

**A BETTER
MEDWAY**
Easier ways to be healthy

R&S

Stuff

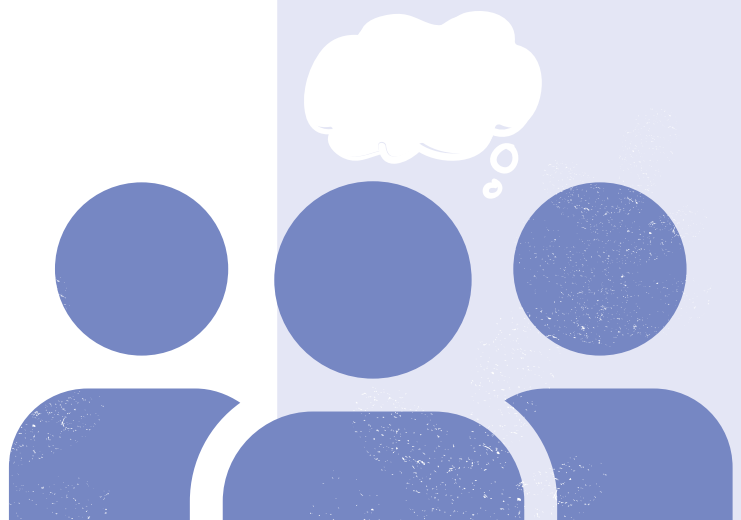


What young people want and
need from their Relationships
and Sex Education



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Context & Stuff

Rationale of &Stuff

The &Stuff Toolkit was created because Medway young people told us loudly and clearly that they want RSE that feels relevant, inclusive, honest and shaped by their real lives. Nationally, 57% of young people say RSE needs improving (Sex Education Forum, 2024), and meaningful pupil voice is one of the strongest predictors of better, safer lessons.

Medway is home to over 68,000 children and young people, yet there are indications that uptake of contraception and online STI testing among teenagers may not align with the level of need in the population. According to the Medway Health and Wellbeing Survey (2025), 77% of pupils who are sexually active report always using protection. However, 23% say they are unsure or do not use protection. At the same time, teenage conception rates in Medway remain higher than the averages for both the South East and England (ONS, 2022). These findings suggest that, while many young people are making informed choices, some may face barriers in

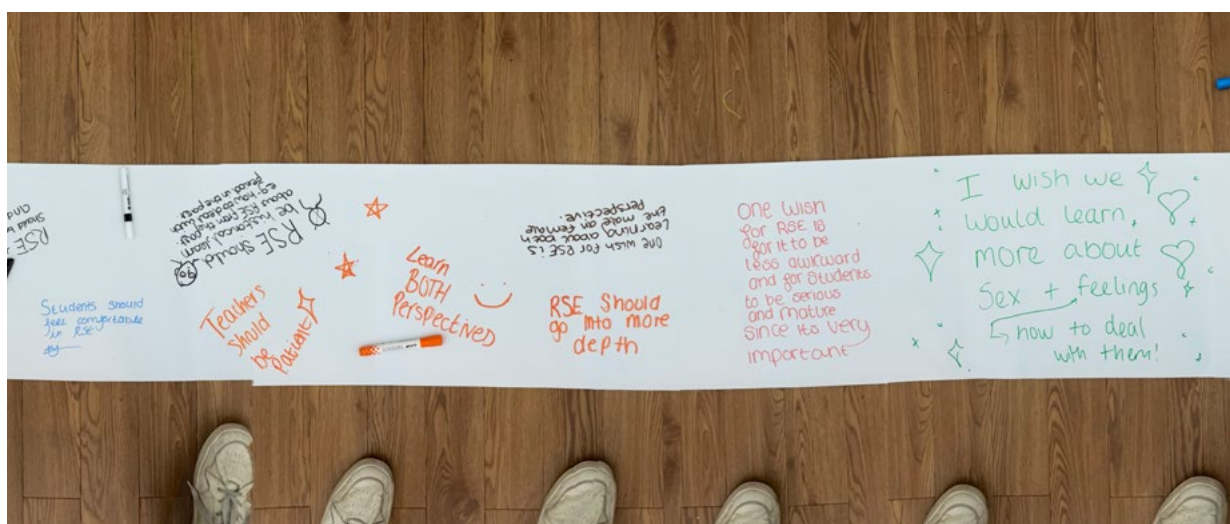
accessing the information and support they need to stay safe and healthy.

RSE plays a critical role here. Evidence shows that high quality RSE is linked to young people seeking help earlier, practising safer sex, having stronger consent skills, and navigating online risks with more confidence. It also contributes to reducing unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, and supports young people to recognise healthy relationships, boundaries and respect. (SEF, Evidence Briefing 2022)

Medway pupil voice highlights another important challenge. 65% of young people say they cannot, or are not sure if they can, freely express their views in school, with only 35% feeling they can speak openly (Medway Health and Wellbeing Survey 2025). That means most young people do not feel fully confident in sharing their views.

Building on Medway's strong PSHE model, this initiative brought together secondary schools, RSE specialists and young people as equal partners. Funded by Medway Council and delivered by RSE specialists Alice Hoyle and Ian Timbrell, the project trained RSE Ambassadors to explore what young people really think, need and want from their lessons.

Over two terms, we worked with a group of year 10 and 11 Ambassadors to conduct research into what





young people think of RSE. They received training on how to collect data, including carrying out surveys and creative activities, in order to find out the thoughts and opinions of their peers and their wider school. Then the schools were brought back together for a day in the Autumn term where the Ambassadors shared what they discovered, and deepened the discussions.

Their response voices, ideas and priorities shaped this toolkit, ensuring it reflects real experiences, local needs and the statutory expectations of RSE in 2026. The result is practical guidance created with young people for their educators to improve the quality of RSE across Medway.

57% of young people are calling for the government to improve RSE

Why “&Stuff”?

The name came straight from the young people we worked with. Every school we met, every group we sat with, so many of their brilliant ideas ended with the same throwaway line, “...and stuff.” They wanted better consent education and stuff, confident teachers and stuff, real conversations and stuff. It became their unofficial chorus for wanting more detail in their RSE.

After hearing it for the hundredth time, we asked if they’d like the whole project to lean into it. Something more alive than “Medway RSE Ambassadors Project”, something that actually sounded like them. The answer was an enthusiastic yes.

So “&Stuff” stuck, because this toolkit isn’t just about sex or relationships, it’s about everything around them; all the messy, important, real-life stuff young people told us they need. It’s a reminder that when we actually listen, young people show us exactly where the learning needs to go.



Get in touch

For enquiries relating to this toolkit please contact
Medway’s Child Health Team: childhealth@medway.gov.uk



Core Messages for Young People

We know that young people respond more positively to messages from other young people

We worked with the Ambassadors to think about what core messages Medway young people needed to hear in relation to RSE. Using Core Messages created by young people in Brighton and Hove in 2018, the Ambassadors adapted them for the present day, and to reflect the world that they are living in now. When developing them, a golden thread emerged: communication. When considering each of the core messages, communication should be discussed;

particularly how we all communicate in different ways, and that communication is not as simple as saying yes or no.

We know that young people respond more positively to messages from other young people and so these core messages should be covered in lessons and revisited as needed. By giving these core messages, this is a way of supporting social norms and demonstrating that behaviours such as misogyny are not typical of young people.

Top tip:

You may choose to adapt them into school specific versions or create posters or other materials that promote these messages.

Core Messages for Young People

Medways RSE
Ambassadors want all
Medway young people
to consider the following
points about Relationships
and Sex Education:

1. Our golden thread: Communication: *watch, ask, listen, and talk honestly.*

Good relationships ask questions, listen and share how you feel, verbally and non-verbally. If something doesn't feel okay, say so.

2. Be how you want to be

Everyone deserves respect and space to be themselves. Gender, sexuality, identity, you do you.

3. Trust your instinct

Our instincts are shaped by lots of things, friends, culture, what we see online, so it's okay to talk about them. Listen to your body. If it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.

