropriate teaching involves, but with added flexibility where necessary to meet the needs of children.

To improve sequencing and a more considered approach to preventing and tackling domestic abuse and other VAWG related crimes, the guidance should instead include a framework which situates the different forms of abuse noted in the continuum of VAWG, with an approach centred on gender inequality, the root causes of misogyny and intersectionality.⁵⁵ Research has demonstrated that RSE is a potential vehicle through which to address the root causes and cultures of sexual and gender based violence, if it is framed through an equity and rights lens.⁵⁶ It is imperative that the curriculum is sequenced to understand societal factors of domestic abuse and other VAWG related crimes, and link discussions about gender and intersecting forms of inequality, gender stereotypes and discussions about power abuse.⁵⁷

Consideration as to what is age appropriate should be made at the local level, based on the intelligence as to what children are experiencing from children themselves, the domestic abuse lead for the local authority, the Designated Safeguarding Lead and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub at a local authority/community level. An example of this in practice is the work of the Northumberland Domestic Abuse Service Prevention Practitioner, who delivers targeted, age-appropriate workshops tailored to the specific needs of children and young people identified in partnership with schools and youth services.

⁵⁵ EVAW. (2023) It's #AboutTime A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls. Available at: <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/FINAL-About-Time-WSA-report-140723.pdf>

⁵⁶ Yilmaz, V. and Willis, P. (2020). Challenges to a Rights-Based Approach in Sexual Health Policy: A Comparative Study of Turkey and England. *Societies*, 10(2), p.33. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc10020033>.

⁵⁷ EVAW. (2023) It's #AboutTime A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls. Available at: <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/FINAL-About-Time-WSA-report-140723.pdf>

3) Implications and unintended consequences

Inhibiting disclosure

As set out above, the restrictions on content are not reflective of children's experiences of the world and the content will come far too late in a child's life and development. As a result, the age restrictions do not effectively safeguard children and this carries significant risk. The guidance as drafted does not equip children and young people with the tools, knowledge or skillset to identify abuse and harms, and most importantly, disclose or access support. The evidence is clear that effective RSE encourages disclosure, including numerous case studies whereby children only realised they had been subject to abuse following effective RSE. A 2015 review found that 'children who are taught about preventing sexual abuse at school are more likely to tell an adult if they had, or were actually experiencing sexual abuse.'⁵⁸ Moreover, Goldfarb and Lieberman's research in 2021 found that RSE programmes increased reporting of domestic abuse, citing that 'one of the most common effects was increased knowledge of a resource person to whom children would report abuse.'⁵⁹ Therefore, integration on sex and relationships content is key and separation of the content means that vital opportunities to protect children through RSE are lost.

Moreover, the implementation of age restricted content will mean that schools may struggle to create an environment that encourages disclosure, as conversations may be shut down if the children are under the age limit. Children must be supported and encouraged to talk freely about their experiences, and teachers must not be inhibited from having important conversations that might protect them out of fear that it cannot be discussed. The imposition of age restricted content creates an unnecessary barrier to protecting children and helping them to access support.

The draft guidance currently outlines that subjects can be addressed once an incident has taken place. **Waiting for the harm to occur is not prevention activity and hurts children.** There must be more flexibility, that meets the needs of the children, than the proposed guidance offers.

Lost prevention opportunities

The benefits of effective RSE are twofold. Not only does it encourage disclosures of abuse, it also works to prevent further abuse by presenting an important opportunity to challenge attitudes which condone abuse behaviours that could impact future relationships. Evidence from the specialist VAWG sector and decades of academic research show that teaching children about harmful gender stereotypes, consent, respect and healthy peer relationships from the earliest stages of school are key to preventing VAWG and intersecting forms of

⁵⁸ Walsh, K., Zwi, K., Woolfenden, S. and Shlonsky, A. (2015). School-based education programmes for the prevention of child sexual abuse. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, (4). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.cd004380.pub3>.

