**Centre for Science and Policy**

**Policy Workshop**

**Consent Education**

**A summary of the discussions held on 12 July 2018**

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# Background

Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is undergoing large changes. Before her resignation as Education Secretary in January 2018, the Rt Hon Justine Greening MP ensured that legislation passed by Parliament made compulsory Relationships Education in primary schools and Relationships and Sex Education in secondary schools. At that time, the guidelines had not been updated since 2000 and did not include more recent issues such as sexting, online grooming and pornography (Bloom, 2017). Over the next few months, the Department for Education will be working on a Statutory Guidance document and developing the new RSE curriculum. This will include evaluating which topics should be compulsory, and how these can be delivered in a safe and age-appropriate manner. As part of this process, the Department for Education has carried out large-scale public engagement exercise (Gov.uk, 2017). There were 23,500 responses to the call for evidence and consent was one of the topics on which they have seen significant convergence in views.

The new Relationships and Sex Education has the opportunity to address the findings of a 2013 report commissioned by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner. This report discovered that young people “have a very limited sense of what getting consent might involve” and “receive little useful help or guidance from either Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) or parents in how to negotiate sex” (Coy et al. 2013). The report found that sexting is widespread, that pornography influences young people’s attitudes towards sex, and that gender norms influence how young people negotiate heterosexual encounters, with males incentivised to pressure females into sex. It also found that young people misconstrue rape as occurring only between strangers and mis-perceive actions by victims of sexual violence (e.g. clothing choices) as consent.

To ameliorate this confusion among young people, Relationships and Sex Education needs to inform young people about ethical issues pertaining to sexual consent. These ethical issues are currently researched by academics in disciplines such as Philosophy and Law. This research addresses questions like: is so-called affirmative consent required to make permissible sexual activity? How can consent be undermined by a lack of capacity, e.g. from youth or intoxication? Which forms of coercion or pressure undermine consent? To date, academics have addressed these questions in order to inform rape law and other sexual offence policies, but the connections with education policy remain under-explored.

# Purpose of the workshop

This workshop brought together policymakers, practitioners and academics to discuss issues around consent and form a network of experts for those involved in the design of Relationships and Sex Education. The workshop began with a roundtable discussion during which the future of Relationships and Sex Education was discussed, including what the curriculum might cover, how it could be taught, how this will be made relevant to 21st Century concerns. The workshop also focussed on what the academic community, practitioners and other interested parties could do to help the Department for Education in its preparation of the Statutory Guidance. The key questions were:

* What are the risks of online pornography? How much can young people be expected to learn from social media, and how much should be provided in school? How can we try to ensure that young people are using appropriate websites or vloggers? This is addressed in section 3.
* How will the new curriculum fit in with 21st Century concerns? What is the best way to include LGBT issues within Relationships and Sex Education? This is addressed in section 4.
* Where are the gaps in academic research? How can academics and stakeholders work together for policymakers? This is addressed in section 5.

# The internet, risks and resources

When it comes to the biological aspects of sex education there is a clear and authoritative source of information for students – the NHS website. Unfortunately, no such equivalent exists for the relational side of relationships and sex education. Students are aware that there are good sources of information online but can’t always distinguish them from unreliable sources. While it is important for the curriculum to cover the biological aspects, it is also essential to emphasise the relational aspects on which students are lacking guidance.

## Online resources and vloggers

Vloggers reach thousands of people who want to learn about sex, including issues around consent. This is an incredible and growing resource for young people which allows them to access content anonymously without the risk of embarrassment or judgement. However, there is a danger of an ‘echo-chamber’ effect. People who seek out and watch these videos are often those who have given serious thought to the issues, while those who would benefit most from watching them may not find them. The order of search results and the type of audience a vlogger reaches depends on their meta-data and the framing of the videos. One way to combat this could be to package the content to make it look appealing to different groups of people.

## Pornography

In general, young people do not go to pornography seeking information. However, we take in information all the time from what we see, films we watch and people we know. This is especially true for children. The age at which children are exposed to pornography is consistently falling, with the most recent estimates being age 10 or 11 (BBC, 2016). Given sex education is not included in the primary school curriculum, children are likely to learn what sort of sex is normal through films or pornography before the lessons begin. School needs to provide young people with the ‘filters’ through which to interpret what they see.

## Preferred sources of information.

While the internet is important, young people do not want it to be their main source of information. Surveys showed that young people want information from schools, family and health professionals, in that order (Sex Education Forum -The evidence, 2015). 23% of boys want their fathers to teach them, but this only happens in 3% of cases. It is a real problem that many fathers do not feel able to talk about these issues. In many cases parents want to have a role, but they feel uncomfortable partly because they did not receive good education on these issues themselves. This generational block is a systemic issue in such a quickly evolving topic as Relationships and Sex Education. This also means that many teachers who have not received proper training are reluctant to teach about complex RSE issues for fear of confounding the problems.