4. Know the facts

Not everything you hear or see online is true. Find information from trusted sources, not rumours or influencers.

5. Think about safety - yours and others'

We all deserve to feel safe in our bodies, relationships and environments. If you are feeling unsafe, step back and get help. Protect yourself and your partners.

6. In the right time

It's important to know things, but you don't have to do everything. Don't rush it. Think about why you're doing it and what feels right for you. No pressure. 16+ is the law.

7. Consent is everything

It should be clear, enthusiastic and ongoing. No means no, and anyone can change their mind at any point.

8. Sex ≠ porn

Remember, what you see online or in porn isn't real life. Don't use porn for sex education (online isn't always real life).

9. Keep it fun, kind and equal

Healthy relationships should feel good, safe, fun, trusting not pressured or wobbly. Find the balance between each individual in the relationship.

10. You've got rights

You have a right to help and support without judgment, even if you are under 16. Use your rights to get confidential advice, contraception, testing and treatment. Whatever you need.





Our Principles of RSE

Young people told us clearly what makes RSE work best for them: lessons that feel safe, inclusive and genuinely relevant to their lives. They wanted a set of principles that would guide teachers in creating the kind of learning environment where they can ask questions, feel respected and make sense of complex issues without judgement.

To develop these principles, the Medway RSE Ambassadors drew on the new guiding principles for RSE in the 2025 DfE guidance (page 5), the Sex Education Forum's 12 Principles of Good RSE, and examples from other local authorities. They compared this with their own experiences of what helps, and what hinders, their learning.

Another clear golden thread emerged: inclusivity. Young people stressed that RSE only works when every pupil feels seen, safe and represented. And so when considering all of these principles, inclusivity should be at the heart of teaching and learning.

The Medway Principles are therefore a direct message from young people to teachers. They outline the conditions that help pupils learn well and the approaches they believe should shape RSE across Medway.

Our Principles of RSE

1. Make it safe

RSE should be a space where everyone feels safe to speak and be themselves. That means all genders, sexualities, backgrounds and abilities are respected, within clear ground rules and boundaries, and a suitable location is used for teaching.

2. Be direct and clear

Teachers should speak plainly and avoid skirting around difficult topics, as young people quickly lose trust when information feels vague or incomplete. Clear, accurate explanations help pupils feel confident, reduce misconceptions, and create a classroom where questions can be asked without embarrassment.

3. Keep it relevant to our lives

Talk about what actually happens, in relationships, friendships, online and offline. If it doesn't feel like it applies to us, we stop listening. We want up to date and inclusive information, not dated videos or generic worksheets that pretend everyone's the same.

4. Focus on positives, rather than negatives

If RSE is all "don't do this" or focused on risks and fear, we switch off, or even do the thing you're telling us not to do! Teach us how to make good choices, not just what to avoid.

5. Build it up over time

Start with the basics and add more as we grow up. Don't drop us into heavy stuff without warning, but don't leave out things we need either. Help us learn by teaching topics in depth, and revisiting them often, adding more each time.

6. Make it interactive, not awkward

We learn better when we can talk, ask questions (especially anonymously), do activities, and hear real examples. RSE should feel like a proper subject, not a lecture or filling in a worksheet, or a cringe moment.

7. Teach with confidence

We need teachers who are trained and comfortable leading RSE - not someone reading from a script or who is clearly uncomfortable. It shows when you're confident, and it helps us feel comfortable too.

8. Help us find support

We want to know where to go, in school and outside, if we need help or advice. That includes knowing who we can talk to and where to get health info that's actually reliable.

9. Get parents and carers involved (the right way)

Help parents and carers understand what we're learning and how to talk to us about it. Some might need extra support, but we don't want them to dictate what we can and cannot learn. We want to be able to talk to them about this stuff even when it's awkward.

10. Our voices matter

RSE should reflect our needs and lived experiences, not only be shaped by what the adults think we should or should not learn. Listen to us first.



Getting ready & Stuff

Why Listening to Young People Matters

Young people were clear throughout the Ambassador workshops: RSE is most effective when it reflects their realities, questions and concerns, not assumptions made about them. They want learning that feels relatable, inclusive and safe. The DfE's first guiding principle reinforces this too, stating that "an inclusive and well sequenced RSE curriculum should be informed by meaningful engagement with pupils to ensure that the curriculum is relevant and engaging." Listening to young people turns RSE from something delivered at them into something built with them, strengthening trust and creating a curriculum that genuinely supports their wellbeing. Their voice helps teachers understand not only what pupils know, but how they feel in the room, whether they are anxious, curious, confused or not quite ready. Without this insight, lessons can land too early, too late or at the wrong depth.

At the same time, pupils don't know what they don't know, so they rely on adults to bring the knowledge, perspective and legal context they can't yet see. When youth insight and adult expertise sit together, RSE becomes relevant, balanced and genuinely useful.

People
in power
shouldn't
decide what
we learn
without
hearing from
us first.

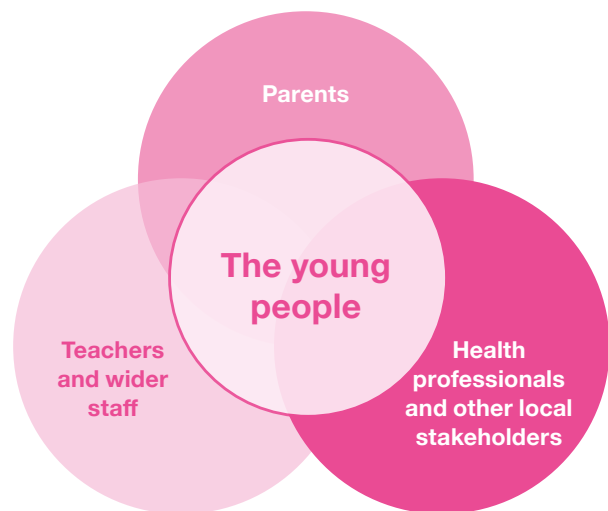


Whole-School Baseline:

Deeper Understanding Of Your Community

A whole-school baseline brings together the perspectives of pupils, parents, carers, teachers and pastoral staff so you can understand the needs, pressures and expectations shaping your community before planning RSE. It highlights gaps in knowledge, cultural influences, safeguarding themes and what matters most to the people around your pupils.

The 2025 statutory guidance is clear that schools must consult parents on RSE content and policy, and maintain transparency about materials used. Gathering parent and carer views through surveys, informal Q&As, anonymised shared questions or work with community partners can reduce misunderstandings, build trust and help adults feel more confident talking at home.



Top tip:

Rather than holding separate events on RSE, have an RSE stall at events parents are already coming to e.g. parents evening or an online safety parents session.

Pastoral teams play a crucial role too, as they hold rich insight into pupils' wellbeing, emerging patterns, safeguarding concerns and the unseen pressures that should shape curriculum decisions. Teachers' reflections on misconceptions, class dynamics and pacing add another essential layer.

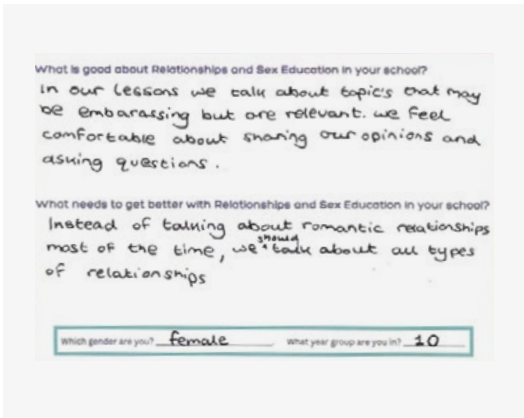
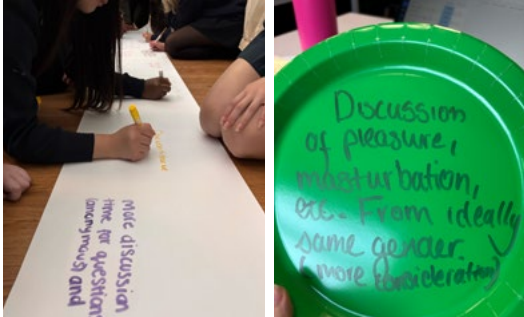
The strongest RSE happens when all these voices work together, but pupil voice should be given significant weight, because their learning, safety and lived realities are the heart of the curriculum.

