



Department
for Education

Parental Engagement on Relationships Education

With support from





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Summary

This document provides information to primary schools on what is expected of them in terms of parental engagement on the forthcoming introduction of Relationships Education and why. It also provides advice, tips and case studies on effective parental engagement. This includes where to go for help and the important role governors can play in this process.

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Introduction

From September 2020, all primary schools will be required to teach Relationships Education. Schools will be required to have a policy, published on their website, setting out how they intend to approach the subject. (They will also be required to teach Health Education – they are not required to have a policy on this, but may do so if they wish.)

Both parents and schools play a key role in the education of children. Parents should therefore be encouraged to be involved in their child's education in schools. Schools deliver a broad and balanced curriculum that will prepare pupils for life in modern Britain. Constructive dialogue between schools and parents about that curriculum, as well as other aspects of the school's activities, supports mutual understanding and ultimately benefits the progress of pupils.

Consultation is a process by which an organisation, over a specific period of time, seeks the opinions of relevant people about particular activities or proposals, to better understand their views and take them into account when making final decisions. For schools, consultation is about them providing

formal channels through which parents can express their views about certain aspects of the school's work. Consultation is more commonly thought of in schools as parental engagement. This document will therefore refer to parental engagement rather than consultation unless referring to the specific legal duty to consult (in section 3).

The broad process for engagement should involve the school providing clear information to all parents, in an accessible way, on their proposed programme and policy; parents being given reasonable time to consider this information; the school providing reasonable opportunities for parents to feed in their views; and the school giving consideration to those views from parents. Schools ultimately make the final decisions and engagement does not amount to a parental veto. The Department for Education will back schools that, having engaged with parents and carefully considered their views, take reasonable decisions about their Relationships Education policy.

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What must schools engage parents on?

From September 2020, the law requires primary schools to consult on their Relationships Education policy. Please see the 'Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education guidance' for more information on content and school policies.

Where primary schools have previously been teaching some or all of the content in the above guidance under a different umbrella subject – for example Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE), equality education or Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural education – this overlapping content must from 2020 form part of the school's Relationships Education policy and be subject to parent consultation. For example, teaching about marriage falls under Relationships Education from September 2020. If the school already teaches about marriage under a PSHE programme, this topic will still fall under the remit of the Relationships Education policy and will be classed as Relationships Education. (The school may continue to teach such content under any name that suits them and in any format within the school, but it must have formed part of their Relationships

Education policy and therefore form part of the parental engagement process).

Any primary school choosing to teach Sex Education – which is recommended by the Department for Education but not required by the law – must have a policy on this as well and should consult parents on it.

Consultation must be carried out when the policy is formed and subsequently whenever it is updated. The Department for Education recommends that schools engage with parents on these policies on a regular basis, as the parent body does not remain static and the programme may need to be adapted to meet new needs and ensure continuous improvement. Schools will want to consider this and develop an approach that is proportionate to their needs.

Schools are not required to consult parents on any other aspect of their school's curriculum. Schools will, however, share their curriculum with parents, usually via the school website, and should be prepared to seek their views on subjects about which they know their parents have strongly held beliefs.

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Why are schools required to engage parents?

Schools already invest time in communication with parents in many of their activities, and do so well. They do this because they recognise the importance of strong, constructive and open conversation with parents in the education of their children. Engagement on Relationships Education will build on this strong foundation.

Engagement is a positive step – it helps to ensure that everyone involved understands what is being taught, when and how. It helps develop a shared set of values between parents and schools on these subjects. It gives parents a voice and the knowledge that their views are being listened to. It helps to dispel myths about the subjects, and it creates an opportunity to build stronger relationships with parents.

Crucially with these subjects, it can help parents to understand how they can support what their child is learning in school with their own teaching at home. Relationships Education is best delivered with cooperation and support from parents.

Engagement works best when everyone involved enters into it with an open mind.

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What do we mean by engagement on Relationships Education?

Engagement means schools providing the opportunity for parents to feed in their views on the school's proposed Relationships Education policy, and includes considering whether any strongly held views of their parent body should lead the school to adapt when and how they approach certain topics with their pupils. Schools should consider those views and balance them with their views on the needs of the pupils and school. Ultimately it is for schools to decide their curriculum, having taken these views on board.

We do not think that headteachers should spend disproportionate amounts of time engaging parents or that this engagement should go on in perpetuity. Effective engagement has an end point, at which plans and policies are decided, and the school explains to parents the conclusions they have reached and the curriculum approach they plan to adopt.