⁵⁹ Goldfarb, E.S. and Lieberman, L.D. (2021). Three decades of research: The case for comprehensive sex education. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, [online] 68(1), pp.13–27. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.036>.

violence. A Youth Endowment Fund report found that in schools where RSE was administered well, on average, dating and relationship violence prevention can reduce violence in partner relationships by 17%.⁶⁰ In addition, Goldfarb and Lieberman undertook a systematic literature review of research on school-based programs to find evidence for the effectiveness of comprehensive sex education.⁶¹ One programme included in the review, known as Safe Dates, demonstrated a reduction of sexual violence perpetration at immediate post-test, as well as reduced perpetration and victimization of physical violence at the 4-year follow-up. Compared with controls, treatment schools reported 25% less psychological abuse perpetration, 60% less sexual violence perpetration, and 60% less physical violence perpetration with a current dating partner.⁶²

As well as impacting on sexual and domestic abuse, RSE can also significantly improve school cultures, by addressing the harmful attitudes and beliefs that serve to uphold 'rape culture'.⁶³ Programmes reviewed by Goldfarb and Lieberman found 'a reduction in rape myths, victim-blaming, and reduced social acceptance of sexual coercion and harassments, for primary-aged children, there was also strong evidence for the effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention efforts, including teaching children about bodily autonomy and communication'^{64 65}

Without an effective RSE curriculum and with age restricted content blocking in-depth conversations with teachers, children will continue to seek information from problematic sources. A report from Women's Aid found that children and young people who were exposed to misogynistic social media content, like that of Andrew Tate, were almost five times more likely than those not exposed to view hurting someone physically as acceptable if you say sorry afterwards.⁶⁶ This highlights the power of social media and problematic content, which if not challenged, may pass into children's everyday belief systems and lives. By not giving children the necessary information, it poses a significant risk that young people could themselves perpetrate rape and sexual assault without a full understanding of the law, the harm and the consequences.

⁶⁰ Youth Endowment Fund. (2022). *New research finds that schools delivering specialist Relationship and Sex Education lessons can significantly reduce violence in partner relationships*. [online] Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/news/new-research-finds-that-schools-delivering-specialist-relationship-and-sex-education-lessons-can-significantly-reduce-violence-in-partner-relationships/>.

⁶¹ Goldfarb, E.S. and Lieberman, L.D. (2021). Three decades of research: The case for comprehensive sex education. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, [online] 68(1), pp.13–27. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.036>.

⁶² Foshee, V.A., Bauman, K.E., Ennett, S.T., Linder, G.F., Benefield, T. and Suchindran, C. (2004). Assessing the Long-Term Effects of the Safe Dates Program and a Booster in Preventing and Reducing Adolescent Dating Violence Victimization and Perpetration. *American Journal of Public Health*, [online] 94(4), pp.619–624. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1448308/>.

⁶³ Sex Education Forum (2022). *Working Together for Quality Relationships and Sex Education Relationships and Sex Education: the Evidence*. [online] Available at: <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/RSE%20The%20Evidence%20-%20SEF%202022.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Goldfarb, E.S. and Lieberman, L.D. (2021). Three decades of research: The case for comprehensive sex education. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, [online] 68(1), pp.13–27. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.036>.

⁶⁶ Women's Aid (2023). 'Influencers and Attitudes: How will the next generation understand domestic abuse?'. Available at: [Influencers and Attitudes: How will the next generation understand domestic abuse? \(womensaid.org.uk\)](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/influencers-and-attitudes-how-will-the-next-generation-understand-domestic-abuse/).

The role of parents

A Whole School Approach to combatting domestic abuse and other types of VAWG involves the whole school community, which is inclusive of parents⁶⁷. As drafted, the guidance frames RSE as a negative addition to a child's education, and pits parents against the school. This is not the experience of many schools and specialist organisations, with ERAW reporting that parental involvement in RSE curriculums has tended to be positive.⁶⁸ Similarly, UNESCO cites one of the positive effects of RSE as being increased communication between parents/carers and their children.⁶⁹

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner agrees that it is important that parents understand what type of content makes up their child's RSE curriculum. However, the tone of the guidance infers that schools and parents would likely disagree on the content. There is an over-focus on parental rights to withdraw their children from sex education and to seek views from the child on this arrangement only 'where appropriate.' The relationship between the school and parent should not be presumed to be adversarial. Instead, there must be a focus on parents and schools working together in the community response to preventing abuse. The guidance should make clear recommendations and best practice for schools in involving parents in a positive and transparent way – as an example, this could include parent forums where materials are shared, questions can be asked and concerns are mitigated.

