
A CRITIQUE OF

**LIBERAL APPROACHES TO
RELATIONSHIPS AND
SEXUALITY EDUCATION**



Summary

Reviews of Relationships and Sexuality Education are underway in Ireland. This paper is a critique of liberal approaches to sex education, by which we mean an approach that teaches that consent is the only necessary condition a couple need fulfil before having sex with one another. We believe this approach is not compatible with true human flourishing and it is not an approach most parents would favour being taught to their children. We believe sex education should offer children and teenagers a model of sexual behaviour that includes a stress on consent but goes beyond this and emphasises the importance of the relational aspect of sex. We believe this is more compatible with human flourishing and the good life.

A liberal approach to relationship and sex education is now common in Ireland north and south. Typical of the approach is the work of Prof. David Archard whose contributions and publications have carved out an influential case to the professional public and to policy makers in Northern Ireland.¹ A similar outlook informs the *Spotlight* report to the Oireachtas Education Committee.² We will also look at this. It was written by Dr Ann Nolan, Senior Parliamentary Researcher (Social Science) at Leinster House. We will examine their work as representative of the liberal view of sex education overall. The liberal approach stresses value neutrality so that the educational experience of the student will be free from as many normative values as possible. Nevertheless, the liberal approach cannot escape value judgement. This is clear from the fact that, for Archard and Nolan, education has a particular goal or purpose, hence RSE must contribute to that purpose. The purpose they envisage is that of producing informed and conscientious members of society who are capable of making their own decisions in sexual matters. This outlook in turn presupposes as values:

1. the maximization of happiness for the students
2. freedom of choice, and
3. the good for society in having such educated young people making their own sexual choices.

In other words, they make a normative value out of free consent, but do not go any further than this. As we shall see, this represents a value judgement that consent is sufficient to legitimate any sexual activity, and one wonders what parents would think about this being taught to their children.

What liberal models of RSE in fact espouse is a classical utilitarian ethic and an individualistic anthropology. The utilitarian ethic makes no proper attempt to nurture the formation of character in young people, but rather seeks the maximization of happiness. This failure to form character in education conflicts with the value of freedom of choice; since, if students have not been given any guidance in sexual matters other than maximising their own happiness within the constraint of respect for others, then they are ill-equipped to make judgements on the kinds of relationships they form and in turn about the kind of sexual activities that will lead to their flourishing. Not only that, it is unclear how such an RSE programme can measure its own success, since if consent is sufficient there are scenarios wherein people can consent to what does not make them happy.

All of this brings us to the problematic anthropology of contemporary liberal approaches, and it is such that they envisage humans as nothing more than isolated individuals whose relationships need only be transactional (the guiding question in this case being: what do I get out of it?). The transactional nature of human relations, and in this case sexual relations, is clear from the fact that no scrutiny is given to the kind of relations involved and often little provision is made for relationship education (indeed, as mentioned, Archard and Nolan make no normative claims about relationships);

1 See, for instance, Archard, D., 'How Should We Teach Sex?', *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (1998), 32:3, pp. 437 – 449.

2 Nolan, A. *Spotlight: School-based relationships and sexuality education (RSE): Lessons for Policy and Practice* (2018).



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rather all is licit so long as a minimal notion of consent and avoidance of harm are affirmed. Hence, consenting transactions are held to be enough to have a flourishing sexual and emotional life; they are consumers (of each other's sexuality) and need not be participants in a properly mutually reciprocal relationship. This is a flawed view of humans that does not recognize the full nature of the person as living in community with others. The relational aspect of being human is essential to us, and accordingly the indispensability of human relationships cannot be overlooked in the education of our young in this respect. Thus, a better model than the liberal one for RSE is required, one which recognises the fullness of the person and his or her relationships.

'Morally-neutral' sex education

The task of delivering a course with a significant moral content in a contemporary State-funded school is a difficult one. This is because a greater degree of pluralism and multiculturalism in a society often leads to greater disagreement about moral norms and judgements of value. With greater plurality and hence disagreement about moral norms, delivering a course heavily laden with such norms is seen as problematic; for inevitably there will be both parents and students whose moral context diverges from the norms propagated in the classroom. Hence, it is assumed that the State in turn cannot endorse one moral outlook over another, and so when it comes to formulating a policy towards relationships and sex education (RSE) in State-funded schools, such a policy must not favour one moral outlook over the other.³ But this leads to a highly individualistic moral outlook, one that is certainly not value neutral but highly contentious, as we shall see.

