

Sex and Relationships Education *Should it be compulsory in schools or not?*

Review by **Philippa Taylor**
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The Government has announced that Sex and Relationships Education will be made compulsory in all schools, from age four.

The drive to do so seems unstoppable given that 'the numbers of STI diagnoses in those aged 15 to 24 years has risen considerably'.¹ Supporters of relationship education believe it will also help protect children from cyber bullying, pornography, 'sexting' and other such challenges. But will compulsory SRE solve these problems?

First, the vast majority of pupils in school do receive sex and relationships education. Only in academies, independent and primary schools was it not compulsory, and the majority take this area of education seriously.

Yet, despite widespread SRE STIs among young people continue to increase, faster than any other group.² A recent, large, Cochrane study found that sex education programmes do not reduce pregnancy or STIs.³ This does not suggest that teaching SRE in every school will improve things.

The key issue is the basis and thinking behind sex education. Organisations behind the long-term drive for compulsory sex

education (the PSHE Association, Sex Education Forum etc) champion 'non-judgmental' sex education, devoid of context such as marriage, family life, fidelity or exclusivity. It is all about individual choice – with consent. Could this change under the new Government proposals?⁴

That said, there are a couple of welcome proposals. One is the name, it will be called RSE – relationships and sex education. While this is word games it does reveal priorities by putting relationships first and placing sex in context. Second, schools will be able to teach RSE in line with their faith.

However, while parental withdrawal will be maintained for secondary schools, there will be no opt out at all for primary school pupils. Even for secondary schools the opt out provisions will be limited (only for the 'sex' part) and probably only up to age 15.

Parental concerns about making sex education compulsory have partly stemmed from concerns that children will be exposed to unsuitable materials which sexualises them (see this example)⁵ while approaches based on encouraging young people to exercise self-control or chastity, and encouraging parental involvement, have attracted very little support

and often outright opposition. Moral confusion has resulted from abandoning moral absolutes. The relativistic approach advocated by campaigners for compulsory SRE can actually make it easier for vulnerable children to be exploited.

Sexual intimacy is something valuable and worthy of respect.⁶ If this is taught under the new Government proposals then it will be a positive development, however more likely will be pressure for ever more explicit sex education. Sex education is an ideological battlefield that impacts children from a young age. The danger is that a Government-funded strategy of undermining parents and pulling down traditional moral standards may well prevail.

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Bullying and NHS culture *How we challenge it*

Review by **Steve Fouch**
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It seems hard to credit that an organisation whose primary focus is the care of the sick should have an appalling reputation for bullying and intimidation of staff. However multiple surveys¹ of NHS staff show that at least 25-30% of respondents reported experiencing bullying from colleagues and managers at some point. Ten percent say that they have experienced discrimination in the workplace, and that figure doubles for black and ethnic minority staff members, and nearly as high for disabled employees.

Alarming, in a recent survey, over half of those who had experienced bullying reported that they felt it had been because they had raised concerns about care standards, patients' safety or had stood up for colleagues facing discrimination.²

Sometimes it may be the culture of a team that singles out those who don't fit in. This is particularly true where a culture of

'getting by' has developed because of staff 'burnout'. Any staff member who seeks to give their best shows everyone else up and becomes an obvious target. Ironically, those who seek to raise standards can find themselves accused of bullying.

Furthermore, the fact that so many colleagues just won't back up or support the bullied individual for fear of becoming a target exacerbates the situation. The culture of fear and intimidation leaves many of those facing bullying isolated and even ostracised by their colleagues. Bullying can be as much a sin of omission as one of commission.

Up to a third of those experiencing bullying have been forced to leave their jobs.³ There is a strong correlation between bullying or 'disruptive behaviours' and the occurrence of adverse events and compromises in patient safety.⁴

Workplace culture plays a big part in shaping us as professionals – but culture is

not static. It is not just managers who shape the culture, we all have a role.

Christians are meant to be salt and light⁵ in our workplaces; challenging bullying culture, caring for those on the receiving end, leading by example.

We need to be caring for ourselves physically and spiritually, particularly finding others to pray with us and support us, either in our churches or with other Christians in our workplaces. We need also to find and work with likeminded colleagues (not just Christians) who share a common concern to create a better working environment.

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