**NC15 and NC16: Introduction of mandatory Relationship and Sex Education for all children in all schools**

*Report stage, Children and Social Work Bill*

There is an urgent need to educate children about safe relationships that happen both offline and online. We support amendments NC15 and NC16 which set the foundations for ensuring that all children in their primary and secondary education are developing skills and knowledge that would make them safer in relationships that they form. We particularly welcome that the proposed changes extend to cover academies and independent schools.

In taking these changes forward, we would like to see a commitment to wider consultation on details of what should be delivered as part of Relationship and Sex Education in schools. In particular, we would like to see a commitment to consult with children and young people themselves, who are best placed to explain the risks they face and topics they believe they need to learn about. As part of this consultation the government should also look at how to make this education accessible for children with learning disabilities and how young people aged 16 -17 are supported to learn about safe relationships.

There is also a need for an informed debate on how the parents’ rights to withdraw from all or some of Relationship and Sex education in secondary school can be balanced appropriately with a child’s right to education that makes them equipped with knowledge on how to stay healthy and safe. Such debate should not only focus on the extent of the right to withdraw but also on measures that need to be put in place to ensure that where parents withdraw a child from an element of RSE education, a child is still learning about this at home.

**Extension of Relationships and Sex Education to all schools**

Under the Education Act 2002, all schools have the duty to safeguard and promote the welfare and wellbeing of their pupils.1 Relationships and Sex Education should be seen a key part of how schools can meet this duty. Currently Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) is statutory in all local authority maintained secondary schools. Academies and Free Schools are not under a duty to teach SRE, but those that do must have due regard to the Sex and Relationship Education Guidance 2000.2

The most recent Ofsted review of SRE found that one third of schools who delivered SRE required improvement in their delivery of this vital subject. In secondary schools, Ofsted were clear that too much emphasis was placed on the biology of reproduction and too little on healthy relationships, sexuality, the influence of pornography and keeping safe. This led Ofsted to conclude that inadequate SRE leaves pupils vulnerable to abuse or exploitation, without an understanding of how to negotiate risky situations or where to go to for help.3

The Children’s Society’s learning from direct work with children and young people supports the introduction of compulsory Relationships and Sex education in all schools. We know that the risks children face today, such as sexual exploitation and the risk of being groomed offline and online are not adequately addressed in classrooms.

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We are clear that the online world presents opportunities as well as risks for young people, and that it is vital that children and young people are equipped to view online content critically. Young people today are increasingly affected not just by relationships and people they meet in everyday situations but also are exposed to information and individuals online. Recent research found that most young people recognise that pornography is unrealistic; however, those who had not been engaged on this issue by their school or family were more likely to have positive responses towards pornography. Additionally this same research found that young people are equally as likely to find pornography accidentally as they are to actively search for it. Worryingly, almost 22 per cent young people who had seen online pornography disagreed or strongly disagreed that sexual activities should be safe for everyone involved.4

We know from our research that many young people experience inappropriate sexual behaviours in schools as well as in communities where they live. Fifteen per cent of referrals to our CSE services come from educational settings. A number of our projects are linked to local schools where we deliver sessions to children and young people to raise awareness and an understanding about CSE or provide one to one work with young people affected by CSE. Our practitioners tell us that there is still not enough recognition of sexual violence among young people and school staff and the staff do not always have knowledge and skills to deal with issues of sexual violence when they emerge or know how to support young people who have experienced sexual crimes, or who are exhibiting harmful sexual behaviours.

It is important that RSE recognises the risks posed to both boys and girls, for example, 1 in 4 of the young people supported by our sexual exploitation services across England are male; and high-quality education should cover different range of relationships which may be experienced by those of different sexual orientations and gender identities. It is also important that RSE is delivered in accessible way to children with learning disabilities. Our research and direct work with these vulnerable group shows that children with learning disabilities are very vulnerable to abuse and sexual exploitation but often receive little or no education about relationships and sex5.

The evidence in support of the need for Relationships Education starting in primary schools and delivered in an age appropriate way is overwhelming. Whilst we accept that many schools and academies may already provide Relationships Education, such provision is not consistent. The proposed changes will ensure national consistency and ultimately will help more children be aware of risks, how to stay safe and where to seek help.

The Children’s Society believe that Relationships Education in isolation will not fully inform and protect children. Relationships Education needs to be embedded as part of a whole-school approach, which recognises the importance of mutual respect and healthy relationships; and equips staff with the skills they need to support – or signpost to support – when children and young people are worried about something going on in their lives. We would expect all schools to give detail of their ‘whole-school’ approach in publicly available policies.

These amendments to this Bill are the beginning of a long-overdue conversation about the place of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) in the curriculum in all schools; and we hope that

5 http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/underprotected-overprotected
the government will continue to explore how lessons for life can be required in all schools throughout the school day.

**The views of children and young people**

Young people we work with overwhelmingly speak in support of compulsory RSE and the lack of current provision in schools. That is why we believe that in taking these changes forward, children and young people themselves should be asked what they need to learn about and how these subjects would be best delivered in schools. This would help to understand where young people feel the gaps in provision exist which could be addressed through teaching RSE.

**Involving and supporting parents with RSE**

Currently Section 405 of the Education Act 1996 gives parents a right to withdraw their child from SRE. The only exceptions to this are the biological aspects of human growth and reproduction that are essential elements of National Curriculum Science.

We recognise that parents have a key role to play in education of their children in both the context of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC) and their legal responsibility for children’s education. However, we are concerned that not all parents may be equipped to provide appropriate RSE to their children should they choose to withdraw their children from some or all of RSE.

We believe that in going forward the debate should not only be on the extent of parents’ rights to withdraw from all or some of RSE, but also on what should be done to ensure that children are receiving appropriate education even if their parents withdraw them from school provision. This can be ensured through support for parents to educate children on relationships and sex and schools and families and schools working together to ensure that all children learn about these important subjects appropriately.

**Questions to the Minister**

- Could the Minister confirm that the proposed changes will include special schools and academies and that RSE will be made accessible for children with SEN?
- Will the Minister commit to consult directly with children and young people on provision of RSE?
- Has the Minister given consideration to what measures need to be put in place to ensure that children who are withdrawn from RSE classes are still educated on the subject?

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