Significant voices within the discussion of RSE provision on the island of Ireland, both north and south, have argued that in order to ensure neutrality in the deliverance of RSE such a programme of education must be free of all moral content. These contributors have argued that in this respect the best approach to RSE provision in schools is a liberal and somewhat relativistic one.⁴

3 See for instance the Department of Education UK Draft Consultation July 2018 *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), and health Education*, p. 3: 'It must be taught sensitively and inclusively, with respect for the backgrounds and beliefs of pupils and parents while always with the aim of providing pupils with the knowledge they need of the law'; also *Relationships and Sexuality Education Guidance: An Update for Post-Primary Schools* (CCEA, 2015), p. 6: '... [T]he teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education should be inclusive of all differences regardless of race, age, disability, ethnicity, religion, culture, gender and sexual orientation'; Chapter 3 of this document is devoted to the inclusivity of RSE in the NI curriculum.

4 Cf Nolan, *Spotlight*, pp. 4, 7 – 8, 35, 49, and Archard, 'How Should We Teach Sex?', pp. 437 – 449. Neither Nolan nor Archard offer any justification for the liberal outlook, they merely assume it and work within that paradigm.

The liberal approach to sex and relationships is such that everything is licit so long as it serves the individual's purpose and does not harm anybody else; this upholds the principle of classical liberalism that every individual should be free to do as they please so long as no harm comes to anyone else.⁵ Harm to another is typically taken to be measured on the basis of consent and this is so even when the action is one which would traditionally be taken to be harmful, but deemed acceptable if one consents to it.⁶

Relativism

The relativistic nature of this outlook is in the fact that there are no constraining moral norms other than the harm principle, i.e. the injunction not to harm another; and harm is a substantially subjective notion depending on how someone perceives that an action affects them. Hence, the acceptability of a sexual act is dependent on the degree to which the one who experiences the act perceives it as harmful. Accordingly, modern RSE policy discussions predominate towards endorsement of a liberal outlook (see for instance references to Nolan in n. 2 below): anything goes so long as it is self-serving and no-one is harmed. Defenders of this outlook maintain that this is the only value neutral approach because:

1. it respects the liberty of every individual to engage in his or her own private sexual activity with the only constraint being that they do not harm others
2. it does not endorse any absolute moral norms which may be inconsistent with other moral traditions.⁷

Thus, the modern liberal approach is assumed to be the one most conducive to value neutrality and the one most appropriate to a modern pluralistic and multicultural state.⁸

5 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Dent & Sons, 1962), pp. 72 – 73: 'The principle is that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others...The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign'.

6 Archard, *Sexual Consent* (Colorado-Oxford: Westview Press, 1998), p. 1: '... Consent makes a difference to whether some sexual activity is seen as immoral or not ... A sexual practice which is not consented to is immoral ... A sexual practice which is consented to is permissible. Whatever people do sexually as "consenting adults" should be allowed, even if the rest of us find a particular practice disgusting or shocking'; p. 3: 'Consent has been described as "morally transformative", as displaying a certain "moral magic" in the way that it can suddenly make an otherwise wrong action right'.

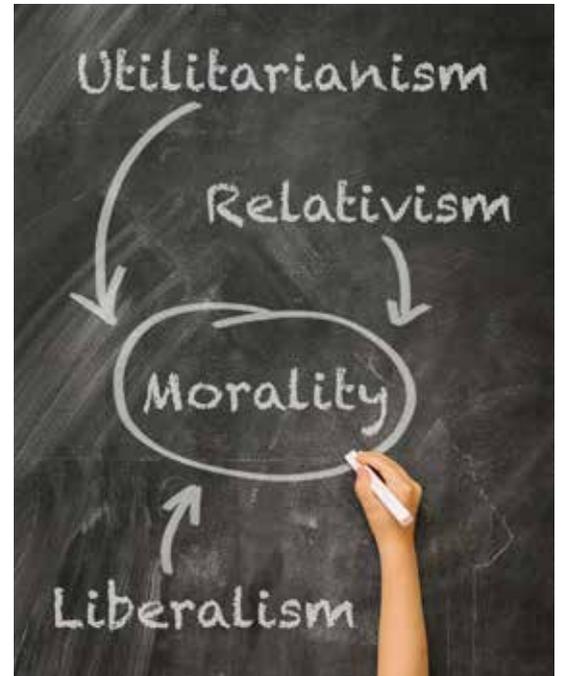
7 Nolan, *Spotlight*, p. 21, n. 90: "'Moral relativism" refers to the philosophical view that there is no objectively determined measure of 'right' or 'wrong'. As such morals are relative to the traditions, convictions, values and practices of an individual or a group of people. It is a non-judgemental philosophical position that urges people to act is [sic] a way that is right for them adopting an "each to their own" position'.

