



The Priory School of Our Lady Of Walsingham



RSE Policy (Relationship & Sex Education)

Reviewed by: Executive Committee

On:

Next review due: September 2024

Signature of Principal

Relationship & Sex Education (RSE) Policy

This Policy sets out Priory School of Our Lady of Walsingham's approach to RSE (Relationships & Sex Education) according to the May 2019 law, and June 2019 guidance, and the later guidances from the Department of Education (DfE) and Ofsted listed as Appendix 1.

This policy also applies to the EYFS.

The Policy is to be understood as part of the school's pastoral care and is closely linked to its Safeguarding Policies on Child Protection, Behaviour, Anti-Bullying & Fundamental British Values, Code of Conduct, Use of Internet Policy, and is set in the context of its Christian ethos. It has at its core the 1998 Human Rights Act, which states:

...the state shall respect the right of parents to ensure such teaching...is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.

It fully supports and complies with the DfE September 2021 Statutory Guidance on Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE).

The Policy is in 4 parts below:

1. Summary of the new legislation
2. Guiding Principles
3. RSE Team & Personnel
4. Schedule of implementation

Appendix 1:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Priory School RSE Curriculum | September 2023 |
|---------------------------------|----------------|

Appendix 2: Summary of official guidance & materials

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| 1. Statutory Instrument | 9 May 2019 |
| 2. Official DfE Guidance | 26 June 2019 |
| 3. Update to Guidance | 9 July 2020 |
| 4. Guidance to Plan RSE | 24 September 2020 |
| 5. Ofsted Guidance
"Inspecting Teaching of the Protected Characteristics in Schools" | 27 September 2020 |
| 6. Ofsted "Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools & Colleges" | 10 June 2021 |
| 7. Ofsted Research Commentary
"Teaching About Sex, Sexual Orientation & Gender Reassignment" | 6 July 2021 |
| 8. Official Guidance RSE (Secondary) | 13 September 2021 |

Appendix 3: RSE Consultation email to parents *8 June 2021*

Appendix 4: RSE Consultation email to parents *7 October 2022*

Appendix 5: Language Rules email to parents *23 June 2021*

1. Summary of legislation

The May 2019 law mandates parental consultation and stresses taking into account the religious background of pupils. It makes Relationships Education mandatory in Primary & Secondary schools, and also in Independent Schools, and Sex Education mandatory in Secondary Schools only.

Parents now have the right to request their children are taken out of such classes or lessons in secondary school, although the Headteacher can override that wish, but by completely undefined criteria except “the welfare of the child”.

2. Guiding Principles

If a school is to teach relationships, it first has to incarnate them in its actions and its operation, as well as through any theoretical teaching. Ofsted reports of 2012 and 2018 have said that Priory School already does this successfully, and this is built on in terms of this RSE Policy. This is most marked in our 2018 report where we received Outstanding – the highest grade – for the area of inspection that covers this issue:

Pupils’ personal development and welfare are outstanding. Staff care for and support pupils exceptionally well. The school has a family atmosphere and pupils thrive. The 2012 report noted also: Pupils’ spiritual, moral and cultural development is good overall. There are many strengths including the school’s successful efforts to establish positive relationships with pupils and their families.

The ethos of the school - as is stated on the website - is based on “academic rigour & pastoral care”. Its foundation is the Christian ethos of the unique and irreplaceable value of every individual as a child of God, where all the issues of people living and working together – issues of fairness, equity, effectiveness, cohesion – must be worked out in practice every day. The school’s previous Sex Education policy fully embodies this.

This Christian ethos in RSE rests on a central principle: that the school acts in loco parentis - parents delegate the education of the children to a school, but they do not relinquish it.

In light of this, it is the school’s policy that sex education in terms of sexual morality and intimacy, rather than issues of law or science which are covered in the curriculum (see 4, Implementation below), is the province of parents and families, and can only be delegated to the school if parents so choose. Relationships in terms of behaviour and conduct, particularly between the sexes, in the context of the social and communal life inside the school are of course dealt with via both the ethos and rules of behaviour but also specifically by sessions with senior students jointly or separately by gender, with specific reference to the Language Rule of the school (email June 23rd 2021).

