

Education Committee

RSE mini-inquiry

The importance of parental engagement when it comes to relationship and sexuality education in schools



Parentkind

About Parentkind

Parentkind is the voice of parents, we represent the views of parents to local, regional and national governments through our research including the National Parent Survey.

Our evidence tells us that parental participation in education benefits all children in all schools, and society as a whole.

Parentkind's network of 12,800 Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) across the UK mobilises over 100,000 volunteer fundraisers, raising in excess of £120 million annually to fund vital equipment and services for our schools. We work with parent groups in over 400 schools across Northern Ireland and have a dedicated Northern Ireland Senior Policy Researcher working to promote the voice of parents at all levels of government. We also provide secretariat support to the APG for Parental Participation in Education in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Introduction

School-age children spend 80 per cent of their waking hours outside school, and mainly at home, but all too often there is a disconnect between home and school¹. That needs to change. We want every school in Northern Ireland to benefit from a community of parents who are empowered to support their child's learning. We know this is critical to tackling the attainment gap and is a key intervention in helping to remove the barriers that prevent many children and young people from engaging in learning. But parental engagement should go beyond attainment and form part of all aspects of a child's life including the sensitive topic of relationship and sexuality education. **When parents are consulted with, and plans are transparent they are four times more likely to support proposals and have confidence in what is being delivered².**

This briefing focuses on data gathered from parents around relationship and sexuality education and the importance of parental engagement in education.

1. National Parent Survey 2024³

1.1 The National Parent Survey was conducted by YouGov on behalf of Parentkind during April and May this year. A total of 5,490 parents from across the UK took part, 303 of

¹ LIFE Center: About LIFE (life-slc.org)

² <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/research-and-policy/parent-research/research-library/school-education-policies/relationships-and-sex-education-poll-may-2023>

³ <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/assets/resources/NI-NPS-24-Hyperlinked.pdf>

which were from Northern Ireland⁴. All parents responding to the survey have at least one child aged 4-18 in school.

The survey covered a broad range of topics including education, screen time, mental health and the cost-of-living. **The research revealed that parents in Northern Ireland value relationship and sex education and agree that it is an important part of the school curriculum.**

- When asked how important is it that your child's school curriculum focuses on teaching about relationship and sex education at post-primary level the majority of parents (89%) said it was important.
- When asked how important is it that your child's school curriculum focuses on teaching about relationships education at a primary level the majority of parents (82%) said it was important.

When it comes to the current curriculum focus on relationship and sex education there is a mixed picture from parents.

- **When asked about the curriculum focus on teaching about relationship and sex education at post-primary level**
 - One in ten (10%) parents said it was too much
 - Over half (59%) of parents said it was about right
 - Almost one in five (18%) parents said it was too little
- **When asked about the curriculum focus on teaching about relationships education at primary school level**
 - Four per cent of parents said it was too much
 - Over half (55%) of parents said it was about right
 - Less than one in five (17%) of parents said it was too little

1.2 Online relationships

Our research with parents reveals that there are considerable concerns from parents about online safety. Parents in Northern Ireland whose child has access to electronic devices were most likely to be concerned about the negative influence social media has on their children with four in ten (40%) confirming this is a concern for them compared to the UK average of 31 per cent. Relationship and sexuality lessons must include a focus on online relationships.

2. The importance of parental engagement on relationships and sexuality education

⁴ As the survey is not polling the entire population of parents in Northern Ireland, but rather a sample of the population, results are subject to a margin of error which is estimated to be up to +/- 5.6 percentage points for the whole sample. The exact margin of error varies with the proportion considered. This means that, if for instance, according to the survey 33% of respondents strongly agree that their child enjoys school, in reality the proportion is likely to be between 27.4% and 38.6% (i.e. the margin of error would be +/-5.6%).

2.1 Parentkind conducted an online poll in May 2023 with parents in England regarding their views on relationships and sex education⁵. The research found that engaging with parents has a huge effect on parents’ perception of relationship and sex education lessons.

Parents who had been able to review materials before lessons were four times more likely to say they were happy with the content of lessons than those who hadn’t.

