

Section

2

Relationships and Sexuality Education in Wales: Then and Now



This section provides a brief overview of how RSE has changed in Wales and why.

It includes the core underpinning principles of Wales' new RSE and an overview of the three curriculum content strands (also known as the RSE Code).



RSE is everywhere!

Children start learning about relationships and sexuality education (RSE) long before they start school. Throughout their lives children and young people will encounter complex and contradictory messages about sex, gender, relationships and sexuality from, for example, advertising, books, music, social media and television and from family members, peers and communities. These messages will shape their day to day lives, who they imagine themselves to be and what they want and expect from their futures.

"High quality RSE provision will support learners to critically engage with what they are learning and experiencing. This supports them to understand their values and beliefs and to advocate for respect and understanding of others"

(Welsh Government RSE Guidance 2022)

"Children and young people are navigating a range of complex and contradictory messages about relationships and sexuality that will shape their sense of self and their relationships with others"

(Welsh Government RSE Guidance 2022)

Schools can listen, learn and respond

Children arrive at school with their own questions, curiosities, ideas and imaginations about relationships, bodies and identities. The role of school-based Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is to create safe and enabling learning environments within which children can explore what they already know and are interested in, access accurate information, listen to the views and ideas of others and expand their understanding of themselves and the world in which they live.

Why change was needed

In Wales a new curriculum and statutory guidance has been developed for schools and other educational settings which will be in use throughout Wales from 2022.



As part of these changes Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) has also been reviewed by an expert panel leading to new legislation and new guidance that will also be in place from 2022.



Drawing on a wide range of national and international research, an expert panel found that previous law and guidance on Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) in Wales was outdated and its non-statutory status meant it was often poorly resourced and given low priority in schools, leading to uneven and unequal provision.

In addition, the expert panel (Renold and McGeeney 2017a, 2017b) found that the old SRE was...

Too biological: School based SRE has been criticised for being 'too biological', with a focus on human development, puberty and sexual health at the expense of a focus on children's rights, gender and sexual equity, and on children's emotions and sexual relationships and experiences.

Too shaming: School based SRE has also been criticised for being too negative and risk focused, without giving enough attention to the positive and pleasurable aspects of relationships and sexuality. Such approaches, which often use shock and shame to educate young people, have been shown not to be effective. What's needed are affirmative approaches that offer support, hope, encouragement and possibility.

Too late: Research shows that there is a big gap between what children and young people want to learn and the SRE they experience in school contexts. Frequently children report learning about SRE issues too late in their lives. Part of the reason for this gap between learning and experience is that there are not enough opportunities for children and young people to influence what they learn and make it relevant for their lives.

Too out of date: Current law and guidance on SRE is outdated. It fails to reflect the ways in which children and young people are navigating an increasingly complex world of expanding and contracting understandings and experiences of sex, gender, sexuality and relationships.

Too straight: School-based SRE often only refers to heterosexual relationships and fails to include Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ+) identities, expressions, experiences, relationships and rights. This fails to meet children and young people's diverse experiences, needs, questions and concerns.

Too ableist? SRE is often inadequate for children and young people with disabilities and additional learning needs. Too often schools fail to promote the relationship and sexual rights of young people with disabilities or ensure access to accessible and developmentally appropriate resources.

WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE IN WALES WANT SCHOOLS TO STOP AND START in RSE?

STOP...

avoiding difficult topics
always splitting us 'boy/girl'
ignoring that other sexualities exist
blaming women for sexual assault,
ie. 'cover up', 'don't ask for it', 'just say no'
racism and homophobia make a school
a more happier and safer place to be
stigmatising 'women's issues' and
uncomfortable topics
alienating people who experience love/
attraction differently to the 'normal'
being uncomfortable

(age 13-16)

STOP...

body shaming
people being bullied and
having bad thoughts
feeling awkward - it's fine to talk about it
discriminating people that are LGBTQ
seeing racism and people being sexist
keeping secrets from us
kids about our topic
being the person
THEY want you to be

(age 11)

STOP...

stereotyping people
avoiding questions
giving confusing messages
treating us like kids
bullying because
of the way they look
bullying people
who are different

(Special School)

For more examples from early years settings, primary, secondary special schools on young people's views on what and how they want to learn about RSE, go to the **StARting Out** case studies section in this resource.

WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE IN WALES WANT SCHOOLS TO STOP AND START in RSE?

START...

teaching about different sexualities
discussion time and time to talk about the topic
making sure we are in a relaxed, judgement free zone
start addressing topical issues instead of dancing around them
teaching about realistic situations, consent and safe sex, toxic masculinity, misogyny, gender identity, periods, inclusive lessons LGBTQ+, harassment and assault, sexualisation of girls.
being more inclusive in general (sexuality, gender etc)
teaching about pleasure and oral sex, specifically female masturbation
being sex positive! It's not a bad, secretive and forbidden thing – treat it positively please
queer sex ed – not just existence but how sex works for different relationships and people

(age 13-16)

START...

learning more about sex so people are less awkward talking about it
asking people what they want to learn about
loving people for who they are
seeing equality throughout school
being open about your relationships and sexuality
a club for LGBTQ+ so they feel better
being respectful to everyone no matter their looks or sexualities
being easier to talk to

(age 11)

START...

targeting the lessons towards our age group
saying it as it is
treating us like adults
making the lessons more engaging
treating people the same
giving us clear information
listening to learners in lessons
adding more information on each subject we learn

(Special School)

For more examples from early years settings, primary, secondary special schools on young people's views on what and how they want to learn about RSE, go to the **StARTing Out** case studies section in this resource.

Summary of the key changes to RSE in Wales

The definition of Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) has changed and expanded to Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE).

This new definition signals a much more holistic and integrated curriculum that can be explored across schools to meet the diverse needs of children and young people.

RSE will now be statutory for all children ages 3-16.

In line with best practice schools are now able to start to build a spiral RSE curriculum from a young age. This ensures that from foundation phase onwards, teachers can co-create a relevant and developmentally appropriate curriculum that will support learners throughout their school lives.

RSE will be delivered as part of a whole school approach,

in line with best practice and the new Curriculum for Wales.

RSE will be integrated into the new 6 AoLE as a cross-curricular subject.

Learners will be able to explore themes holistically and learning will not be limited to stand alone lessons or assemblies.

Children's rights to RSE are now protected by ending parental right to withdraw.

Parents will no longer be able to withdraw their children from RSE which means that all children will now have the right to participate in developmentally appropriate RSE.

There will be an emphasis on Rights, Equity, LGBTQ+ Inclusivity and Empowerment

in both the content and the pedagogy of the RSE provision.

Research Matters

A wide body of national and international research has guided the development of RSE in Wales. There's a lot we can learn from this research (summarised in the reports by Renold and McGeeney 2017) about WHAT children and young people want and need to learn in RSE and HOW best to create safe and enabling learning environments within which to explore this content.

Re-defining RSE

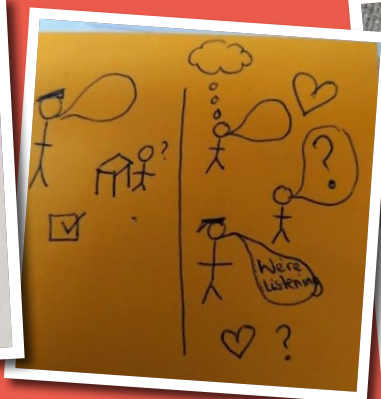
"RSE provision helps to ensure learners develop a positive understanding of relationships and sexuality and recognise misconceptions.

RSE aims to empower learners in line with their needs, experiences and wider development. Through discussion and by responding to learners' questions and needs, it can provide safe and empowering environments that enable learners to reflect on and express their views and feelings on a range of issues."