In summary: matters relating to sex, sexual orientation and gender that are public and involve the law are the proper subject of class teaching. Matters, however, that involve family values and beliefs, and individual physical and psychological development are by their nature private and the province of the family. This public/private division is observed throughout our approach to RSE. There may be occasions when classes of mixed gender are appropriate for joint discussions as well as classes separated by gender.

However, the policy also recognises that for some parents, assistance would be helpful in the personal education of their children in such matters. Therefore, the school will supply and recommend trained sexual health advisers from the NHS for those families who wish to take advantage of these services.

The approach of the school is accurately encapsulated by a paragraph from the Ofsted Guidance of September 27th 2020:

Schools are at liberty to teach the tenets of any faith on protected characteristics (this includes religion, sexual orientation and gender reassignment). For example, they may explain that same-sex relationships and gender reassignment are not permitted by a particular religion. However, if they do so, they must explain the legal rights LGBT people have under UK law, and that this and LGBT people must be respected.

Recognising this, the Policy aims to ensure that rights under law and the persons that hold them are to be respected at all times; aspects of conduct and behaviour are subject to formation

according to values that must come from the family context, outside the school's remit. It follows the core tenet of the Christian faith in taking parents as the "primary educators" of their children, while at the same time the school sees consultation with parents as key to the successful delivery of RSE to cover the "public/private" aspects inherent in it.

3. RSE team & personnel

The RSE team will comprise four staff in both Junior & Senior School, incorporating the current PSHE teacher in the Junior School, the SENCO, the Head of Religious Studies, and the Principal. They are responsible for implementing the lessons for RSE, which as the government advises can be incorporated in PSHE lessons; in sourcing and advising on Sexual Health Advisers from the NHS and liaising with them and families; in maintaining consultation with parents; and overseeing and reviewing the RSE Policy at least once a year; and presenting an annual report to the Executive Management Committee.

4. Schedule of implementation

RSE will be taught, as at present, inside PSHE lessons for both Junior School and Senior School classes. These already have operated in the school but will now be timetabled weekly for senior and junior classes. The current Junior PSHE session will incorporate the appropriate aspects for Junior School pupils. Sex education is not mandatory for Junior Schools but for those parents who wish to carry it out, resources and advisors will be provided on request according to the external programme used by the school, issued by the company "Fertile Heart".

In the Senior School, both the current timetabled Civics lessons and also use of the daily "General Time" will be the periods on the timetable used for RSE. It will be closely integrated in lessons on Language and our Language Rules, as per a letter dated June 23rd 2021 sent to parents. This bears in particular on issues relating to the Protected Characteristics and anti-bullying, and the Ofsted "Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools & Colleges" June 10th 2021.

Authorised by the Principal, Mr David EJJ Lloyd

September 2023

Appendix 1

Priory School RSE Curriculum

September 2023




- Three (termly) themes (see below), with several topics within each
- **We decide on which topics to cover – always covered age appropriately and ever mindful of the faith context of our school**
- Use assemblies to introduce a topic with follow up in tutor time, lessons, co-curricular activities and general school life
 - Word of the Week and Question of the Week
 - Samples of evidence submitted by academic and pastoral staff
 - Topic, Word and Question of the Week shared with parents (for reinforcement at home) in weekly Newsletter
- Welcome Tuesday Talks in these areas
- Friday Junior School assembly will be used to reinforce the theme, word and question of the week

Health and Wellbeing	Relationships	Wider World Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The body / puberty / menopause 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • British values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal care/hygiene 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bullying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contemporary issues – global/local
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different types of intelligence, e.g. emotional intelligence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital citizenship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Money management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutrition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical upstanding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grooming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fake news
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Money matters (the economy)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy v unhealthy relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity – what makes me, me? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules/natural justice / law
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths and qualities (self-esteem) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reproduction and sexual health – science education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology / AI
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study skills 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DEIJ
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TV / Technology / Gaming 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unhealthy behaviours / addictions 		

