

## Education Committee Mini Inquiry into Relationship and Sexual Education Parenting Focus Statement

Parenting Focus (PF) is the leading organisation in Northern Ireland advocating for the voice of parents and carers of children and young people. We are dedicated to supporting parents and ensuring their voices are heard in decisions that affect them. Established in 1979, formerly known as the Parents Advice Centre and later Parenting NI, provides free support through a range of services, including a Freephone Support Line, family support services and various evidenced-based programmes and workshops. Our mission is to ensure parents have access to timely support and information to guide them through their parenting journey. Our vision is of a society where parenting is valued, parents' voices are heard, and every family receives the support they need. We believe that the best and most effective way to support children is by supporting those who parent them and we strive to deliver responsive and accessible parenting support and services across the region.

PF is mindful of the legislative and policy context within which the provision of relationship and sexuality education is governed.

Firstly, the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act, 2019 placed into domestic legislation the recommendation of the CEDAW committee which recommended that the UK government and NI Executive should:

*“Make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory component of curriculum for adolescents, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion, and monitor it’s implementation.”*

This was further reinforced by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child when in June 2023 their Concluding Observations recommended the need to:

*“Integrate **comprehensive, age-appropriate and evidence-based education** on sexual and reproductive health into mandatory school curricula at all levels of education and into teacher training and ensure that it includes education on sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive health rights, responsible sexual behaviour and violence prevention, without the possibility for faith-based schools or parents to opt out of such education.”*

In turn the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 has laid out the statutory duty for Relationships and Sexuality Education to be factual and “**contain age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education**”.

Finally, this is further reinforced by the recently published Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls which states that an area of focus will be:

“Further developing, in collaboration with young people, the design of relationship and sex education which is **accessible, inclusive, and age and developmentally appropriate**, in the context of changes to mandatory content”

Parenting Focus is mindful of the evidence already submitted by NICCY, the NIHRC and Children's Law Centre and do intend to repeat their statements with regards to the realisation of the rights of children and young people. We wish it to be noted that we fully endorse their comments, analyses and recommendations.

Parenting Focus strongly advocates for topics such as respect and dignity, bodily autonomy, child protection, online safety, inappropriate touching, and general preventative education mandatory in schools. We firmly believe that topics such as consent, domestic abuse and violence, diverse family situations, LGBTQIA+ aspects and information, changing societal values, and female genital mutilation should be mandatory components of the educational curriculum and delivered in an age-appropriate way. These subjects are crucial for fostering a safe and inclusive environment for all young people, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to understand and navigate complex social issues. Addressing diverse family situations fosters acceptance and understanding, reflecting the varied realities of students' lives. It is essential to recognise that without equal access to this education, some young people will be left at a disadvantage, making them more vulnerable and at greater risk of receiving inaccurate or potentially harmful information from peers.

Education on consent empowers young people to recognise and uphold their own boundaries and those of others, while discussions on domestic abuse and violence raise awareness and promote healthy relationships. Consent is a fundamental aspect of healthy relationships and is crucial in the context of the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls strategy. This strategy emphasises the need for comprehensive education on consent to empower individuals, particularly young people, to understand their rights and the importance of mutual agreement in any intimate interaction. By integrating consent education into the curriculum, we can cultivate a culture of respect and accountability, which is essential for preventing violence and promoting gender equality. The strategy recognises that educating both young people and their parents about consent not only raises awareness but also fosters open dialogue, which is vital for addressing the root causes of violence against women and girls. Making these topics mandatory ensures that all children receive the comprehensive education they deserve to thrive in a diverse and evolving society.

It is important that children and young people are consulted on the content of the curriculum that must be developed within the parameters set above ie age-appropriate, scientific and comprehensive. This right must extend to parents and carers and Parenting Focus, therefore, strongly recommends co-design and consultation with parents regarding RSE. Research indicates that RSE programmes that actively involve parents not only foster and enhance communication between parents and their children about relationships and sexuality but also promotes safer sexual behaviours among young people. Research in both the 'JACK' trial and The Healthy Young Adult Relationships (HYAR) study highlights that it is clear that both young people and parents express a desire for open dialogue on these crucial topics, Aventin, (2021) *Engaging parents in digital sexual and reproductive health education: evidence from the JACK trial*. Academia.edu. Available at: [https://www.academia.edu/54161772/Engaging\\_parents\\_in\\_digital\\_sexual\\_and\\_reproductive\\_health\\_education\\_evidence\\_from\\_the\\_JACK\\_trial](https://www.academia.edu/54161772/Engaging_parents_in_digital_sexual_and_reproductive_health_education_evidence_from_the_JACK_trial).

However, in the current context, many teenagers report rarely or never discussing sex with their parents, while numerous parents feel ill-prepared to initiate these conversations. By involving parents in the development and implementation of RSE, we can bridge this communication gap, empower families, and ensure that young people receive the same consistent and supportive guidance on relationships and sexuality. This collaborative approach not only enriches the educational experience but also reinforces the importance of parental engagement in fostering healthy, informed attitudes amongst children and young people. Moreover, engaging parents equips them with the confidence and tools to address challenging topics, helping build a balanced, supportive approach to RSE. This approach provides parents with the opportunity to discuss their own perspectives on topics covered in a comprehensive, age-appropriate, and scientifically based curriculum. Engaging in RSE allows parents to integrate family values into these discussions, fostering a balanced understanding that respects both educational content and personal beliefs. This shared responsibility between parents and schools ensures children receive a well-rounded education that respects their rights and prepares them for healthy relationships.

We note that the issue of consent has been discussed at some length during this Inquiry. To be clear, Parenting Focus does not agree with the opt-out provision for parents to exclude their children from specific elements of an RSE curriculum that has been thoroughly consulted on and is deemed to be scientifically accurate, age-appropriate and comprehensive. Parents do not have the right to withdraw their children from any other subject in the curriculum. We agree with the NIHRC that ethos and value have a role to play in school and, of course family life but not in a scientific-based area such as this. Parents should be fully aware of the curriculum that their children are taught and be supported to be able to discuss this openly with their children including within the context of their beliefs and values. PF accepts that this is a complex area but believes that these complexities can be overcome.

Parents are partners in their children's education and have a right to the support and information to be able to discharge that responsibility accordingly.

Parenting Focus welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee's Mini-Inquiry and is happy to assist in any other way.