(Welsh Government 2022)

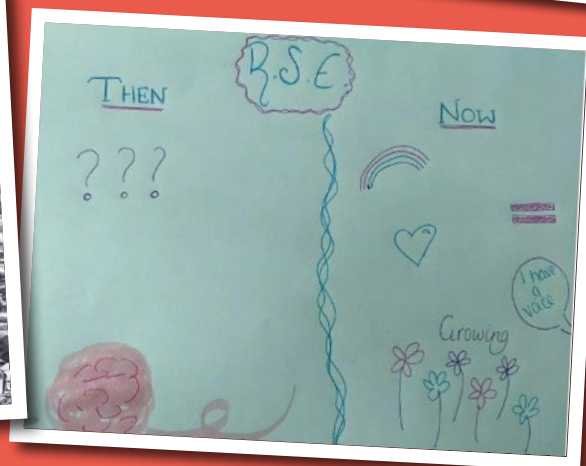
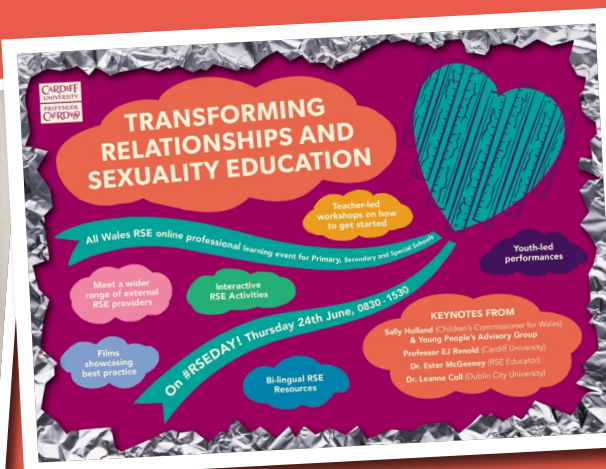
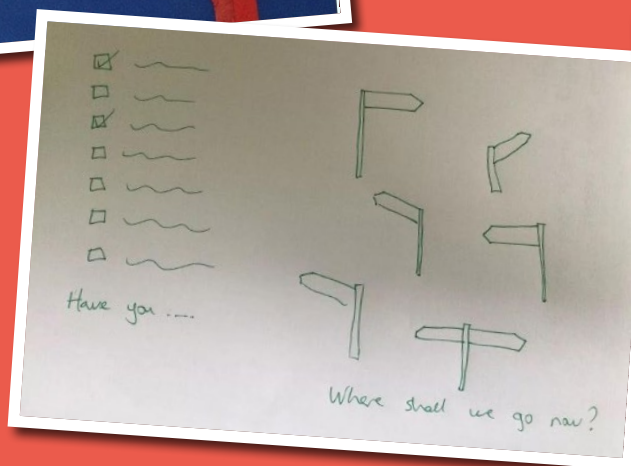


Find out more about the definitions of sex, gender, sexuality and relationships at www.agendaonline.co.uk and the evidence-base that has informed this new definition of RSE at bit.ly/futureofSRE



RSE then and now

On RSE day 2021, Professor EJ Renold, Dr. Ester McGeeney and Dr. Leanne Coll organised an online conference to introduce teachers to the new forthcoming RSE in Wales. At the end of the morning session participants were asked to create an image that represents what RSE in Wales was and what RSE in Wales is now becoming. These are some of their images.



What are the key curriculum themes?

The content of the new RSE is imagined in two ways.

Firstly as a set of six themes that have been developed by teachers based on the UNESCO International Sexuality education guidance.

**Sex,
Gender and
Sexuality**

**Bodies
and Body
Image**

**Rights
and
Equity**

**Sexual
Health and
Well-being**

Relationships

**Violence,
Safety and
Support**

"The Welsh government committed to covering the following themes in RSE: relationships; rights and equity; sex, gender and sexuality; bodies and body image; sexual health and well-being; and violence, safety and support."

(Welsh Government 2022)

WHAT

What is the RSE code?

