



Preventing Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG): Protecting Inclusive and High-Quality Relationship, Sex, Health & Education (RSHE)

Review of the RSHE Statutory Guidance: a briefing
July 2024

*“Consent is a really serious thing but people talk about in the playground like it’s a joke. There needs to be more education.”
(Young Person)¹*

Endorsed by:



Supported by over 40 specialist VAWG organisations and members of The End Violence Against Women Coalition’s VAWG Prevention Network. For full list of signatories please page 8.

¹ EVAW (2023) [#About Time Campaign](#) - young person focus group.

Introduction

The Relationship, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum was made mandatory in 2017 with mass cross-party support. Guidance that was informed and supported by evidence across health, education, safeguarding and faith groups is now being reviewed. The need for inclusive, high-quality RSHE is more pressing than ever. Many of the problems it addresses are endemic in society, such as violence against women and girls (VAWG), which is the focus of this briefing. We are therefore deeply concerned that the draft updated guidance removes or restricts protective, preventative education in this area to the extent it leaves children and young people at increased risk. We call on your support to protect inclusive and high-quality RSHE.

VAWG and Young People 2024: from bad to worse

- 10% of children are **watching porn from as young as 9, and most commonly from 13.**² Whilst **90%** of 18-26 year olds think online pornography has a major impact on what teenagers perceive to be normal sexual behaviour.³
- This year, the Crown Prosecution Service found that, the public's accurate **understanding of rape** "is **outweighed by false beliefs, misunderstanding, lack of knowledge, and underlying stereotypes**", and that these misconceptions are **more prevalent among younger generations.**⁴
- **1 in 4 girls** have shared a **sexual image of themselves** (24%) and of those, a quarter (24%) said they felt pressured into it, and almost a third (31%) initially wanted to but later regretted it.⁵
- The number of girls who have experienced some form of threatening or upsetting behaviour online **has risen from 65% in 2018 to 81% in 2023**⁶
- The majority of recorded incidents of **online sexual abuse** involved reports of **children** (aged 10 to 17) **offending against other children (52%),** up from around one third.⁷
- **80% of girls** think schools need to do more to support young people's sex and relationships education.⁸
- **61% of children and young people** said they were unsure or **did not know where to go for support if affected by domestic abuse.**⁹

How RSHE is critical for the prevention of VAWG

² Children's Commissioner (2023). ['A lot of it is actually just abuse'- Young people and pornography.](#)

³ CEASE (2024). [British public attitudes towards pornography.](#)

⁴ CPS and Equally Ours (2024) [Rape and serious sexual offences: public understanding and attitudes and Reframing Rape: Effective communication about rape.](#)

⁵ End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [It's #AboutTime: A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls.](#)

⁶ Girlguiding (2023). [Girls Attitudes Survey 2023.](#)

⁷ National Policing Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (2023). [National Analysis of Police-Recorded Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation \(CSAE\) Crimes Report 2022.](#)

⁸ End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [It's #AboutTime: A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls.](#)

⁹ Women's Aid. (2023). [Influencers and Attitudes: How will the next generation understand domestic abuse?](#) Women's Aid.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is endemic in our society. Schools are a critical site for the protection of children and young people, and present the best opportunity to challenge attitudes which condone abuse and transform the long-term likelihood of abuse in adult relationships.¹⁰ Decades of research shows that teaching children about harmful gender stereotypes, consent, respect and healthy peer relationships from the earliest stages of school are key to preventing VAWG and intersecting forms of violence.¹¹ Under Chapter III of the Istanbul Convention (of which the UK Government is signatory), the prevention of VAWG requires long-term changes in the attitudes and behaviours which can lead to, justify, trivialise and minimise the occurrence of such violence; and commits signatories to teaching about gender equality at all levels of education.¹² Furthermore, prevention and improving the RSHE curriculum is a key strand in the last government's 2021 Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.¹³

