

## **Informing Choices NI response to the consultation on Relationships and Sexuality Education**

### **Who we are**

Informing Choices NI (ICNI) are a pro-choice organisation. Alongside Alliance for Choice and Women's Platform we requested that the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women conduct an inquiry into access to abortion services in Northern Ireland. The subsequent recommendations which stemmed from the inquiry were enshrined in law within the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 and are the basis for the changes to the education curriculum surrounding the teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).

ICNI deliver award winning RSE programmes. Our [Just Ask](#) programme works specifically with individuals with a learning disability, difficulty, and autistic people, as well as their parents and guardians. This programme won the Making a Difference (Team) Award at the National Learning Disabilities and Autism Awards 2023. Our [Speakeasy](#) programme encourages parents and guardians to engage confidently with their children and young people about a wide range of issues surrounding relationships and sexuality. We also deliver bespoke RSE training for professionals, which is accredited by Open College Network NI.

**Question 1: The content of teaching and learning resources for Learning for Life and Work developed by CCEA should be factual and contain age-appropriate, comprehensive, and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion and these resources should not advocate, or oppose, a particular view on the moral and ethical considerations of abortion or contraception – (AGREE)**

ICNI believe that all children and young people should have access to age-appropriate, comprehensive, and scientifically accurate RSE in school. This education should start early, and be relevant at each developmental stage.

By beginning RSE at a young age, children learn to talk about feelings and relationships, and are prepared for puberty before it happens. They can then also understand and challenge any misinformation and stereotypes that they may encounter in the future.

Comprehensive RSE develops confidence and resilience in all aspects of a young person's life. It equips them with the knowledge to recognise abuse; provides information about forming positive relationships; and gives clarity around giving and withdrawing sexual consent.

Research in this area highlights that it can also lead to young people delaying sexual activity, as well as making them more likely to use contraception, when they do decide to have sex.<sup>i</sup>

ICNI promote positive attitudes around sex and sexuality. We believe that RSE should be inclusive, and facilitated by trainers who are confident in talking about all issues relevant to the subject. This will include access to contraception and abortion.

It is our experience that pupils will have pre-informed values around abortion and contraception before they enter the classroom. When discussing these issues both the resources used, and the facilitators guiding the conversation, should not advocate or oppose a particular view on the moral and ethical considerations involved.

The role of the facilitator must be non-directive, while enabling an open, honest, and respectful discussion. In doing so they should be mindful of all opinions, and the personal circumstances of pupils.

The purpose of the conversation should not be to change anyone's personal values, but to give factual and accessible information, to enable young people to make informed choices.

ICNI believe that if young people know how to access sexual and reproductive health services, and have the confidence and support to do so if they choose, we will experience a changed society.

**Question 2 - Parents/carers should be informed about the specific nature and content of the age-appropriate, comprehensive, and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion – (AGREE)**

ICNI recognise that parents and guardians have unique knowledge about their children, and as an organisation we seek to establish a partnership approach when engaging with them around RSE.

We acknowledge that some parents have fears and concerns around the teaching of this subject. This is understandable, as many adults received little, or no formal education in this area.

Many parents have also grown-up in a society where sex and sexuality have been viewed as taboo topics. Therefore, some will find it embarrassing and uncomfortable when talking to their children and young people about these issues. Others may also be hindered by gaps in their knowledge, and require additional support.

ICNI believe that parents should be informed of the specific nature and content of the RSE curriculum, and that resources should be made available to them. This will aid them in providing RSE at home, and reinforce the positive messages from the classroom.

Engaging parents with the curriculum will also assist to identify their needs, hopes, and concerns, while alleviating their fears.

To do this effectively, schools should be supported to develop resources to support parents and guardians, and consider offering RSE programmes to them. This inclusive approach would empower parents to play a proactive role in their child's education.

It is our experience that when schools actively engage parents in discussions around RSE, they can provide a better understanding of its context, and alleviate any potential concerns. This leads to a more positive environment for parents, teachers, and pupils.