## List of recommended online resources:

* www.brook.org.uk
* Doing it: https://hannahwitton.com/book/
* Digital Romance report: <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/professionals/guidance/digital-romance/>
* Stonewall: https://www.youngstonewall.org.uk/

# LGBT+ issues and vulnerable people

Issues related to minority groups are often overlooked or included as add-ons at the end of a lesson. It is important to use inclusive language throughout RSE since otherwise young people may not recognise anything in the discussion and teaching materials that they can relate to, and this can leave them feeling more isolated. Diversity in the classroom should actively be seen as an asset and this view should also be threaded through the values of the school. However, teachers are often wary about including these topics without proper training in case they make mistakes and so confound the problems.

## LGBT+ issues

Many LGBT+ students feel that RSE does not include them. Because of the lack of education that they receive in schools, many LGBT+ young people turn to the internet to find the information that they need, leaving them more vulnerable to misinformation and abuse. To make LGBT+ students feel included and accepted healthy same-sex relationships, homosexual sex and other forms of sex should be included in the teaching material and gender-neutral names used in any example scenarios.

## People with disabilities

In the past it may have often been assumed that young people with disabilities are not interested in sex. As a result, many receive little or no formal sexual health education. While many people with a learning or other disability say that having a relationship is important to them, only 3% of adults with disabilities live in a couple, compared to 70% of the general adult population (Emerson et al. 2005). People with disability face various barriers to having personal and sexual relationships. Meeting people is more difficult and social isolation is common. Moreover, the balance between risk and rights for people with a disability engaging in intimate relationships is often biased towards restricting their choices even if they have the ability to consent. Research suggests that disabled young people are at greater risk of abuse than non-disabled young people. However, young people with disabilities have the same right to RSE as their peers. They should be supported to develop positive, healthy, informed and safe intimate relationships. Teaching about consent is an integral part of this. RSE can be modified to allow for information to be understood and learned in a way that is meaningful to young people with disabilities.

## Vulnerable people

Some children seem resilient to social pressure, while others are more vulnerable. Also, children with learning difficulties are vulnerable. Some girls that seek help or advice on RSE issues have very low self-esteem, meaning that they do not assert themselves, so education on consent must be combined with other forms of support to help these vulnerable young people protect themselves.

# Potential research contributions

The Department for Education is currently drawing up the RSE curriculum. There is a particular window over the 18 months after the date of this workshop during which evidence concerning what should be taught would be particularly useful to policy makers. Evidence on the most effective teaching methods is also valuable, although in some cases this should be discussed with other bodies such as the PHSE union or teachers’ unions, who are better placed to make recommendations on teaching practice.

## An overview of the uncontentious truths

Academics tend to value being different as individuals whereas policy makers value collaboration, compromise and consensus. Policy makers turning to the academic literature for evidence often find it difficult to get a concise overview on areas in which academics generally agree – the uncontentious truths. It would therefore be useful for policy makers if academics were to create research summaries and infographics outlining these uncontentious truths. For example:

* Consent is an active process, it is not given once and assumed thereafter, it can be withdrawn at any time.
* Consent looks slightly different for everyone. The view of consent as a clearly defined moment is focussed on penetrative sex. In reality, people ‘collage’ sexual acts together and the form of consent can be dependent on this.
* There is a strong link between good quality sex education and gender bias prevention.
* Statistics on sexual offences are often misleading. When women feel empowered to report sexual offences, the rate of sexual offences will often rise. This is often not because the problem is getting worse, but that the number of unreported offences is declining.
* Consent is an active decision, not a desire. Someone may want to have sex but decide not to, and not consent.

## The relational preconditions for consent

From a philosophical viewpoint, there is a grey area between the minimal standards of obtaining consent and the healthy way which should be encouraged. Below the minimum standards is classed as rape and is rightly discouraged and punished, but there isn’t enough guidance to encourage healthy practices. Perhaps consent is the minimum condition, but the ideal would be ‘enthusiastic participation’.

There is the need for RSE to acknowledge and present sex as positive and positing an equal right to experience sexual pleasure, regardless of gender or disability, as the foundation for consent. Saying ‘yes’ may not be sufficient if a young person feels that the fact that sex is requested or expected or normal, is sufficient reason to say yes without any coercion even if it is not really wanted. Young people cannot know what they are consenting to, or to aim for enthusiastic informed consent if they are only ever taught to avoid sex that is emotionally and physically risky or morally questionable (i.e. sex in pornography is bad sex), however ‘good sex’ is never explored.

