ANY USE?

Young people’s opinions on Relationship and Sexuality Education in Belfast 2019

Belfast City Council
Belfast Youth Forum
Belfast Youth Forum would like to thank our project partners:

COMMON YOUTH.  
QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST  
CENTRE FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

This project is part of World Children’s Day celebrations to mark the 30th anniversary of the UN CRC.

30 YEARS  
CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Because the best way to celebrate our rights is to assert them!

WHO we are

Belfast Youth Forum (BYF) is the youth council for Belfast City Council.

We've made up of 40 young people from communities across Belfast and all of our members are aged between 13-18 years old (21 years old if disabled or have just left care). We meet in Belfast City Hall twice a month and it’s our job to make sure that decision makers within local and regional government hear what young people have to say about Belfast and the issues that shape our lives.

We think government should only make decisions and policies for young people that promote, uphold and protect our rights.

Our ‘Any Use?’ research project is our latest youth-led campaign.

To try and make this happen, we organise youth-led campaigns, events and consultations with young people across Belfast to raise awareness of rights, issues and influence change. We also create research projects on issues such as hidden homelessness, shared youth spaces, poverty and mental health based on listening to what young people have to say. We share these views with decision makers in government and advocate for rights-based youth policies and services.
WHY did we do this research?
Throughout 2017 and 2018, BYF held a number of youth consultations in Belfast including an event called ‘Rights Here! Rights Now!’ with the Lord Mayor in City Hall, which 120 young people attended.

MISS A TURN!

GO! DOWN YOU GO!

Because RSE had been highlighted by young people or in issues, BYF decided to select it as one of our campaign areas.

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[Image of dice and dominoes]

Young people spoke constantly about their current RSE not meeting their needs and wanting RSE provision to improve in schools.

A theme that young people raised time and time again is the need for good quality Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE).

We think young people can provide important insights into RSE as they are the ones who will help inform and shape what RSE in schools looks like.

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OUR aims
We wanted our research to find out:

1. Young people’s opinions on RSE in Belfast
2. How useful young people find their current RSE
3. If young people understand their rights in relation to RSE

We want to use the information we gather to ensure young people’s voices are included in RSE policy decisions moving forward.
It is recognized that good quality RSE gives young people the knowledge, skills, information and tools they need to make healthy, safe and positive sexual relationships.

With good-quality RSE, young people are better able to understand and appreciate their sexual rights and responsibilities, and take them for their own and their partner's sexual health and well-being.

When it comes to RSE, young people's voices and views matter. RSE is not just about designed and imposed from an educator (adult) perspective and fails to explore what young people themselves understand about their rights and responsibilities for RSE, what they think is age-appropriate content, how they felt RSE should be delivered in schools and who should deliver it.

In a recent Department of Education consultation on RSE in England (2019), only 3% of the 11,150+ respondents were young people.

The facts and figures

As a result of young people being ignored in debates and discussions on RSE, gaps exist in the RSE they receive.

This runs the risk of RSE varying greatly in quality and context, being taught and not grounded in the reality of young people's lived experiences.

It also leaves RSE open to being influenced by the religious and social values of the school and therefore increases the risk of RSE being age-inappropriate and non-reflective.

In NI, while the Department of Education provides guidance for primary and secondary level schools, schools are free to develop their own policy on how they address RSE within the curriculum.

THE facts and figures

RSE: It's a children's rights issue!

Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) says:

"Every child has the right to the best possible health. Governments must provide good quality health care... and education on health and wellbeing so that children can stay healthy."

The right to sexual and reproductive health is an integral part of the right to health and a particular focus in the UNCRC General Comment No. 20 on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence (CRC/GC/20), which states...

"All adolescents should have access to free, confidential, adolescent-responsive and non-discriminatory sexual and reproductive health services, information and education." (X159)

The Department of Education and the Department of Health have a responsibility to ensure young people have RSE provision that upholds this right. Local councils like Belfast City Council, with their Community Planning powers, also have an important role to play in working with government partners to help create rights-based RSE provision for young people.
HOW did we do our research?

Like all Belfast Youth Forum projects, our RSE report is a piece of work done by young people for young people.

We asked Queen’s University Centre for Children’s Rights to support our research project because they are experts at working with young researchers, and they use child rights-based methods and processes when working with young people on research projects.

The QUB Centre for Children’s Rights helped us to:

- Develop our online survey;
- Gain ethical approval for our research;
- Collect surveys from young people;
- Analyse our findings;
- Create a research report.