ICNI's Speakeasy programme supports parent-child communications around sexuality and relationships. Children and young people want to discuss these issues with the people they

feel close too. Speakeasy gives parents, guardians, grandparents, and foster carers the opportunity to openly communicate about growing-up, puberty, sexual consent, sexuality, and identity, and develop strong relationship skills against the backdrop of an online global world.

The programme is funded by the Public Health Agency in the Belfast and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust areas, and is highly recommended by both parents and teachers:

*“I really appreciate hearing about what is age-appropriate. I get so nervous when my daughter asks questions like ‘Where did I come from?’ that I end up making jokes about it and not actually answering her. I feel a lot more confident now.” Parent*

*“Parents and guardians are sometimes nervous and anxious about RSE but the Speakeasy programme supported them with understanding how to talk to their children in an age-appropriate way and helped to reassure them that others are in the same boat as them. The parents and guardians grew in confidence and their anxieties and fears were substantially reduced.” Principal*

We would encourage all schools to promote the Speakeasy programme when discussing their RSE programme with parents and guardians. Further information regarding Speakeasy, and the topics discussed within the programme, can be found [here](#).

**Question 3 - The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child includes at Articles 1-3 and 12 the rights of the child to ‘express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously’ and at Article 5 ‘the rights and responsibilities of parents and carers to provide guidance and direction to their child as they grow up so that they fully enjoy their rights. This must be done in a way that recognises the child’s increasing capacity to make their own choices.’ The Department’s guidance, when developed, should consider**

**in such instances how schools balance the rights of both children and parents/carers in implementing the regulations – (DISAGREE)**

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child released a statement in October 2023 to clarify the concepts of parental guidance and evolving capacities of the child as enshrined by Article 5 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).<sup>ii</sup> Within this, they state:

*“The Committee notes that parents’ responsibilities, rights and duties to guide their children is not absolute, but, rather, delimited by children’s status as rights holders. The provision of direction and guidance by parents must be exercised in a manner to respect and ensure children’s rights.*

*“As a child grows and matures, greater weight should be given to the views of the child, with parents adjusting their guidance and direction to reflect the child’s evolving capacities in the exercise of their rights.*

*“...when children reach a sufficient level of maturity and capacity to exercise their rights independently, there will be a decreasing need for parental direction and guidance. As children acquire capacities, they are entitled to an increasing level of responsibility for the regulation of matters affecting them. The evolving capacities should be seen as a positive and enabling process, not an excuse for authoritarian practices that restrict children’s autonomy and self-expression, and which are often inaccurately justified by pointing to children’s relative maturity.”*

ICNI believe that a framework which pits schools against parents, and parents against children, is not a conducive environment within which to provide RSE.

As stated previously, ICNI acknowledge that some parents have fears and concerns around the teaching of RSE. There can be a multitude of reasons for this, including misinformation surrounding what is being taught, the purpose as to why it is being taught, their own lack of education and confidence in this area, as well as their deeply held values and beliefs.

While a small minority of parents do not support the teaching of RSE, we believe children and young people have the right to high-quality, comprehensive RSE, which promotes good sexual health and equal and enjoyable relationships.

We would highlight that children and young people are living in a society which is alien to that of which their parents were born into. Advances in technology mean they now have access to vast amounts of information at the click of a button. While this has many positives for education and social connections, young people are also more susceptible to the provision of misinformation, and from developing distorted beliefs and perceptions about relationships through pornography.

By excluding young people from RSE, they will be denied opportunities to be exposed to factual information, and for inaccurate perceptions to be challenged.

It should also be noted that not all children and young people live within safe households, or are involved in healthy relationships. As part of RSE they will receive information to enable them to recognise abuse, identify the qualities they should expect from positive relationships, and informed about giving and withdrawing sexual consent.

ICNI believe that all children and young people should receive age-appropriate, comprehensive, and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, unimpeded from the prospect of parental withdrawal from the subject. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child agrees. In their Concluding Observations to the UK Government, the Committee recommended that they:

*“Integrate comprehensive, age-appropriate and evidence-based education on sexual and reproductive health into mandatory school curricula at all levels of education and into teacher training and ensure that it includes education on sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive health rights, responsible sexual behaviour and violence prevention, without the possibility for faith-based schools or parents to opt out of such education.”<sup>iii</sup>*

Therefore, any guidance produced by the Department of Education should adopt a child’s rights approach which supports the realisation of their fundamental right to education, and the right to access information which is supportive to their wellbeing, free from the possibility of exclusion.

