

## Education & Skills Committee evidence session on Personal and Social Education (PSE)

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### Key points

- As a child protection organisation, we are focused on the role which PSE can play in preventing abuse and helping children to keep safe.
  - There is little information about the reality of PSE in Scotland. We would welcome further scrutiny of this from the Committee
  - We are increasingly concerned about children's online safety; PSE must support children to develop the necessary knowledge, skills and resilience.
  - Children need high-quality, age-appropriate and consistent education about healthy relationships. We support mandatory PSE in schools.
  - Children and young people must be central to the development of a comprehensive PSE approach.
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We very much welcome the opportunity to participate in the Education and Skills Committee roundtable on Personal and Social Education (PSE). This is a subject of increasing priority for the NSPCC and many other organisations with which we work.

As the NSPCC, our remarks are focused on the role which PSE can play in child protection. We believe good PSE is critical to the preventative agenda. It can teach young people about healthy relationships, abusive behaviour, online safety and staying safe. It helps them develop their understanding of what is right and wrong and the skills to ask for help.

### About NSPCC Scotland

We are working with partners to introduce new child protection services to help some of the most vulnerable and at-risk children in Scotland. We are testing the very best intervention models from around the world, alongside our universal services such as ChildLine , our *Speak out. Stay safe* school service and our adult helpline.

Abuse ruins childhood, but it can be prevented. That's why we're here. That's what drives all our work, and that's why – as long as there's abuse – we will fight for every childhood.

## PSE in Scotland

Guidance on the delivery of Relationship, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) education was published by the Scottish Government in 2014<sup>1</sup>. However, anecdotally, teachers tell us that they often do not have sufficient knowledge or confidence to deliver this vital aspect of education. Good practice is out there; often schools, or clusters of schools, develop their own materials and lesson plans to tackle issues such as bullying; online safety; sexting and pornography, but more leadership is required at a national level.

A recent longitudinal study by Dr Deborah Fry at the University of Edinburgh into new teachers' attitudes and confidence on dealing with bullying and child protection in Scotland<sup>2</sup> found that, despite a strong desire from new teachers, initial teacher education was inconsistent not comprehensive on these issues. Similarly, that research recommends the need for continuing professional development and whole school approaches.

Generally, it is unclear what the reality of PSE/RSHP delivery is across schools in Scotland: its content or quality; how confident teachers feel in delivering it; or, importantly, what children and young people need and want to talk and know about.

Despite many Scottish Government policies pointing to its importance (for example, the CSE national action plan; Pregnancy and Parenthood in Young People strategy; Equally Safe) there has been insufficient national attention paid to the delivery of RSHP itself.

Children and young people have the right to high-quality healthy relationships education. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child remarked in its recent concluding observations that it was concerned that relationships and sexuality education is not mandatory in all schools and recommended that the UK ensure that meaningful sexual and reproductive health education is part of the mandatory school curriculum, including age appropriate information on matters including the prevention of sexual abuse or exploitation including sexual bullying<sup>3</sup>.

We want to see improved, consistent, high-quality, age-appropriate open and discursive RSHP delivered across schools in Scotland. This should give children the opportunity to learn about and explore topics like safety, respect, consent, stereotypes, equality and rights.

The NSPCC supports mandatory PSE in schools. We are aware that Scotland has a non-statutory curriculum but nevertheless we feel that there is a strong rationale for doing all we can to place significant emphasis on PSE, giving it parity with other subjects. Similarly, it is vital that improved PSE is delivered not just in classrooms, but is supported by a whole-school approach which creates safe and inclusive environments for children.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government (2014). Conduct of Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood Education in Schools, Edinburgh: Scottish Government, available at: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2014/12/8526>

<sup>2</sup> Forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> UN CRC Committee's Concluding Observations, p16. Available at: [http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/GBR/CRC\\_C\\_GBR\\_CO\\_5\\_24195\\_E.docx](http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/GBR/CRC_C_GBR_CO_5_24195_E.docx)

## Children's online safety

PSE needs to reflect the reality of children's lives and, in today's digital world, this must encompass consideration of children's experiences online.

The internet has a huge bearing on how children interact with each other in school, and outside. As part of our Net Aware research on social networks, a third of children reported seeing bullying or hate content on the social networking sites they used most frequently.

Last year there were over 25000 Childline counselling sessions about bullying, across the UK, including bullying online. Counselling sessions about online bullying have seen an 88% increase in the last 5 years (2011/12 – 2015/16), and is one of the most counselled online issues.

Similarly, 'sexting' has become an increasingly common activity, with many young people perceiving it to be a normal part of relationships. Both boys and girls in the NSPCC's Boys and Girls Speak Out study<sup>4</sup> talked about receiving sexually harassing texts, even if they were also aware of how to block these kinds of messages. Overall the research found that children were ill-equipped to deal with sexual harassment and very few felt comfortable talking about these issues with parents or teachers. Our research also suggests that sexting is not a gender neutral phenomenon, and can be coercive, and linked to harassment, bullying and even violence<sup>5</sup>. The sexting advice pages on the Childline website received over 180000 views last year; the most viewed page on the website.

We are particularly concerned about the impact of pornography on young people's attitudes and behaviours. Research by the NSPCC and the Children's Commissioner in England, with over 1,000 young people aged 11-18, found that over half had been exposed to online pornography, with nearly all of this group (94%) having seen it by age 14<sup>6</sup>. Many young people stated that they perceive pornography to be an accurate representation of sex; with just over half of boys and four in ten girls believing that what they have viewed is realistic. Worryingly, many girls expressed concern that pornography changes boy's attitudes towards females and impacts upon their understanding of sex and relationships.

PSE has a fundamental role in exploring these topics, supporting young people to stay safe and free from harm in their relationships, both online and offline.

## NSPCC activity in this area

Across the UK, the NSPCC is involved in a number of activities to support children's education.

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<sup>4</sup> Renold, E. (2013). Boys and girls speak out: a qualitative study of children's gender and sexual cultures. London: NSPCC. Available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/2013/boys-girls-speak-out/>

<sup>5</sup> Ringrose, J. et al (2012) A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting'. London: NSPCC. Available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/qualitative-study-children-young-people-sexting-report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Martellozzo, E. et al (2016) "I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it" London: NSPCC. Available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/2016/i-wasnt-sure-it-was-normal-to-watch-it/>



In Scotland, and across the UK, we offer our *Speak out. Stay safe.* programme free to all primary schools. The programme, delivered through assemblies and workshops to primaries 1-7, teaches children essential child protection information in a lively and interactive way. The programme, which meets all of the health and wellbeing outcomes under the Curriculum for Excellence, helps pupils feel empowered to recognise abuse and know how and where to get help.

**We would be delighted to arrange a visit to *Speak out. Stay safe.* for Members to observe the programme being delivered in a primary school in their local area.**

We are also undertaking work to support this process by developing children led solutions in Wales, developing a 'keeping safe' project for schools in Northern Ireland with funding from the Department for Education in England, and developing a framework where schools can spot normal, age appropriate behaviour from risky or harmful behaviour.

### **Conclusion**

We welcome the Education and Skills Committee's consideration of PSE, and would stress the critical role that high-quality and consistent PSE plays in helping children and young people keep safe, and preventing abuse and exploitation. However, the delivery of PSE appears inconsistent across Scotland and more clarity and leadership is needed around what our expectations are of this vital aspect of the curriculum. Finally, children and young people's views should be at the forefront of any developments in this area.