

Title: Parent Zone response to the government consultation on relationships education, relationships and sex education, and health education in England.

1) Introduction

Parent Zone specialises in providing support to parents and families responding to the challenges of a digital age.

Our mission is to make the internet work for families. We reach over **5 million families** a year through our various programmes including:

www.parentinfo.org our free national newsfeed service for schools delivered in partnership with the CEOP command of the National Crime Agency. Parent Info provides information to parents on all of the issues caused or amplified by the internet. From Gambling to Self Harm, Cyberbullying to CyberCrime.

Digital Parenting magazine in partnership with Vodafone providing a physical magazine to families handed to them by the professionals they trust. This year we will be sending 2 million copies of the magazine to schools, police forces and social workers. The magazine is only sent by request – schools and professionals order as many copies as they need. To date, it has reached over 5 million families.

[Parent Lounge](#) our online space where parents complete our digital parenting programme and access our parenting experts delivering support via our Live Chat service. The lounge has over 1000 visits a day with over 50,000 parents taking our online Parenting in The Digital Age parenting programme in the last year. The programme is the only digital parenting programme available in the UK and is currently being adapted for use in Romania, India, Finland, Norway, Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh funded by Telenor, the national telecoms company in Norway.

Dove Self Esteem Programme in partnership with Unilever this programme helps parents to play their part in improving girls' self-esteem.

Digital Life Skills, in partnership with Vodafone Global delivering parent sessions designed to help parents build children's digital literacy and life skills. The programme will be delivered in 9 countries including the UK.

Resilient Families Programme funded by the Home Office delivering pupil, parent and professional training on the subject of online radicalisation and extremism. The programme includes online and face to face training and has reached over 70,000 families since its launch in 2016.

Internet Legends in partnership with Google, delivering internet safety assemblies to primary school children in England and Wales. The programme is being scaled to reach more schools and families in 2018.

Digital Schools working with schools throughout the UK to provide a complete digital resilience based education including online safety lessons, parent facing support including online digital parenting courses and training for teachers and support staff.

Digital Families Events our annual programme of events including an internet safety conference in partnership with CEOP and the Scottish government's internet safety summit.

Finally, we conduct research with parents, children and professionals including:

How are we doing? Research conducted with children to ask them how they think the first generation of digital parents are doing.

The Perfect Generation. Research with children and teachers to ask whether they felt social media was having an adverse impact on their mental health.

The Digital Family. An exploration of the risks and opportunities families face online.

Our response:

Our response reflects the concerns parents have raised with us and covers the areas in which we have expertise. Where possible, we have addressed the specific questions in the consultation.

Background

Parent Zone has been working with parents to help them guide their children through the challenges and opportunities of digital life since 2004. In that time, we have seen growing levels of concern about children's ready access to pornography and highly sexualised material. Whilst some of those concerns can be managed with the use of filters and parental controls, nothing can replace good enough at home parenting and education. In addition to content concerns, we know that children have access to digital spaces that make relationships complex to manage and understand. In a digital world, children need to be able to manage multiple levels of 'friendships' and online relationships from digital romances to toxic digital encounters. With that in mind, we welcome the new RE, HE and RSE and believe it is an important opportunity to support children's digital resilience and keep them safer online and off.

However, we are disappointed that sex education has been excluded from the primary years and that parents continue to have a right to withdraw. Including sex education for primary age children and removing the right to withdraw would not only align with the international legal narrative which qualifies RE, RSE and HE as a children's right, but would also help educate parents about the lived realities of children in a digital age, dealing with a problematic knowledge gap. Compulsory RSE and HE in primary *and* secondary would ensure that the UK was fulfilling its obligations under Article 19, Article 29 and Article 2 of the UNCRC.¹ Article 19 and 29 place responsibility on the state to provide educational measures to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as to help them develop mentally and physically. Article 2 is a non-discrimination clause, which should be read in conjunction with Article 19 and 29 to reject a parental right to withdraw and guarantee that all children are educated on these topics consistently.

