



KS1-5

Addressing misogyny, toxic masculinity and social media influence through PSHE education

Guidance

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Addressing misogyny, toxic masculinity and social media influence in PSHE education

Understanding the issues and risks:

Schools are increasingly concerned about the impact of online influencers that promote misogynistic rhetoric. This content can be permissive of: discriminatory behaviours and attitudes (including racist, antisemitic, homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic attitudes); sexual harassment and abuse; abuse in relationships; and victim-blaming narratives.

The entry point for young people's first engagement with such content can often seem quite superficial, but social media algorithms can then lead them to increasingly problematic and extreme content.

This all comes at an age when young people may be particularly insecure and vulnerable to persuasive narratives. For example, much of this content taps into insecurities about body image and agency. The focus on money, success and power also plays on financial and status insecurities that may lead to risky and even illegal behaviours.

Women and girls in particular are put at risk by narratives that normalise sexual harassment and abuse, promote unhealthy relationship behaviours and victim blaming. Similarly, the sharing of homophobic and transphobic content by some influencers can inform behaviour and attitudes towards LGBT+ young people in schools. Toxic masculinity is also harmful and restrictive to boys and men. Promoted stereotypes contribute to existing narratives that restrict and undermine help-seeking – especially in relation to mental health and emotional wellbeing. Some online spaces even direct young people towards other harmful content, including content that promotes self-harm and suicide.

In some extreme circumstances, boys can also become radicalised via involvement in forums and communities that promote and celebrate violent behaviours, including rape, child abuse and terrorist acts.

PSHE education should primarily be used as preventative education, providing a foundational understanding from an early age about healthy relationships, respect, self-esteem, digital literacy, economic wellbeing, critical thinking, and recognising and challenging negative influences. And, importantly, it should explore the links between these areas. This is crucial for safeguarding and building resistance to problematic narratives (as well as the influencers and algorithms that deliver them so effectively).

Of course, education is only one part of the solution, but it is a key part. There are essential efforts – for example through the Online Safety Bill – to make aspects of the digital landscape safer for children, but technical solutions must be complemented by human solutions that emphasise respect, equality and diversity.

Read on for advice on how to cover these issues through PSHE education, including recommended teaching resources.

The PSHE Association is the national body for personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education. A charity and membership organisation, the Association supports a thriving community of schools and teachers with resources, training, advice and guidance:

www.pshe-association.org.uk/membership

Teaching about these topics safely:

- **Avoid focusing the lesson on specific influencers, websites or groups that promote harmful attitudes.** This is important, as you cannot assume even the most popular influencers are known by all pupils. Speaking about a specific influencer or influencers might prompt suggestions from students of additional, less well known influencers, and encourage those previously unaware to check them out – thereby providing a potentially inspiring role model and affecting how advertising and algorithms influence their future viewing. Speaking in general terms also helps pupils to understand that this advice applies to any problematic influencers in future, not just those currently causing concern.
- **This should be delivered by appropriately trained, prepared teachers using safe, effective materials:** Anyone teaching this complex content should be given the training and pedagogical understanding to teach it safely and well.
- **Establish a safe learning environment:** establishing a safe learning environment with pupils before teaching takes places is crucial.

Relevant guidance and training:

- See [our guidance on handling complex issues and creating a safe learning environment](#)
- Our [interactive PDF posters](#) outline key steps and best practice principles to help you create a safe learning environment and teach PSHE education safely.
- [We have a range of online and face-to-face CPD options](#) covering all aspects of leading, planning and teaching PSHE education (including RSHE), as well as topic-specific learning on everything from sexual harassment to mental health.
- See our [free online course for trainee teachers](#) on the fundamentals of safe, effective practice.