What whole-school baselines can reveal

Whole-school data helps identify:

- emerging patterns around safety, identity, relationships or online risks
- areas where pupils consistently feel unprepared
- differences between cohorts or year groups
- cultural or community expectations that may affect RSE
- safeguarding issues that may require earlier coverage
- repeated misconceptions across the school
- what pupils feel they need, versus what adults assume they need

This information informs long-term curriculum planning and helps avoid repeating the same topics year after year.



Creative methods for gathering whole-school baseline data with pupils

Surveys are the most common method of data collection in schools, but more creative activities can help young people open up, and make it accessible to more pupils.

Topic ranking or prioritisation activities

When pupils place topics in order of importance, it shows where they feel least confident. Talk about why this is. See page X for how the RSE Ambassadors ranked topics.

RSE Postcards

Using anonymous postcards, young people can tell you what they really think about RSE. They can be placed in a central location or given out in an RSE lesson or form time. These let pupils contribute honestly without fear of judgement or exposure but may lead to some inappropriate responses.

Stop, start, continue plates

Give out red (stop), start (green) and continue (yellow) plates and ask the pupils what they want to stop, start, and continue learning about or doing in RSE lessons.

Lego protests

Using a box of Lego, create a scene of a group of lego people protesting to improve RSE in your school. Listen carefully to their conversations, not just looking at the final model.



For further creative activity ideas to consult with young people about their RSE please watch this Unboxing RSE video clip.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sf0MWHn42a0>

Year-group or demographic focus groups

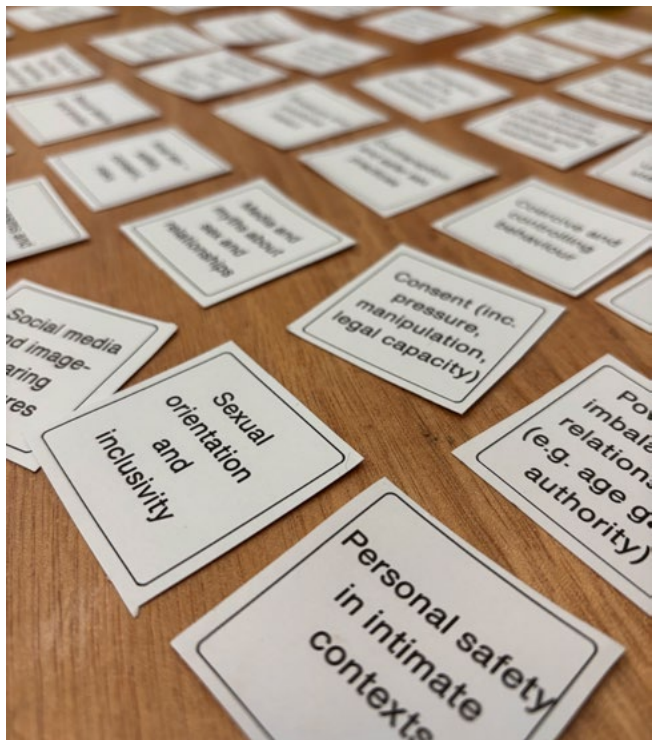
Year-group or demographic focus groups work best when pupils can speak freely without feeling exposed. Distancing techniques are key here, because they let pupils talk about the topic rather than themselves. Using general, third-person or anonymous questions keeps the conversation safe, especially for those who may have lived through difficult experiences. You might ask what people their age sometimes find confusing, what a character in a story might need, or what helps pupils feel comfortable in RSE. These small shifts avoid pressuring pupils into disclosure or implying expectations about their relationships or sexual lives. When focus groups are framed this way, every pupil, including those carrying quieter or more complex experiences, can shape the curriculum without being put at risk.

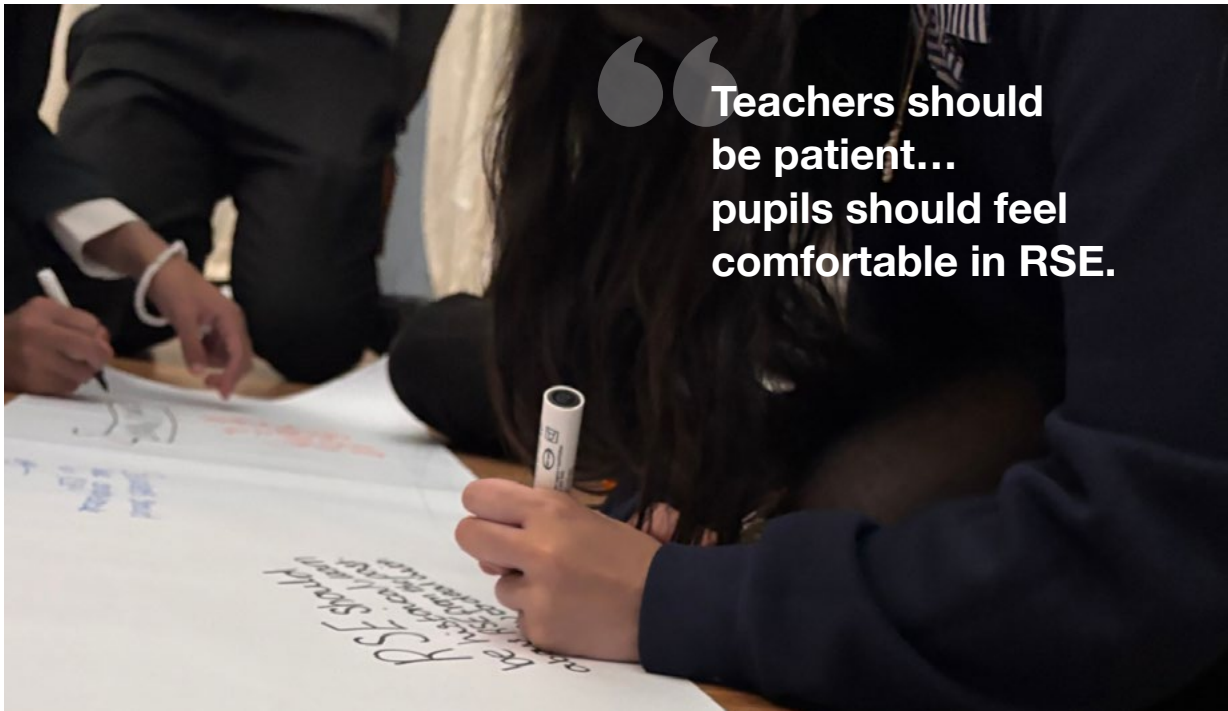
Top tip:

Pupil voice should run through every lesson, while parent and teacher consultation is planned for across the year. Listening isn't a single event, it's an ongoing cycle.

Continuing to listen

After the baseline assessment, it's important to keep listening in lessons, across the school year and across the wider community. Pupils' needs can shift quickly, so regular check ins help teachers adapt content and keep the space safe. Planned input from parents, pastoral teams and staff adds helpful context, and a small working group, including pastoral staff, teachers, a designated governor and parent representatives, can give gentle ongoing oversight. This keeps communication open and supports curriculum planning while ensuring pupil voice stays at the centre of decisions.





“Teachers should be patient... pupils should feel comfortable in RSE.”

Who is delivering RSE?

Pupils have low confidence in sessions facilitated by undertrained educators. In this case, they describe the delivery as awkward, rushed or vague - and sometimes inaccurate. From experiencing cover lessons across the curriculum, pupils have a keen sense between content led by a teacher with sufficient knowledge and confidence, compared to a lesson being covered by someone with no preparation. They notice when teachers avoid questions or seem embarrassed, which can shut down discussion and undermine trust.