"One of the biggest flanks where you could say [the Tackling Violence Against Women Strategy] has not been successful is in education. There has been the RSHE work, but I do not think that goes far enough...We need to prepare children a lot more for what they encounter, including influences and attitudes that they will be exposed to, and people who will try and take their thinking in a certain way." **Laura Farris MP, former Minister for Victims and Safeguarding** - oral evidence to the Home Affairs Committee on non-contact sexual offences 2024.¹⁴

In recent years we have seen the growth of online misogynist influencers, who promote violence against women and girls, and have had a real impact on boys and young men's attitudes and behaviour.¹⁵¹⁶¹⁷ They claim to be leading positive conversations about masculinity but in fact are re-producing harmful narratives, limitations and pressures on boys. Schools and colleges are often left to deal with the aftermath of this, without sufficient funding or resources to deal with the issues. Teachers and staff have reported feeling ill-equipped and unprepared to address the scale of the problem.¹⁸

It is also essential that RSHE tackles intersecting forms of inequality and marginalisation. For example, Black and racially minoritised girls are more likely to experience racialised sexual harassment about their bodies and appearance, and this harassment focuses on their difference from a white Europeanised

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [It's #AboutTime: A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls](#).

¹² Council of Europe. [Istanbul Convention Action against violence against women and domestic violence](#)

¹³ Home Office (2021). [Tackling violence against women and girls strategy](#).

¹⁴ Home Affairs Committee (2024). [Oral evidence: Non-contact sexual offences](#). UK Parliament

¹⁵ Women's Aid. (2023). [Influencers and Attitudes: How will the next generation understand domestic abuse?](#) Women's Aid.

¹⁶ Ellery, B and Mitib, A. (2023). [Social media companies profit from misery spread by misogynistic influencers](#). The Times

¹⁷ Hope Not Hate (2024). [State of Hate 2024](#)

¹⁸ End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [It's #AboutTime: A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls](#).

norm.¹⁹ LGBTQ+ young people are at increased risk of violence in school, and homophobic bullying is common as a way to police conformity to gendered expectations, even in primary schools.²⁰

Risks to RSHE and to efforts to prevent VAWG

Since RSHE was made mandatory, many schools have made progress in implementing the guidance. However, in the aftermath of the pandemic and as a result of insufficient resourcing and political will, the roll out of mandatory RSHE has been slower than planned.²¹ A [recent survey of 1000 young people aged 16 and 17 by Sex Education Forum](#), found that more than half said they learnt either nothing at all or not enough about key mandatory topics, such as healthy relationships, power imbalances in relationships, and pornography.²² Whilst recent Women's Aid research found over a quarter of women 18-25 experienced the RSHE they had in school as 'rushed and awkward'.²³

A recent [report published by EVAW](#),²⁴ highlighted a number of blockages to the successful roll out of RSHE and a Whole School Approach²⁵ to tackling VAWG in our schools, alongside a series of recommendations. This included tackling the lack of training, support and time for school staff, inadequate resourcing levels, and the need to value the specialist VAWG sector's contributions to partnership work, including those organisations that are run 'by and for' Black, minoritised, and marginalised victims and survivors of VAWG.

Critically, there is significant concern about a recent backlash to RSHE stemming from contested claims of inappropriate content.²⁶ Some of this seems to be fuelled by largely anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and has potential to incite opposition to the vital education that young people need. Over 50 organisations and experts in VAWG, led by EVAW, expressed these concerns in a [letter to the then Secretary of State for Education in March 2023](#).²⁷ Furthermore, over 130 organisations took [Brook and Sex Education Forum's pledge for inclusive RSHE](#).

¹⁹ Sundaram, V., Jessop, N., Bell, B. & Jackson, E. (2022). [Everything is racialised on top: Black and minoritised girls' and young women's experiences of public sexual harassment in the UK](#). Plan International UK.