Addressing these issues through KS1 and KS2 PSHE education

Tips for laying the foundations at key stages 1 and 2:

- With younger pupils, the aim is to develop respectful attitudes by focusing on learning that supports inclusion and belonging rather than covering specific types of discrimination, such as misogyny.
- At key stage 1 this might include exploring how everyone is equal and deserves to be treated with respect. Also, recognising and celebrating people's similarities and differences.
- This may extend to learning about stereotypes in early key stage 2, including gender stereotypes and how these can be unfair.
- Then at upper key stage 2, pupils could explore how these stereotypes can have negative effects on a person's behaviour, aspirations, and feelings about themselves.
- Teaching should also reflect younger children's early experiences online and begin to develop digital literacy skills to identify trusted sources, false information, and negative influences.
- This will all help to prepare pupils for more specific learning about discrimination (including discrimination based on gender) in the later primary years and in secondary school, as they access digital platforms with increasing independence.

Statutory guidance at primary phase:

These topics are included in the DfE [statutory Relationships and Health Education guidance](#) for KS1 and KS2 as follows:

Relationships education

Respectful relationships

- the importance of respecting others, even when they are very different from them (for example, physically, in character, personality or backgrounds), or make different choices or have different preferences or beliefs.
- that in school and in wider society they can expect to be treated with respect by others, and that in turn they should show due respect to others, including those in positions of authority.
- what a stereotype is, and how stereotypes can be unfair, negative or destructive.

Online relationships

- that people sometimes behave differently online, including by pretending to be someone they are not.
- that the same principles apply to online relationships as to face-to face relationships, including the importance of respect for others online including when we are anonymous.
- how to critically consider their online friendships and sources of information including awareness of the risks associated with people they have never met.
- Being safe
- how to report concerns or abuse, and the vocabulary and confidence needed to do so.

Health education

Internet safety and harms

- why social media, some computer games and online gaming, for example, are age restricted.
- that the internet can also be a negative place where online abuse, trolling, bullying and harassment can take place, which can have a negative impact on mental health.
- how to be a discerning consumer of information online including understanding that information, including that from search engines, is ranked, selected and targeted.
- where and how to report concerns and get support with issues online

Developing this learning through PSHE education at key stages 3, 4 and 5/post-16:

- Statutory RSHE can help schools to address this as part of their wider PSHE education curriculum as it addresses a range of topics, including treating each other respectfully; online and media influences; identifying discrimination; and seeking support, including in relation to radicalisation.
- While the statutory guidance does not extend to post-16 settings, schools and colleges are encouraged to support students by offering these subjects. The [PSHE education Programme of Study](#) outlines what can be covered at key stage 5/post-16.

- The [statutory RSHE guidance](#) gives schools an outline of what they need to cover, and the important knowledge that pupils should acquire, but PSHE education must also equip pupils with the skills and attributes to apply this understanding in the real world.
- The [PSHE education Programme of Study \(KS1-5\)](#) and [Programme Builders](#) exemplify how to integrate the statutory content into a comprehensive PSHE education programme.

Statutory guidance at secondary phase:

These topics are included in the DfE statutory Relationships, Sex and Health Education guidance for KS3 and 4 as follows:

Relationships & Sex education

Respectful relationships, including friendships

- how stereotypes, in particular stereotypes based on sex, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation or disability, can cause damage (e.g. how they might normalise non-consensual behaviour or encourage prejudice).
- that in school and in wider society they can expect to be treated with respect by others, and that in turn they should show due respect to others, including people in positions of authority and due tolerance of other people's beliefs
- the legal rights and responsibilities regarding equality (particularly with reference to the protected characteristics as defined in the Equality Act 2010) and that everyone is unique and equal

Online and media

- their rights, responsibilities and opportunities online, including that the same expectations of behaviour apply in all contexts, including online
- about online risks, including that any material someone provides to another has the potential to be shared online and the difficulty of removing potentially compromising material placed online
- what to do and where to get support to report material or manage issues online
- the impact of viewing harmful content

The statutory guidance also requires that young people are made aware of 'relevant legal provisions when relevant topics are being taught', including:

- violence against women and girls
- extremism/radicalisation
- hate crime

Health education

Mental wellbeing

- how to critically evaluate when something they do or are involved in has a positive or negative effect on their own or others' mental health

Internet safety and harms

- the similarities and differences between the online world and the physical world, including: the impact of unhealthy or obsessive comparison with others online (including through setting

unrealistic expectations for body image), how people may curate a specific image of their life online, over-reliance on online relationships including social media, the risks related to online gambling including the accumulation of debt, how advertising and information is targeted at them and how to be a discerning consumer of information online.