- Use National Days:
 - Remembrance – 11 November
 - Anti-Bullying Week – w/c 13 November 2023
 - Safer Internet Day 2024 – Tuesday 6 February 2024 (theme to be confirmed)
 - Black History Month – October 2024
 - International Women’s Day – Friday 8 March 2024
 - Saints’ Days – Andrew 30/11, David 1/3, George 23/4 (also Shakespeare’s birth and death date) and Patrick 17/3
 - Other

Appendix 2

Summary of official guidance & materials

1. Statutory Instrument 9 May 2019

RSE REGULATIONS
MAY 2019 Statutory
2. Official DfE Guidance 26 June 2019

RSE Statutory
Guidance June 26th
3. Update to Guidance 9 July 2020

RSE Policy Sept
2022.pdf
4. Guidance to Plan RSE 24 September 2020
[Plan Your Relationships, Sex and Health Curriculum](#)
5. Ofsted Guidance 27 September 2020
“Inspecting Teaching of the Protected Characteristics in Schools”
[Inspecting Teaching of The Protected Characteristics in Schools](#)
6. Ofsted “Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools & Colleges” 10 June 2021
[Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges](#)
7. Ofsted Research Commentary 6 July 2021
“Teaching About Sex, Sexual Orientation & Gender Reassignment”
[Teaching About Sex, Sexual Orientation and Gender ...](#)
8. Official Guidance RSE (Secondary) 13 September 2021
[Relationships and Sex Education \(RSE\) and Health Education](#)

Appendix 3:

RSE Consultation email to parents

8 June 2021

From: Priory School <mail@prioryschool.org.uk>
Sent: 8 June 2021 15:48
To: [BCC'd to All Parents]
Subject: RELATIONSHIPS & SEX EDUCATION

Dear Parents/Guardians,

You may remember in January I wrote to you regarding new government regulations that came into force in 2019, on the subject of Relationships & Sex Education.

The subject was compulsory from Sept 2020 as follows:

ReLE in primary schools; RSE in secondary schools

However, due to the national lockdowns, its start date is now the Autumn Term 2021, ie next September. There is also a new curriculum for Health as well, so you may also have seen the acronym RSHE – Relationships, Sex & Health Education. Health Education is not mandatory for independent schools.

Much of the new curriculum builds on current practice in PSHE – Personal, Social & Health Education. But this new law sees a major change in teaching, in particular for Sex Education. This is still not mandatory in Primary Schools, and in Secondary Schools parents have the right to request their children are taken out of such classes or lessons, but the Headteacher can override that wish, but by completely undefined criteria except “the welfare of the child”.

It is of note that this leaves for Secondary pupils only Religious Education as the subject where a child can be withdrawn from lessons. It is clear I think why RE & Sex Education have traditionally been the subjects that were not compulsory, as they touch on profound issues of belief and conviction, and major issues of conscience. To make them mandatory would be to compel consciences. This is where the new law has been subject to the most enormous controversy, precisely for this reason. There have in fact been a number of major protests, such that there are now a number of law cases, many still proceeding, concerning the introduction of this new curriculum. Its effects will probably in the next few months come under the scrutiny of the Education Sub-Committee in Parliament, which has the duty to monitor the work of the Department of Education. It is a very fraught current area of education and law.

There are also many parts of the new curriculum – particularly those around internet safety, and online issues – which are excellent and uncontroversial. I have attached to this email the actual law – in the form of the Statutory Instrument passed in May 2019 – and also the Guidance issued by the Department of Education later that year in June 2019, which contains the details of what they would like to see covered. It is important to note Guidance is NOT mandatory – and schools may not follow it if they can give good reason why not.

Part of the law is that it is mandatory to consult parents on any introduction of a new policy under the Act. It is also mandatory to draw up a policy but every school must consult with its parents. That is, for the first time, laid down by law. That is exactly what I would like to commence with you by this email.

My purpose is to explain our approach to date; outlining how we think we should comply with the law; and giving a timetable within which we will do that. The management team (or Exec) has been working on this, with the aim that the broad principles to be proposed will be put before you as parents, as this email endeavours to do, so that by the start of the September term the shape of our RSE is clear to all. We very much want to hear from you – I hope after you have read the outline in this email of our overall approach, and the principles that guide us, you will have a basis on which to reflect, and comment, and propose - by email phone or personal meeting if Covid restrictions allow.