The RSE Code "contains mandatory requirements, the legal basis for which is set out in the legislation summary of this Curriculum for Wales framework guidance. It sets out the themes and matters that must be encompassed in RSE. A curriculum and teaching and learning must encompass the mandatory element of RSE outlined within the following RSE Code"

(Welsh Government 2022)

RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITY



Secondly the content of the new RSE is imagined as three thematic strands. These thematic strands make up the RSE code. The six themes cut across the three thematic strands.

SEXUAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



"To assist schools and settings in their planning of RSE, these themes are interwoven into the learning strands" (Welsh Government 2022)

EMPOWERMENT, SAFETY AND RESPECT



The range of relationships that human beings have throughout their lives
How identity can be shaped by our relationships and sexuality

RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITY

The importance of human rights in securing healthy, safe and fulfilling relationships in an inclusive society (Welsh Government 2022)



The health issues related to relationships and sexuality

Learning about how living things grow, reproduce and have a life cycle

SEXUAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

An understanding of how sexuality and sexual health affects our well-being

Developing an understanding of the human body, including people's feelings about their bodies and how these can be represented (Welsh Government 2022)

Learners' rights to safety and protection and freedom from harm and discrimination
How and where to seek information, help and support

EMPOWERMENT, SAFETY AND RESPECT

How to support and advocate for the rights, fair treatment and respect of all (Welsh Government 2022)



For further detail on each thematic strand, across three phases (from age 3, from age 7, from age 11) go to the **Making the RSE Code matter** section.

A spiral curriculum

"Each strand of learning below are in three broad developmental phases. As they are set out, they represent the building blocks of progression in RSE. As learners progress, they will be building upon previous learning from either phase one; or phases one and two, consolidating and strengthening the same dispositions, knowledge and skills and applying them in new, relevant contexts. This is very different to simply acquiring learning about topics in isolation and then moving on to other content"

(Welsh Government 2022)

"The learning for RSE refers to both what is taught expressly and what is embedded throughout the curriculum and in the school environment through the whole school approach"

(Welsh Government, 2022)



HOW

Transforming RSE: 8 guiding principles

The new Relationships and Sexuality Education statutory guidance outlines a vision for how the spiral curriculum content must be provided.



POSITIVE, PROTECTIVE AND PREVENTATIVE

"Schools should look to create safe and supportive learning environments. These help create trust and allow learners a safe space to consider learning, ask questions and express their thoughts and feelings. Practitioners should seek to present learning around RSE issues positively and meaningfully"



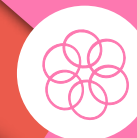
HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUITY BASED

"Schools and settings should discuss RSE in the context of children's rights as protected by the UNCRC. A rights based approach supported by equity should be embedded in the learning"



LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVE

"RSE will be realised in a way that is inclusive in accordance with the principles of equality ... this of course includes gender equity and LGBTQ+ inclusivity"



ITERATIVE AND PROVIDED ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

"RSE is a broad, interdisciplinary and complex area that includes biological, social, psychological, spiritual, ethical and cultural dimensions."



RELEVANT, RESPONSIVE AND DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE

"Schools should include learners' perspectives to ensure relevant and responsive RSE and provide increasing opportunities for learners to help direct their learning as they progress. Learners' views about what, how and where they learn should be taken into consideration so that the RSE curriculum can truly reflect the experiences that children and young people encounter in society"



INFORMED AND SUPPORTED BY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

"Professional learning is a key requirement for the realisation of high quality RSE, and should occur at a school, cluster, regional and national level"



INFORMED BY A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

"This means effectively linking all aspects of school, including the curriculum, policy, staff, school environment and community to support learners in their relationships and sexuality education"



ENGAGING WITH LEARNERS, PARENTS, CARERS AND WIDER COMMUNITIES

"Schools and settings should have clear lines of communication in relation to RSE and should engage with learners, parents, carers and the wider community, offering them the opportunity to engage with learning and teaching in RSE"