COMMON YOUTH.

We also asked Common Youth to work with us because they are experts at working with young people to explore relationships, sexual health and sexuality.

Common Youth helped us to:

- Understand current RSE policy and provision;
- Design our survey questions;
- Collect surveys from young people.

We knew that working with Queen’s University and Common Youth would help make our work more credible and would produce a stronger report.

Young people also completed paper-based surveys at BTF’s ‘Party in the Park’ event and in Common Youth’s drop-in clinics.

A total of 771 young people completed our survey.

From September to October 2019, we analysed the findings of our research with Queen’s University and created our report.

Our research was carried out from August to September 2019:

We used the information young people gave us to create our recommendations for government at the end of this report.
WHO took part?

771 young people took part in our survey
67% of participants were female
31% percent were male
2% identified as neither male nor female
79% lived in Belfast
70% attended a school in Belfast

Our findings

A RIGHT TO RECEIVE RSE

We asked young people if they had a right to receive RSE in school and whether or not they thought this right was being met.

52% of young people said they felt their right to receive RSE was not being met.

72% of young people who took part in the survey said they knew they had a right to receive RSE in school.

23% felt that adults trusted young people to make their own choices about relationships and sex.

The proportion of 14-16 year olds saying their right was met (56%) was significantly higher than the proportion of those 17 or over saying this (43%).

56% felt that adults did not trust them and one in five (20%) said they did not know if adults trusted them in this regard.

1 in 5
**HOW do young people describe their RSE?**

We asked young people to tell us three words that best described the RSE they received in school.

Overall, negative word associations dominated young people’s answers. The four most commonly used negative associations were:

- ‘Basic’
- ‘Unhelpful’
- ‘Useless’
- ‘Biased’

Other frequently used negative associations were:

- ‘limited’
- ‘vague’
- ‘uninformative’
- ‘heteronormative’.

**LEARNING about sex and relationships**

The three most popular sources from which young people said they learn about relationships and sex were:

1. **Friends and peers (62%)**
2. **Social media (55%)**
3. **Lessons in school (54%)**

Boys were much more likely than girls to use the *Internet* as a source of information. In fact, for boys this was the main source of information.

For girls, however, **friends and peer groups** were most common followed by social media.

(multiple responses were permitted)
RSE in school

Young people were asked a range of questions about RSE in schools.

The vast majority of young people (86%) felt that school was the best place to receive RSE.

Only 10% of young people had received RSE before they were 11 years of age, for example, in primary school.

55% of young people first received RSE in school when they were between 11 and 13 years of age.

Over half (52%) said they did not receive RSE when they were 14 to 16 years of age.

This may help explain why many 16 to 18 year olds said they had a right to RSE. Many young people over the age of 16 did.

How useful is RSE in school?

We asked young people to rate how useful their RSE in school was.

60% of young people felt that the information they received was either 'not useful' or 'not useful at all'.

73% of young people said they only received RSE 'once or twice' or 'rarely'.

Only 10% said that they thought the information they received in RSE was 'very useful'.

The later young people first received information about relationships and sex, the less useful they found this information.

60% of those who first received RSE at 16+ found the information wasn’t useful. This compared with 31% who first received information about relationships and sex when they were 8 to 10 years old.
**WHAT subjects was RSE taught in school?**

- Nearly half (49%) of young people felt that the way RSE was taught was influenced by religion or the ethos of the school they attended.
- However, nearly three quarters of young people felt RSE should not be influenced by the school’s religion or ethos.
- Only 13% felt that it should.

**In what subjects was RSE taught in school?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biology/Science</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RE</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSHE</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form class</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We asked young people how they felt RSE should be delivered in schools and who should deliver it.

- The overwhelming majority of young people (77%) thought a taught course as part of an existing subject or a special RSE curriculum programme was the best way to deliver RSE.
- Only 7% of young people thought RSE should be delivered through one-off ‘talks’ in school.
- This finding is particularly stark given 73% of young people told us they have only received RSE in school ‘once or twice’ or ‘barely’.

**How should RSE best be taught?**

- **Bundled into an existing subject such as PSHE**: 34%
- **Built into a taught curriculum programme**: 34%
- **Taught as a non-official class**: 17%
- **As an off the shelf resource**: 3%

**Who should deliver RSE to young people?**

- **A qualified RSE teacher**: 43%
- **Young people who are trained to deliver RSE**: 18%
- **An expert or guest from an outside organisation**: 11%
- **A regular teacher (e.g. form teacher)**: 6%
- **A youth worker**: 6%
- **A child protection/parental care teacher**: 4%

By far the most commonly given response in relation to who should teach RSE was ‘a qualified RSE teacher’.