- Over six in ten (63%) parents agreed with schools using external providers to support lessons while three in ten (30%) disagreed
- Eight in ten (80%) parents believe it’s important that schools consult with parents in advance about the content of sex education lessons
- Over half (58%) of parents tell us that schools have provided them with information in advance
- Parents who had been consistently informed of the content in advance by their child’s school had more confidence in both the national curriculum and the specific content that was being taught at their child’s school, and were far more likely to be happy with the school using external providers.
- In contrast, parents who had not heard anything from their child’s school about the content of lessons were a lot less happy with what they believed was being taught in the school and within the national curriculum, and gave a more polarised view on the school using external providers⁶.

The 309 parents whose child’s school told them in advance about the content of RSE lessons said:	The 446 parents who did not hear from their child’s school about the content RSE lessons said:
82% were fairly/very happy with the content of lessons 5% were fairly/very unhappy 3% told us they didn’t know	15% were fairly/very happy with the content of lessons 32% were fairly/very unhappy 27% told us they didn’t know
55% agreed they had confidence that the national curriculum covers sex education appropriately 19% disagreed	57% disagreed that they had confidence that the national curriculum covers sex education appropriately 18% agreed
86% agreed they were happy with the use of external providers 9% disagreed	49% agreed they were happy with the use of external providers 43% disagreed

⁵This poll was conducted online between 2 May - 5 May 2023 with responses from 1,064 parents in England. We invited responses from Parentkind’s own contact list of parents (c.26,000) and PTA members. A link to the poll was also made available on Parentkind’s social media platforms, and we conducted some targeted recruitment via social media advertising aimed at parents in England.

⁶ <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/research-and-policy/parent-research/research-library/school-education-policies/relationships-and-sex-education-poll-may-2023>

7% said that they felt their child had been taught something inappropriate for their age	35% said that they felt their child had been taught something inappropriate for their age
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- 2.2** Parentkind conducted a separate poll of parents from Northern Ireland in June 2021 seeking their views on RSE⁷.
- When asked if their child’s school had an RSE policy almost seven in ten (69%) said they didn’t know
 - 44 per cent of those parents said they had been given the opportunity by the school to provide feedback on its RSE policy and the same number (44%) said they hadn't.
 - Almost all parents (92%) said it was important for parents to be involved in the design of the RSE policy for your child’s school
 - The vast majority (95%) of parents said it was important parents were able to access guidance on how to support their child with what was being taught in RSE lessons⁸

3. When it comes to education and decision-making parents feel overlooked

3.1 It is widely understood that when parents are engaged with their child’s education outcomes improve. **Our 2023 National Parent Survey revealed a worrying picture of parents being overlooked when it comes to education and government decision-making:**

- Just 10% of parents in Northern Ireland think the government listens to their views
- 8 in 10 (80%) parents in Northern Ireland want a say in their child’s education at a school level
- Just over half (53%) of parents in Northern Ireland say their child's school acts based on their views
- A third (34%) of parents in Northern Ireland think their child’s school should be more accountable to parents than it is currently
- Just over half (53%) of parents in Northern Ireland say their school listens to parents
- Fewer than 1 in 5 (18%) of parents in Northern Ireland think their local education authority listens to parents⁹

4. Policy levers to deliver parental engagement in education

4.1 It is already clear that the Department of Education recognises the importance of parental partnership in education as a root to tackling disadvantage and improving home and school relationships. Parental engagement has been identified in major policy

⁷ A short online survey was promoted on social media to parents of school age children in Northern Ireland between 1pm on Wednesday 2nd June – 1pm on Monday 7th June. 251 parents started the survey with 191 parents completing it in full. Please note not all parents answered every question and percentages below may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