8 Archard, 'How should we teach Sex?', p. 448: 'We should be as free in our sexual lives as it is alleged we should be in every other part of our life. And we should teach sex in a way that is consistent with that ideal'.

Utilitarianism

We have already pinpointed two explicit features of modern RSE policy discourse viz (i) its commitment to classical liberal ideals and (ii) its endorsement of relativism. But these commitments are rooted in a more fundamental philosophical tradition. We have already focussed our attention on that tradition by considering classical liberalism. But classical liberalism is also connected with the moral position of utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism is the view that the moral worth of an individual's action is not intrinsic to that action but dependent on its utility; utility here is often taken to be usefulness either to the individual or to some group, and usefulness is often taken to be some form of happiness. Hence, the moral worth of an action is dependent upon the degree to which it produces happiness in the individual or for the group. Different views on happiness and utility abound in various branches of utilitarianism, but in Mill, whose account of liberalism we have already alluded to, it signified the higher order pleasures of human life, and certainly excluded any kind of harm. Hence, any action which causes harm to another is not good in which case one cannot endorse it morally. This kind of utilitarianism goes hand in hand with the liberalism that informs contemporary RSE policy discourse, and it manifests itself primarily in terms of concern about the typical consequences of unprotected sex, i.e. pregnancy and STIs.



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The associated conception of the human being is of a self-serving individual. Society on this account is not a natural feature of human inter-communicability; rather it is something that human beings, for whatever reason, have agreed upon. But in so agreeing upon society, humans must still be preserved in their liberty from society, in which case they must be free and able to exercise their self-serving freedom so long as they do not harm others; and this, as we have observed, is a key feature of modern liberal approaches to RSE: anything goes sexually so long as no one is harmed. This account of the human person manifests itself in the evolving view of RSE policy in the lack of consideration of any moral norms for the kinds of relationships in which one can engage.

Accordingly, the deeper philosophical bedrock of liberal RSE policy is an endorsement of some form of utilitarianism and a commitment to the view that humans (school students in this case) are radically individual.

Given his philosophical credentials, these commitments are brought out most explicitly in Archard's account of consent whereby the one who consents is put under an obligation with respect to that to which he or she has consented. Hence consensual sexual encounters are conceived of on the model of transactions with obligations to be met, not on the model of love and commitment with desires that are fulfilled.⁹

The consequences for modern RSE provision are striking; for insofar as this approach eschews any moral content to RSE (consent aside), no sexual act or sexual relationship can be taught as valuable (or not) in itself – everything goes so long as nobody is harmed (in the next section we will tease out this notion of harm). Consequently, the predominant approach is a fact based one which focuses on sexual health from two angles:

- the avoidance of physical consequences which result from sexual activity, e.g. pregnancy and STIs¹⁰;
- the pursuit of a 'healthy' sex life (the 'sex positive' approach) conceived of as one wherein sex can occur free from value judgement, in which the different means of sexual pleasure are explored and in the exploration of which the student has confidence.¹¹

“ The liberal approach also sees no overriding reason to promote fidelity or monogamy.”

Everything else typically assigned to RSE e.g. forming a long-term monogamous relationship, finding the right sexual partner, having children, the facts of life, belong in RSE, if at all, within a value neutral context as part and parcel of individual taste rather than anything essentially connected with relationships and sexuality. Some students and parents may want these more traditional features of sex and relationships, but not all do so. Hence, a wide-ranging value-free RSE policy cannot

prize the traditional approach to sexuality over a modern liberal one, in which case the traditional approach, emphasising the relational side of sexuality, must give way to modern liberalism which treats relationships as an optional extra and not something that ought to be sought. The liberal approach also sees no overriding reason to promote fidelity or monogamy.

