

NSS welcomes updated guidance on relationships & sex education

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The government has resisted religious pressure to extend parents' right to withdraw their children from relationships and sex education (RSE) in a move welcomed by the National Secular Society.

Draft [guidance](#) from the Department for Education (DfE) has removed parents' explicit right to withdraw their children from sex education in secondary schools in England. The guidance replaces that right with a "right to request" withdrawal.

There remains no right to withdraw children from relationships education, which begins in primary school, or the newly-introduced subject of health education.

When parents request withdrawal from sex education schools will be expected to hold conversations with them. They will be expected to honour the request up until three terms before the child turns 16, except in "exceptional circumstances".

Children who are almost 16 who do not wish to be withdrawn from sex education, but whose parents have requested it, will be entitled to one term's worth of teaching.

The guidance includes dispensations for faith schools, which "may teach the distinctive faith perspective on relationships". It adds that "balanced debate may take place about issues that are seen as contentious" in faith schools. Schools may "reflect" on ways "faith institutions may support people in matters of relationships and sex".

All schools are allowed to "teach about faith perspectives" on RSE.

The guidance also says "the religious background of all pupils must be taken into account when planning teaching" in all schools.

All schools are told to comply with the Equality Act of 2010.

The government assessed the impact of the guidance on schools' duty to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relationships between groups. Its [assessment](#) found "no impact" or a "potential positive impact" for people with all relevant protected characteristics.

Ahead of publication, the NSS met with the DfE and wrote to the education secretary Damian Hinds urging him not to dilute the guidance.

The NSS's letter came in response to pressure from religious organisations opposed to RSE. On Monday MPs debated a petition calling for a parental opt-out from RSE after it received more than 100,000 signatures.

Earlier this month the NSS [revealed](#) the bigoted messages being promoted by some religious anti-RSE campaigners. Dr Kate Godfrey-Faussett, who organised the petition which was debated in parliament, has encouraged Muslims to adopt a "psychological" or "mental health" response to

same-sex attraction.

The government also faced pressure to dilute the guidance from some orthodox Jewish and Christian groups.

In response to the guidance NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "We welcome this new guidance as step in the right direction for children's rights.

"Parents' rights and religious freedoms aren't absolute and must be balanced against the need to ensure that all young people are equipped with the knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence to keep themselves safe and cope with the many pressures and challenges of growing up.

"All pupils should have the right to an education that gives them clear and accurate information on the issues that matter to their health and wellbeing. This includes learning that LGBT people and same-sex relationships exist. Religious objections can't be allowed to override attempts to ensure that happens.

"We remain concerned that faith schools will be given far too much leeway to teach these subjects in accordance with their faith, distorting the subject and providing a disservice to their pupils.

"We also fear that the parental opt-out from sex education will lead to important information being denied to some of the children and young people who stand to most benefit from it. We urge the government and school leaders not to neglect the rights of pupils in the face of demands from parents."

The guidance comes in response to a consultation on the topic which took place last year. The NSS warned of the risk that faith groups would continue to distort RSE when it [responded](#) to the consultation.

In a major [report](#) on sex education in England last year the NSS [revealed](#) that more than three-quarters of faith schools in England were failing to teach sex and relationships education impartially.

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