PRIORY SCHOOL – APPROACHES TO RSE TO DATE

1. As the Ofsted reports from 2012 and 2018 may disclose, our approach to relationships in school and indeed any teaching on them has meet with approval. This is most marked in our 2018 report where we received Outstanding – the highest grade – for the area of inspection that covers this issue: Pupils’ personal development and welfare are outstanding. Staff care for and support pupils exceptionally well. The school has a family atmosphere and pupils thrive. The report goes on: The proprietor has built a caring school with pupils’ needs at its heart. Staff have high expectations of pupils and of what they are able to achieve. Pupils benefit from an effective programme of personal, social, health and economic education. Speakers are invited to the school regularly so that pupils learn about others’ lives. They develop empathy and understand what it is like to live in modern Britain. As a result of the excellent standards of care and welfare, the school is a peaceful and calm haven.

2. The 2012 report noted also: Pupils’ spiritual, moral and cultural development is good overall. There are many strengths including the school’s successful efforts to establish positive relationships with pupils and their families. The ethos of the school - as is stated on the website - is based on “academic rigour & pastoral care”. Its foundation is the Christian ethos of the unique and irreplaceable value of every individual as a child of God. This, of course, does inform the values embodied in the school’s procedures and daily operation. We do see the school as a “mini-society” where all the issues of people living and working together – issues of fairness, equity, effectiveness, cohesion – must be worked out in practice every day.

In a small society that is a school, it is the living daily operation of these very social relationships that also educate children by experience as much as by teaching or classroom lessons, and many would say that is the most valuable and enduring effect of a school. Its aim is to be a safe, controlled environment in which the child can experience all these issues that he or she will meet in the larger society of adult life, but in a way that that is contained and controlled, and therefore the difficulties or dangers - of bullies, of bad example – can be surmounted with the support that the school environment can offer.

The point of all this is that a school, if it is to teach relationships, first and primarily has also to incarnate them in its actions and its operation, as well as through any theoretical teaching. And it may well be it is best taught overall through the former, through the experience of being in the school and all that means. That is largely what the Ofsted reports have said that we already do successfully, and I would wish to build on that in terms of our policy for the new RSE in terms of overall Relationships – the R in RSE.

3. This then brings us directly to the issue of Sex Education, which is the other part of the new RSE curriculum, the S part so to speak. The school has operated for many years with a very clear policy on this which is embodied in its Sex Education policy, also attached. The principles of our approach here are again based on the Christian ethos of the school, and the whole issue of how a small society like a school functions. I would immediately stress that this Christian ethos is not a question of the specific moral rules or beliefs of the Christian faith; but rather rests on a central principle in relation to the nature of families and the role of parents. You will probably be familiar with the phrase “in loco parentis”, a Latin phrase meaning “in the place of the parent”. It has always been the law of this country that parents delegate the education of the children to a school, but they do not relinquish it. Children are not the property of a school, much less a local authority or government department. The great Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 after the Second World War makes this crystal clear – a principle now in our laws via the Human Rights Act of 1998: In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions. I would add this is a principle shared by the other great faiths that now make up the religious profile of our society.

4. This has meant that we have held to the principle and policy that Sex Education is the province of parents and families, and can only be delegated to the school if parents so choose. We all have to recognise I believe that issues of sexual relationships, of intimacy, of sexual conduct and behaviour have developed over the centuries in society their own varying codes and rules, and are very much a part of personal and individual belief: in matters of sexual morality and relationships, three factors in relation to children must always be borne in mind: the values and beliefs of the child and the child’s family, the differing developmental aspects of children both physically and psychologically; and the differential aspects that pertain to boys and girls.

POLICY PROPOSAL

5. We have concluded that it is impossible to meet and accommodate all three varying factors if Sex Education is taught in the context of the classroom. Each family will have its own beliefs and children will bring their varying beliefs to the classroom. In any class the physical and more important psychological and maturational development of children may vary radically; and the gender issue of boys and girls in a co-educational school is very real. We therefore propose maintaining the overall current policy that Sex Education belongs in the family not the classroom, and the school will assist where parents wish and where its role “in loco parentis” is appropriate. It was this policy that was in place when we had our 2018 Ofsted inspection with the happy results quoted at the beginning.

