

Evolution Business Centre,
6 County Business Park,
Darlington Road, Northallerton,
North Yorkshire,
DL6 2NQ.
01765 688827

admin@mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk
www.mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk

Marie Collins Foundation

Submission to the Committee for Education

Mini-Inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Northern Ireland

(October 2024)

The Marie Collins Foundation is a UK charity uniquely focused on addressing and responding to the significant problem of Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse (TACSA). Our field of engagement includes direct and indirect support and advocacy work with victims and survivors of TACSA; research endeavours on this topic with academic partners and the overall promotion of the lived experience of victims and survivors of TACSA, to inform and influence improved prevention and response to TACSA, both domestically and internationally. We also create and deliver specialist training to professionals across the globe to equip them for better intervention and support for those who have experienced TACSA and to promote a victim focused, recovery approach.

With our subject matter expertise on TACSA and direct work with victims, survivors and families, we are aware of the important intersection of Relationship and Sexuality Education as a vehicle to promote recognition of abuse and improved safety in Children and Young People (CYP). We recognise that the mini-inquiry into RSE was primarily aimed at parents, teachers and CYP and their views on the proposals contained in the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023. As such, we were unable to submit a proper response within the survey portal, but we believe that the Marie Collins Foundation has important insight for the Committee for Education on this topic, therefore we are making a written submission, following invitation for comments by the Committee¹. Our response centres around three domains: 1) public health 2) safeguarding and 3) child rights.

¹ [Inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) in Schools \(niassembly.gov.uk\)](https://niassembly.gov.uk/inquiries/relationship-and-sexuality-education-rse-in-schools)

We are highly supportive of the Secretary of State’s attempt to implement recommendation 86(d) of the Report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women (CEDAW), via the new regulations. Delivery at Key Stages 3 and 4 of **“age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion²”**, as a compulsory component of curriculum for adolescents is imperative.

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a significant public health issue³, resulting in lingering effects of abuse, both physical and psychological^{4,5}. Prevalence rates are indicative only, as abuse is known to be underreported⁶, especially by boys^{7,8}. The Centre for Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse suggest that over 5000 children experience abuse every year in England and Wales⁹. It is likely that children and young people in Northern Ireland experience abuse at a comparable level. Research suggests that around a third of all CSA is perpetrated by a family member¹⁰. Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse (TACSA) is at a significant and increasing scale. Childlight’s “Into the Light” Global Index Report (2024) indicates that over 300 million children face online violence and abuse annually¹¹. Furthermore, over 20% of children in Western Europe experienced some form of online abuse and victimisation during their childhood¹², with 12% experiencing this in the past year. Research has also demonstrated a clear

² Section 2, The Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023

³ Ladis, I., Abrams, D., & Calkins, C. (2023). Differential Associations between Guilt and Shame Proneness and Religious Coping Styles in a Diverse Sample of Young Adults. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 38(1–2), 670–697. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221081931>

⁴ Easton, S. D. (2020). Disclosure of child sexual abuse: Directions for breaking new ground. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 99, 104287–104287. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104287>

⁵ Lateef, R., Alaggia, R., Collin-Vézina, D., & McElvaney, R. (2023). The Legacy of Shame following Childhood Sexual Abuse Disclosures. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 32(2), 184–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2022.2159910>

⁶ McTavish, J. R., Sverdlichenko, I., MacMillan, H. L., & Wekerle, C. (2019). Child sexual abuse, disclosure and PTSD: A systematic and critical review. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 92, 196–208. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.04.006>

⁷ McTavish, J. R., Sverdlichenko, I., MacMillan, H. L., & Wekerle, C. (2019). Child sexual abuse, disclosure and PTSD: A systematic and critical review. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 92, 196–208. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.04.006>

⁸ Lev-Wiesel, R., & First, M. (2018). Willingness to disclose child maltreatment: CSA vs other forms of child abuse in relation to gender. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 79, 183–191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.02.010>