While not every teacher needs to be an RSE specialist, anyone delivering the subject needs basic training, clear lesson materials and time to prepare. Short low-cost CPD sessions, peer observation or providing staff with pre-prepared scripts and FAQs can significantly improve teachers' confidence in RSE, making delivery feel safer and more consistent.

Consistency in RSE provision

Pupils talk and pupils notice when different staff approach lessons very differently. A few key structures can help:

- Shared lesson packs with examples and boundaries reduces the need to improvise.
- Short briefing guides for each topic, including “What to say if...” or a FAQ section
- A right-to-pass and question-box system so all staff can manage difficult moments confidently
- Clear escalation routes so staff know what to do if any concerns are raised.
- Training designed to meet the needs of all staff, recognising staff may be approaching this topic with vastly different level of experience, confidence or enthusiasm



Qualities of teachers

Young people in Medway were very clear that the way a teacher approaches RSE is just as important as the content itself. They described a “perfect teacher” as someone who is confident, knowledgeable and relatable - someone who teaches with clarity, listens without judgement, and helps them feel safe to learn without pressure. Just as strongly, they highlighted the behaviours that make RSE difficult: teachers skipping topics they find uncomfortable, lessons that lack detail, or classrooms where poor behaviour and awkwardness get in the way of meaningful discussion.

These insights remind us that good RSE is not about being an expert in everything; it’s about how teachers show up - prepared, patient and aware that

some topics may feel personal or sensitive for young people.

On the following page is an audit designed to help teachers reflect on the specific skills required for high-quality RSE and to support schools in building confident, well-equipped teams. Young people in Medway were very clear that the way a teacher approaches RSE is just as important as the content itself.

To make this process emotionally safe for staff, the audit should be used as a developmental tool, not a performance measure. Teachers should be encouraged to reflect honestly on their strengths and areas for growth, with the understanding that RSE requires specialist skills that evolve over time. Peer observations, paired discussions and team reflection can help create a supportive culture where teachers learn from one another rather than feel evaluated. The audit can be used to identify individual CPD needs, strengthen consistency across the team, inform who is best placed to lead particular topics, and ensure that pupils experience the kind of RSE they told us helps them learn best.

RSE Teacher Audit

Self and Peer Reflection Tool

Rating scale:

1 = Not yet

2 = Developing

3 = Secure

4 = Strong

1. Creates a Safe and Respectful Learning Environment

Establishes a clear, calm and emotionally safe atmosphere where pupils can discuss sensitive issues without fear of shame or judgement.

Self: 1 2 3 4

Peer: 1 2 3 4

2. Demonstrates Strong Safeguarding Awareness

Recognises early indicators of risk or distress, responds appropriately to disclosures and maintains vigilance during discussions where safeguarding concerns may emerge.

Self: 1 2 3 4

Peer: 1 2 3 4

3. Holds Accurate and Current RSE Subject Knowledge

Uses medically and legally accurate information, correct terminology and has confidence discussing rapidly evolving topics such as consent, gender, digital safety.

Self: 1 2 3 4

Peer: 1 2 3 4

4. Uses Effective RSE Pedagogy

Employs interactive, participatory methods that promote discussion, skill development and critical thinking rather than passive learning.

Self: 1 2 3 4

Peer: 1 2 3 4

5. Communicates Clearly, Calmly and Without Judgement

Explains concepts with clarity, maintains professional composure during sensitive topics and models open, respectful dialogue.

Self: 1 2 3 4

Peer: 1 2 3 4

6. Responds to Pupil Voice and Adapts Appropriately

Uses baseline assessment, questioning and observation to pitch learning accurately and ensures all pupils have equitable ways to participate.

Self: 1 2 3 4

Peer: 1 2 3 4

7. Facilitates Complex and Sensitive Discussions Confidently

Guides pupils through challenging conversations with balance and sensitivity, using distancing techniques and maintaining clear professional boundaries.

Self: 1 2 3 4

Peer: 1 2 3 4

8. Demonstrates Bias Awareness and Inclusive Practice

Avoids assumptions, integrates representation across identity, culture and experience and challenges stereotypes sensitively and accurately.

Self: 1 2 3 4

Peer: 1 2 3 4

9. Manages the Learning Environment Effectively

Maintains consistent expectations, promotes respectful conduct and ensures discussions remain safe, purposeful and accessible to all.

Self: 1 2 3 4

Peer: 1 2 3 4

10. Encourages Independent Thinking Rather Than Telling Pupils What to Think

Supports pupils to explore ideas, weigh up evidence and form their own views within a non directive, non judgemental framework.

Self: 1 2 3 4

Peer: 1 2 3 4

Curriculum &Stuff

Curriculum Planning for RSE

A strong RSE curriculum grows with pupils, giving them what they need at the right time. When content arrives too early, it feels unsafe, and when it repeats year after year, pupils switch off. Pupils told us clearly that RSE should feel useful, relevant and well-timed.

Listening to pupils, alongside whole-school baselines, helps shape a progression model that reflects real life rather than assumptions.

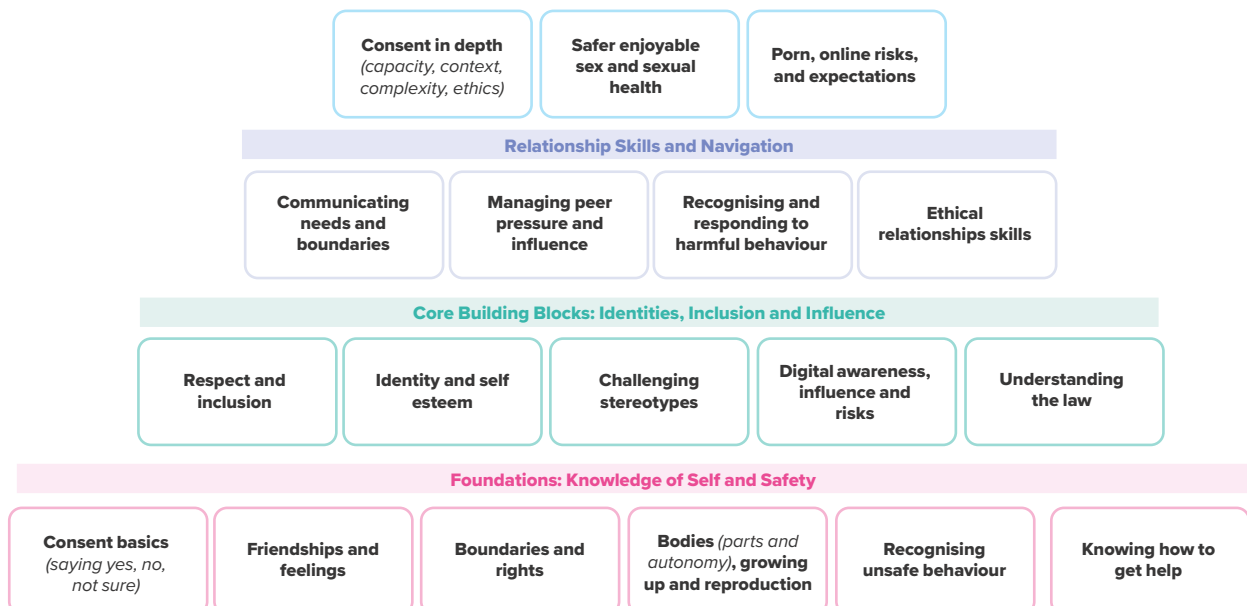
Learning about your body and your future plans is key.

What progression means in RSE

Progression in RSE is not about becoming “more explicit” each year. It is about deepening understanding, building confidence and expanding pupils’ ability to apply learning in real situations.

Medway RSE Sequencing Pyramid

Below is an exemplar stepped pyramid showing learning that grows in depth and complexity, you can create your own based on school priorities and needs.