6. On immediate aspect of this can be swiftly dealt with. Sex Education is NOT mandatory in Primary Schools. We have debated this in our executive meetings and have decided we will not be carrying out any Sex Education in the primary school. Mrs Kirby, the Head of the Junior School, is clear about this and she has the full support of the management. It is a sad fact that ideological campaigners have chosen this field of education as an area to persuade of their views and put materials in front of children that actually raise serious issues of safeguarding. The Department of Education itself has now formally warned against this in its supplementary guidance of September 24th 2020, clearly in response to the controversies that have arisen. But points below with regard to what the school can offer individual families would still stand in relation to primary school families as secondary, IF the family so wishes.

7. In Secondary schools RSE is mandatory but parents have the right to request withdrawal of their children in any part relating to Sex Education. The government recognises the delicate issues of conscience and parenting by maintaining this right of withdrawal. So we propose that while parents retain their current legal right to teach their children in this area as they see fit, if they wish the school to assist we would do that on an individual and confidential basis with child(ren) and family. Some parents or families may prefer an appropriate professional person to teach their son or daughter about these issues on this basis. What we will not do is carry it out in a classroom context, as we believe this is actually not only impossible given issues of belief, maturation and gender, but actually inimical to good Sex Education: there is a grave danger in detaching Sex Education from the family context and locating it in a classroom where, by that very act, it is taken out of a context of values and family relationships, and depersonalised and objectified, severed from its natural role inside the family. To support parents in this we will be developing resources we do not currently have in terms of trained personnel and support staff; but they will work with families, not in the classroom. That is the specific approach we propose.

8. We do think however, that there is a significant number of improvements we can make and meet through classroom teaching - for instance, the issues of physical and hormonal growth and development that could be dealt with by appropriate personnel to a class – boys and girls being approached separately. We have actually been concerned recently with some of the behaviour and more explicitly language used by children on their return from lockdown. I am writing to all parents separately on this as we do think immediate and helpful steps can be taken that also are linked to this whole issue of relationships. But the critical point is we would not use the classroom as an appropriate context to teach matters to do with Sex Education in relation to sexual practice, sexual morality or religious beliefs. This is and must remain the property and prerogative of each family, with its own beliefs and knowledge of its own children. It can be debated at the appropriate age; but to teach it in effect makes the school, rather than yourselves as parents, guardians of conscience. That is not the role or the purpose of a school as we see it.

9. This, however, is not quite what the government has in mind in its Guidance, attached. However, the law is quite clear. A school can teach according to its religious ethos: in adhering to the principle that the Christian faith sees the place for education as located in the family, and also bearing in mind that the private aspects of Sex Education belong in that context and not in the public, social environment of the school, we recommend to you as parents that we maintain that principle as the guiding light of implementing RSE. If through this consultation and by your consent and agreement we do so, we will have complied with the law on this matter and can then draw up the practical aspects of how we implement the new law in Priory School, and develop the resources to assist both you and your children as and when you believe it can be helpful in so doing.

This is necessarily a long email and I am very happy to discuss its contents and its ideas by email or telephone or meeting. I have already discussed these ideas with parents at various times and I am grateful to those parents – and staff – for their time and consideration. But we must extend this to the whole school community now, as the government requires. We will follow in due course with a full policy setting out the result of these discussions with you, and the specific measures we would advise putting in place. Over the next few months I do hope we can come to an agreement as to the guiding principles for this new area of the curriculum, and in that context frame the overall policy that we will enact thereafter. Kind regards, E J Matyjaszek, Principal

Appendix 4

RSE Consultation email to parents

7 October 2022

From: Priory School <mail@prioryschool.org.uk>
Sent: 30 October 2022 23:16
To: [BCC'd to All Parents]
Subject: RELATIONSHIPS & SEX EDUCATION

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I am writing to you as Parents of children who have been enrolled in Priory School the last 6 months about an important aspect of school life on which the law requires us to consult with parents.

