



PolicyWISE



# Wise in 5: Relationships and sex education

Wise in 5 is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England) in 5 (it takes just five minutes to read).

It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

PolicyWISE creates neutral and constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to develop relationships, respect and knowledge. We support and nurture a common culture of developing and sharing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.



	Right to withdraw	Sexuality in subject title	Changes likely in 2023/24
England	+		+
Northern Ireland	💡	+	+
Republic of Ireland	+	+	+
Scotland	+		+
Wales		+	
Key	+ In effect - Yes	💡 Proposed	⚠️ Considered

# Wise in 5: Relationships and sex education

## Overview

Ahead of the expected [September 2023 report and recommendations](#) of **England's relationships, sex and health education** independent review, we're taking a look at the state of play and recent developments in relationships and sex education across the nations of the UK and Ireland.

Across the nations, there are similar discussions but different positions on issues such as whether guidance for schools should be statutory, whether it is a mandatory subject for all pupils, whether parents should have the right to withdraw pupils, where and how it is delivered within a curriculum, and even how the subject should be named and described.

In March, the UK Prime Minister announced that the Government in England would be conducting a review of **"Relationships and sex education"** statutory guidance. An independent panel is currently looking at *"what is appropriate to teach... at what age...and ensure all content is factual and age appropriate."*

Recent curriculum changes in [Wales](#) have seen the topic re-named **"Relationships and Sexuality Education"**, and it is a statutory requirement within the new curriculum framework and mandatory for all learners in primary and secondary schools. In [Scotland](#), it is called **"Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood"**, as part of the Curriculum for Excellence and is a statutory requirement in all schools managed by local authorities. The Scottish Government is currently consulting on [new draft statutory guidance](#) on the delivery of the subject.

In [Northern Ireland](#), **"Relationships and Sexuality Education"** is mandatory requirement within the curriculum, but there is no uniform statutory guidance for schools. However, with the Assembly and Executive not restored, the UK Government [has legislated](#) to update RSE curriculum requirements, including education on "reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion" with a duty on Northern Ireland's Department of Education to issue content guidance by early 2024. In the Republic of Ireland, **"Relationships and Sexuality Education"** sits within the wider Social, Personal and Health Education curriculum, with a new iteration starting in secondary settings from September 2023 following a recent [national review](#) of the subject.

Across the nations, and further afield, related issues such as digital literacy, gender-based violence, gender and sexual identity and mental health and wellbeing play a part in curriculum discussion and reforms.

The [National \(GB-wide\) Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles](#) provides a longitudinal overview of difference in behaviours and attitudes, starting in 1990. Try this [Open University attitudes interactive](#) to learn more about the "average" views and how your views compare. [UNESCO](#) works with partners across the world to research and support an evidence-informed approach to learner-centred sex education, with an increasing focus on staying safe online as well as healthy relationships.



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# Nation by Nation

## Wales

The new Curriculum for Wales (introduced in primary schools and some secondaries from 2022, and all schools from 2023) includes mandatory Relationships and Sexuality Education for pupils all pupils up to the age of 16.

There is a mandatory RSE code which sets out the learning for different phases, and statutory guidance which supports RSE delivery and planning as a “cross cutting element” of the curriculum, drawing on history, culture, social and technological influences, rather than being situated within one of the six areas of the curriculum.

The government’s code identifies three strands for RSE delivery: relationships and identity; sexual health and well-being; and empowerment, safety and respect. The code states that school-level curriculum “must include learning to develop learners’ awareness and understanding of different identities, views and values and a diversity of relationships, gender and sexuality, including LGBTQ+ lives.”

There is no parental right to withdraw from RSE in the new Curriculum for Wales.

## Scotland

Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood education is an element of the Health and Wellbeing area (one of eight areas) of Curriculum for Excellence.

In line with the approach of the Curriculum for Excellence, the approach to RSHP is not prescriptive for teachers and pupils but there is published Experiences and Outcomes and statutory guidance, which applies to local authority managed schools (but not to private or faith schools). A [consultation](#), which runs until November 2023, aims to update the 2014 statutory guidance, following reviews and the “change in social fabric.” It emphasises the need for guidance to “match the current, relevant and age and stage appropriate resources now available for teachers.”

The Experiences and Outcomes emphasise an “understanding of how to maintain positive relationships with a variety of people and are aware of how thoughts, feelings, attitudes, values and beliefs can influence decisions about

relationships, and sexual health.” Reflecting the government’s ambition to “embed” LGBT inclusive education, free resources and training are made available for education staff.

There is a parental (and child/young person) right to withdraw from all or part of a planned sexual health education programme within a RSHP education programme. The current consultation on new statutory guidance does not propose to change this.

## England

Since 2020, “Relationships Education” and “Relationships and Sex Education” has been compulsory for primary and secondary school pupils respectively in England. The statutory guidance which supports this (containing information on what schools should and must do) applies to all schools, including the independent and faith sector.