¹The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 19,2,29.

This legal and digital context gives us an opportunity to take a bold step to provide all children with the education they need.

The Realities of the Digital Family

Sex-Education and Children's Perspectives

Alongside a strong legal justification for sex-education, the lived experiences of children in a digital age also provide strong social evidence for why sex-education should be mandatory in primary schools, as well as secondary schools. Many children of a primary school age use the internet, with 53% of 3-4 year olds and 79% of 5-7 year olds going online for 8-9 hours a week.² The draft regulations emphasise how the lived experience of young people should be accounted for when determining the curriculum, and we strongly support this. Children are living in an age of digital romance where there is no distinction between offline and online and children themselves have raised concerns that they have not received sufficient education in developing and managing healthy relationships in this space.³ A report by the Children's Commissioner for England supports this view. It found that children and young people want information and advice about porn in the sex-education curriculum that is suitable for all ages and genders, to help them know how to be safe online.⁴ In light of this strength of feeling amongst children and young people about the importance of early education around sex and online experiences, we recommend that the regulations take into account the voice of the child and make sex-education mandatory in primary schools, as well as secondary.

From our expert understanding, if schools, working in partnership with parents, do not provide children with sex-education then there is an increased risk that they will turn to the internet or remain uneducated about sex. This poses a variety of well understood risks, such as OCSE. In light of this, we support the principle embedded in the draft regulations that there should be no "artificial separation"⁵ between relationships and sex, and that this should extend to education about the online

² Ofcom https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/108182/children-parents-media-useattitudes-2017.pdf

³ <https://www.brook.org.uk/press-releases/digital-romance>

⁴ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MDX-NSPCC-OCC-OnlinePornography-CYP-Version-16.5.17.pdf>

⁵ Draft Guidance 16 - https://consult.education.gov.uk/pshe/relationships-education-rse-healtheducation/supporting_documents/20170718_%20Draft%20guidance%20for%20consultation.pdf

world. This is necessary in primary schools as well as secondary because parents often feel particularly nervous about talking to their children about sex during the primary school years. They believe they are ‘protecting their innocence’ or simply do not realise that children need to have this knowledge at a young age, not least, for safeguarding reasons. And, with mobile phone use widespread in this younger age-group, children are only as safe as their least-protected friend. Therefore, sex-education should be mandatory in both primary and secondary schools, with appropriate support from the government and organisations to teachers and parents.

Online Relationships, Risks and Digital Resilience

Having clarified why we believe RSE needs to be mandatory in both primary *and* secondary schools, we will now outline why teaching digital resilience is an essential part of this process. Teaching children to be digitally resilient is an effective way to help children stay safe online and benefit from the opportunities the internet offers.⁶ Given that the draft regulations acknowledge online relationships, they should also account for the risks of the online world and how children can learn to build up resilience to such risks in a positive way. Although one might presume that parents can filter and monitor their child’s use of the internet, which could prevent them from encountering all risks associated with researching sex online our research has found that this is not always the case. In our recent online resilience report we found that 70% of children age five to fifteen have access to a tablet and 40% have access to a phone.⁷ It is becoming more likely that children have many devices which cannot be individually filtered by their parents, meaning the protective actions of parents may not guarantee safety from potential risks.

In the absence of quality and relevant information, children may turn to the internet to find out information about sex and relationships. To mitigate associated risks, we strongly recommend that RSE becomes mandatory in all levels of schooling, whilst making sure that this is complemented by a digital resilience framework. We believe these two recommendations to be interlinked because they both address the lived realities of children. Children may use the internet to find out about relationships and sex, so they then need to learn to be resilient to the risks of this process.

⁶ <https://parentzone.org.uk/parent-zone-digital-resilience-curriculum-guide>

⁷ <https://parentzone.org.uk/digital-resilience-curriculum>

We are currently working with the DCMS and many other organisations on a digital resilience framework and tool-kit. The four core pillars consist of **knowing** what to do to seek help, **learning** from experience, **recovering** when things go wrong and **understanding** when you are on risk. We believe that this should be included as part of the new curriculum, alongside teaching children about physical and mental resilience and wellbeing.