Practical models for delivery

Schools in Medway use a range of practical delivery models for RSE, and each brings particular strengths depending on timetable structures, staffing, and the needs of pupils. These models are not intended to be chosen in isolation; instead, they should be blended to create a coherent, inclusive and well-sequenced programme that reflects pupil voice and aligns with the school's values and statutory duties. The following approaches can be used flexibly - alone or in combination - to ensure that RSE is taught regularly, confidently, and in ways that feel safe, relevant and engaging for young people.

Spiral curriculum



Whichever approach you decide to take for designing your approach to RSE, it should be designed as a spiral curriculum. Skills, knowledge and concepts should be revisited and built on each year, so that pupils are not simply repeating the same content (which the Ambassadors told us often happens in subjects such as puberty) but the Sequencing pyramid used to consider how the curriculum develops over time, and aligns with adolescent development and prepares pupils gradually.

Possible approaches



1. Theme-Based Blocks (ideal for form-time delivery)

Schools with crowded timetables may teach RSE in themed blocks that is delivered by a range of staff working on the same topic. This model makes expectations clear for staff and pupils, even when specialist time is limited.



2. Cross curriculum (diffuses pressure on lesson time)

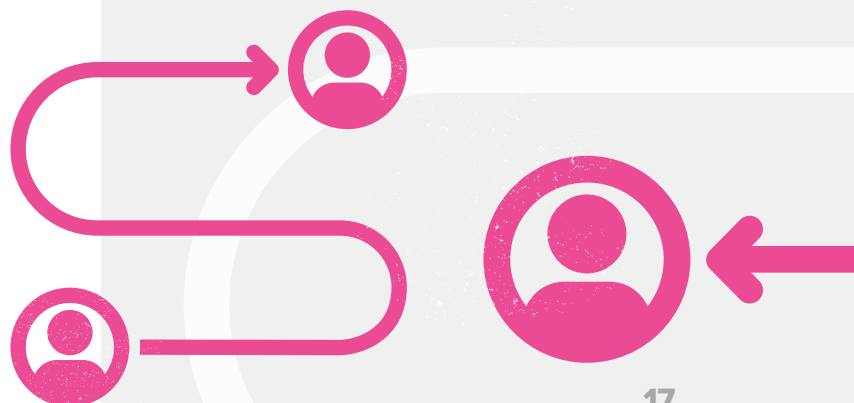
RSE content is mapped across multiple subjects to ensure students learn everything in the context of wider subjects. Requires significant buy-in across a range of subjects but allows RSE content to be embedded.



3. Modular Specialist Lessons (maximises quality of delivery)

Schools allocate protected RSE lessons led by a small team of trained staff who rotate through year groups across the year. This model prioritises consistency, subject expertise and safer classroom climates, and ensures that sensitive or complex content is taught confidently. It works particularly well when schools want to improve pupil experience but cannot timetable weekly RSE; modules can be scheduled each term without losing coherence.

All of these approaches have strengths and can work to compliment each other in a hybrid model.



What to teach and when

Practically, you will likely benefit from creating a framework curriculum as a foundation to ensure all topics are covered in a helpful and timely way. However, best practice RSE requires you to have some level of flexibility. The needs of a year group will vary between different cohorts. Even the best, most modern, complete and up to date curriculum will not be a perfect fit under all circumstances. Deliberately planning in space for the potential inclusion of extra sessions will help ensure your teaching meets the needs of your students.

Pupil Prioritisation of RSE Topics – Ambassador Workshop Summary

During the Medway RSE Ambassador Workshop, pupils were asked to order Relationship, Sex and Health Education (RSE) topic cards from 'Most Important' to 'Least Important', and in one version, from 'Start' to 'End'. This activity revealed how young people perceive the relevance, timing and importance of different aspects of RSE. The following summary combines observations from all group boards, identifying both specific examples and broader themes in their choices. REMEMBER: This is what a small cohort of Y10 pupils told us - it is not definitive for the whole of Medway young people. You may wish to repeat this task in your setting to find out if the pattern is similar or different.

Overall Patterns

Across all groups, there was a strong degree of consistency in what pupils ranked as the most important

areas. Themes relating to safety, consent, respect, inclusivity and real-life understanding consistently appeared at the top. More specific or explicit topics (for example, sexual acts or pleasure) tended to fall toward the least important end, reflecting both a sense of readiness and what pupils perceive as appropriate to cover later.

Most Important Topics/ Topics to Start With

The following topics appeared most frequently in the 'Most Important' or early priority positions across the groups:

- Consent and capacity (e.g. under influence of drugs/alcohol)
- STIs – awareness, testing, protection
- LGBTQ+ relationships and rights
- Gender identity and gender expression
- Understanding the law (age of consent, image sharing, assault)
- Exploring attraction and fluidity in identity
- Respecting difference and tackling discrimination
- Online abuse and exploitation (e.g. sextortion, blackmail)
- Where to go for help / trusted adults / services
- Pregnancy – conception, choices, and abortion

Pupils placed strong emphasis on consent and safety as the foundations of good RSE. They wanted learning that helps them protect themselves and others, understand the law, and recognise healthy, inclusive relationships. Equality and representation were also high priorities, with many noting that RSE should acknowledge gender and sexual diversity throughout the curriculum.

Middle Importance Topics/ Topics to Build On

- Recognising abuse – physical, sexual, emotional
- Mutual respect and personal boundaries
- Pornography and its influence on expectations
- Breakups and emotional impact
- Contraception and safer sex practices
- Power and imbalance in relationships (e.g. age gaps, authority)
- Sexual harassment and sexual violence
- Social media and image-sharing pressures
- Masturbation and solo sexual activity

These topics were viewed as important but more appropriate once the basics of consent, respect and boundaries had been covered. Pupils recognised these as real-world issues that require maturity and context to discuss meaningfully.

Lower Importance Topics/ Topics Towards End of RSE Provision for Older Students

- Types of sexual activity (e.g oral sex, anal sex, penis in vagina sex)
- Sexual pleasure and communication
- Orgasms and the sexual response cycle
- FGM, So-called ‘honour’-based abuse and forced marriage

These topics were generally placed at the ‘Least Important’ or ‘End’ of the sequence. Pupils saw them as needing to come later, once a sense of safety, comfort and trust had been built. While still seen as relevant and important, they were perceived as more advanced or sensitive.

Trends and Themes Identified

- **Safety first** – Consent, protection and knowing where to seek help dominated every group’s priorities.
- **Inclusivity matters** – Identity, gender and equality featured strongly in the top tiers, showing the importance of recognition and belonging.
- **Online realities** – Pupils consistently prioritised topics around online abuse, sexting and media pressure.
- **Emotional learning** – Relationship skills, managing breakups and boundaries appeared as mid-level priorities.
- **Readiness and respect** – Explicit sexual content was deferred to later, showing awareness of developmental appropriateness.
- **Consistency** – Across groups, pupils followed a similar pattern: foundational safety and respect first, emotional and practical learning next, explicit content last.



Implications for Curriculum Design

The order pupils created supports a spiral curriculum approach, starting with values and safety, then moving towards more complex and explicit content as confidence and maturity develop. Consent, inclusion and digital safety should underpin the entire curriculum rather than be treated as standalone units. Teachers need to consider readiness and comfort when introducing sensitive topics, ensuring lessons are trauma-informed and supported by clear group agreements.

Remember, the 2025 RSHE guidance gives schools freedom and flexibility to respond to pupil needs. Schools must have regard to the guidance, but if they depart from any part of it they simply need “good reasons for doing so” (page 3). This allows teachers to go further or adapt content when it’s clearly needed for their pupils.

Teaching & Learning &Stuff

Safer Spaces in RSE

Pedagogy

RSE teachers are the best teachers...

Teaching Relationships and Sex Education requires additional skills in creating and maintaining safer spaces, answering tricky questions and facilitating challenging discussions. RSE teachers also need to maintain confident subject knowledge in an ever-changing field, and be continually vigilant towards any emergent safeguarding issues. Therefore, if you want to improve your teaching skillset overall... teach RSE!

The good teachers point you in the right direction, but they don't tell you what to think. They let you figure it out without judging you.

