

RSE and Health Education Statutory Guidance

A comparison of the 2019 statutory guidance with the new guidance published by the Department for Education in July 2025, for introduction on 1 September 2026.

1. At a glance

	2019 guidance	New guidance (2026)
Full title	Relationships Education, RSE and Health Education: statutory guidance	Same title (unchanged)
Publication date	2019	July 2025
Applies from	September 2020	1 September 2026 (schools may adopt earlier)
Current guidance until	31 August 2026	—
Length	50 pages	47 pages
Underlying law	Children and Social Work Act 2017, ss.34–35; 2019 Regulations	Unchanged – only the guidance is updated, not the legislation
Review cycle	Not fixed in the guidance	Technical update every 3 years; full review every 6 years

2. What has NOT changed

Before looking at the changes, it's worth being clear about what stays the same. The core legal duties on schools are unchanged - this is an update to the guidance, not the underlying regulations.

- **The three subjects remain compulsory:** Relationships Education in all primary schools, RSE in all secondary schools, and Health Education in all state-funded schools (independent schools remain exempt from Health Education).
- **Parents' right to withdraw is unchanged:** parents can still request their child be withdrawn from sex education (not from Relationships or Health Education), and pupils can still opt back in from three terms before turning 16.
- **Schools must still have a written RSE policy** and consult parents when developing or reviewing it.
- **The primary curriculum headings are largely retained** (Families and people who care for me; Caring friendships; Respectful relationships; Being safe) though several have expanded content, and one is renamed.

3. Renamed or restructured sections

The overall shape of the guidance is familiar, but a few section headings have changed to reflect their broadened content.

4. Major new curriculum content

The new guidance keeps the same broad structure (Relationships education, RSE, Health and wellbeing) but adds substantial new content reflecting developments since 2019 - in technology, the law, and public health. None of the topics below appeared in the 2019 guidance.

Online safety and technology

- AI chatbots: the risks of fake intimacy and harmful advice.
- Deepfake: how to identify them and the harm they can cause.
- Sextortion and online scams relating to sex.
- Gambling and gambling-style content in gaming, including video game monetisation.
- How algorithms and targeted advertising select and target online content.

Abuse, exploitation and the law

- Strangulation and suffocation as specific criminal offences.
- Forced marriage and the illegality of marrying before 18 (Age of Marriage Act 2023).
- Virginity testing and hymenoplasty: the harm caused and the law (both illegal since 2022).
- Financial and criminal exploitation, including county lines.
- Public sexual harassment and upskirting, named explicitly as forms of sexual harassment.
- Fixated, obsessive and stalking-type behaviour.

Sexual ethics and online culture

- The influence of incels (“involuntary celibates”) and online influencers on attitudes to sex and relationships.
- An explicit new emphasis that “ethical behaviour goes beyond consent” and requires kindness, care and awareness of power dynamics.

Health and wellbeing

- Nicotine pouches, alongside vaping and smoking.
- HIV prevention drugs (PrEP and PEP) and where to access them.
- Antimicrobial resistance
- Pre-conception health, folic acid and pelvic floor health; miscarriage and pregnancy loss.
- Menstrual and gynaecological health in more depth, including PCOS and endometriosis.
- Gillick competence and the legal age of medical consent (16).
- Navigating the healthcare system – GPs, A&E, pharmacists and local sexual health services.
- Gambling-related mental health harms.
- Life-saving skills, including CPR and the use of defibrillators.

5. Policy and approach changes

Alongside new content, the final 2025 guidance made some notable decisions after public consultation - several of which reverse proposals in the 2024 draft version:

Topic	What changed
Age limits on sensitive topics	The 2024 draft proposed fixed age/year-group restrictions on certain sensitive topics. This was dropped in the final 2025 guidance – schools continue to use professional judgement to keep content “age and stage appropriate”, as under the 2019 approach.
Gender identity / biological sex	The 2024 draft proposed banning teaching about “the broader concept of gender identity”. The final guidance instead requires schools to teach the facts and the law about biological sex and gender reassignment as distinct legal concepts (reflecting the April 2025 Supreme Court ruling that “sex” in the Equality Act means biological sex), while avoiding endorsing contested views – for example, schools should not teach as fact that “all people have a gender identity”.
Parental transparency	New, explicit statement that any contractual clause preventing a school sharing RSHE materials with parents is “void and unenforceable”. More detailed guidance on how to share materials (parent portal, presentation, or take-home copies with a no-copying agreement).
LGBT content	Secondary schools are now expected to integrate content on same-sex relationships throughout the RSE programme, rather than deliver it as a standalone lesson. Primary schools are “strongly encouraged” to include same-sex parents when teaching about families.

6. What this means for schools

- **Review and update the RSHE policy and scheme of work** against the new content list, ready for 1 September 2026 (early adoption is permitted).
- **Refresh parent-facing materials and consultation processes** in line with the strengthened transparency requirements.
- **Check staff training and CPD** covers the genuinely new topics, particularly AI/deepfakes, gambling harms, and the updated approach to teaching biological sex and gender reassignment, plus existing safeguarding-sensitive areas (suicide prevention, eating disorders, self-harm).
- **Review contracts with any external RSHE providers** to confirm they do not restrict parents' access to materials: such clauses are now explicitly unenforceable.

Please see the content comparison documents for a more detailed comparison between the two subjects within PSHE in Primary Steps, Progression Steps and Steps 4 Life.



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