

Use of Vocabulary in Primary Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)

Why name sexual parts?

School is a place where all children should be able to develop good communication skills, confidence, positive body image and strong personal safety skills. RSE is one vehicle for enabling children to develop these skills in a safe and supportive environment. We know that having names for things is a way we can comfortably bring them into our experience and feel connection with them and control over them.

For many adults (teachers, parents, carers and governors included) the use of vocabulary to describe the human body and in particular the sexual parts of the human body is a sensitive topic. Many people personally feel uncomfortable using particular words and are anxious that teaching scientific words for sexual parts to children may challenge their innocence. However, the sensitive, age-appropriate use of scientific vocabulary for sexual parts can contribute to positive body image, open discussion and questioning and the development of strong personal safety skills.

All schools aim that children will learn to value themselves and their bodies, communicate their feelings and emotions, engage in positive and rewarding relationships and to keep themselves safe. The sensitive, age-appropriate use of scientific vocabulary for sexual parts supports these aims.

The basic skill of being able to confidently name parts of our own bodies without feelings of embarrassment or shame is one of the key building blocks needed to achieve each of these aims. Feeling connection and confidence with our own bodies contributes to a positive body image, a feeling of ownership and control and is the basic mechanism for being able to communicate about our bodies.

The DfE Guidance for Relationships Education, RSE and Health Education (2019) states that as part of primary Relationships Education children should learn the following as part of the 'Being Safe' area of work:

*** How to reports concerns or abuse, and the vocabulary and confidence needed to do so**

It is therefore part of the statutory curriculum for all schools that children learn the names of body parts and how to talk confidently about these to trusted adults. Learning the names for sexual parts is a protective factor.

The following extract from the Sex Education Forum's publication, 'RSE for Primary Aged Children' 2002 describes the importance of using agreed, 'scientific' terms when describing parts of the body:

'Research with children has shown that they are often confused in their understanding of their bodies and how they work. It is important that teachers use correct terms when introducing new topics. Family names or common names (for sexual parts) can be acknowledged, but it is good practice to use words such as ovum and sperm (new terms for new concepts). Early and accurate naming of children's body parts is vital.

If children haven't been equipped with the words for parts of their bodies and have picked up the message that adults don't talk about them either, how can they be expected to describe them to an adult if they need to? This has serious implications for child protection.

Boys' genitals do generally get named, even if the words used are family names or slang, at least it is acknowledged that they exist. In comparison, girls' genitals often don't get named. This absence deprives girls of a comfortable language about themselves. If they are to develop a positive sense of their bodies as a source of pride and pleasure, sexual as well as reproductive body parts should be part of their vocabulary.'

Key Message: The consistent use of age-appropriate scientific vocabulary throughout the school contributes to positive body image, open discussion and questioning and the development of strong personal safety skills.