Relationships and Sex Education

What does this mean for my teen and how can I help as a parent?

What is RSE?

Relationships and Sex Education ("RSE") became compulsory in all secondary schools as of September 2020. It is an updated version of the education programme launched in 2000. The world for young people looks very different from the way it did 20 years ago so these changes are designed to bring the content into the 21st century, making it relevant for your teen. Some of the changes that are covered include:

- The growth of social media and the pressures and impact that can have on teenagers
- Online pornography which is now widely accessible, even to underage teens
- Sexting, including the possible repercussions of sharing inappropriate images
- Grooming and the risks of feeling close to someone online without really knowing anything about them
- Changing attitudes and laws around sexuality, gender and marriage

What's covered in RSE?

The aim of RSE is to give young people the information they need to help them develop healthy, nurturing relationships of all kinds, whether with family, friends, professionally or intimately. It covers a wide range of topics and builds on some subjects that have already been introduced in primary school.

This includes learning about:

- families and people that care for them;
- respectful relationships, including friend-ships;
- online relationships and media;
- being safe (including risk areas such as drugs and alcohol); and
- intimate and sexual relationships, including sexual health.

How is RSE taught?

Schools have a great deal of flexibility as to how and when RSE topics are taught. This means that what your teen learns about from Year 7 to Year 11 may be different from school to school (so don't compare if you have teens in different schools), but in the fullness of time the school must cover all subject areas. This allows schools to bear in mind sensitivities within their own unique communities.

Many schools deliver RSE in timetabled lessons as part of their Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum, but some schools may deliver it through off-timetable days and workshops that take place at various times throughout the school year. External specialists may be invited to speak on certain areas, which might fall outside the expertise of school teachers, such as a member of staff from a Sexual Health Clinic.

Can I withdraw my teen from RSE?

You can't withdraw your teen from any component that forms part of the Relationships Education element of RSE, such as lessons that teach about families, friendships, general health, risky activities and how to stay safe online and offline.

However, you do have the right to withdraw your teen from some or all of the sex education components within RSE up to three terms before they turn 16 (the legal age of consent). At this point, your teen can choose to receive sex education if they would like to, and the school should arrange for them to receive this teaching in one of those three terms. For the sake of clarity, there is no right to withdraw students from any component of the national science curriculum, such as learning about sexual organs or reproduction.

Be informed

We don't recommend withdrawing your teen from components of RSE because they will miss out on guided discussion with the correct information and may, instead, seek out information from unreliable online sources or their friends. If you are concerned about how your teen is receiving RSE, we suggest:

- Obtaining a copy of the RSE curriculum from your child's school so you can see what topics your teen will be learning about each year
- Asking for examples of the resources used in the delivery of RSE to understand how certain topics are taught
- Speaking with a member of staff from your teen's school to discuss with them the parts of the curriculum that make you feel uncomfortable

The Parents Guide to Relationships and Sex Education (2021-2022)

Why parents are so important

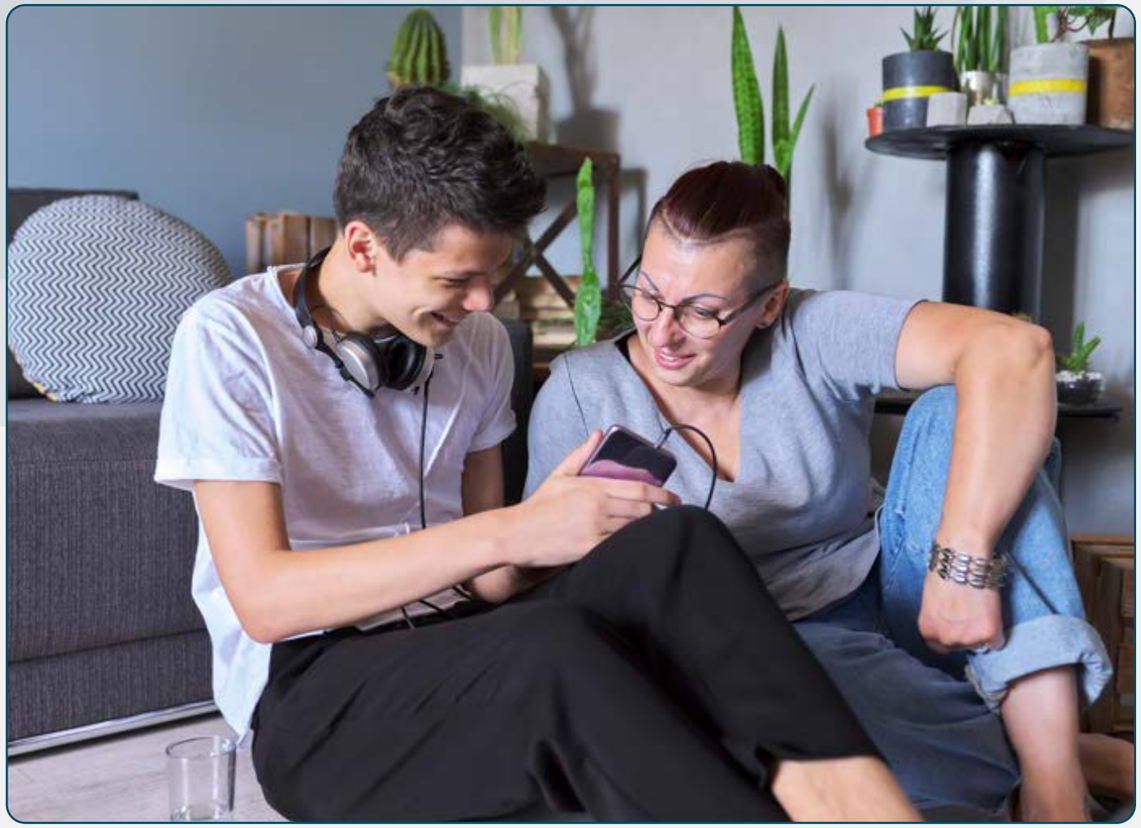
Parents are a very important influence on their teen's decisions about relationships and sex. When parents communicate frequently and openly, teenage children feel closer to them and more able to communicate.

