



Sex and Relationships Education: Setting the record straight

The Catholic Education Service for England and Wales (CESEW) generally supports Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) within Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education¹ where this is appropriate to the needs of the children and young people and will help them to develop healthy lifestyles and respect for the sanctity of life.

Our expectation is that good SRE is life affirming and that it should assist in reducing the number of teenage pregnancies and abortions. It can do this by helping to develop young peoples' self esteem and belief in the value of married life alongside the behaviours necessary to resist pressures for early sexual activity and sexual relationships outside marriage. In all these matters it will be essential that pupils in our schools develop in knowledge and understanding of the teachings of the Church.

1) Catholic Education is a three way partnership between home, school and parish.

We endorse strongly the view that parents are the first and primary educators of their children. Many teachers tell us that parents often welcome the school's support and contribution to PSHE, building on what parents begin and continue at home. Similarly, we acknowledge that grandparents and the extended family, including the parish community, often serve as positive role models for children and young people. They have enormous potential to be a positive influence.

2) Much that is proposed for SRE is already taking place in schools.

This is true, particularly with respect to the biological aspects such as being able to name external body parts (for children in primary school) and learning about the physical changes that take place in the human body as children grow (Key Stage 2). These have been required within the science programmes of the National Curriculum dating back to the early 1990s. There are already programmes of study for personal wellbeing at Key Stages 3 & 4 but these are currently advisory. What the current proposals do is to make it more likely that there will, through a statutory entitlement to PSHE, be more coherence so that, for example, parents will know what is to be provided in PSHE and can expect to see the school's policies and be able to discuss these.

¹ Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) is an aspect of Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education

3) Schools will choose the materials and resources that they think will best suit the needs of their pupils in teaching and learning about PSHE and SRE within this.

There is no requirement that any specified resources from government or elsewhere will be required to be used. Therefore, it will be up to the individual school, determined by its policy for SRE and the wishes of the Governing Body, to ensure that the resources to be used are chosen wisely bearing in mind the ethos of the school and the development and maturity of pupils. Parents have a right to see the school's SRE policy and we would encourage parents who so wish to ask to see the resources that will be used. We are also expecting that our Catholic university colleges and joint universities will take a proactive role in teacher training and professional development to fit teachers for their important role in teaching PSHE.

4) Knowing about something is not necessarily the same as promoting it.

Knowing about facts is not the same as promoting particular behaviours. To keep our young people ignorant about facts e.g. to prevent an age appropriate understanding of contraception and its risks or to hide the negative consequences of abortion, does not help to reduce teenage pregnancies; better that such learning take place in the context of the Church's teaching rather than risk that young people be ill informed by peers, value-free advertising or the media.

Young people may experience a great deal of pressure from these sources but a well informed conscience and details of relevant biological and other facts can help to keep the young person safe, resisting behaviour into which they may otherwise be coerced. Not only can "learning about" help children and young people to make the right decisions for themselves, it can also help them to be a force for good with their friends and peers.

5) CESEW strongly wishes that the parental right of withdrawal of their children from SRE could have remained throughout statutory years of schooling.

However, we can also see the potential benefits of all young people receiving appropriate SRE, perhaps, most particularly as they approach the age of 16 with all the opportunities and rights offered to young people at that age.

We were also mindful of the legal advice that had been provided to the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) on this issue. In making their decision to limit the right of parental withdrawal from sex education, DCSF say that they were acknowledging "the trend in the development of English law over many years towards greater autonomy for children when they are of an age to make decisions for themselves". They point out that "this can be seen in the long line of cases concerning consent to medical treatment – most famously discussed in Mrs Gillick's case (*Gillick-v-West Norfolk and Wisbech Area Health Authority*) but also contained recently in cases such as *R(Axon)-v-Secretary of State for Health* in 2006". DCSF have advised that they considered this, along with fuller individual pupil participation in the Education process and the right of the child to be consulted as had been underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), to which the United Kingdom is a signatory.

We understand that where our Catholic schools are providing SRE, as most do, that the level of withdrawal of pupils from SRE is actually very low. We believe that this is a sign of the confidence that parents have in the programmes that our schools

provide and the dialogue and good communications occurring between schools and parents. We are confident that this will continue in the future.

We very much hope and expect that what is being provided in SRE and the clear publication of school's programmes and teaching strategies to parents will enable parents to feel content with what is being offered so they will not feel any need to withdraw their child from these lessons. Nevertheless, we remain adamant that parents must continue to have the right of such withdrawal of their children until the age of 15 years.

6) Pupils will be expected to know that there are different kinds of relationships including Civil Partnerships.

CESEW regards this as a very sensitive issue given the importance of marriage and the Church's expectations that sexual relationships should be reserved for marriage. It is, however, the case that the media, not least television programmes including "soaps" often watched by relatively young children offer examples of many different types of friendships and relationships. PSHE will provide an opportunity to discuss friendships and different types of relationships in ways appropriate to the age and maturity of the child in the context of the Church's teaching.

In teaching PSHE, teachers will need to act wisely, mindful that the teachings of the Church must be upheld in our Catholic schools and the innocence of children preserved. This must take place whilst also acknowledging pupils will often be encountering conflicting messages from external sources. This is an example of where good teaching will need to respond to the maturity of children and the environment in which they live, coupled with respect for the dignity of all human persons, upholding the Church's teachings.

Children need to have an age appropriate understanding of the human body and such knowledge does not deprive a child of his or her innocence. For example, the age of puberty is falling, many girls beginning menstruation while still at primary school. It is important that they understand what is happening to them and that boys also understand that this is a natural and healthy part of growing up and that they are taught to respect one another's development.

7) Don't forget the "relationships" in SRE Education.

The government has emphasised that good SRE focuses a great deal on the relationships aspect, including teaching about the skills needed for healthy relationships. They require young people to be taught about the importance of marriage and family life. This may, for example, help young people to avoid unwanted advances and to be assertive about their own beliefs and wishes. Good relationships education rooted firmly in Church teaching will also help in an understanding of one another.

8) The Connexions Service and other external bodies work in Catholic schools at the invitation of the school, working within the parameters of the school's ethos.

The Governors and Headteacher of a school are the ones who decide on who may come into school as speakers, offering various services, etc. Through dialogue they agree their expectations and parameters for the work of that service. It should not,

therefore, be the case that any external service can come in and give advice that counteracts the school's teaching and in a Catholic school de facto, the teaching of the Church.

9) Some Catholic schools do have on site health clinics.

There are different levels of service that these clinics can offer and this is something negotiated in advance. The fact that a Catholic school may have an onsite clinic in no way indicates that the clinic is offering contraceptives, or assisting in the facilitation of abortions. Again, parents, in whatever type of school, are reminded that they have a right to ask about any such services operating in their child's school and to make their feeling and expectations known to the school's leaders.

10) Bishops and the CESEW have been given assurances by the Secretary of State that our schools will be able to deliver SRE which is in accordance with the ethos and values of our schools.

Whilst the outlines of the proposed SRE content is broad and lacks detail, it provides a structure from which our schools can plan their own programmes within the context of the Church's teachings. Indeed, the requirement to teach SRE should also be seen by our schools as an opportunity to ensure that young people know and understand what the Church teaches and expects on these matters.

CESEW will continue to vigilantly monitor the Government's plans for PSHE as the new curriculum is subject to parliamentary approval. We will have no hesitation in responding robustly if the Government's assurances to us are undermined in any way.

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