Positive sexual relationships or sexual pleasure as a legitimate aim or expectation is too often absent from the conversation even though a positive experience/pleasurable sex must be what we are holding up as the gold standard when we demonstrate concern about young people’s ability to ask for or give consent.

Social pressures also play a role in young people’s decisions on whether or not to have sex, and the validity of consent in the presence of such pressure is questionable. Additionally, the grey area between common ‘white lies’ and serious deceit, and the extent to which each invalidates consent is under debate. Academic research which clarifies these, and similar issues, would be valuable.

## The development of consent giving behaviour

Education on consent in a general sense begins early on, even with toddlers asking permission to borrow toys. Toddlers can choose what they consent to and they are taught how to do this effectively. These early stages of consent giving provide the context for each child as he or she begins to think about consenting or obtaining consent for sex. Research should focus on how this consent giving behaviour develops through childhood and adolescence and what are the best ways to teach consent giving behaviour so that it leads to healthy relationships in the future.

## How best to teach about consent

The optimal method for teaching a given topic is constantly being reviewed. Evidence on optimal teaching methods and best practices from the academic community are always useful. In addition, teaching resources such as accurate statistics and infographics are useful for educators. Suggestions from the workshop included:

* ‘Teachable moments’ – examples from TV shows such as Love Island which a teacher can show the class and ask for their opinion of it, in order to begin a discussion.
* Counterexamples – if a pupil has a particular issue the teacher should be able to reply with, ‘what about in this scenario?’. For instance, when explaining the difference between wanting sex and consenting to sex, a teacher could refer to the example of not wanting someone to come to your birthday party but agreeing they can.

All participants strongly agreed that RSE education cannot be confined to 1 hour per week in classes, it must be backed up by the culture throughout the school. If cheating on a test is worthy of detention but groping is not, that sends a clear message to pupils. Social norms within a school often trump the official rules, so it important that these unhealthy social norms be challenged and healthy practices are encouraged. It is also important that good sex education should fit alongside education about alcohol and drugs, since they are strongly linked, especially in young people.

# Conclusion

The current reform of Relationships and Sex Education provides an opportunity to bring RSE into the 21st Century. This workshop brought together policy makers, academics, practitioners and other stakeholders to discuss the issue of consent and how it should be covered in schools. The key points from the workshop are summarized in this report.

The internet gives young people easy access both to pornography and to valuable information on consent and other RSE issues. However, students do not find it easy to judge which are the reliable sources online, and they would rather be taught about these issues by their parents and in school. Consent is a highly gendered issue, and good RSE combined with a positive culture within the school can reduce gender bias. LBGT+ issues should be incorporated into the RSE curriculum and teachers should be given proper training so that they can address these issues confidently. Academics and other stakeholders can help the Department for Education, and other bodies involved in implementing RSE, by providing succinct statements of the uncontentious truths about consent.

# List of attendees

* **Professor David Archard** **(Chair)** Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Queen’s University Belfast
* **John Ashcroft**, Research Director, Relationships Foundation
* **Ian Bauckham,** Education Advisor on Relationships Education and PSHE, Department for Education
* **Liv Bauckham**, Love4Life Manager, TwentyTwenty
* **Dr Clare Chambers,** Reader, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Cambridge
* **Alice Chicken,** Assistant Director, Relationships Education, RSE and PSHE, Department for Education
* **Dr Tom Dougherty,** University Lecturer, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Cambridge
* **Lucy Emmerson,** Director, Sex Education Forum
* **Dr** **Mollie Gerver**, Assistant Professor, Department of Government, University of Essex
* **Dr** **Lilia Giugni,** Co-founder and CEO, GenPol / Post-doc, Cambridge Judge Business School
* **Lisa Hallgarten,** Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Brook
* **Professor** **Rae Langton,** Faculty Chair and Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Cambridge
* **Dr** **Hugh Lazenby,** Lecturer in Political Philosophy, University of Glasgow
* **Claire Lightley**, Head of Training, Family Planning Association UK
* **Tobias Müller,** Research Associate, GenPol / PhD candidate, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge
* **Kate Parker,** Founder & Director, Schools Consent Project
* **Professor Massimo Renzo,** Professor of Politics, Philosophy & Law, King's College London
* **Hannah Witton,** Vlogger and Author

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* **Laura Hyde,** Events Coordinator
* **Kaisa Juosila,** Policy Fellowships Coordinator
* **Toby Jackson,** NERC funded Policy Intern (Note taker)

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