²⁰ Girlguiding (2023). [Girls Attitudes Survey 2023](#)

²¹ End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [It's #AboutTime: A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls](#).

²² Sex Education Forum (2022). [Young People's RSE Poll 2022](#). Sex Education Forum.

²³ Women's Aid. (2023). [Influencers and Attitudes: How will the next generation understand domestic abuse?](#) Women's Aid.

²⁴ End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [It's #AboutTime: A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women & Girls](#).

²⁵The End Violence Against Women Coalition defines a WSA as "an approach that addresses the needs of pupils, staff and the wider community across the entire school environment, from the curriculum or learning environment to addressing the school's physical environment and what actions are taken to prevent VAWG and ensure safety for both students and staff".

End Violence Against Women Coalition. (2015) [A Guide for Schools](#).

²⁶ End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [Concerns vital Relationships & Sex Education review is based on contested claims and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric](#)

²⁷ End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [Don't politicise Relationships, Sex & Health Education, 50+ VAWG experts warn](#).

The needs highlighted by young people are at odds with the RSHE review's focus on age restrictions within the curriculum. Any debate on what is 'age-appropriate' must be grounded in the reality of what children are facing and encountering online and with their peers. Rather than arbitrary age caps on what can or cannot be discussed, children need the space to talk about their real life experiences and opportunity to develop the skills to stay safe in the world they live in. This needs to happen in safe spaces in which they can explore ideas, concepts and attitudes without fear of judgement or blame.

"We need to improve education [to prevent the escalation of VAWG]...We do not do enough at that very early stage...There needs to be a bit more consistency in education, and I would start it really young." **Laura Farris MP, former Minister for Victims and Safeguarding** - oral evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee on preventing the escalation of violence against women and girls.²⁸

Introducing age restrictions would not enable schools to respond to the realities of children and young people's lives, meet the diverse and changing needs of the children and families they serve, nor would it reflect effective curriculum design or pedagogy. We're deeply concerned that if government proceeds with this draft guidance they will fail young people in a number of ways:

- **Shutting down conversations about relationships and sex to supposedly 'protect children', when we know that conversely, this stops children from being able to identify unhealthy relationships, pushes sexual abuse into the shadows and leaves children less able to find help if they need it.** Stopping younger children from having guided, informed discussions about sex and relationships will only put them at risk. There is overwhelming evidence that by giving them the support, skills and knowledge they need to navigate the world they live in, quality RSHE helps protect children's rights and freedoms to a childhood free from abuse.
- **An overall lack of coherence in what can be taught, and when.** While porn, image-based sexual abuse and sexual harassment can be taught from year 7, sexual acts, sexual violence and domestic abuse cannot be taught until year 9. The exclusion of the realities of domestic abuse until year nine does not accord with children's experiences as victims in their own right, with 1 in 5 children in the UK having lived with an adult perpetrating domestic abuse.²⁹ And given image-based sexual abuse is a form of sexual violence, and it is clearly impossible to teach about porn without being able to reference sexual acts, we're concerned that these new age restrictions are not only incoherent and confusing for teachers and their pupils, but they may deter schools from teaching RSHE at all. In addition, separating forms of gender-based violence in this way means teachers are unable to show how these acts are all connected, with their roots in the male power and entitlement that inequality produces.
- **A failure to take a preventative approach.** RSHE is the cornerstone of work to prevent violence against women and girls. The proposed age restrictions come with a caveat: teachers can

²⁸ Women and Equalities Committee (2024). [The escalation of violence against women and girls - Oral evidence](#). UK Parliament.

²⁹ [NSPCC](#): Child abuse and neglect in the UK today, 2011

address 'prohibited' subjects with younger students if an incident has taken place. Waiting until after the harm is done violates children's rights to a safe childhood free from abuse. Moreover, without early education and support, young people may not be able to recognise unhealthy behaviours, prolonging trauma which could otherwise be avoided through a preventative approach.