Moreover, the guidance should make clear that there can be no automatic removal of a child from sex education upon a parent's request, but that clear reasons for any request must be given and where appropriate, the head teacher has the power to decline that request. As an absolute priority, the child's views on this request must also be sought. There must be a recognition that home is not always a safe space for children, and pulling a child out of sex education may, in some circumstances, be an indicator of risk. As highlighted above, effective sex education can enable children to recognise and report abuse, which abusive parents may want to prevent happening. Where parents request for the child to be removed from sex education, the guidance should direct schools and head teachers to consider the Gillick Competency to assess if the child or young person is competent enough to make their own decisions about access to sex education, where a child is deemed Gillick competent to make their own decision, they should still access that education should they wish.⁷⁰ Schools should also consider that parents may coerce their child into saying they do not want to participate in sex education, and consider the child's age, maturity and mental capacity, their

⁶⁷ ERAW. (2023) It's #AboutTime A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls. Available at: <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/FINAL-About-Time-WSA-report-140723.pdf>

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ UNESCO. (2016). Review of the Evidence on Sexuality Education. Report to inform the update of the UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education; prepared by Paul Montgomery and Wendy Knerr, University of Oxford Centre for Evidence-Based Intervention. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: [Review of the evidence on sexuality education: report to inform the update of the UNESCO international technical guidance on sexuality education | Health and Education Resource Centre](#)

⁷⁰ NSPCC (2022). *Gillick Competence and Fraser Guidelines*. [online] NSPCC Learning. Available at: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-protection-system/gillick-competence-fraser-guidelines>.

understanding of the issue and what it involves – including advantages, disadvantages and potential long-term impact, to name a few.

Implications for Teaching

As noted above, the changes to the guidance lack coherence, which will significantly impact on the ability of schools and teachers to deliver the guidance in a way that best meets the needs of children and young peoples.

It is well established in research that teachers lack confidence delivering the current RSE curriculum. A recent joint survey by the NSPCC and teaching union NASUWT found that nearly half of secondary school teachers (46%) do not feel confident delivering RSE (2022).⁷¹ Similarly, in a Sex Education Forum survey a mere 6% of teachers had learnt about RSE as part of their initial teacher training, and less than half of teachers said their training to deliver RSE was adequate.⁷² Moreover, one of the key recommendations which came out of recent roundtables which the Commissioner's Office held with teachers was that teachers wanted access to high quality, free training for school staff on teaching RSE.

With the introduction of new, incoherent age restrictions prohibiting some content, it is highly likely that teachers will feel even less confident, in particular due to fear of delivering prohibited content too early. As a result, teachers may opt to teach topics on an incredibly basic level, lacking necessary detail. This will have a significant detrimental impact on children and young people's understanding of incredibly sensitive topics.

A further implication for schools is the handling of questions from students on content which has been restricted to older children, which is bound to occur. Whilst the draft guidance asks schools for a policy on how this should be handled, it does not set out what that policy should be. Prohibited topics will in reality continue to be discussed in the school playground or with older siblings, or children will access inappropriate sources of information. This will be near impossible to avoid, and shutting children down if they ask about this type of content will be very harmful.

The guidance also fails to take into account the high workload of teachers and pressures on capacity. The guidance requests that all RSE materials should be made available to parents ahead of delivery, which is highly resource intensive, especially in the context of already overburdened teaching staff. Moreover, the guidance also makes clear that where contracts with specialist services mandate that materials cannot be shared with parents, these contracts are automatically void. It would be extremely difficult for these resources to be supplied, and capacity and workload of the specialist sector must be well-considered and respected. It is vital that the expertise of specialist sector is not lost in delivering extremely effective RSE.

⁷¹ NSPCC (2022). *Half of secondary school teachers don't feel confident delivering sex and relationships education*. [online] NSPCC. Available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2022/teachers-sex-relationships-education/>.

⁷² Sex Education Forum (2022). *Working Together for Quality Relationships and Sex Education Relationships and Sex Education: the Evidence*. [online] Available at: <https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/RSE%20The%20Evidence%20-%20SEF%202022.pdf>.