The guidance says that “pupils need knowledge that will enable them to make informed decisions about their wellbeing, health and relationships and to build their self-efficacy.” It makes a clear distinction on the requirement for all primary schools to teach relationships education and for all secondary schools to teach relationships and sex education (primary schools may also choose to teach sex education).

The government “expects all pupils to have been taught LGBT content at a timely point” but that it is for schools to consider the “appropriate” point.

Schools are required to consult with parents when developing and reviewing their policies for Relationships Education and RSE, and there remains the right to withdraw pupils from sex education (but not Relationships or Health Education).

## Northern Ireland

Since 2007, Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) has been a statutory component of the Personal Development ‘area of learning’ (primary pupils) and Learning for Life and Work ‘area of learning’ (secondary pupils) within the (revised) Northern Ireland Curriculum.

Although it is a statutory requirement there is no statutory government guidance, but all grant-aided schools are required to have a RSE policy

*“based on consultation with parents and pupils”.* Northern Ireland’s Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment has produced a non-statutory progression framework to support *“age-appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills, and develop attitudes, beliefs and values about relationships, intimacy and sexual identity.”*

*“LGBTQ+ Matters”* is one of the *“priority”* areas of the framework, and schools are expected *“to increase knowledge and understanding of LGBTQ+ matters in an age-appropriate way that is in keeping with the school’s ethos and RSE policy; and support pupils who identify as LGBTQ+.”*

There is no current statutory parental right to withdraw a pupil from RSE, however this will change following a duty placed on the Northern Ireland Department of Education because of recent UK Government legislation. This also sets a duty on the Department to bring forward content and delivery guidance to ensure *“age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion”* is a compulsory element at Key Stage 3 and 4.

## Republic of Ireland

Since 2018, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has led reviews, reports and development groups on reforming the Relationships and Sexuality Education curriculum in Ireland.

As a result of this work, a new Social, Personal and Health Education curriculum (including revised RSE) is **available** for post-primary settings in September 2023, with a **draft curriculum** for older secondary years out for consultation until October 2023.

The new post-primary specification says that *“Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is an integral part of, and connects with, aspects of SPHE... As (learners) continue to form their identity, they are making sense of life experiences, information, images and messages about relationships and sexuality... Having the opportunity to think about and discuss relationships, sexuality and healthy sexual expression within a safe classroom setting and with a skilled teacher is vitally important.”*

The post-primary specification mentions sexual orientation and identity but not LGBTQ+ specifically. The draft **senior specification**, within the Relationships and Sexuality ‘strand’, says that *“Each of the learning outcomes should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.”*

There is a statutory parental right to withdraw pupils from any aspect of the curriculum, including RSE.

## Wise up – 5 policy points to takeaway

Five key points from what we've learnt above, which could be considered as part of further policy development and delivery in any or all of the nations:

1. Policymakers should give careful consideration, working with education staff, parents and pupils, to the naming of the subject. Subtle differences across the nations may imply different perspectives, objectives and content.
2. Relationships and Sex Education can help change and challenge attitudes to unhealthy relationships and violence against women and girls in particular. By including a focus on digital literacy and staying safe online, studies show that positive teaching and learning could reduce online abuse and violence against women and girls.
3. Recent polling in England revealed that children and young people felt that certain issues should have been covered more during RSE. These included power imbalances in relationships (58%), LGBTQ+-relevant information (54%), the attitudes and behaviour of boys and men towards women and girls (55%), and what a healthy relationship looks like, including online relationships (54%).
4. RSE can be a topic that provokes strong opinions and be influenced by misinformation. Policymakers should prioritise clear, timely and accurate information that is available to parents, education staff and pupils. For example, [this leaflet](#) from the Welsh Government, or [this FAQ](#) by the UK Government for England.
5. Terminology, as well as attitudes, technology and the law, can change rapidly. Education staff must be supported with up-to-date resources and professional development for their own practice, but also to enable positive engagement with parents.



## Our focus and way of working makes us unique:

1. **Space:** We create and maintain neutral but constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to develop relationships, respect and knowledge.
2. **Sharing:** We develop and support a common culture of sharing and developing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.
3. **Solutions:** We help governments focus on evidence-informed policy solutions for citizens and communities across the nations, informed by comparative and collaborative research and methods.

## Our offer

The PolicyWISE team work with governments, researchers and partners to identify the opportunities for research and evidence to help solve policy challenges across the UK and Ireland. Utilising our distinct focus and skills we deliver impactful and dynamic training for any audience interested in learning how a comparative policy analysis can benefit their work.

We create the right circumstances for meaningful knowledge exchange between and within organisations, whether that is round-tables, seminars or conferences. We bring together thought-leaders from most areas of public policy, helping you find the solutions to the tricky issues you are looking to solve.

**Dewi Knight, Director**

Interested?

## Get in touch



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