Liberal approach not morally neutral

As an entryway into evaluating the liberal approach to RSE we shall begin by challenging the attempt to devise a value-neutral policy. While the liberal model strips value from all sexual practices so as to preclude any value judgement, it stresses the value of personal freedom and consent and indeed the value that these have as part of RSE. It is clear that Nolan and Archard value personal freedom and consent, otherwise they would not recommend them in their writings. Not only that, they clearly value these things as part of RSE policy, otherwise they wouldn't recommend them for the teaching of relationships and sexuality in schools. There is a tension then between the desire of a liberal approach to be value neutral and the fundamental values endorsed by that approach.

The reality is that it is impossible to devise *any* RSE policy without making value judgements; this is because the very task of devising such a policy is value-laden. It is envisaged that it would be a good

9 See Archard, *Sexual Consent*, p. 3 *et seq.*

10 Nolan, *Spotlight*, p. 27.

11 *Ibid*, p. 21, n. 90, 33, 37 – 38, 49; see also Pound *et al* 'What is best practice in sex and relationship education? A synthesis of evidence, including stakeholders' views', *BMJ Open* 2017; 7:e014791. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2016-014791, p. 5.

thing to teach children about relationships and sex, and whatever goes into that policy is envisaged by the policy-makers to be good. Those goods are in turn seen as values, and so the very act of devising a policy is run through with value-judgements. Hence, no RSE policy is value-free, despite protestations or desires to the contrary. One may wish instead for value-minimal (or in Nolan's case, value-relative) approaches; but these can hardly be presented as value-neutral approaches. And indeed the operative question in all of this is: what makes those values (of Nolan and Archard) preferable to other values?

Accordingly, we must consider whether or not the values espoused by the liberal approach are actually good ones; if they are not, then we ought to reject them and the approach that endorses them. In consideration of this, let us interrogate the liberal approach in a threefold manner:

- its stress on freedom and consent,
- its utilitarianism, and
- its individualistic anthropology.

Liberal individualism

Let us begin with freedom. Simply because some activity can be freely chosen does not entail that it ought to be chosen. Similarly, just because one freely chooses to do something does not mean that the person was right so to choose it. Outside the context of sex, the distinction between choosing and making the right choice is quite clear and uncontroversial; and indeed we often hold people responsible for making wrong choices. If we are to be as free in our sexual lives as we are in every other part of our lives, then we are to be just as responsible in our sexual lives as we are expected to be in our non-sexual lives. This means not simply engaging in a sexual activity because one can, but weighing up whether or not one ought to engage in that activity; and this is something one cannot do unless one is committed to certain values pertaining to sex and relationships.

“ A good example is adultery. A couple may have consensual sex, but one of them may be married to someone else. Even though the act is consensual, do we think it is right when it involves infidelity?”

Now, of course, liberals recognise that there is some constraint on freedom, that freedom whilst necessary is not sufficient for doing what is right. Minimally there is a line that cannot be crossed and this line, at least with regard to sex, is consent. Yet it is also the case that with full and free consent there can still be problematic and quite harmful sexual encounters which we (including parents) would not want for our children to engage in at any stage in their lives. A good example is adultery. A couple may have consensual sex, but one of them may be married to someone else. Even though the act is consensual, do we think it is right when it involves infidelity? If we believe it is wrong, then we are saying that consent alone is not enough to make a sexual encounter morally right in and of itself.

But what does a liberal approach have to say about this?

We should also consider situations wherein individuals have multiple consensual sexual encounters. While the individuals involved may have consented to the casual sex, they perhaps did not consent to being ignored, blocked, cut-off, in effect 'ghosted' afterwards.¹²

Do those promoting a liberal approach to RSE envisage outlining the sorts of scenarios cited above? If not, is their philosophy of RSE truly 'objective'?

Liberal approaches cannot advocate for a certain kind of relationship in which sex should occur, since even bad relationships involve free consent, and so can multiple and even concurrent ones. Hence the liberal model has no basis for avoiding the pitfalls and contradictions of a consent-only approach.

Failure to deliver the promised happiness

So much for the liberal focus on freedom, what about the commitment to utilitarianism, meaning the wish to maximise happiness; does the liberal approach fare any better when it comes to this, that is, does it actually meet its promise of maximising the happiness of young people?