It is a new area that schools have to cover since a change of the law in 2019. Its implementation was delayed by Covid in many ways, but we were able to write to and consult with parents very fully in the summer of 2021, and commence implementation of our policy in the academic year 2021-22, but we need to refresh that now with yourselves as new parents.

It concerns what is called "Relationships & Sex Education" or RSE in short.

You may have read about it in the press from time to time. Also, although the law was passed in 2019, Guidance as to its implementation has changed and updated several times since, so it is a very "active" issue for schools, authorities, parents and the Department of Education.

All the legal and other relevant references are contained in the attached RSE Policy, permanently on the school website for access. This policy may have to be updated from time to time, and we will write to you regarding this as regular consultation and communication with parents is part of the new law.

Prior to 2019 Sex Education was not mandatory for independent schools, and where it was "taught" parents had the right to withdraw their children from any such classes or sessions.

This changed in 2019 whereby Sex Education was folded into a larger framework covering Relationships, so becoming RSE. The Relationships part of this is mandatory for Primary & Secondary pupils. Sex Education is only mandatory for Secondary schools. It is not mandatory for Primary Schools.

All religious schools can teach RSE according to the tenets of their faith.

What we have done at Priory School is take the view that parents are the "primary educators of their children" and what is appropriate to be taught at school are those matters that pertain to the social and communal nature of the school, how boys and girls relate to each other in the public context of school, to understand their differences and their common bonds, and to learn how to respect, and relate to, each other. Issues of Relationships that are personal and intimate cannot be taught in the social context of the school as they cannot be taught without an expression of value, and that can only come from the home itself and will be individual to each family.

We do however recognise that for some parents the subject of intimate relations can be difficult to broach with children, and we can recommend trained advisers from the NHS who can carry this out with your children if you wish, on a 1-to-1 basis, taking their guidelines from what you want your children to learn.

The simple rule is : what is public or social in terms of relationships, how we treat each other, how we respect each other, what the law is, we teach in school. What is private in terms of personal relations, intimate relations or the expression of values that differ from family to family are to be taught at home, or within school by trained advisers that you as parents will instruct.

When we consulted with parents in 2021, we had a considerable response, the vast majority of which was in favour of the approach the school was taking. We had several very fruitful meetings and conversations with parents, that did lead to adaptations of the policy. We are very happy to repeat that process with yourselves as new parents. So please do not hesitate to make an appointment to discuss these matters if you would like to, or if you have any queries or requests or concerns on this policy or what we might be teaching your child.

Subsequent to the development and practice of our RSE policy, we also revised what we called our "Language Rules" which do embed the practice of mutual respect between all in the school community. This was contained in an email sent on June 23rd 2021. It has proved a very effective set of rules, and will be forwarded to you all after this email.

Thank you for your continuing support for the school.

Kind regards,
Edmund Matyjaszek
Principal

Appendix 5

Language Rules email to parents 23 June 2021

From: Edmund Matyjaszek
Sent: Wednesday, June 23, 2021 8:47 PM
To: [BCC'd to All Parents]
Subject: Language Rules

Dear Parents/Guardians,

As promised, I am writing to you about issues relating to the use of language in the school, and in social media communications between pupils

This is an important issue that goes directly to the heart of the school's ethos and also to current law. It forms a crucial part of our endeavour to educate and prepare your children for the world they must live in.

We found on return from lockdown in March quite a few times that the language being used both in social media and in the playground had deteriorated from what we knew in previous years. I have had several helpful conversations with some of you as you know.

There has always been an issue with derogatory terms used by pupils - every school has to deal with this - where one or more pupils attempt to establish dominance over, or dismissal of, another. These are expressions that focus on race, on gender, on sex and disability. Religious abuse also has reared its ugly head at times, although, thankfully, for the moment we have been spared this in our school.

There are also instances of what has been termed "slut-shaming" and "fat shaming", where a pupil is made the subject of group comment.

What all these terms share is that they are derogatory. They are meant to insult or diminish and wound. They are a form of bullying or denigration.

