

challenging religious privilege

national  
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# **A RESPONSE TO THE REVIEW OF PERSONAL, SOCIAL, HEALTH AND ECONOMIC EDUCATION 2011**

28 November 2011

[Note: The Government said in the Schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, that it would conduct an internal review to determine how to support schools to improve the quality of teaching of personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, including giving teachers the flexibility to use their judgement about how best to deliver PSHE education.]

## **About the NSS**

The National Secular Society (NSS) is a not-for-profit non-governmental organisation founded in 1866. It promotes the separation of religion and state, and seeks a society where law and the administration of justice are based on equality, respect for Human Rights and objective evidence without reference to religious doctrine or belief. The NSS promotes secularism as the best means to create a society in which people of all religions or none can live together fairly and cohesively.

### **Q1) What do you consider the core outcomes PSHE education should achieve and what areas of basic core knowledge and awareness should pupils be expected to acquire at school through PSHE education?**

1. Build on the success of falling teenage pregnancy rates in England and Wales<sup>1</sup>. Holland, France and Germany have much lower rates of teenage pregnancy and they also start sex education earlier than the UK. While education is not the only factor reducing pregnancy (and STIs), it is a major factor. There is also strong evidence from Canada that good sex education can significantly contribute to reducing teen pregnancy and abortion<sup>2</sup>.
2. Reduce rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) through education. The highest rates of STIs are in the under 25 age group, particularly for genital warts, gonorrhoea and chlamydia. One in ten people in the 16-24 age group carries chlamydia. Of even more concern is that of all 16-19 year olds diagnosed with an STI in 2009, at least 11 per cent of women and 12 per cent of men will become re-infected within a year<sup>3</sup>.
3. Reduce homophobic bullying by improving education and normalising all sexualities. A YouGov polling demonstrates that nine in ten secondary school teachers and more than two in five primary school teachers have witnessed children being subjected to homophobic bullying in their schools. Teachers say the vast majority of homophobic incidents go unreported by pupils. Three quarters of young LGBT people who attend faith schools have experienced homophobic bullying<sup>4</sup>.
4. Prepare young people to be healthy, safe, well-informed, in control, able to take responsibility – and to enjoy exploring their sexuality.
5. It is essential that, while young people are taught about stable relationships (of all kinds), they are also prepared to embark on casual relationships safely.

### **Potential barriers to achieving these outcomes:**

In some religious schools, teaching may be biased by the selective use of facts or morally loaded against casual sex, short-term relationships or any non-heterosexual or pre-marital relationships. This would leave young people unprepared to protect themselves or gain confidence and understanding of their bodies. They may be ill-informed or too embarrassed to buy contraceptives or to consult health-care professionals about STIs or pregnancy. They may also be unprepared and vulnerable if they discover they are gay. It is not acceptable to teach

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-12537912>

<sup>2</sup> <http://aol.it/okBjon>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.fpa.org.uk/professionals/factsheets/teenagers#nGQ7>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/the\\_teachers\\_report\\_1.pdf](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/the_teachers_report_1.pdf)

that being LGBT is tolerated as long as someone stays single and celibate. It is also essential that young people are empowered and know that certain sorts of behaviour (for example abuse or pressure to have sex) are not acceptable and what to do if they experience them; in order to do this, teaching needs to make them aware that certain behaviours a) exist and b) need not be tolerated. They need to know that they can approach teachers without being judged and that confidentiality will be respected.

**Q3) Which elements of PSHE education, if any, should be made statutory (in addition to sex education) within the basic curriculum?**

1. Statutory elements should not just cover basic biological facts. They should also include all variants of sexual and non-sexual relationships, contraception and abortion in a factual and unbiased way.

2. Mention should be specifically made of civil partnerships and other non-heterosexual relationships as well as variations on monogamous, heterosexual marriage. For schools with a strongly religious ethos, it would be too easy to define 'family life' in narrow terms, focussing only on life-long heterosexual marriage. Some religious groups oppose adoption by gay couples; the guidance should explicitly mention committed non-heterosexual relationships or individuals as equally important for raising children.