Talking about relationships and sex shouldn't happen as a one-off "sit down talk". By regularly talking about RSE topics at home you will help to take away some of the stigma by making it part of the everyday. You'll also help your teen understand the differences between what they may see online versus what they experience in real-life:- in some cases the contrast can be extreme.

An easy way to get comfortable with RSE topics is to watch television aimed at teenagers. Using television is a great way to talk about sensitive issues because it shifts the focus from your teen to imaginary characters, making it much easier for them to express opinions without feeling it's personal and about them.

Further support

The Parents' Guide to provides parents and carers with the information they need at GCSE and sixth form to help their teenage children create successful and happy futures. For further support and information visit: www.theparentsguideto.co.uk/support



Our top ten tips on how to talk to your teen about relationships and sex

1. Start early and often

Being open to discussing relationships and sex early in your teen's life will help them feel more comfortable talking to you and asking questions when they're older. Having regular conversations also sends the message that these topics are important enough to talk about regularly and are a normal part of life.

2. Listen without interrupting

Listening to your teen is key in helping them become comfortable with talking and opening up to you. Encourage them to talk by asking lots of questions. If they start the conversation with a question, get them to share with you what they already know about the topic before giving them an answer. This will help you assess their scope of understanding and give you chance to find out more about what they know before you share your knowledge.

3. It's ok to feel embarrassed or awkward

Everyone's comfort level is different when it comes to discussing relationships and sex. Try not to let embarrassment or awkwardness discourage you or your teen from having these conversations. It is likely that your teen will be very grateful to you for taking the initiative to talk about it and let them ask questions .

4. Try to be positive without judgement

You want your child to be able to talk to you about anything so it's important that you do not invalidate them, their feelings and their experiences but approach the conversation ready to listen. Try not to say anything that might close down the channels of conversation now or in the future and try not to focus only on the dangers and negative consequences of relationships and sex; it's important you recognise all the positive aspects and feelings too.

5. Don't make assumptions

Don't assume that just because your teen has asked you a question about relationships or sex, that they're actually in one or actively participating. Plenty of teens may ask questions about these topics because they are curious or they've come across something online or through a friend. If your teen asks you a question, provide them with an answer, if you don't have one, be truthful. This helps create trust between you and them and will make it easier for them to turn to you for help when they're older.

The Parents Guide to Relationships and Sex Education (2021-2022)

6. Ask for a copy of your teen's RSE curriculum from their school

Ask for a copy of your teen's RSE curriculum from their school. This will let you know when topics are being covered so that you can talk to your teen about these topics before or after they come up (depending on what's easier for you). If you're not comfortable with the topics, you can talk to school staff about how they will present the information. Schools spend a lot of time making sure their lessons are age appropriate and suitable for their students and their communities.

7. Use prompts to get the conversation started

If you're struggling to get the conversation started, television shows, movies, websites, books and magazines can be a springboard for educating them about relationships or sex without the difficulty of initiating a conversation that seems targeted specifically at them. For example, if dating, LGBTQIA+ issues, love or sex come up on a TV show or in a movie that you are watching together, it can prompt a discussion. Questions like, 'what would you do if someone you were dating acted like that character in this TV show' can help trigger useful conversations where you learn how they feel without making it about them.

8. Make it about values

There are a lot of places your teen can go to find out about relationships and sex – school, books, internet and friends. What's important is that you help your teen learn positive and healthy values around these topics – such as how to treat others kindly and respectfully. Without this guidance, young people can learn from sources with unrealistic depictions of relationships and sex.

9. Don't always make it about them

Your teen might fight it easier to talk about relationships and sex when it's in the third person. Stories about friends, family members or examples you come across on the TV or in the news are all good ways to get your teen speaking. Questions such as 'what do you think that person should have done?', 'what could they have done differently?' and 'what pressures might they have felt?' can help get your teen talk freely about potentially difficult topics. This is because it shifts the focus from your teen to imaginary characters, making it much easier for them to express opinions without feeling it's personal and about them.

10. It's ok not to have all the answers

It's ok to tell your teen that you don't know the answer to something. Either tell them that you'll get back to them after you've done a bit of research or use it as an opportunity to do the research together. There are plenty of great resources and websites on the internet for parents and their children. If you're not sure where to start, try www.brook.org.uk