⁹ [The scale and nature of child sexual abuse: Review of evidence \(csacentre.org.uk\)](https://www.csacentre.org.uk)

¹⁰ [National Analysis of Police-Recorded Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation \(CSAE\) Crimes Report - January 2022 to December 2022 \(vkpp.org.uk\)](https://www.vkpp.org.uk)

¹¹ (2024). Into the Light Index. <https://intothelight.childlight.org/>

¹² [Childlight | Into the Light Index Indicator 1 - Global Prevalence of Online Victimisation](https://www.childlight.org.uk)

link between CYP's exposure to pornography and commission of Harmful Sexual Behaviour towards other children and peers^{13, 14}.

Research shows that children are better equipped to understand sexually abusive behaviours when they have been taught about body boundaries, sex and sexuality. There are clear and evidence-based reasons for teaching children about sex in an ongoing, educative way. We believe delivering a core curriculum of RSE to all children at Key Stages 3 and 4 is best achieved via school settings. This will improve public health outcomes, by strengthening overall safeguarding of children, via access to life-protecting and life-enhancing information, as an extension of CYP's rights to both education and information. Parents may also wish to teach and supplement their child's learning on these important topics at home and we support parents' rights to do so. However, we do not believe that this should ever replace or supersede the need for schools to be the primary place where a cohesive and standardised RSE curriculum is taught.

While we agree in principle that parents should be informed and consulted on RSE content and delivery, we also believe that the RSE mandatory minimum curriculum should not be determined by parents. Such content should be set according to experts within public health and safeguarding, having regard to information that CYP need to maximise their personal health, wellbeing, and interpersonal relationships. It is essential that CYP receive age-appropriate information, with RSE instruction that grows and matures along the general developmental pathways of childhood and adolescence. RSE should be factual and scientifically based, which will equip CYP to understand and make informed decisions regarding sex and relationships as they develop.

We believe it is essential for parents to be kept informed about when and what RSE lessons will be delivered in school. This can facilitate follow-up conversations to happen at home in families where the parent-child dyad is strong and supportive or could foster improvement with this. We believe it is fair, proportionate and reasonable for any parent to request and have access to the RSE materials and

¹³ Gemma McKibbin, Cathy Humphreys, Matt Tyler & Anneliese Spiteri-Staines (2024) Clusters of risk associated with harmful sexual behaviour onset for children and young people: opportunities for early intervention, *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 30:2, 185-196, DOI: 10.1080/13552600.2022.2117429

¹⁴ Gemma McKibbin, Julie Green, Cathy Humphreys & Matt Tyler (2024) Pathways to Onset of Harmful Sexual Behavior, *Victims & Offenders*, 19:5, 739-777, DOI: 10.1080/15564886.2023.2208579

resources. This acknowledges parents' rights, established in law and noted by the NI Human Rights Commission during their appearance before the Committee for Education on 11th September 2024¹⁵. Yet, we agree with the Commission that a balance must be struck between parents' rights and the rights of children to be educated fully, as a fundamental human right and further enshrined via the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

For some parents, confirmation of when and what RSE lessons will be undertaken in school can be a helpful tool to consolidate what they are teaching their children already, in the home. For other parents, it may provide a helpful on-ramp to begin these conversations with their child. However, we do not believe that parents should be able to opt their children out of RSE at any point, including Key Stages 3 and 4. We are concerned with the risks this presents to CYP who may be shielded from vital teaching around healthy relationships and sexuality. Research supports that the majority of CSA is committed by someone known by the child or young person. This includes abuse that may take place at home, by a parent or sibling. Those who do not receive rigorous RSE are less likely to correctly identify the abuse or are unable to access help and intervention from trusted adults or specialist services.