To begin with, a commitment to utilitarianism undermines the value neutrality that the liberal approach seeks to uphold by making happiness a moral goal. Not only that, if the aim is to increase the happiness of young people, and the wider population as well, then schools ought to (for example) warn students about the association between early sexual initiation and poor outcomes, and also the apparent greater likelihood that women regret 'one-night-stands' (see below). If we are genuinely interested in teaching young people the 'facts of life', and how to maximise their happiness, then what justification can be given for withholding this information, even on the basis of a more permissive, liberal philosophy?

For example, a 2018 study by Young, H. *et al* called 'Sexual intercourse, age of initiation and contraception among adolescents in Ireland: findings from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Ireland study'¹³ found that 22.8pc of boys and 13.4pc girls were under 14 when they first had sex and this was associated with negative lifestyle behaviors, e.g. drug and alcohol consumption.¹⁴

Before going on, let us first consider these figures. The young people just mentioned were all well under the age of consent when they first had sex. Part of sex education must include clear guidance on the age of consent (16 in Northern Ireland and 17 in the Republic).

12 For details of one such experience that is emblematic of the phenomenon see <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/07/style/modern-love-he-asked-permission-to-touch-but-not-to-ghost.html?smtyp=cur&smid=tw-nytstyles>.

13 Honor Young, Lorraine Burke and Saoirse Nic Gabhainn, 'Sexual intercourse, age of initiation and contraception among adolescents in Ireland: findings from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Ireland study', *BMC Public Health* (2018), 18:362.

14 Young (2018), table 2.

The majority of the young people surveyed for the above study indicated that it would be easy for them to access contraception or were in fact accessing contraception. Easy access to contraception and its use would of course be a necessary recommendation for a liberal RSE policy, not only to avoid an unwanted pregnancy, but also to avoid an STI.

Nevertheless, despite easy access to contraception, if we look at the STI figures, we notice that they are on the rise among the youth. If we take the *Sexually Transmitted Infection surveillance in Northern Ireland 2017* published by the Public Health Agency as representative, it shows that new diagnoses of chlamydia, gonorrhoea, genital herpes simplex (first episode), genital warts (first episode) have increased from previous years. Within the female population it was women in the age group of 16-24 who were consistently the worst affected, whereas in males it tended to be those in the 20-34 age bracket.¹⁵ So young women having just reached the age of consent are in fact suffering from the sexual culture engendered by a liberal approach to sex and relationships (young men too suffer, though at a later stage).



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Not only that, there is a significant body of research which shows that casual sexual encounters at an early age with multiple partners can lead to negative health outcomes in: psychology (suicidality, risky behaviour, poorer sense of well-being)¹⁶, physical health (such as alcohol and drug abuse)¹⁷, and relationship health (such as a greater risk of divorce later in life).¹⁸ Furthermore, a very recent study has shown that having fewer sexual partners is associated with lower probability of STIs/STDs, unintended pregnancy and better relationship quality.¹⁹ Hence not only is the sexual liberty advocated by the liberal model of RSE bad for one's physical health, it also affects negatively one's mental health, and so is of very little utilitarian benefit.

In addition, a study which appeared in the October-December 2016 issue of *Evolutionary Psychology* found that women are considerably more likely than men to regret a one-night stand (34.2pc vs

15 Public Health Agency, *Sexually Transmitted Infection surveillance in Northern Ireland 2017* (http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/STI%20surveillance%20report%202017%20_0.pdf).

16 Bersamin, M., *et al*, 'Risky Business: Is There an Association between Casual Sex and Mental Health among Emerging Adults?', *The Journal of Sex Research* (2014), 51:1; Dubé, S., *et al*, 'Consequences of Casual Sex Relationships and Experiences on Adolescents' Psychological Well-Being: A Prospective Study', *The Journal of Sex Research* (2017), 54:8; Silverman, J.G., *et al*, 'Dating Violence Against Adolescent Girls and Associated Substance Use, Unhealthy Weight Control, Sexual Risk Behavior, Pregnancy, and Suicidality', *JAMA* (2001), 286:5.

17 Epstein, M., *et al*, 'Adolescent Age of Sexual Initiation and Subsequent Adult Health Outcomes', *American Journal of Public Health* (2018); Coker, A.L., *et al*, 'Correlates and Consequences of Early Initiation of Sexual Intercourse', *Journal of School Health* (1994), 64:9.

