

DELIVERING STATUTORY RELATIONSHIPS & SEX EDUCATION 2020

Teaching RSE to pupils with SEND

Adele Bates shares practical advice and resources to help ensure that RSE is accessible to all pupils, including those with SEND

From September 2020, the new RSE curriculum will become compulsory in all schools.

Whilst it is clear that RSE must be accessible for SEND pupils, there is little guidance on exactly how to do this.

Having spent the last few months writing, delivering training and leading discussions in this area it is evident that we are in the trial stages; sharing best practice from special schools, PRUs, APs to mainstreams and back will help us develop a solid approach to ensuring some of our most vulnerable young people are accounted for.

More vulnerable pupils

For pupils with disabilities and other additional vulnerabilities the lessons may need deeper thought and repetition, to ensure that all pupils are receiving age appropriate, useful RSE that ultimately enables them to live healthy, safe lives.

It can be tempting to shy away from awkward questions, or wrongly assume that these pupils won't need to know certain areas of RSE. However, these young people can be particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and non-consensual sexual experiences (three times as likely according to the NSPCC).

They also have the right to enjoy safe, healthy relationships and positive sexual experiences with their own bodies and others': the same as any human.



Adapting the curriculum

To adapt the RSE curriculum there are two clear questions we need to ask.

- Who are the pupils we are teaching?
- What are our pupils' specific needs?

All our pupils are different, and each of them will be able to access RSE in different ways – our job is to find out what works best, whilst ensuring they have accurate content.

I discuss this further along with some top tips in a video on Dr Pooky Knightsmith's youtube channel: [Sex ed and special needs](#).

Implementing RSE for SEND across the curriculum

Throughout the guidance the strong message is that RSE should be interwoven across the curriculum rather than stand alone lessons (this point is particularly made for [LGBT content](#)).

This can work well for SEND pupils as topics are revisited in different contexts to embed understanding and learning. School trips to a hospital or GP for example, could also include introducing the clinics and professionals specific to sexual health. It's also important that pupils have a few adults they can trust to talk to.

Physically disabled pupils

Physically disabled people have sex, relationships and families – some don't.

Many disabled people experience infantilisation from able-bodied people – particularly around sex.

When teaching physically disabled pupils ensure that there is not an assumed norm around sex or our bodies.



If you have not experienced a physical disability in your life so far, do your research. The pupils will have specific questions (whether they dare to share them with you or not) around their own disabilities and how that may affect things emotionally, with a partner(s) around safety and sexuality.

Disability activist [Elizabeth Wright](#) shares some astounding insights into her lived experience of her disability and the education she received.

- [Infantilising disabled people is a thing and you're probably unconsciously doing it.](#)
- [Love, sex and disabled women: we want to be sexy too](#)
- [Moon cups are not for me: the reality of period products for disabled women](#)

Considering our physically disabled pupils' needs around RSE, we also have a duty as educators to educate our abled-bodied pupils about difference, to question society's perceptions around physical differences and sex.

d/Deaf and visually impaired pupils

How have you adapted the lesson about putting condoms on safely for your visually impaired students? Are staff able to explicitly and confidently explain what is going on?

Do your visually impaired pupils know what other genders' bodies are like? Do you have anatomically correct models that you can use?

Visually impaired pupils will not have the same access to information about RSE as their sighted peers will have; this can affect their development with their sexuality.

Radio 4 has a [useful discussion on RSE for visually impaired pupils](#), whilst the Royal National Institute of Blind People has [information about 3D models that can be printed](#).

Ensure resources are accessible to your pupils, and that they are given equal chance to ask questions with trusted adults. For [d/Deaf pupils](#), the NSPCC have recorded a [British Sign Language resource](#) around consent that can be shared with adults and children.



Pupils with learning difficulties and autism

Pupils with learning difficulties and autism may be developing physically at a different rate to their mental capacity, which can make them particularly vulnerable. Ensure that lessons and resources are delivered in a way that they can understand, and yet still covers the content that would be appropriate for their age and bodies.

The social side to RSE can be hard for these pupils. They may not understand social signals in the same way as others – flirting and innuendo can be particularly challenging, e.g. "do you want to go all the way?". Avoid using metaphors and euphemisms that could cause confusion, e.g. "others shouldn't touch you down below without your permission".

You should also avoid generalisation; statements such as "touching yourself in private is OK" may be difficult to interpret – be specific, "in your bedroom, when alone" or even have visuals to help aid understanding. Visual aids are also helpful when teaching about genitalia.

Role play, discussions using sentence starters and scripts and actual examples in films or visiting actors can help the topic become accessible. This should be revisited often to ensure deep learning.

I have created a [Year 7 and Year 8 RSE six week scheme of work](#) that has been successfully used with SEN pupils with learning difficulties in a mainstream setting.

Pupils with SEMH

Pupils with [social, emotional and mental health \(SEMH\) issues](#) already have existing challenges with engaging in social situations, dislike of change and difficulties around forming healthy, trusting relationships. Therefore RSE can be triggering and challenging for them.

Some SEMH pupils have an 'act tough' persona – which may well have helped them to survive in past traumatic experiences.



Teachers need to realise that the bravado and claimed expertise around sex could be hiding lack of knowledge, fear or even a disclosure about past abuse. Creating safe spaces for these pupils to learn RSE is vital, and staff need to be sensitive to possible triggers, safeguarding and child protection policies and procedures.

Menstruation

Menstruation is now a part of the curriculum.

For pupils with SEND this change in the biologically female body may be hard to understand, they may not have the capacity to ensure their own hygiene or communicate when pain or other symptoms occur.

Menstruation should be taught to all genders. Menstruation affects all of us, and can act as a great information tool about health and stress levels in a particular environment. The [autism-friendly guide to periods](#) and [Red School](#) are great resources.

LGBT

Some SEN pupils will also be LGBT.

Some SEN pupils will have LGBT parents/carers, family and friends.

Unfortunately, where RSE is taught to pupils with SEN the LGBT part of the curriculum is often missed. However, young people with learning disabilities are more likely to express themselves authentically, become attracted to whoever they're attracted to, and not conform to the general [cis-heteronormative bias](#) of western society (and many other social norms).

For more information on how to teach LGBT content see my article [LGBT+ in the RSE curriculum](#).



Parents/carers

Health and relationship education (taught in all primary schools) is compulsory. However, parents/carers have the right to withdraw their child from sex education (delivered in primary schools at the discretion of the school and all secondary schools).

Some may have concerns that their child's additional needs mean that they should not be taught RSE. Topics such as masturbation (for all genders) being taught as a 'private act in your own bedroom' may be challenging for parents/carers; communication is key.

Heads are advised to meet with these parents/carers, highlighting the detrimental effect this may have on a child who is excluded from RSE lessons, and what they may learn as hearsay from their peers about RSE.

Other tips for implementing the new changes

- Elect a named governor to lead on RSE.
- Delegate a named member of SLT to be responsible for RSE.
- Train staff on new topics they may need to teach.
- Involve parents, carers and pupils early on in consultations.
- Share best practice with other schools, set up links with other types of schools who may have pupils with additional needs similar to yours.
- Get to know your pupils well so that you can adapt specifically for them.

Adele Bates is a teacher, speaker, writer and educator for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties. With over 17 years' experience, Adele teaches pupils in a variety of educational settings, trains others to do so – in schools, universities and conferences, and advises on whole school approaches to supporting these students. Find out more about Adele's work as a behaviour and education specialist at Adelebateseducation.co.uk