While some parents are both informed and engaged in teaching and guiding their children about relationships and sexuality, many parents are either unwilling or poorly prepared to teach their own children. This produces an information deficit in CYP, which can drive them to seek the information from suboptimal sources, including pornography¹⁶, and leaves them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, including through technology and online channels, as they are less equipped to identify unhealthy, predatory or abusive behaviours.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) confirms in Articles 28 and 29 that children are entitled to information. RSE is one strand of activating this right. Children develop at different rates, and cognitive and chronological and physical development can all occur in a varied way that does not

¹⁵ [Minutes Of Evidence Report \(niassembly.gov.uk\)](https://niassembly.gov.uk)

¹⁶ Amy J. Peterson, Gillian K. Silver, Heather A. Bell, Stephanie A. Guinosso & Karin K. Coyle (2023) Young People's Views on Pornography and Their Sexual Development, Attitudes, and Behaviors: A Systematic Review and Synthesis of Qualitative Research, *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 18:2, 171-209, DOI: 10.1080/15546128.2022.2096163

necessarily align. Children may seek information from a safe adult at school (including an RSE teacher/provider) because they are concerned about something or have already been exposed to harm. Access to consistent teaching on RSE within the school setting facilitates CYP actualising their rights, as well as improving their safeguarding knowledge and range of avenues for help.

We support the views expressed by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People on 2nd October 2024¹⁷ to the Committee on Education regarding the online harms CYP are increasingly exposed to and the need for comprehensive education in schools to help mitigate these risks. In keeping with the recent report from Barnardo's Ireland (2024)¹⁸, we encourage the Department of Education to include a specific curriculum focus on Artificial Intelligence (AI) within RSE so that children and young people can engage with it safely, recognising benefits, as well as risks associated. Research with young people has shown they too want more robust sexuality education, including discussion about forms of child sexual abuse¹⁹. The Commissioner also advocated for proper consultation directly with CYP to ascertain what topic areas and issues they are facing, which could be incorporated within RSE. We agree that this is wise, but should be kept under review, so that the RSE curriculum can be adapted periodically, to reflect new or emerging areas of concern and need for CYP.

We note the mini-inquiry discussion around delivery of RSE by teaching staff versus external providers. In our view, there are merits with both approaches and a hybrid mechanism may be beneficial. Yet, it is crucial that teachers are properly trained in both content and delivery of this curriculum. The Department of Education must provide comprehensive detail and guidance to teachers, to build teacher confidence when teaching the RSE component. This would help to redress the noted issue of confidence in the ETI report on the preventative curriculum (p5)²⁰, which is barrier to effective delivery by teaching staff and knowledge acquisition by pupils. High quality curriculum materials from the Department would also improve standardised and effective RSE delivery, school to school, rather than the patchy approach outlined in the ETI report (p5). This must include sufficient detail around online

¹⁷ [Minutes Of Evidence Report \(niassembly.gov.uk\)](https://niassembly.gov.uk)

¹⁸ [Barnardos Report Reveals 63% of Children Learn About AI \(Artificial Intelligence\) Through Social Media - Barnardos](#)

¹⁹ McKibbin G, Humphreys C, Hamilton B. "Talking about child sexual abuse would have helped me": Young people who sexually abused reflect on preventing harmful sexual behavior. *Child Abuse Negl.* 2017 Aug;70:210-221. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.06.017. Epub 2017 Jul 3. PMID: 28628898.

²⁰ [The preventative curriculum in schools and Education Other Than at School \(EOTAS\) centres \(etini.gov.uk\)](#)

harms, abuse and AI, coupled with sufficient teacher training in these key areas. External providers could supplement the primary form of RSE delivery. The advantage of some external provision is that the key messages and learning are reiterated by outside sources, which affirm the main curriculum as both important and normative content. There may be more variety in how the material is taught, which could allow reinforcement of messaging, as well as differences in how CYP engage with teaching and learning modalities. Although we believe RSE should be school-driven, we think some flexibility should be retained to allow schools to consolidate RSE from external, but vetted and trusted expert external partners, budget-permitting.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our comments to the Committee for Education. The Marie Collins Foundation would like to make ourselves available to the Committee as witnesses in any matter under consideration by the Committee which relate to or intersect with TACSA, including support, intervention, training and lived experience of those who have experienced TACSA.