Classroom logistics

Make the physical space feel private. Close blinds, adjust lighting or shift to table groups if a circle feels too exposing. Representation matters in what is displayed, so use materials that reflect Medway's diversity.

If your lesson includes any worksheets or written tasks, inform the pupils before they start about where their work will end up. Will the paper end up saved with their name attached or will they be safely disposed of. Clear information can prevent students from becoming anxious and distracted by worrying about who might read their responses. Think carefully about the balance between the need to document the progress of your lessons and the value of privacy.

Groupings can shift depending on the topic. Mixed groups are useful for empathy and shared understanding. Single sex or gender groups can sometimes help pupils speak more freely, as long as all pupils receive the same curriculum and trans and non binary pupils are meaningfully included in decisions about what feels comfortable.

Emotional Safety

Use distancing strategies so pupils can explore topics without exposing themselves. Scenarios, characters or "someone might" frames take the heat off personal experience. Teachers should not share their own sexual or drug stories. Young people said it feels intrusive and can unintentionally shut them down. If in doubt, keep private life private. When responding to questions which could feel personal (What does sex feel like? When do people normally start having wet dreams? etc) you can use distancing phrases such as "Some people say.." "Statistically..." and "Evidence suggests..."

Some schools may work with external guest speakers who may tell personal stories about drug addiction for example. This must be handled with care. But the underlying relationship between a guest speaker and a pupil is different to the teacher/pupil relationship. It may be appropriate for a guest speaker to be more personal than a school teacher.

Remind students they have a right to pass. This becomes especially important in topics linked to trauma or shame. A private signal or a planned exit task can keep the lesson safe without drawing attention to anyone.

Managing the room

Good RSE makes space for discussion without forcing disclosure. Use paired chats, small groups or quick-write activities to give everyone a low pressure route in. Whole-class discussions are useful, but pupils told us that stopping conversations too quickly can feel like shutting the conversation down. Aim for balance and clarity so discussions stay thoughtful without feeling policed.

Some teachers use techniques like calling in and calling out. Calling in draws a student into a more thoughtful moment when their comment needs shaping. Calling out is for behaviour or language that crosses a line. Always link back to your group agreement and your behaviour policy. Questions like “Is that an opinion or a fact?” or “How could we check that?” help widen the voices in the room and prevent dominant voices from taking over.

Deliberate language

Language shapes safety. Use clear, respectful terminology for genitalia because pupils said a shared vocabulary helps them feel grounded and protected. Additionally, from primary school onwards, within the DfE statutory guidance for health education, it is a requirement for content to include “The correct names of body parts, including the penis, vulva, vagina, testicles, scrotum, nipples” (page 25).

Avoid terms that assume identity, for example “all boys” or “all girls”. Switch to “most”, “some” or the specific body part. Don’t assume boyfriend or girlfriend, you can use partner/significant other as well. Be conscious of the risk of shame associations in language, you should say STI (not STD) disease and diseased risk shame around concepts of “clean/dirty”. It is good to invite questions about language, for example, educators should not use the term “child pornography” but should use “Child sexual abuse images” or “sexually explicit images of children”. A discussion about the risk of normalising and trivializing the seriousness of such images by categories

them as a type of pornography can role model curiosity and learning as a teacher.

Anonymous questions

Anonymous question boxes feel simple but they unlock honesty. Ask everyone to submit something, even if it is “I do not have a question”. This protects anonymity and stops guessing games. If a question needs checking, let pupils know you will answer it next lesson. Never shame a question. The anonymity is part of the safety. To maintain anonymity (and keep a safe space) you may need to reword a question to obscure the identity of the asker and keep with the group agreement around shared language.

Use these questions to shape future content, challenge misconceptions and identify when a one-to-one signpost might be more appropriate. If a safeguarding concern comes through the box, follow your school policy while protecting the pupil’s dignity.

Top tip:

Anonymous question boxes can work with groups of any size. For smaller groups, to get the process started and to help young people feel more confident that their question will not be identified, you can seed the box with a handful of pre-selected questions. These can be questions saved from previous students’ contributions or even made by staff.

Ending with care

Always close a session deliberately. Recap key ideas, normalise a range of feelings and remind students where support is available. Pupils said knowing where to get help makes them feel safer learning about difficult things.

Ensure your planned lessons contain enough flexibility to account for any shortage in time caused by interruptions or late starts. Make sure you know in advance which activities to skip or abridge to save time before teaching the lesson. Make sure you always save enough time to end the session without rushing your recap and signposting.

Safe uncertainty

Adopting a safe uncertainty approach in Relationships and Sex Education means changing how we see our role in the classroom. Rather than positioning ourselves as the person with all the answers, we act as a facilitator who helps young people think things through for themselves. This reflects a simple but important truth: relationships are messy, people are complex, and real life rarely fits into neat rules or slogans.

In practice, safe uncertainty starts with being honest as a teacher. This might sound like acknowledging that there isn't always a single "right" answer, or saying, "Different people might feel differently about this, let's explore why." As a safe adult, your authority doesn't come from certainty, but from creating a classroom where pupils feel secure enough to ask questions, share ideas and sit with complexity without fear of judgement.

This approach shifts the focus from telling pupils what to think to supporting them to develop good judgement. For example, instead of relying only on

blunt messages such as "don't send nudes" or "no means no", safe uncertainty explores the thinking behind these ideas. Pupils are encouraged to consider pressure, power, feelings, context and consequences. Legal facts and safeguarding messages still matter, but they are placed within discussion rather than delivered as the whole lesson.

There is strong evidence that purely prohibitive approaches do not lead to safer behaviours. While it is natural for adults to want clear, reassuring rules, young people consistently tell us they need space to talk things through. Safe uncertainty focuses on what actually helps pupils grow: opportunities to reflect, practise decision-making and understand how values, boundaries and relationships work in the real world. This aligns with what pupils in Medway prioritised most strongly, including consent, safety, respect and knowing where to get help.

In the classroom, a safe uncertainty session might involve discussing a realistic scenario where intentions are unclear, feelings change, or boundaries are tested. Rather than steering pupils towards a single conclusion, the teacher supports careful questioning: What might each person be feeling here? Where could pressure show up? What would make this situation safer or kinder? These kinds of discussions build critical thinking and ethical awareness, sometimes described as developing "sexual citizenship".

Teaching this way can feel uncomfortable at first. It requires teachers to tolerate ambiguity, manage differing opinions and resist the urge to close conversations too quickly. Discomfort, when handled well, is not a sign that something has gone wrong. Instead, it often signals meaningful learning. Ground rules, distancing techniques and clear safeguarding boundaries help keep this work safe and contained.

Ideally, pupils leave a safe uncertainty lesson with more questions than answers. That is not a failure of teaching, but a sign that thinking has begun. When young people continue these conversations beyond the classroom, they are more likely to apply what they have learned to their own lives with care, confidence and awareness.

For further reading on this approach, visit www.re-imagining-rse.org



Inclusion and Diversity in RSE

Please note that the schools that were able to take part in this project were all single-sex schools. This may mean some views shared particularly around single sex education may have had different findings if our cohort had included pupils who attended mixed schools. This is why it's important for you to carry out your own benchmarking and pupil voice activities in your own school.

Why representation matters

Pupils were clear that they learn best when they can see their lives, identities and families reflected in the curriculum. They want RSE that feels real rather than tokenistic. That means a curriculum that mirrors their experiences and also gives them a window into experiences they may not share.

Making inclusion everyday, not a themed week

Young people told us that inclusion cannot rely on dates in the calendar or one-off lessons. They want conversations about identity, equality, attraction and relationships woven through the curriculum in a way that feels natural. Quick references to Black History Month or Pride without a broader context can feel performative rather than meaningful. Instead, use examples, scenarios, images and language

that consistently reflect a range of cultures, family structures, bodies, genders and sexualities. For example, there does not need to be a lesson on same-sex contraception, but contraception lessons should include information and scenarios for a wide range of relationships.