18 Teachman, J., 'Premarital Sex, Premarital Cohabitation, and the Risk of Subsequent Marital Dissolution Among Women', *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2004), 65:2.

19 Kahn, N.F. *et al*, 'Associations Between Patterns of Sexual Initiation, Sexual Partnering, and Sexual Health Outcomes from Adolescence to Early Adulthood', *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* (2018) 47:6, pp. 1791 - 1810.



20.4pc).²⁰ It also found that more men than women were more likely to regret passing up casual sex (28.9pc vs 3.6pc). The interesting thing is that the study was conducted in egalitarian Norway, which has gone further than practically any society in history, in seeking to erase the differences between the sexes and yet it still found different levels of regret between the sexes.

Another study, this time by evolutionary psychologist Anne Campbell from 2008, also found differences in levels of regret.²¹ For example, it found that women were much more likely than men to feel 'used', and much more likely to feel they had 'let themselves down'.

This sexual culture is not one of responsibility, but of irresponsibility whereby sex is seen to be nothing more than an enjoyable past-time as opposed to an extremely potent situation that unites two people at their deepest and most personal levels. These young people are engaging in sex at a young and quite formative age. Given the STI stats above, it is during those years whereby they are forming themselves as young people ready to embrace the world that they are being quite physically damaged by sex, especially young women, to say nothing of their psychological or moral outlook. Hence, the liberal approach to sexual relations can hardly be said to promote the happiness and well-being of our youth, in which case it is inconsistent with utilitarianism.

All of this is a symptom of a wider problem whereby sex is not seen as an activity uniting two people; rather it is seen as something that two individuals do for themselves for their own reasons – each to their own. And this is the radical individualism to which liberalism is committed. On the individualistic model, sex is seen as something that only accidentally unites two people; it divorces sex from any deeper relationship. But as we have seen, that divorce from a deeper relationship, or indeed consideration of any kind of relationship at all brings about a sexual culture in which young people are badly affected by STIs, they are having drunken underage sex, and indeed, given the number of sexual partners alluded to above along with the stories we have been hearing from the MeToo movement, many of those involved in a liberal sexual culture have lost respect for each other.

20 Kennair, L.E.O., *et al*, 'Sexual Regrets: Tests of Competing Explanations of Sex Differences', *Evolutionary Psychology* (2016).

21 Campbell, A., 'The Morning after the Night Before: Affective Reactions to One-Night Stands among Mated and Unmated Women and Men', *Human Nature* (2008), 19:2.

The liberal model is a failure both theoretically and in practice. Theoretically speaking it cannot hold together all of its philosophical commitments. Practically speaking young people are often harmed by a liberal sexual culture.

Conclusion

So, we have seen what the liberal approach is and its central problems. Outside of the context of the kind of high-level reasoning on behalf of liberalism offered by Archard *et al*, it is often assumed that 'sexual liberation' is an attractive position in light of the alternative. The alternative is often taken to be a lack of liberation, some form of repression.

In fact, the real alternative is a vision that places sex in a relational setting, in the case of Christians and other religious believers, that setting is marriage.



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Parents need to ask themselves what they want their children taught in schools. Do they want them to hear that consent alone is enough, or do they want them to be taught that sex should take place within a relationship. Most people today believe it is 'unrealistic' for people to wait until they are married before they have sex, but do we believe it is unrealistic to wait until they are in a relationship? If this goal has become 'unrealistic', then we must ask why, and whether this is a good thing?

The goal of liberal sex education is to treat relationships as an optional extra and concentrate on consent. Table 5 in the document 'Spotlight', which has been examined in this paper, outlines what it called 'Characteristics of Good Practice in RSE', and the word 'relationships' is mentioned once.²² We think most parents will reject this approach if they are made properly aware of what is being offered.

At the very least the two basic alternatives to the teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education must be thoroughly debated. What is the basic vision of the good of sex and relationships we want our children taught?

22 Nolan, A., *Spotlight: School-based relationships and sexuality education (RSE): Lessons for Policy and Practice* (2018).

About the Iona Institute

The Iona Institute promotes the place of marriage and religion in society. We defend the continued existence of publicly-funded denominational schools. We also promote freedom of conscience and religion.



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