**At what age?**

Over half of respondents felt that young people should start to be taught about personal and sexual relationships when they are between 11 and 13 years of age.

**Age at which respondents felt young people should start to be taught about personal and sexual relationships (16)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Personal relationships</th>
<th>Sexual relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11-13</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16+</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What influence should young people have in the delivery of RSE?**

- **Talking to other young people about how things are working**: 81%
- **Being involved in brainstorming ideas about RSE**: 75%
- **Choosing who delivers RSE**: 66%
- **Choosing RSE materials or resources**: 59%
- **Choosing RSE curriculum and content**: 59%
- **Delivering RSE sessions**: 59%

(multiple response table)
WHAT should be taught to young people in RSE?

Of the top 10 most popular subjects young people wanted to learn about in RSE, sex was an obvious choice, with personal relationships in second place.

The most popular subject young people wanted to learn about in RSE was personal relationships (67%).

The next most popular subjects for young people were:
- Sexual intercourse (59%)
- Deterring STIs (53%)
- The prevention of STIs (52%)
- Personal relationships, sexual intercourse and STI prevention were chosen subjects by more than six in ten young people.

43% of young people said that all the subject areas listed should be included in RSE.

WHAT does all this mean?

1. The vast majority of the respondents said they had a right to RSE but many agreed that this right was not being met.
2. White 66% of the respondents said RSE at school, the frequency, content and delivery of this was deemed ‘Basic’, ‘Useless’ and ‘Biased’.
3. Only 10% said that the information they received was ‘Very useful’.
4. Our young people’s current experience of receiving RSE is ‘barely’ (37%) and ‘while in biology or science class’, and more influenced by the school religion or ethos, is not good enough and is not helping our young people to make healthy and safe decisions as they transition to intimate relationships.
5. It is also evident that the later young people receive RSE, the less useful it is to them.
6. As a result, young people reported that they resort to friends (62%) and social media (55%) for the information they need to know, and the internet was the main source of information for boys.
7. This risks exposing young people to misinformation, myths, misconceptions and inaccuracies about sexual health and relationships.
8. Despite their critique of current RSE provision in school, an overwhelming amount of young people felt that school was the best place to receive RSE (84%).
9. But it should be delivered during a more in-depth taught course (75%), and by a qualified RSE teacher.
10. To address issues, concerns or questions young people may have that are not being met by current RSE provision, 86% felt that young people voices should be included.
11. In this way, they can help inform the content, design and delivery of RSE and make it more relevant and useful to their actual needs.
12. Interestingly, the most popular issue young people wanted to learn about during RSE was how to negotiate personal relationships (66%), and the majority thought that age 13 is a good time to start RSE.
21.

Co-produce a curriculum programme and relevant interventions with young people

Work with young people to develop age-appropriate, relevant and inclusive RSE programmes for schools. This should be a mandatory part of the school curriculum.

As part of this work, current RSE content should be broadened to include issues around:

- Personal relationships;
- Sexual rights and behaviours;
- Gender equality and diversity;
- Responsible parenthood;
- Violence prevention;
- Preventing unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Policy makers and service providers should also work in collaboration with young people to review the nature and extent of barriers they face in accessing RSE and sexual health services, and co-produce RSE interventions with young people to enhance relevance and applicability of the to the reality of their lives.

3.

Specialist staff to deliver RSE

We want co-produced education programmes to be delivered by specialised, qualified and trained staff who fully respect the rights of young people to privacy and non-discrimination.

RSE information and interventions should be made available in alternative formats to ensure accessibility to all young people including those with literacy issues and disabilities.

It is also important to note that while this study focuses on young people and RSE while at school, we also have subgroups of youth who may miss this, for example, young people excluded from school, incarcerated or withdrawn from classes by parents.

Therefore, when designing co-produced RSE interventions, it is important to engage with these groups of young people and produce interventions that can be used across contexts and not just in schools.
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THANK you!

We want to say a big thank you to all the young people who took part in our research, without your help none of this would have been possible.

JOIN our campaign!

Tweet, Facebook and Instagram your messages about Relationship and Sexuality Education in Belfast. Help us to challenge the stereotypes, influence decision makers and get people talking!

Remember to include our hashtag #AnyUse

Follow us on Twitter
@Belfast_YF

22.
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