Small choices make a big difference. Rotate the pronouns in your scenarios. Use varied names that reflect the pupils you serve. Check whether your resources show young people who differ in ethnicity, accent, religion, ability, gender expression and sexual orientation. Consider how you could represent aspects of identity which are less visible such as mental ill-health, social class and hobbies. Representation is not about being perfect. It is about being intentional.

Make it clear that no one needs to speak on behalf of a whole identity group. Pupils said they feel uncomfortable when adults expect them to be a spokesperson for their race, religion or sexuality. Invite stories when pupils choose to share them, but never require them. Use fictional or composite scenarios to explore perspectives safely.

Considering gender and LGBT+ inclusion

Pupils said discussions about gender, stereotypes and LGBT+ relationships were often avoided or only mentioned in passing, because of national challenges in supporting teachers in how to effectively discuss gender in the classroom. Young people were very clear they wanted to discuss this safely and without conflict. Teach about LGBT+ identities as part of the normal flow of lessons rather than a separate unit. When talking about relationships and consent, name same sex couples alongside heterosexual couples without signalling it as unusual. This usualises inclusion rather than spotlighting it.

Gender Stereotypes

A gender equal approach means not assuming anyone's identity or desires from how they look. It also means avoiding language that reduces pupils to

stereotypes. For example, saying “boys will be boys” or assuming that girls do not experience desire creates pressure and misunderstanding.

Equally when covering issues such as identity, body image, online life and mental wellbeing, include examples of identities that challenge gender assumptions without making that the central point of the lesson. For example, consider how gender is represented around issues of mental health, hobbies and criminal behaviour.

When learning about consent, coercive control and spotting signs of abusive relationships, it’s important that boys are not always seen as the perpetrators. This can lead to boys who are experiencing this abuse being less willing to come forward or to ask for help. Use a diverse range of scenarios to ensure that no one group feels stigmatised, without diminishing the fact that more women experience domestic violence than men.

SEND inclusion

SEND pupils reminded us that inclusion means flexibility, not assumptions. Some pupils prefer pictures to words, some find images overwhelming. Some engage well in group discussions, others need shorter, chunked tasks. Pupils also told us that they do not want their potential for future relationships underestimated. High expectations paired with reasonable adjustments create dignity. The adjustments that work in SEND settings often benefit the whole class too.

When using props, SEND pupils have as diverse a range of opinions as other groups. You may wish to have a mixture of life-like and abstract objects so that pupils can explore the props that are most helpful for them.

Check in with individual pupils and the adults who support them before making changes. Adaptation is not about watering down content. It is about removing barriers so that every pupil can access the same core learning.

RSE should be more inclusive to everyone and their experiences.

15% of Medway pupils do not identify as heterosexual. (Medway Health and Wellbeing Survey 2025) so RSE has to meet their needs.

What young people tell us about activities

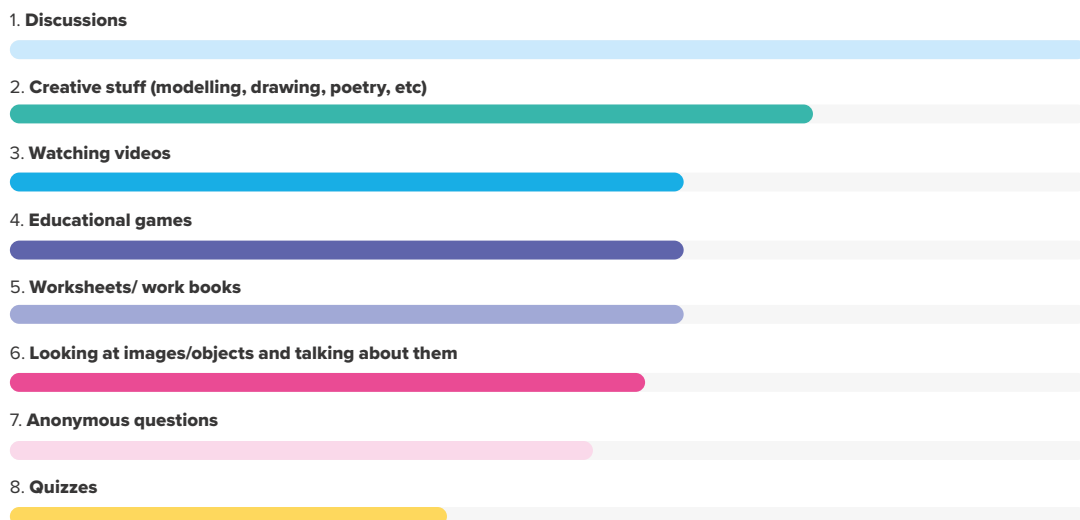
Young people in Medway told us clearly that how they learn in RSE is just as important as what they learn. They said lessons feel most meaningful when they are invited to take part – when they can discuss, question, create, think critically and explore real-life scenarios safely. Activities that involve conversation, creativity or problem-solving help them feel engaged and respected, because they can bring their own perspectives without being judged.

At the same time, pupils were very clear that overly passive activities – especially watching a video without any introduction, follow-up questions or space to talk – do not help them learn deeply. Many described videos as “fine as a starter” but “boring” or “pointless” if teachers rely on them as the entire lesson. This reflects wider evidence that young people learn best when teaching is interactive, participatory and grounded in discussion, rather than when they are simply shown information and left to interpret it alone. Schools should also note that pupils told us that they dislike lessons dominated by worksheets or booklets, which they feel reduce the opportunity to explore sensitive topics safely and openly.

Medway Ambassadors emphasised that comfort and safety are fundamental. Activities that allow choice, anonymity, movement, debate, creativity or small-group discussion help them feel “comfortable in RSE” and more willing to contribute. They want RSE to feel like a space where their questions matter and where different viewpoints can be expressed respectfully.

The following was a summary of the types of activities and where young people ranked them from most to least favourite.

What type of activities are your favourite type to do?



Questions to help determine whether an activity will be effective

Teachers can use these reflective questions when choosing or planning an activity. They help ensure alignment with the Medway Principles and Core Messages, and adopt best practice principles.

1. Safety and comfort

- Does this activity help create a safe enough space where pupils can take part without feeling exposed?
- Are you confident the activity will not shame or embarrass someone?

2. Relevance and honesty

- Is the content accurate, balanced and free from stereotypes?
- Would pupils recognise themselves or their world in this?

3. Interaction and pupil voice

- Does the activity welcome discussion of different viewpoints rather than pushed toward one “right” answer?
- Do quieter pupils have a way to contribute, including anonymously?

No such thing as a silly question.

4. Inclusivity and representation

- Will pupils of all genders, identities, cultures, faiths and abilities feel seen?
- Does it reflect the diversity of real relationships and families in Medway?

5. Trauma-informed practice

- Does the activity avoid shock tactics?
- Is there a low-intensity or opt-out role available?

6. Skill-building and ethical thinking

- Does it build communication, boundary-setting or empathy?
- Will pupils have the opportunity to develop their skills in ethical thinking?

Teach us to respect consent, confidence, connection, communication.

7. Sequencing and timing

- Is this pitched at the right stage based on pupils’ readiness?
- Does it build on what they already know without jumping too far ahead?

8. Teacher readiness

- Am I confident enough in the topic and style of the activity to lead this?
- Have I received sufficient training to facilitate this activity well?

If teachers can answer “yes” to most of these questions, the activity is likely to support Medway’s vision for RSE that is safe, inclusive, relevant and genuinely meaningful.

Activities

that work
well in
RSE

Below are activity types that pupils enjoy and that support deep, ethical learning

1. Structured Discussions

Example: “In pairs, discuss three ways someone might show they’re uncomfortable in a relationship. You can jot ideas on mini whiteboards.”

2. Creative Responses (drawing, modelling, crafts)

Example: “Create a ‘healthy relationship symbol’ using collage materials - no words, just imagery. Then explain why you chose your symbols.”