#### **Question 4 - Pupils and parents/carers should have access to an overview of their school's RSE policy and planned RSE programme – (AGREE)**

ICNI believe that schools should involve both pupils and parents in the development of their RSE policy. Research conducted by the Belfast Youth Forum in 2019 found that young people described the RSE they received in school to be 'basic', 'unhelpful', 'useless' and 'biased'.<sup>iv</sup>

86% felt that school was the best place to receive RSE, yet only 66% said they had received RSE. 60% felt that the information they received was either 'not very useful' or 'not useful at all'. The research recommended that a curriculum programme should be co-produced with relevant interventions from young people and that:

*"Policy makers and service providers should also work in collaboration with young people to review the nature and extent of barriers they face in accessing RSE and sexual health services, and co-produce RSE interventions with young people to enhance relevance and applicability of this to the reality of their lives."*

In April 2023 the Education and Training Inspectorate published a Thematic Evaluation of the Preventative Curriculum in Northern Ireland.<sup>v</sup> This report was based on responses from more than 14,500 primary and post-primary pupils, and 500 schools.

Within it, post-primary pupils stated they wanted to learn more about topics such as sex, consent, and sexual violence; teenage pregnancy; contraception and STIs; and abortion.

In relation to improving the standard of the RSE curriculum they wanted more discussion, rather than long presentations, and a variety of topics covered each year.

They felt the content was too heteronormative, and believed that the subject should not be taught through the lens of the church.

They also believed that boys and girls should not be separated during the teaching of RSE.

In June 2023 the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) published a report on RSE in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland.<sup>vi</sup> This followed an investigation undertaken by NIHRC, during which they appointed independent experts to assist in their assessment of the provision of RSE.

The experts noted that the guidance produced by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) in 2019 recommends that school policies include references to sections of the UNCRC. They state this demonstrates a clear intent of the CCEA and Department of Education for schools to promote the human rights of young people.

However, they concluded that:

*“Much guidance appeared to imagine the student to be passive and deficient – unknowledgeable, potentially reckless, in need of protection from bullying, peer pressure, media influence, of guidance in moral values that they are assumed to lack. Where they were considered as ‘responsible’ this was often conceived in punitive terms about accepting consequences of sexual activity, such as parenthood. Too rarely was the child imagined as a rights-bearer seeking relationships, who could actively contribute to RSE and make independent informed decisions, or even as deserving of adult interest in their lives and cultures.”*

As such, they recommended that:

*“Schools should engage pupils as partners in co-developing and evaluating RSE. Consulting students should help ensure that RSE is ‘student-sensitive,’ appropriate and meets the needs of young people in the context of their actual relationship and sexual cultures.”*

ICNI believe that pupils should have access to an overview of their school’s RSE policy and planned RSE programme, and their views should also be sought regarding the content and effectiveness of its delivery.

As stated in our response to question 2, we also believe in actively engaging with parents and guardians around RSE. This includes providing them with access to the school’s RSE policy and planned programme, in order to assist them when discussing RSE at home.

**For further information please contact:**

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- <sup>i</sup> Douglas B. Kirby - [Sex and HIV Education Programs: Their Impact on Sexual Behaviours of Young People Throughout the World](#) (2007)
- <sup>ii</sup> United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child – [Statement of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on article 5 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (2023)
- <sup>iii</sup> United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child - [Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#) (2023)
- <sup>iv</sup> Belfast Youth Forum - [Any Use?](#) (2019)
- <sup>v</sup> Education and Training Inspectorate - [The Preventative Curriculum in Schools and Education Other Than at School \(EOTAS\) Centres](#) (2023)
- <sup>vi</sup> Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission - [Relationships and Sexuality Education in Post Primary Schools in Northern Ireland: A Compelling Case for Reform](#) (2023)