The Right to Withdraw and Parental Concerns

Our work with parents in the digital age has revealed that they have a lack of information, confidence and support in how to talk to their children about the interconnectedness between relationships, sex and the internet. 77.5% of parents do not understand the digital world of their children, and even if they do understand they may not have the confidence to talk about it. In light of this considerable knowledge gap around online environments and associated risks, parents should not be placed in the position to decide whether their child needs sex-education at primary school.

As outlined above, if parents lack the skills, confidence and knowledge to provide quality sex-education, then they are likely to find out information online. We need to support parents to understand this reality, not provide them with a right to withdraw their child.

It is the responsibility of society, government and organisations to protect the best interests of the child, and we believe that these regulations need to prepare children for the real risks which they may face in a digital world. Providing a right to withdraw places pressure on parents, side-lines children's realities and does not align with children's fundamental rights. For all these reasons, we recommend that the right to withdraw is abandoned.

However, if the right to withdraw is to remain, we strongly recommend that is hedged with certain legal requirements that would keep parents knowledgeable about the benefits of teaching sex-education and make them less likely to withdraw their child. The draft regulations indicate that regular engagement with parents after they withdraw their children is "best practice" and we recommend that this should be changed to mandatory. Regular consultations with parents about the lived realities

of children will help fill the knowledge gaps addressed above. We believe that this will lead to more parents feeling informed and confident about why it is in the best interests of the child to be taught sex-education in both primary and secondary schools, making them less likely to withdraw.

Resources for Parents

To finish this consultation, we wanted to show our support for the requirement that schools must have an up-to-date policy on RSE, RE and HE which is made available to parents and others, free of charge. This basic requirement should help parents understand the necessity of sex-education, reducing the likelihood of them withdrawing their child. However, the policy needs to be written in a parent-friendly way and proactively promoted. It is not enough for schools to have a policy for parents to access on request, they need to develop a proactive conversation with parents including one that confirms that children who are removed from RSE are still receiving the education they require, albeit from alternative sources to school.

Supporting parents with concerns about this subject is a difficult task for teachers and we therefore urge government to consider how they might best help them to do so. In 2015, the DfE⁸ worked with Parent Zone to launch Parent Info, a service designed to give parents information on all of the issues caused or amplified by the internet to help them prepare their children for adult life. Parent Info is completely free and is designed to be embedded on school websites. We have found that the most-read articles by parents have been about RSE or RE, with an article about ‘coming out as transgender’ having over 22,700 views, closely followed by articles on social media and self-esteem and teens on tinder.⁹ We would like to see this service sit alongside the requirement to have a policy on RSE, HE and RE. We would also like to see a proper framework developed for schools to use with parents who choose to withdraw.

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/hundreds-of-schools-sign-up-for-first-ever-national-safety-tool>

⁹ <https://parentinfo.org/article/when-your-child-comes-out-as-transgender-a-qa-with-sue-chitayi>

Conclusion

Overall, we recommend first that sex-education should be compulsory in both primary and secondary schools to protect the best interests of the child. Secondly, the parental right to withdraw should be replaced with increased resources for schools to ensure parents have the knowledge and confidence to understand the complex link between sex, relationships, the online world and the positive role digital resilience can play within this. Thirdly, if there is to remain a parental right to withdraw, sex-education should still be compulsory in both primary and secondary and the right should be hedged with certain legal requirements which would support parents to understand and be confident in why their child is being taught sex-education from an early age. Parent Zone has no wish to undermine the rights of parents; but the right to withdraw is not aligned with the biggest area of concern for the parents we speak to, which is a lack information and confidence about talking to their own child about online risk. Nor is it aligned with the child's own rights, which are of paramount importance. Instead we support parents and schools with resources such as Parent Info, to help them keep up with the fast-paced reality of the digital space.