One can educate endlessly about respect and language and kindness, but as recent cases that have prompted new Ofsted guidance on sexual harassment in schools may show, any number of classes on respect and consent and relationships are worthless if perpetrators think they can get away with it. We have long had as one of our red lines of discipline that obscenities and such insults are always met with immediate sanctions.

There is no doubt in our minds that the two long lockdowns of the last 15 months have driven all to their computer screens and increased internet use, from which many habits, in particular of language, have been picked up. Much of the damaging and corrosive material available on films, YouTube, online gaming sites and other platforms can – and does – easily become established as normal behaviour for many children.

The law is very clear on this and in the adult world it can have a particularly damaging effect. As has been reported in the news media, careers in sport, the arts and in public life have been destroyed because of comments made on social media platforms. Use of such terms in the workplace has led to dismissal or court cases with high costs awarded. This is because there are certain characteristics protected by law: no-one may be discriminated against because of them. This list is taken from the Equality Act 2010 from the government website in A-Z order:

Age, Disability, Gender Reassignment, Marriage and Civil Partnership, Pregnancy and Maternity, Race, Religion or Belief, Sex, Sexual Orientation

Clearly, all the instances of derogatory language to which I have referred above fall within the above characteristics:

Disability, Race, Sex (or Gender), Sexual Orientation

The importance of this in the "real world" cannot be overstated. The hurt and distress caused by the use of derogatory terms has been well evidenced. With that in mind, we are setting a very clear standard for all to comply with. Already, all senior classes have had specific sessions delivered by Mrs Soar, Head of the Senior School, and myself on exactly this; Mrs Kirby, Head of the Junior School, will shortly be holding similar sessions with Years 5 and 6 pupils, as sadly evidence of such behaviour at that age has manifested itself several times this term.

Because of the wounding and belittling nature of such derogatory terms, and bearing in mind how the law specifically requires us to educate on this, together with the intent to ensure respect is shown by all, we will be focusing even more intently on the following rule:

When use of such derogatory terms is proven by two or more witnesses, immediate suspension will occur for one, two or three days depending on the severity of use or the level of intent or malice. There will be no mitigating circumstances.

The purpose of such a policy is quite clear: it is to make the penalties for such language so immediate that pupils will have a strong filter in their minds as to what is permissible in school time. We believe this will also help them to prevent themselves by the training they have in their school days from falling foul of the law in their adult lives because they will have learned at school such insults are to be completely avoided.

We have based this on the similar successful policy regarding mobile phone use in school: possession alone requires immediate suspension. The effect has been of this policy of zero tolerance that we no longer encounter the problem. We are looking to do the same with derogatory or belittling speech.

We trust we have your support in this policy and will ask your child(ren) to understand and adhere to it, as we have explained at school. We will revisit this regularly in terms of training the children in what is expected of them.

In addition, we do earnestly hope that you become acquainted as parents with what your children are doing online and the times of the day they spend online. There is also the very grave danger for younger children online of being subject to predators. We cannot stress how important it is that you know who your child(ren) is talking to, and what they are watching. There are also age limits restricting use of the following social media platforms, as follows:

Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok 13 years
WhatsApp 16 years

Moreover, Mrs Dale, Head of IT, has in the past held sessions for adults, and we would be happy to facilitate that idea if so desired.

One important footnote: many of the instances of social media use occur outside school time. That is the private realm of pupils of course. But if media use either affects pupils in school or is directed against pupils in school, then it falls within our rules as it affects matters in school.

If directed at another pupil, it will fall within this policy if proven, normally by print-outs of use of words.

We realise this new policy may not please everyone. But it has arisen as the direct result of considerable instances experienced the last few months, and we feel it is vital to the functioning of the school and the welfare of pupils and to re-embed respect for each other as a cardinal principle of Priory School, and is designed so that the prime purpose of the school – the studies and learning of the children – can always be safeguarded and assured.

We are now in the process of drafting this policy; it will be consistent with our existing Safeguarding Children, Conduct and Behaviour policies in particular, and of course will form part of the new RSE policy still being consulted on in terms of relationships.

Thank you for your understanding and support. Kind regards,

E J Matyjaszek
Principal