Schools should be clear with parents, from the outset and throughout, that while their views are welcome and will be genuinely reflected on to reach their final decisions, they do not amount to a veto over curriculum content. Different parents are likely to have conflicting views and the school needs to consider other factors, alongside parent views, in making their decision. This means that a veto from parents is not possible and would not be in the best interests of the school.

We are clear that both parties should engage in open, constructive and respectful dialogue at all times and that protests and/or the intimidation of headteachers and staff have no place in the engagement process or any of the operations of the school.

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Use of existing methods

Schools are well practised at engaging their parent bodies on aspects of their activities – where they have good practices in place, these can and should be used to engage parents on this topic. If schools feel that their current engagement processes could be more effective, the introduction of the new subjects is a good opportunity to learn from good practice in other schools and improve. Schools may also wish to do more than their standard approach if they think there are particular sensitivities in their parent community in relation to the subject.

The case studies below are designed to demonstrate the ways in which different primary schools currently engage with their parents, and all of these could be utilised successfully as methods to engage parents on the Relationships Education policy.

Case study 1

Making changes to policies

“When we are changing key policies in our school, we have a standard process which we follow. We start by conducting an internal review of the policy and review what works and what could be improved. We also ensure that the policy is compliant with any statutory guidance. This internal review involves both staff and governors.

Usually, we then seek feedback from both parents and pupils on the policy. There are different ways we do this, depending on the policy. For parents, this might involve signposting the draft policy online and inviting feedback via a standard questionnaire form.

We also use existing events such as parents’ evenings as a way to gather further feedback. On occasion, we will use existing parental forums and groups to share the policy and to seek feedback. We are always careful to manage expectations when consulting with parents and we are clear that while we will take all feedback on board, it’s not possible to respond to each individual concern.

Once a policy has been formally agreed, we inform parents via our regular newsletter and highlight any key changes that we think they should be aware of.”

Case study 2

Engagement with parents on Sex Education

“In our junior school, the sex education curriculum was blocked into a single unit and covered in the summer term in each year group.

Each year, a few weeks before the teaching began, parents of children who were new to the school (i.e. predominantly year 3 pupils, but also those who had moved mid-year) were invited to an information evening with the year 3 teachers and the PSHE leader.

During the meeting parents were given an overview of the curriculum for each year group and were also shown a selection of the resources that would be used in the lessons (e.g. videos and books). Parents were given the chance to ask questions about the curriculum.

If particular concerns were raised about specific aspects of the curriculum, these were recorded and discussed further with those parents separately. Any concerns would be considered by school leaders and sometimes governors too to see whether any changes needed to be made. It should be noted that not all parental feedback resulted in changes to the curriculum.

In addition, a few weeks prior to the sex education lessons starting, a letter was sent to all parents to inform them that the lessons were due to begin. This was so that they were prepared should the children want to talk about the topic at home.”

Case study 3

Informing parents about the curriculum

“At the start of each school year we invite parents to school to meet their child’s new teacher. This is an opportunity for the parents to ‘put a face to the name’ and begin to get to know the staff that will be working closest with their children that year. It is also an opportunity for teachers to talk to parents about the curriculum content and topics that will be covered (as well as the usual routines and key dates etc.)

At this point we talk about the PSHE curriculum. We explain what will be covered and roughly when in the year the different topics will be taught. We explain that there is more information about the curriculum online and remind parents that they can come and talk to teachers during the year if they would like to find out more.

Parents always welcome this opportunity to hear more about the year ahead and how they can support their children at home.”

Case study 4

Engaging with parents

“In our school we utilise social media channels such as Twitter and a weekly blog on our website to keep parents informed.

When seeking feedback from parents we use workshops – some of these are pupil-led, others are led by staff and consist of part information giving, part discussion and Q and A. We also hold governor/parent surgeries where appropriate.”

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Tips for parental engagement

The Department for Education has published parent guides for parents of primary and secondary pupils about the new subjects – providing these to your parents can be a helpful first step in opening the conversation.

Once you have prepared your programme and drafted your policy, there are different options for engaging with parents. Stage one of an engagement process should be information and briefing. Stage two is a suitable method to gather parent views. Both stages could be written or face to face, depending on the needs of the school and parents.

Some schools prefer to conduct a written engagement process to ensure that everyone feels able to participate, not just those confident enough to speak up in meetings. It is useful to ask open questions to allow parents to respond with their views, rather than closed 'yes or no' questions, which can be unnecessarily polarising.

Schools should be aware that written parental engagement documentation may be subject to freedom of information requests, and will want to consider whether they should proactively publish information about the responses

they received and their proposed next steps. They will also want to consider the workload implications of a written exercise and read the Department for Education's 'Making data work' report regarding unnecessary data collections.