- how to identify harmful behaviours online (including bullying, abuse or harassment) and how to report, or find support, if they have been affected by those behaviours.

Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) 2022 statutory guidance

- The statutory KCSIE guidance stresses that *'schools and colleges play a crucial role in preventative education'* and that this is most effective in the context of a whole school approach that *'creates a culture of zero tolerance for sexism, misogyny/misandry, homophobia, biphobic and sexual violence/harassment'*.
- Regarding the curriculum, KCSIE outlines the importance of *'a planned programme of evidence-based RSHE delivered in regularly timetabled lessons and reinforced throughout the whole curriculum'* and that *'such a programme should be fully inclusive and developed to be age and stage of development appropriate'*.
- KCSIE lists the areas of statutory RSHE of key importance to safeguarding. These are also particularly relevant to addressing toxic masculinity and misogyny in the classroom:
 - ◇ healthy and respectful relationships
 - ◇ boundaries and consent
 - ◇ stereotyping, prejudice and equality
 - ◇ body confidence and self-esteem
 - ◇ how to recognise an abusive relationship, including coercive and controlling behavior
 - ◇ the concepts of, and laws relating to - sexual consent, sexual exploitation, abuse, grooming, coercion, harassment, rape, domestic abuse, so called 'honour'-based violence such as forced marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), and how to access support, and
 - ◇ what constitutes sexual harassment and sexual violence and why these are always unacceptable
- The KCSIE guidance also reminds us that all schools are subject to the Prevent duty, meaning they must have *'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism'* and that *'The Prevent duty should be seen as part of schools' and colleges' wider safeguarding obligations'*. KCSIE advises that *'designated safeguarding leads (and deputies) and other senior leaders in schools should familiarise themselves with the revised Prevent duty guidance: for England and Wales, especially paragraphs 57-76, which are specifically concerned with schools (and also covers childcare)'*.

Teaching resources and related learning

- Teaching about consent and healthy relationship behaviours counters messages that normalise unhealthy relationship behaviours. See:
 - ◇ [Key stage 1-2 guidance and lesson pack on teaching about consent](#)
 - ◇ [Key stage 3-5 guidance and lesson pack on teaching about consent](#)

- ◇ [Key stage 1-2 'Changing and growing up' Medway Public Health lesson pack](#)
- ◇ [Key stage 3-4 'Relationships and Sex Education' Medway Public Health lesson pack](#)
- ◇ ['Relationships Expectations' lessons from the BBFC that explore media influence](#)
- This teaching should be linked to learning about mental health and emotional wellbeing in both primary and secondary phase, as influencers prey upon young people, with challenges relating to their self-esteem and mental health. See:
 - ◇ [Key stage 1-2 guidance and lesson pack on teaching about mental health and emotional wellbeing](#)
 - ◇ [Key stage 3-4 guidance and lesson pack on teaching about mental health and emotional wellbeing](#)
- Some influencers combine discriminatory content with messaging about the importance of acquiring wealth and material possessions. This messaging is often aimed at those experiencing or concerned about unemployment or financial difficulties. It is therefore important to ensure that the economic wellbeing aspects of your PSHE education curriculum help young people to recognise pathways to careers, identify strategies to support their financial wellbeing in the future and to challenge economic misinformation presented by influencers.
 - ◇ See our [Programme Builders](#) for when and where to plan and teach this content