Research and Policy Team

Marie Collins Foundation

In addition to the above submission, we consulted on 22nd October 2024 with members of our Lived Experience Group (LEG) about the Mini Inquiry into RSE. A key priority and strand of the work of the Marie Collins Foundation is consulting and amplifying the voices of those with lived experience of TACSA. Throughout our work we always reflect the voice and experience of LEG members, to help instruct, guide and inform change and improvements to the safety of children and young people, especially in the online environment. Below you will find the input provided from members of our LEG group regarding various RSE issues. We hope you will read this thoroughly and find it useful. (Members of LEG come from Northern Ireland, as well as other areas in the UK).

Mini-Inquiry into RSE (Northern Ireland): Input from the MCF Lived Experience Group (22.10.24)

General Remarks

- [Have had] personal difficulties in accessing justice within NI, and the mindset of those in charge which impacts some of these conversations. Make it very difficult, records disappeared. Lots of help for 'troubles'-related issues but not for Child Sexual Abuse (CSA).

- No mention of grooming or CSA - is this included in their plan? Not just stranger danger, but abuse within the home - would miss significant elements that are vital for all children regardless of where they are living.
- Must include everything [within RSE]. Previously only taught that indecent images are a crime and anybody who shares will be criminalised, even victims. Very harmful.
- Needs to be taught over a long period of time. Too much to take in if only spoken about once.
- Grooming gangs in NI are very skilled. CSA gets hidden really well within all the other issues going on. Also the small Pentecostal churches who run their own ship can be very dangerous.

Who should provide RSE?

- [Important to] define - could mean someone who wants to teach accurate info or someone who wants to teach non-accurate. Could mean the church or the NHS. Potential for bias.
- Would ban all religious etc organisations going in. Don't trust any religion. Rural areas [may make it harder to have external providers].
- [External providers] do this day in day out, confident, knowledgeable, not embarrassed. Also need teachers there because they know the children and can help.
- External providers could be better as some of them may be more qualified but if teachers can be just as well trained (RSE training on inset days/embedded into teacher training etc) then they'd be good to be part of it too. Because young people see their teachers every day, they're key support people, and having teachers discuss this may help kids feel more comfortable coming to their teachers for help when they need support with an issue RSE-related.
- Would be good to have an option for teachers to opt out of teaching that bit (so someone else would come & do it instead), because if a teacher doesn't believe that stuff should be taught, then it'll always be better that someone else does it anyway.
- All RSE content needs to be delivered by someone who is trauma informed, and in a trauma informed way, as all of the content is stuff that may be triggering - important that this is kept in mind.

RSE and diversity and inclusion

- For LGBT, you would definitely need external providers. Abortion still frowned upon. Placards come out. Not easy for the child. The God-fearing folk are a very powerful entity. Diversity for them is protecting their own. I worry a lot about diverse children. If child discloses, the possibility of a tap on the shoulder “I know where you live”... can be very powerful people.
- Don't know the diverse make up of NI, however the danger is isolating children, may be children from 'different' families, may be too scared to say anything in case it reflects on them. If they don't have that support, what will the outcome be for them? Would sharing it in class silence them even more? Shouldn't even be a question nowadays but it is, it's a huge issue everywhere. It's 2024, we should be able to discuss this, that's why I think it should be someone external. At my faith school we only learned the biological facts, everything else was frowned upon.
- I don't think trans people ever get a mention and I wouldn't expect it either - but it is kind of messed up to go through years of school and not having someone like you ever mentioned. But I'd be so worried about how trans people get talked about because the department for education guidance [in England] (specifically the 2023 consultation) is completely awful & I'd doubt Northern Ireland is better.
- RSE that only includes cis/straight people is not at all good enough and doesn't cover most relevant points for queer people.
- An external provider that can do queer-inclusive age-appropriate sex education would be good here.