3. Concept Sorting (Card Sort / Diamond 9 / Categories)

Example: “Sort these cards into ‘healthy’, ‘unhealthy’, and ‘depends on context’. The focus is on your explanations, not the ‘right’ answer.”

4. Continuum Lines

Example: “Along a line between 100% agree or 100% disagree, stand where you agree: ‘It’s harder to say no to someone you like.’ Be ready to explain why, or just listen if you prefer.”

5. Object-Based Learning

Example: “Pass around and let pupils handle objects, such as different period products, and ask pupils to write down one question or misconception about each.”

6. Short, modern stimulus Clips or Images

Example: A 30-second clip showing an example of conflict resolution, followed by: “What do you notice? What might be going on here?”

7. Scenario Walkthroughs (non-judgement based)

Example: “A character sees a friend sharing nudes they received. Discuss what options do they have? And what support could they access? Explore decisions without forcing pupils to “fix” a problem with one ‘correct’ answer, situations are complex and there are often many options.”



Activities to be avoided in RSE

These activities are familiar in RSE, but pupils told us they can feel stressful, exposing, or unhelpful. Below is a list of activities we recommend avoiding within RSE.

Avoid debates

Learning to academically debate with the intention of winning an argument, can be a helpful academic skill, but RSE is not the time to develop that ability. Classrooms will have mixed levels of experience, knowledge and confidence. Debates may silence quieter or marginalised pupils and may reinforce harmful ideas that one side “wins” through performance rather than evidence. In RSE debates can further polarise issues, instead we recommend hosting conversations that advance human dignity and rights, without needing to declare a winner.

Avoid myth busting

Merely mentioning myths can reinforce them. We know pupils may not always listen to everything we say but may remember bits and pieces of lessons. They may remember seeing a slide or hearing a teacher say outloud “everyone sends nudes” and miss or forget all of the context around how that is a myth. Caution should be used with True/False activities for the same reason. However, we recommend presenting true statements and fostering discussion to centre around other dichotomies such as “basic vs complex”, “boring vs interesting” or “relevant vs. irrelevant”.

Do not use scare tactics

Scare tactics, such as the use of photos of diseased genitals, brutal statistics, or emotionally charged video media about health issues, consent, violence, or abuse, are ineffective in educating young people. Scare tactics cause students to disengage and this can risk retraumatizing those with lived experience. This is a common risk with dramatic recreation videos or dramas. The young people told us scary STI images, harsh statistics or traumatic videos make them shut down rather than reflect. Instead of using hard hitting media designed for outside the classroom, use materials that are designed for shame free education and adopt a trauma informed approach.

Collecting evidence without forcing writing

RSHE learning is mostly verbal.

Appropriate evidence can include:

- Quick exit reflections (spoken or written on sticky notes).
- Summaries of anonymous question themes.
- Observations of discussion quality.
- Group co-created resources (e.g., Diamond 9 displays).
- Short audio reflections or digital polls.

“One wish is that we should learn more... and have more discussions.”

Bringing Our Principles of RSE to Life

Across this toolkit, young people have told us what makes RSE work for them. These questions offer a simple way to check that each lesson honours those messages and the Principles of RSE - keeping learning safe, inclusive and grounded in their real experiences.

Thank you for everything you do to make RSE better for all.

Principle	Question
1. Make it safe	What specific actions have I taken to make this lesson safer for all learners? Did I establish or remind learners about a RSE specific group agreement? Will single sex groups feel safer for some pupils? Will single sex groups feel unsafe for pupils struggling with their gender?
2. Be direct and clear	Did you explain any new vocabulary? Before leading the session, had you practiced (alone or with a co-worker) talking about any sensitive, complex or controversial parts of the lesson?
3. Keep it relevant to our lives	Did the lesson include examples, scenarios or cases that included people the same age as the learners? What do your pupils say they prefer?
4. Focus on positives, rather than negatives	What new skill did the students learn in the session? What positive thing can they now do better?
5. Build it up over time	Which lesson or principle from past RSE workshops did this session build upon? Which future topic is it preparing the learners for?
6. Make it interactive, not awkward	Did the workshop have a dedicated time for questions? What % of the session were the learners being interactive with each other? Can you offer 3 spaces? A girls space, a boys space and a mixed space and pupils can choose where they feel most comfortable?
7. Teach with confidence	How did you personally build your confidence to facilitate the session? Did you practice with colleagues? Have you practised answering expected questions?
8. Help us find support	Does the workshop include clear details of support specific to the topic of the session?
9. Get parents and carers involved (the right way)	How did the content of this lesson connect with the support your school has given parents? How could you support parents with this topic in the future?
10. Our voices matter	How was the lesson influenced by the learners? Did you adapt the content to take account of consultation with the students?

Useful links

For young people

Medway Youth Services

Activities, support services, information and advice

<https://www.medway.gov.uk/youth>

Medway Community Healthcare (MCH)

Chat Health is a secure NHS approved text messaging service. All Medway young people aged 11 – 19 can text 07480 635786 to start a conversation with a School Nurse. Anything from relationships, mental health, bullying, alcohol, self-harm, healthy eating, drugs and smoking.

Sexual Health

Clover Street Sexual Health Services

STI testing, contraceptives, advice and treatment
4 Clover St, Chatham ME4 4DT

<https://www.cloverstreet.nhs.uk>

Phone 0300 123 1678

GET IT

Free condoms and advice for young people

<https://getit.org.uk/>

KOOTH

Messaging, live chat and online community

<https://www.kooth.com/>

Ellie's Angels better u

A free, easy, identifiable and supportive way to journal, create affirmations and use self-help tools to help young people manage their well-being.

<https://www.elliesangels.org/better-u>

THE BEYOU PROJECT

Provides peer and individual support for LGBTQ+ young people, aged 8-25 in Kent and Medway

<https://thebeyouproject.co.uk/>

OPEN ROAD

A service in Medway for young people to talk to someone about alcohol or drugs.

<https://www.openroad.org.uk/medway-young-person-drug-and-alcohol-service/>

CHUMs

Kent and Medway specialist bereavement service

<http://chums.uk.com/kent-bereavementservice/>

For Teachers

The Sex Education Forum

A charity that aims to improve RSE by bringing together a range of professionals and organisations with guidance, evidence and training.

<https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/>

The PSHE Association

Membership Organisation for PSHE that produces materials, guidance and training.


<https://pshe-association.org.uk/>

Medway School Programmes

https://www.medway.gov.uk/info/200221/a_better_medway/440/school_programmes/1


Medway's Child Health Team

childhealth@medway.gov.uk



Find out more

You can find lots more pupil voice related resources to improve RSE in schools on this Padlet we created as part of this project:



About us

This project has been funded by Medway Public Health Team.

Alice Hoyle is an education consultant with experience of being a head of PSHE and a local authority RSE Adviser. She co-authored *Great Relationships and Sex Education: 200+ Activities for Educators Working with Young People* and holds a Master's in Sexual Health Education. Alice is passionate about centring youth voice and supporting educators to deliver inclusive, evidence-based, and engaging RSE that meets the real-life needs of young people. You can find out more about her and her work at <https://www.senseandconnect.co.uk/>

Ian Timbrell is the Founder of More Than Flags and Rainbows, a not-for-profit specialising in supporting schools to develop an inclusive curriculum and strengthen LGBTQ+ inclusion. A former deputy headteacher and local authority adviser, he is the author of *It's More Than Flags and Rainbows*, a practical guide to helping schools usualise diverse families and create safer, more welcoming environments. Drawing on 17 years of experience in education, Ian works with schools, trusts, and organisations to build confidence, improve practice, and equip educators with the language and strategies they need to ensure every child feels seen, valued, and supported. More information can be found at www.morethanflagsandrainbows.com

Gareth Cheesman is a freelance relationship and sex educator. He is a JNC qualified youth worker and holds a Master's in Public Health. Gareth is passionate about facilitating modern, inclusive and fun RSE and equipping educators (of all types) to grow their confidence to do the same. You can find out more about him and his work at <https://www.garethcheesman.com/>



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& Stuff