

Submission to Government re proposed Relationships and Sex Education Curriculum from Soroptimist International of Southend-on-Sea & District

For some years, Soroptimists have lobbied for the introduction of a statutory programme of classes relating to relationships, respect for self and others, human rights and responsibilities in order to create a global society in which all are respected and valued. Soroptimists are pleased that the former Secretary of State for Education, Justine Greening MP recognised this need and proposed the introduction of a statutory Relationships and Sex Education programme, putting the emphasis, rightly we believe, on engendering good relationships from the start of school life and introducing age appropriate Relationships and Sex Education as pupils move through their schooling.

Our suggestions for inclusion in the programme through Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4 are:

Relationships Education in Primary Schools:

- confirmation that pupils have a right to confidentiality when discussing their problems with teachers and other agencies, unless they are considered to be at risk
- how to behave in school and out; consequences of unacceptable behaviours
- different types of relationships – friends, family, strangers and relationships between boys and girls; the need for respect in any relationship

Relationships and Sex Education in Secondary Schools

- relationships between boys and girls; mutual respect; acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in friendships, to include sexual harassment; and in personal, intimate and sexual relationships, the need for commitment, and what this means in a relationship
- clear, objective information on inclusivity; the fact that all relationships that do not harm others are acceptable – same sex relationships; relationships between those of differing ethnicity, religion and culture and those with disabilities
- specific information about sexual relationships and the qualities of a respectful relationship – what is acceptable and what characteristics indicate that a relationship could become abusive; teaching should include the impact of a sexual relationship on both partners and the likely consequences or outcomes

Safe on-line Relationships

- clear information about on-line safety and exploitation, so that students are aware that as either a perpetrator or a victim, there are consequences and that victims have recourse to the law; what to avoid when responding to any on-line contacts
- texting, sexting and the use and abuse of social media; how not to be drawn in and what to do if you are
- the analysis of media coverage, video games etc., to assess gender portrayal and to highlight the unacceptable portrayal of women or other groups

Effective communication with parents

- parents to be invited to sessions at different times to suit as many as possible, so as to discuss and understand the programme on offer; follow-up for those who do not attend
- engage parents in sessions with specialists as well as teachers, who have the expertise and knowledge to advise on issues being discussed with students and to answer questions

PHSE in Primary Schools

- race, gender and equality issues - to be discussed by pre-teens as well as by teenagers
- opportunities to discuss how pupils can promote safe and healthy relationships between all groups and cultures, with examples – to be enacted in drama, highlighted in literature and addressed in assemblies
- broader social and community responsibilities as they relate to relationships with others from differing backgrounds; discussions about tolerance and the consequences of ignoring the country's laws

PHSE in Secondary Schools

- Human Rights law as defined by United Nations, which includes specific reference to violence against women and girls in all its forms; how this is relevant in schools and society; the *impact* of gender inequality and gender stereotypes on behaviour; how to combat this in school and society
- viewpoints and discussions specifically about gangs, their relationships and the consequences for members of gangs; information about how the law can protect them in this country and their rights as young people in society; but if they break the law, the consequences of their actions. Before they choose to involve themselves, students should know that any criminal activity or gang membership, which to a teenager may seem attractive, will have consequences that can seriously influence their future
- financial education e.g. about the cost of bringing a child into the world and the ongoing costs of children; the value of having employment – budget management to cover responsibilities; the Benefits System – who pays in and who takes out.

Flexibility in Delivering the Programme

- A compulsory education programme across all phases must teach all young people about human rights, legal protection and responsibilities, so that all young people realise that being a member of society carries a responsibility to respect and care for and about each other, and there are consequences when the country's law is disregarded. **There can be no opt-out from Relationships Education and PHSE sessions** [NB One could argue that discussions about relationships are ideally best placed in the home environment with parents talking through with their children how they should behave. However, in our experience, across the economic range of society, the families most at risk, whose children may get into trouble because they don't relate well with others in society, are precisely those families who don't talk together or those where the views promoted are not conducive to promoting harmony and Modern British Values in our society. Part of the requirement must be that schools liaise with parents and engage them in the programme, giving parents confidence to follow-up discussions at home.]
- If parents continue to be allowed to opt their teenagers out of Sexual Relationships Education sessions, there should be an obligation to meet with the senior teacher responsible for RSE to discuss this decision. The wider community has responsibility for educating its young people to become tomorrow's citizens, which must sometimes mean taking a stance for the child's rights.

The programme should be delivered:

- allowing opportunities for students to express opinions and to listen to differing views in order to engender thoughtful challenge and attain a respectful viewpoint

- with the inclusion of parents and community personnel – with follow-up of parents who don't attend information meetings
- with sufficient investment in the training for teachers to ensure that the subject is delivered objectively and effectively and is respected as an essential part of the curriculum. Those teaching any elements PHSE and RSE must be well-trained and confident to discuss these issues and to listen effectively to their students, so that students too, become confident in managing their relationships as they grow and develop. Lessons must be rigorously and sensitively planned and their impact assessed and evaluated, with teachers recognising any indicators that need to be followed up either for individual students or for the group as a whole.

Our Reasons for making this submission:

As Soroptimists, we are concerned that the abuse of women in all its forms [Domestic Abuse, Elder Abuse, Female Genital Mutilation, Forced Marriage, 'honour' killings and Trafficking] is widespread and has serious consequences, yet is preventable. A key problem is the persistence of attitudes that excuse and normalise the abuse of women and girls. Although the issue is being more widely discussed, interventions to date have mainly focussed on addressing violence when or after it happens, but the *prevention* of violence has been neglected. Education backed by legislation is the key, and school is the forum where all can be taught respect, where objective discussions can take place and views can be exchanged and clarified. Equality is a fundamental right. There can be no equality between those of different gender, ethnicity, religion or sexuality so long as the abuse of any member of society continues and whilst differences are feared rather than valued. These differences need to be discussed in an objective forum with trained teachers, to whom pupils can relate positively, leading the debate.

If the subject of the rights of the individual is brought into the open forum and discussed objectively, with properly trained, informed personnel, who have links with the community and with parents, namely in the secure environment of school, all young people - every girl and every boy - will know their rights and be able to move forward in claiming them. If information is given clearly at an age-appropriate level, and is built on stage by stage, we believe it will become an intrinsic part of every child's knowledge base.

The implementation of the statutory Relationships and Sex Education programme for all pupils should support the five dimensions of Human Rights education as defined in the UN Decade for Human Rights Education, namely:

- strengthening respect for the human personality and its dignity;
- fully developing the human personality and its dignity;
- promoting understanding, tolerance, gender equality, and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples, and racial, national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups;
- enabling all persons to participate effectively in a free society; and
- furthering the activities of the United Nations to maintain peace

(Guidelines for national plans of action for human rights education–UN–A/52/469/Add.1.)

These objectives have still not been achieved and they align well with Soroptimist International's global aims to promote Education as a way to Empower and Enable women and girls. The delivery of informed Relationships and Sex Education teaching for global understanding based on Human Rights for all is a fundamental need.