



Department of Catholic Education and Formation Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

Relationship and Sex Education in Catholic Schools

Introduction

From September 2020, Relationship and Sex Education becomes statutory in all Secondary Schools in England and Relationship Education becomes statutory in all Primary Schools in England. This document seeks to address some of the frequently asked questions as to how this will affect Catholic education and Catholic schools.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the overall purpose of Catholic education?

The principal purpose of Catholic education is the formation of disciples of Jesus Christ. This is expressed in the Church's Declaration on Catholic Education, which states: "A Christian education ... has as its principal purpose this goal: that the baptized, while they are gradually introduced to the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of faith they have received and that they learn in addition how to worship God the Father ... especially in liturgical action and be conformed in their personal lives according to the new man created in justice and holiness of truth; ... also that they develop ... to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ ... and strive for the growth of the Mystical Body; ... that they are aware of their calling, they learn not only how to bear witness to the hope that is in them ... but also how to help in the Christian formation of the world that takes place when natural powers viewed in the full consideration of man redeemed by Christ contribute to the good of the whole society."

2. Why does the Church have its own schools?

Catholic schools are established by the Church to: assist in its mission of making Christ known to all people; assist parents, who are the primary educators of their children, in the education and religious formation of their children; be at the service of the local Church – the diocese, the parish and the Christian home; and, be "a service to society"ⁱ. These objectives help students to: "encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth"ⁱⁱ; provide an environment in which students are enabled to build and deepen their relationship with God; foster an academic culture aimed at the pursuit of truth; and, actively promote growth in virtue.

A fundamental principle of Catholic education is the formation of the whole personⁱⁱⁱ. In the education of children and young people in Catholic schools, well-taught, age appropriate Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) is an important part of this holistic approach^{iv}. Given the dangers of the modern world, and the ease at which young people can access erroneous information and damaging material, RSE plays a vital role in keeping children safe.

Equally fundamental is the inalienable role of parents as the primary educators of their children, especially when it comes to highly sensitive topics such as RSE^v. Therefore, Catholic schools must collaborate extremely closely with parents to ensure RSE is delivered in an appropriate way^{vi}.

The Church's vision of the "integral education of the human person through a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation"^{vii}, provides the perfect template to deliver effective RSE in a manner that prepares pupils for life^{viii} in modern Britain, as well as teaching them to value the precious gift of human life and the dignity that God gives to every person.

3. Can Catholic schools teach RSE in accordance with the teaching of the Church?

Yes. The Catholic approach to the teaching of RSE existed in Catholic schools long before the introduction of statutory RSE, and the new statutory guidance **does not change** our Catholic approach to teaching the sensitive aspects of this subject. To be clear, the Catholic Church will continue to be able to deliver RSE in its schools in fidelity to, and in accordance with, the teaching of the Church.

4. Will Catholic schools be forced to promote a secular view on contemporary issues?

No. Well-taught RSE serves to keep children and young people safe. Therefore, it is important that RSE which is taught in Catholic schools recognises the context (including the many dangers) of modern society. If parents and schools do not provide pupils with the knowledge that they need to be able to make good life choices, we would be failing in the duty to keep our children and young people safe. This **does not mean** that schools are required to promote a particular worldview. The Government's most recent statutory guidance does not force Catholic schools (or any other school for that matter) to endorse any ideologies, lifestyles or life choices, nor does it say we cannot preferentially promote the Church's teaching on the dignity of the human person and the sanctity of life.

5. Will Catholic schools be forced to teach that Civil Marriage is equal to Sacramental Marriage?

No. The new guidance does not force Catholic schools to teach that Civil marriage is equal to Sacramental Marriage. Catholic RSE gives pupils the ability to understand the significant and important differences between them.

6. Has the Catholic Church submitted to pressure from the Government and special interest groups?

No. The Catholic Church is the second largest provider of education in the country, and as such we are a valued Government partner. Over the years, the CES has worked hard to protect the rights of parents and Catholic schools and will continue to do so. It is because of this close working relationship that the Church has been able to safeguard the right of withdrawal as well as protection of the Catholic curriculum.

There are special interest groups which have approaches to RSE that are incompatible with the teaching of the Catholic Church, and as such should not be taught in Catholic schools.

7. Do you still support the rights of parents to withdraw their children from Sex Education?

Yes. Parents are the primary educators of their children. Therefore, they must always maintain the right to be able to deliver these highly sensitive topics themselves. Catholic schools must work closely with parents in the delivery of RSE, moreover the fact that parents have this right often initiates this important dialogue (see 2. above). Because of this close working relationship, year on year we consistently see less than a quarter of one percent of pupils in Catholic schools being withdrawn. Also, this right is vital for the many Catholic parents who do not have the ability to send their child to a Catholic school, thus ensuring parents can teach these topics in accordance with the teaching of the Church.

8. Who decides what is taught about RSE in Catholic schools?

The decision about what is taught in RSE is set out by a school in consultation with parents. However, the Diocesan Bishop has the final right to decide on whether a Catholic school's curriculum complies with the teaching of the Church. All schools must have regard to statutory guidance, but this is not the same thing as a national RSE curriculum. Because children mature at different rates, or to respond to a specific school incident, schools need this flexibility to come to a reasoned judgement of what is 'age-appropriate' or what is needed to safeguard the pupils in their care. In Catholic schools all RSE must be taught in fidelity to, and in accordance with, the teaching of the Church.

Many dioceses promote the CES's model RSE curriculum for both primary and secondary schools as well as sixth-form colleges. These model curricula equip pupils with the skills needed to deal with the challenges modern society whilst staying true to the Church's teaching on the dignity of the human person made in the image and likeness of God, and on the sanctity of life.

9. What can parents do if they consider that the RSE being taught at their local Catholic school is not in accordance with the teaching of the Church?

If parents consider that the RSE being taught at their child's Catholic school is not in accordance with the teaching of the Church, they should contact the head teacher. Often the concerns of parents can be taken into account when there is a dialogue between home and school. If, after this dialogue, parents are still unhappy they have the right to withdraw their child from sex education. All Catholic schools will have a process for parents to withdraw their children from these lessons which will be available in the RSE policy on the school's website.

10. Where can I find out more information on RSE in Catholic schools in England and Wales?

More information can be found at: www.catholiceducation.org.uk/schools/relationship-sex-education

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ⁱ The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, §4

ⁱⁱ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Catholic Educators, Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., April 17, 2008

ⁱⁱⁱ The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School, Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, §31

^{iv} Cf. Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, Familiaris Consortio, 1981, §37 and, Cf. Educational Guidance in Human Love, Congregation for Catholic Education, 1983, §54 & §69

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- v The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family, Pontifical Council for the Family, 1995, §23
- vi Charter of the Rights of the Family, Pontifical Council for the Family, 1983, Article 5, c.
- vii The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, §4
- viii Educational Guidance in Human Love, Congregation for Catholic Education, 1983, §37 to 40