Should parents be allowed to opt out their children from RSE?

- Very worried about this, would be suspicious of parents who want to opt out. I know of two examples of where parents went into schools to say the child had started acting up at home to pre-empt any disclosures.
- No. Appreciate parents will have different perspectives, but not a bad thing to expose children to perspectives other than your own. What are they trying to hide them from? I have a friend who was pulled out of sex ed as soon as parents could - doesn't mean he's never going to have sex in his life.

- Where will they get the information from if they aren't getting it from home? School is best placed for professionals who know about these things to be able to do it. Parents will have their own opinions and views, but imparting your view onto children instead of taking broader approach is wrong. For abusive parents of course they would want to limit the child's knowledge and risk of disclosure. I learned from the natural history museum [in London] because I didn't learn from school or parents. [My] child currently learning and I'm really happy about this. Don't think opt-out should be an option.
- Definitely shouldn't be an opt-out. Happy for child to learn everything in a safe environment. Don't think many of us have an issue with it, it comes down to religion, some people have very strange views towards religion and sex. Need to challenge the "sex is dirty" narrative.
- Maybe reason why parents don't want children being taught this, possibly because they never had this education themselves so they may be scared. Involve the parents or have sessions for them with an outline of what children will be taught to give peace of mind. May also be very beneficial for them too. Also be taught different things to look out for from a parent perspective.
- I think it's a really good idea for there to be a session for parents on what their kids will be taught.
- A lot of people who have these opinions, also have other opinions that aren't based in fact. They think it's all these wild things that it actually isn't. Transphobia comes from people thinking young children are going through drastic changes, medication and operations etc. Think same thing for this - informing parents may help.
- Education is a human right. So is sex education. Somebody I know didn't know about periods until it happened, very traumatising.
- Previously parents thought any teaching on preventing pregnancy was encouraging sex, so by not talking about it, it wouldn't happen. Children not given credit to make choices and not be swayed. Same with drugs and smoking. Taking away child's right to make an informed decision.
- Biggest problem for children is parents' ignorance. Child's safety more important than parent's beliefs.
- My schools didn't take the signs of my abuse very seriously. In primary school told a teacher [I] thought was pregnant, no questions or probing into what was going on. The denial that something more sinister could be going on. Better to ask questions and the answer be

innocent, than not ask the question and it be something sinister. Faith primary school so taught no sex before marriage. Lots of times I said something or behaved in a way that was inappropriate and there was no response.

- Difficult for a child to go against their parent's wishes? Would they be able to go ahead without the parent's knowledge if they wanted to?
- What about children in the care system? Would foster carers be able to opt out? Would the local authority opt out?
- I worry about parent's ability to opt children out - especially the parts about early pregnancy and abortion access in Years 8-11.
- Because early pregnancies still occur, and young people NEED to have the knowledge and information to get support and make their own informed and supported decisions on that pregnancy. Experiences like that can be so traumatic and parents usually have their opinions on what option their child should take, so the child needs to have knowledge of what their own rights are in these situations.

Should consent be taught within RSE and if so, how?

- [People] often use the word 'consent' for exclusively sexual stuff. [But it's also] asking if someone wants to be hugged. Feels like this is feeding into the exclusively sexual model, should be taught how consent looks in lots of different scenarios. Photos at an event - consent form.
- [Having been abused] thought I was consenting because I said yes or didn't say no, later realised it was fear.
- Consent is fundamental, underpins all of CSA because children can't consent. But it's getting people to understand what consent means.
- One of the problems I have with consent is that it puts the responsibility onto the child. If you don't know what it means or what it involves. Assumed when younger that I consented because I wasn't forced. Didn't realise I was being groomed. Consent needs to be explored and broken down in detail. Important. Agree, not only sexual – medical – if something goes wrong then it's your fault. Not enough emphasis on teaching "they shouldn't be doing this is in the first place". Needs to be more preventative. Feels victim blaming to put the responsibility onto the child.