- **Worrying denial of LGBTQ+ lives and realities, reminiscent of section 28.** Allowing primary schools the option not to include same-sex parents when discussing families, and banning any discussion of gender identity for all young people, is not only harmful to some of the most marginalised children, but it is illogical given it does not reflect the world around us - in our homes, communities, and wider culture - or many children's lived realities.
- **Lack of an intersectional approach to RSHE, despite the specific ways Black girls are subjected to racialised sexual harassment, violence and abuse, and the disproportionate punishments meted out to Black children.** There is an overall absence of analysis of inequality and discrimination and the ways in which these intersect and impact children's experiences.

What is needed from the RSHE Review, and how you can help

- Any RSHE Review must be informed by research and evidence. We call on the new government to abandon the changes in the current draft, and ensure any review of RSHE is informed by the evidence, the experiences of children, and the specialist VAWG sector expertise; and that they make known the evidence sought to inform any new draft guidance.
- The review must listen and respond to the views of children and young people, including marginalised young people - views and experiences have been absent from the review so far, and this must change.
- Rather than setting arbitrary age-restrictions based on idealised and ideological views of childhood, which put children at risk, cut off their access to support, and severely limit our ability to prevent VAWG - we must ensure that the foundations of high quality RSHE are laid at an early age and built upon through consistent RSHE education at all key stages.
- We must centre the need to tackle the cultural norms which underpin the epidemic of VAWG we see today.
- We call for any further review to include a consideration of how teachers can be supported and trained to deliver RSHE effectively, so they can confidently support the young people in their settings rather than fearing what they can and cannot say.
- We call for the expertise of the specialist VAWG sector to be valued, including in the development and delivery of curriculum materials.
- The new government must take an intersectional approach to the development of guidance which should be holistic and inclusive in meeting the needs of all children (e.g. including teaching about LGBTQ+ experiences, recognising special educational needs, and disproportionality and discriminatory responses to Black and minoritised children).

The new government, and parliamentarians, have a vital opportunity and responsibility in the coming months to ensure that RSHE meets the needs of children and young people, and works to prevent VAWG. This means guaranteeing children and young people the information and skills they need to stay

safe, as opposed to moving towards age restrictions which are bound to make teachers feel wary about answering questions that children bring to the classroom. In light of emerging evidence about the extent to which young people are being exposed to misogynistic influencers online and increasingly looking to pornography to fill the gaps in sex education, alongside the prevalence and rates of VAWG, teachers must be provided with the much-needed support and resources to hold space for young people to openly discuss these themes. We cannot afford the cost to these young people, and for wider society, of shutting these conversations down.

We urge you to stand up for high quality RSHE and call on the new government to abandon the proposed draft, averting restrictions that could reverse progress in protecting children and young people and undermine any commitments made by the new government to tackle violence against women and girls.

We would welcome a meeting to discuss further. Please contact our Head of Public Affairs - Janaya Walker - janaya.walker@evaw.org.uk.

Full list of supporting organisations:

- End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW)
- Everyone's Invited
- Women's Aid Federation of England (Women's Aid)
- Tender
- Action Breaks Silence
- Advance
- Agenda Alliance
- Beyond Equality
- Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid
- Bold Voices
- Brook
- FORWARD
- Galop
- Humanists UK
- IDAS (Independent Domestic Abuse Services)
- IKWRO - Women's Rights Organisation
- Imkaan
- IRISi
- Jewish Women's Aid
- Juno Women's Aid
- Latin American Women's Aid (LAWA)
- Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS)
- Let Me Know (LMK)
- National Education Union (NEU)
- Our Streets Now
- PSHE Association
- Refuge
- Rene Cassin
- Respect
- Rights of Women
- School of Sexuality Education
- Solace
- Southall Black Sisters
- Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse (STADA)
- Surviving Economic Abuse
- This Ends Now
- White Ribbon UK
- Woman's Trust
- Women's Budget Group
- Young Abuse Support.