This report will help schools to consider ways of gathering views from parents that are not overly burdensome.

Schools will also want to consider asking respondents to identify themselves as parents. We recommend not accepting anonymous responses, as this means schools are not able to invite a parent with particular concerns in to the school to discuss and they also cannot be sure that the views are those of a parent. Schools should, though, reassure parents that the views they submit will be confidential and only seen and used by designated school staff as part of the engagement process.

Other schools may wish to consider offering a face-to-face discussion to inform, reassure, listen and discuss. One option may be to introduce the information to parents in a year-group meeting. This makes the meetings a more manageable size, and means the most relevant information is being discussed with each group of parents. This could be followed with a drop-in for individual parents to come

in and discuss the proposed approach and ask questions. This can be more manageable for schools and also allow parents who might not feel comfortable speaking up in large groups to have an opportunity to contribute. If the engagement is carried out face to face, we recommend a record is kept of the views expressed and the outcome, to refer to if there is any future challenge to the process.

Ideally, whichever method is used, schools would show parents the resources they will use and set out sequences of teaching. Schools will want to listen to feedback sensitively and where appropriate feed it into their planning or teaching approaches.

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Sensitivities

Schools should in particular consider whether aspects of their curriculum may be sensitive to the pupils or to the parents of their particular cohort and, if so, should ensure they have properly engaged them on this content. Schools have been given the responsibility to educate, however, and ultimately it is for schools to decide what is taught and how.

What is sensitive may vary according to the context of the school. In all schools, when teaching Relationships Education, the age and religious background of all pupils must be taken into account when planning teaching.

This doesn't mean not teaching some content, but may mean particular care is taken over how such content is covered, a different conclusion is reached about when to teach some issues, or additional time is taken to ensure parents are clear about how the teaching is to be done and what resources are to be used.

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Where to go for help

In some cases, schools can find that some of their parents are concerned about their Relationships Education curriculum, or are unhappy with either the engagement process or its outcome. In those circumstances, it is always right to first try to resolve this face-to-face with the parents who are concerned.

If their concerns are about the teaching and content, they may be misinformed or may just need some reassurance about the school's approach. Headteachers should discuss the concerns with them, remind them of the process undertaken to engage parents, and gently but firmly remind them that the school makes the final decision on what is taught.

If concerns are about the process itself, the school should remind them of the information shared with parents, in an accessible way, on the proposed approach to the subjects and the opportunities and timescales parents had to share their views.

Should the parent still not be satisfied, the school should provide them with information about the school's complaints process.

The Department for Education has published advice for schools on handling complaints.

This includes how to handle complaint campaigns. This may be useful if schools receive large numbers of complaints on the same subject, including from people not associated with the school. You can find that advice here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-complaints-procedures/best-practice-advice-for-school-complaints-procedures-2019>

Should the headteacher become concerned that there may be disquiet among a number of parents about their Relationships Education curriculum or other sensitive topics the school teaches and require some advice on the best way to manage this situation, they may wish to contact any or all of the following:

- governors/multi-academy trust
- local authority/regional schools commissioner
- their union

The Department for Education will back any school that, having engaged with parents and listened to their views, takes reasonable decisions on their relationships curriculum, including the teaching of topics sensitive to their parents.

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Role of governors and trustees

Governing boards are responsible for the values of the school, which underpin its culture, strategy, policies and procedures. For policies to be effective it is important that both the governing board and the headteacher work in partnership.

Before giving its formal approval to the school's Relationships Education policy, the governing board should be satisfied that appropriate parent engagement has been carried out.

Governors and trustees can also play an important part in the engagement process. However, the role that they play should be agreed at board level, carefully co-ordinated and based on the understanding that the engagement is organised, managed and led by the headteacher.

Those governors and trustees with knowledge and/or experience of the community served by the school can provide useful insight into the different options for engaging parents and which of these might prove to be most effective. It can also be useful for governors and trustees to be present and participating in face-to-face discussions with parents. This is a visible way of both demonstrating the board's commitment to parental engagement

and supporting headteachers to explain the rationale for the policy that has been developed in partnership.

Parent governors and trustees are elected or appointed to provide a parental perspective on the board, rather than to act as representatives of the parent constituency. That said, it is worth considering how they might fulfil a specific role during the engagement process, given that they are likely to be known to parents.

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Additional Guidance and Support

Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education: Statutory Guidance:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education>

Relationships, Sex and Health Education: Guides for Schools:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-sex-and-health-education-guides-for-schools>

Data Management Advice:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/754349/Workload_Advisory_Group-report.pdf