- If taught well, opportunities for victims to understand they didn't 'consent', aren't at fault, unpick some blame and shame they may feel.
- Consent often taught as a 'one and done' - need to emphasize that consent can be revoked at any time. Perpetrator's number one excuse: you consented, why are you now making allegations. Consent is misused.
- I think consent education is also important for sexual abuse prevention, in the sense that people are less likely to be perpetrators if they're fully informed about consent and what isn't okay. I agree a lot with what [another LEG member] has said but I'm also thinking about consent education from a different angle - teenagers are less likely to perpetrate sexual assault if they've been properly educated on what is wrong
- Porn. Increase in sexual violence against girls. Higher prevalence of sexual violence on social media. Normalised. Don't know how to deal with rejection. Haven't learned how to deal with this on an emotional level and it escalates to violence. Lot of misinformation out there which needs to be overhauled as well.
- This links into how there needs to be better mental health education and support. A lot of violence and abusive behaviours among young people is made worse by poor mental health services/no mental health education in schools. Young people don't get taught key skills for interpersonal relationships or how to regulate their emotions.
- With some police officers they are desensitised to violence and abuse. To accept violence and forget there's a person behind it. Law often overlooks the damage it's causing to the people it's supposed to protect, in the interests of money and not having to do more work.
- The system of policing is inherently violent and can definitely be so harmful to survivors - as a survivor of child sexual exploitation we often get told by social services/mental health workers to "expect to be arrested" / a lot of us get threatened with arrest because our abuse involves money or even for possession of our own images. Statistics of police violence are also just unacceptable and young people need to know about a lot of support services outside of police.
- There needs to be SO MUCH more consent education because its fundamental to sexual assault prevention which is an angle that needs to be worked on more. Like, it needs to be in depth, multiple sessions, a lot of comprehensive consent education is necessary, including points like ability to withdraw consent and coercion.

- There needs to also be mentions of scenarios where the young person cannot consent - like in abuse situations with an adult. Many young people experiencing abuse believe they're consenting.
- Also possibly linking to content creators who make good content about this (for example Hannah Witton makes really good sex education videos) - teenagers listen to YouTube & content creators.

Have you any additional suggestions for improvements to RSE?

- [I] was abused so young I don't remember life before abuse. Would like them [politicians and policy makers] to keep in mind that some of us come to school already knowing about sex. People forget how young it can start.
- It's such a cruel world. Hard to think parents should be reading up on this before even having their first child and bringing them into this harsh world [but] they should have information/leaflets at clinics ready for soon-to-be parents to have access to. Horrible cases of babies [being abused].
- I agree - and bringing up to parents why using anatomically correct language is important for their child's ability to disclose.
- When my child was younger, I wanted to protect from hearing about any of these issues for as long as possible. Lot of parents will have the same instinct. Having the knowledge and understanding and language, being able to recognise that something was wrong. The way to protect children is to teach them. Wrapping them in cotton wool doesn't protect them.
- Sessions for parents to learn what kids are learning - but also maybe a fact-based resource on why it's important for kids to learn this, with points such as:
 - 1) how it equips kids to be able to disclose abuse.
 - 2) statistics on how learning about how to prevent pregnancies doesn't actually encourage them to have sex.

Just debunking myths etc. to reassure parents. I agree with the points [another LEG member] made on challenging ignorance.

- The point [another LEG member] made about who makes the call for kids in care is so important, because kids in care probably need access to RSE information more than anyone else does.

The Lived Experience Group would like to extend an offer of help to Department for Education and Committee for Education on RSE development. In particular, they commented: I think the content is so important and I think the LEG would be a valuable voice regarding the content of this.