⁸ Full data set available as supplementary evidence 1

⁹ [The-National-Parent-Survey-for-Northern-Ireland-2023.pdf \(parentkind.org.uk\)](https://parentkind.org.uk/The-National-Parent-Survey-for-Northern-Ireland-2023.pdf)

directions including *Every School A Good School*¹⁰, *Every Child 2023-28*¹¹, *Attendance Matters*¹² and is embedded within the Northern Ireland Executive's *Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030*¹³. In addition, both the independent panel conducting the review of education and 'A Fair Start' report identified parents as critical partners to delivering better outcomes for children and the education sector as a whole^{14, 15}. However, although the policy direction exists there is currently no framework, accountability or oversight on how schools are meeting the Departments commitment to work in partnership with parents.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1** Relationships and sexuality education in schools can be a contentious topic that has the potential to damage trust between home and school. It is vital that the Department of Education ensures schools are transparent with parents when it comes to the content of lessons. Parents should know what their children are being taught and when to ensure they are prepared to support their children if and when necessary.
- 5.2** The evidence gathered from parents in Northern Ireland indicates that school engagement with parents is often inadequate and not in line with the Department of Education's own policy of '*parents as partners in education*'. It is the view of Parentkind that the Department needs to **develop statutory guidance for schools that will provide clarity on how schools ensure their day-to-day practice supports the Department's commitment to parents and schools working in partnership with complete transparency for parents built into this guidance.**

The statutory guidance should be co-designed with parents and include the following elements:

- Have Ministerial oversight
- Be guided by the principles of partnership and a right to **complete transparency** over the delivery of RSE
- Recognise that a commitment to building relationships between school staff and parents is a key indicator of school improvement and parental engagement should be a key element within all school development plans
- Require all schools to develop a parental engagement strategy
- Be flexible to enable schools to adapt to their circumstances but embed accountability to best practise

¹⁰ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/every-school-good-school-policy-school-improvement>

¹¹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/every-child-de-corporate-plan-2023-28>

¹² <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/attendance-matters-practical-guidance-improve-attendance-together>

¹³ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/children-and-young-peoples-strategy-2020-2030>

¹⁴ <https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/final-report>

¹⁵ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/fair-start>

Adopting this approach will offer all schools the opportunity to follow best practise within a guided framework¹⁶ that is driven by the Department and ensures parents are listened to on the issues that affect their children.

For further information relating to this submission please email Naomi McBurney, Senior Policy Researcher at naomi.mcburney@parentkind.org

¹⁶ <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/for-schools/blueprint-for-parent-friendly-schools>

Northern Ireland RSE Parent Poll – June 2021

Methodology

A short online survey was promoted on social media to parents of school age children in Northern Ireland between 1pm on Wednesday 2nd June – 1pm on Monday 7th June. 251 parents started the survey with 191 parents completing it in full. Please note not all parents answered every question and percentages below may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Q1. Does your child's school have a RSE policy (a document outlining what and how RSE is taught)?

	% of respondents	N=
Yes	12%	31
No	18%	46
Don't know	69%	174
Grand Total		251

Q2. If yes to Q1, how well do you feel that it covers RSE fully and is respectful of your values as a parent?

	% of respondents	N=
Very well	37%	10
Well	33%	9
Neither well nor poorly	4%	1
Poorly	15%	4
Very poorly	11%	3
Grand Total		27

Q3. If yes to Q1, have you been given the opportunity by your child's school to provide feedback on its RSE policy?

	% of respondents	N=
Yes	44%	12
No	44%	12
Don't know	11%	3
Grand Total		27

Q4. How important is it for you to be involved in the design of the RSE policy for your child's school?

	% of respondents	N=
Very important	56%	107
Important	20%	39
Somewhat important	16%	30
Not important	5%	10
Not at all important	1%	1
Don't know	2%	4
Grand Total		191

Q5. How important is it for you to be able to access guidance on how to support what your child is being taught in RSE lessons?

	% of respondents	N=
Very important	68%	130
Important	17%	33
Somewhat important	10%	20
Not important	3%	5
Not at all important	1%	2
Don't know	1%	1
Grand Total		191

Q6. Whilst CCEA have developed guidance on RSE, schools have the right to select materials to use to support teaching and learning about RSE, according to their policy and school ethos.

Which one of the following statements do you agree with?

	% of respondents	N=
All pupils in Northern Ireland schools should be taught the same (age appropriate) RSE content	57%	109
Every school should continue to have autonomy in what RSE content its pupils are taught, in line with its policy and ethos	16%	31
I don't agree with either statement	25%	47
Don't know	2%	4
Grand Total		191