3. Statutory guidance should include a prohibition on teaching abstinence-only. Many religious groups promote abstinence as the only acceptable form of contraception or relationship, despite strong evidence that this does not work<sup>5</sup>. It may delay first intercourse by a few months but when it does happen, it is much less likely to involve a condom. It should be made clear that delaying first intercourse until a young person is ready is not the same as abstinence.

The NSS was concerned by Nadine Dorries MP's proposal that abstinence should be promoted in schools, but only to girls, in order to reduce teenage pregnancies and to reduce child abuse. This religiously-inspired proposal is sexist against both girls and boys; the implication is that boys cannot control themselves and should not even be expected to try<sup>6</sup>.

4. The NSS strongly believes that all teaching around sex and relationships should be evidence-based.

5. Young people need to be taught about the law and health issues in relation to sex, sexuality and sexual health. Even if the doctrine of their community forbids sex before marriage, abortion or contraception, young people need to know and understand the legal and (fact-based) health implications. They also need to know that they are legally able to access confidential contraception services and advice even if they are under sixteen, and that homosexuality is legal.

**Q5) How can schools better decide for themselves what more pupils need to know, in consultation with parents and others locally?**

It is essential to listen to young people and what they say they need, and not give undue weight to the views of parents and religious communities. The NSS supports the Sex Education Forum's (SEF) research in this area<sup>7</sup>. For example, their findings are that 49% of respondents who attended some faith schools reported their SRE as bad or very bad. In general, young people reported that current teaching was inadequate, inconsistent, too biological, not relevant to their lives, that it started too late and was not inclusive enough about sexual orientation.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/apr/16/schoolsworldwide.usa>

<sup>6</sup> Nadine Dorries' 10 Minute Rule Bill, a Private Members Bill, will have its second reading early in 2012.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/333301/young\\_peoples\\_survey\\_on\\_sex\\_relationships\\_education.pdf](http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/333301/young_peoples_survey_on_sex_relationships_education.pdf)

National surveys have shown that parents are generally supportive of PSHE<sup>8</sup>. However, misunderstandings about PSHE are common among parents and carers as well as school governors, partly fuelled by (mostly tabloid) media scares<sup>9</sup> and some misleading campaigns by vocal religious groups<sup>10</sup>. Again, we support the SEF's responses to these campaigns<sup>11</sup>. In strongly religious families, parents may decide schools should restrict or effectively bias what young people are taught. Children may come under considerable pressure from the family to conform to its beliefs. Young people may not know that what they have been told is inaccurate or partial until it is too late and they find themselves in difficulties with pregnancy or STIs, or if they are LGBT. Parents themselves may not be adequately educated in PSHE; they may not feel comfortable or able to discuss what their children should be taught.

The right of parents to lead the lives they choose is not a right to force their children to lead the same lives. Younger children in particular often do not have the experience or the maturity to decide on what they believe – if anything. They may also not feel able to report back to the school on what their families have told them.

It is therefore essential that schools provide comprehensive, fact-based education. Eighty-four per cent of the general public agree that schools should teach children about sexual behaviour and relationships – going beyond the basic biology of reproduction<sup>12</sup>.

Local faith leaders often claim to speak for the whole community whereas in reality, they very often represent only the most orthodox minority. The homogeneity of teaching by a particular faith community often does not reflect the many levels of belief of its members. It also does not allow for treating young people as individuals. There may be particular problems for young women and LGBT people in communities where the leaders are all men and heterosexuality is the only approved model. Again, the conflict between faith and fact may leave children exposed.

**Q11) Please use this space to provide us with your views and any other comments about PSHE.**

Section 4.3 of the consultation says *It should be for teachers, not government, to design the lessons and the experiences which will engage pupils.*

The NSS is concerned that in faith schools, doctrinal teaching will be mixed with fact-based teaching, giving young people a mixed message, weighting facts with inappropriate moral overtones or suggesting that morality is derived only from a particular set of religious values. There is also the potential for creating a conflict between faith values, sexuality and sexual orientation, leaving children isolated and open to mental and physical health problems, victimization or bullying.

There is also a risk of inconsistency, with well-trained teachers providing excellent teaching in some religious schools but not in others. This would be a disservice to young people, effectively creating a PSHE lottery depending on the school. Staff in some schools may not themselves be able or willing to distinguish between evidence-based fact and religious belief. The relative weight given to fact and belief and the tone in which teaching is given may also shape young people's understanding.

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<sup>8</sup> NFER/HEA (1994). Parents, Schools and Sex Education

<sup>9</sup> For example: [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/children\\_shealth/5865714/Five-year-old-students-to-get-compulsory-sex-education.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/children_shealth/5865714/Five-year-old-students-to-get-compulsory-sex-education.html), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1200820/Parents-say-sex-education-schools.html>, <http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/115033/Parents-fury-as-nanny-state-rules-on-sex-lessons> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/primaryeducation/8895580/Parents-in-protest-over-explicit-sex-education.html>

<sup>10</sup> For example <http://www.secularism.org.uk/132834.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.ncb.org.uk/sef/25-november-2011>

<sup>12</sup> Mori (2006) Poll on sex and relationships, published in the Observer, 22 January 2006

Section 4.3 of the consultation also says *Different schools may want to cover different life skills, reflecting their pupils' interests and local circumstances.*

In general, this may be a laudable aim but it does raise some concerns.

If teaching is determined by individual schools, it must be closely monitored. Without close monitoring, it would be too easy for a school to mention alternative beliefs and moral values (or lack of them) only in passing or as lesser than their own. Diversity will not be well served if the school's religious ethos is anti-LGBT, anti-choice or anti sex outside of marriage, for example, and any mention of acceptance is merely tokenism.

Each school should have a written PSHE policy open to Ofsted inspection. We supported Baroness Massey of Darwen's (withdrawn) amendment to the Education Bill calling for school inspectors to report on issues such as the delivery of sex education.

There should also be no implication that morality and faith are linked rather than religious-based morality being one subjective interpretation among many. Although there needs to be a certain sensitivity to young people's cultural background, the potential negative aspects of respecting the role of faith and cultural beliefs should also be considered. The needs of young people must always be the first priority. There should be no attempt to stigmatize young people who are LGBT through religious moralizing, or those who need contraception or even abortions; such teaching – whether explicit or implicit - can encourage bullying and can also have long-term implications for physical and mental health.

Our concerns about the delivery of unbiased information and the needs of young people not being a priority is illustrated by the Scottish Catholic schools who were against young women having the potentially life-saving HPV vaccine against cervical cancer as they said this would 'promote promiscuity'. They gave in only on condition that no sex education was given with the vaccines<sup>13</sup>.

In some communities, unprepared young people may not feel able to use services such as pharmacies or sexual health clinics without their parents and others finding out. There may also be trust issues in strongly religious schools.

It is also important that schools are aware of the issue of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). The charity Forward estimates that as many as 6,500 girls in the UK are at risk of FGM every year; even though it is illegal in the UK, there have been no prosecutions. Some religious leaders in both Muslim and Christian communities condemn it while others either turn a blind eye or endorse it. Teachers should be made aware of the issues, be trained to advise at-risk girls and to talk about the issue in PSHE should the need arise.

## **Conclusion**

While the NSS recognises that some faith schools will provide young people with comprehensive, non-judgemental education, any guidance must ensure that all young people are equally well-informed and prepared, whatever the ethos of the school or the beliefs of their parents and communities.

There must not be a hierarchy of values with religious belief invariably taking precedence over health and well-being if the Government seriously wants to prepare young people for adult life.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://news.scotsman.com/latestnews?articleid=4398680>