



Spotlight issue

Learning through the prism of faith and culture

The purpose of the spotlight issues series is to highlight themes or topics which have arisen across parental contributions. While these issues are reported across chapters, these short papers highlight key aspects for further reflection.

In every world religion there is a commitment to healthy, happy and safe relationships, the importance of family life, respect for others and the belief that every person should live life with dignity. Religious views on human sexuality can differ but teachings usually propose some sort of moral code which influence relationships, family life, sexual activities and practices; religious teaching would seek to ensure that children and young people learn this moral code in appropriate ways at an age-appropriate time.

The religious beliefs of parents will guide how they fulfil their role as their child's primary and most important educator, and this will include how they talk and learn about the topics of interest to the Chat. Parents who have a religious faith have talked about learning at home and views on learning at school through this prism of faith (a belief in God) and culture (the practices of the people within a faith). We have shared the views of parents who have a religious faith across all the chapters reporting on the Chat; this paper provides an opportunity to bring views together in one place.

In reporting on what parents have said there is discussion of learning at home, but it is parental views on the interface between faith and school-based learning that have been of greater focus in parental contributions.

Parents have been clear in our small group chats about the importance of faith, and their role in supporting their child to understand the beliefs of their faith and community.

As a practising Muslim I believe in the sanctity of marriage between a biological male and a biological female, and these are themes that I promote to my kids, so a lot of this very much has to do with faith and culture. It doesn't mean, just to reiterate, it doesn't mean I promote hate to any other community, obviously I have to teach them tolerance on the world we live in now, and we have to accept people from all walks of life.

However, I am going to promote to my daughter what our religious beliefs are.

(Group chat 20)

Parents have talked about how their faith and religious teaching helps them protect their child, particularly so when they must address influences out with the home.

As Christians we feel a great need to help our children process all they see and experience in the world through the lens of our faith. We do that with all parts of life as just a part of our day to day living. We do feel a particular need to do that well on some areas where culture has taken a very different view that it seems to feel the need to push on children.

(Survey response/parent of 6–8-year-old)

There are multiple things that they hear in school, from friends and other sources which differ from what our faith teaches us to hold to. Including hearing things we don't think are appropriate for their age. We try to give critical thinking skills as well as respect to respond to things.

(Survey response/parent of 6–8-year-old)

We teach everything within our Muslim community. We teach from the Quran. As we speak about relationships and things, in our Quran everything is explained. My daughter is studying the Quran. She has learned 15 of the Surah, small ones of one or two lines, they provide guidance and instruction. But children start with the small ones. And then this grows, and they learn more and more as they grow and study. Its comprehensive. So, at school they learn things like maths or physics, but for our life, we get that from the Quran, everything.

(Group chat 6)

It's hard to keep up. Society is changing but I want to uphold my own values.

(Group chat 36)

When parents have talked about the importance and value of faith and culture, they have done so with a pragmatic view, that their children need to be equipped to understand a world external to their family or community.

What your children learn, like through media, that might not be within your values, so we still want to be the people, as the parent, that teaches. But if something isn't within our values then we want them to understand what does go on out there, but that it might not be within our values. So, are we not trusting them to be intelligent enough? They are going to hear lots of different things. They will hear things; we can't imagine they won't. So, we can protect them from what's out there by giving them the tools to understand things, rather than keeping them 'in here' where we think it's safe.

(Group chat 29)

There are things that influence how much we can say to our children, and how much we can't. One thing can be our culture, where we come from and what it's okay to talk about and what it's not. And then also our allegiance influences what we can say and can't. But I feel as a parent, at the end of the day, we need to be thinking about the safety of our children. Are we going to be keeping the information away from them just because we want to conform to our culture or allegiance. Or are we going to give them the right information so that they can make informed decisions themselves. Might be a hard one for parents to balance but I think the best is to know what helps.

(Group chat 34)

Parents have talked about how the beliefs of their faith conflict with their perceptions of what is being taught at school.

However, in terms of topics such as relationships, sex and pregnancy, this is taught from a liberal/secular perspective. In many faith homes pre-marital relationships are discussed but marriage is the focus, and physical relationships are within the boundaries of marriage.

(Survey response/parent of 9–11-year-old)

I know a lot of Muslim parents who are against what is being taught in school, well I have to say I'm not against all of it. I don't mind my kids learning about LGBTQ because it's the society we live in. They need to know people are different, some kids have two mothers or two fathers. But not the sexual stuff. For a 10-year-old no.

(Group chat 9)

The children go to Islamic school, 5 days a week after school here. To learn Arabic and to learn about our religion. And they learn that family life is about the marriage of the man and the woman. The programme here, it's not what I would be teaching them, and not what I learned about when I was 15. At 7 I can't teach him some things, it's at a certain age. But not from 7, 8, 9. In my country, where I grew up, I learned about relationships and this stuff in high school, not primary school. At age 15 we started to learn this from school, and in books. That's a good age to know everything. But from 7, if the programme is about sex or people changing their gender, then no. I have to teach my kids my way. So, I need to be aware of the learning they are doing at school, what are they teaching them?

(Group chat 6)

There is more on what might be considered misconceptions about learning at school in the Spotlight issue: Myth, misconception, misinformation and disinformation.

Parents have shared concerns that children brought up within a faith may not be as ready for the school-based curriculum as their peers.

Our kids are not emotionally at the same stage as other kids might be because in our homes, in the family setting, our kids are not exposed to even their parents' intimacy or relationship, even as simple as hugging. So, they don't understand the details of heterosexual or LGBT relationships. They are not at that stage compared to their peers from a different background. We maintain a modesty in our home, and we like to keep it that way, it's what we believe and are comfortable with, in that modesty and privacy.

(Group chat 20)

Some parents want to provide all learning on the Chat topics at home, and do not support provision in school.

I do not know the calibre of people that will be providing the information to the children at school. I am also concerned about the beliefs and aims of these persons.

I am concerned that the information they may be given might conflict with our morals and culture. Hence, I prefer to be source of these information to my children.

I consider it my parental duties. Let kids be kids.

(Survey response/parent of 3–5-year-old)

Where a religious perspective is thought to be in opposition to more secular societal views, parents have talked about providing children with both perspectives.

As a Christian, I also explain that as part of my faith, we believe only a man and a woman can get married, although emphasise that this is a choice, and that people of the same sex do get married.

(Survey response/parent of 6–8-year-old)

Parents have said that they feel discriminated against in terms of their faith-based views and under pressure to accept what is perceived to be a secular agenda of inclusion.

I teach my son, regardless of what faith we follow at home, when you are a certain age, you make your own decisions but when you are under my roof these are the rules that we follow. However, this is what your religion states, but you must not discriminate, you have an opinion. So, we are constantly teaching our children 'don't discriminate' 'be inclusive' etc etc and yet I almost feel now that it's the heterosexual, religious communities, that are being shunned out, discriminated against – being told you must teach your children this or that.
(Group chat 9)

Parents told us they want non-religious people to understand that their children are taught to be kind, respectful and tolerant.

My husband and I are both quite conservative. But we would never be horrible to someone else because they don't think or feel the same way I do. I would like my kids to be the same, to be confident in themselves that they can make decisions, know how they feel, but that doesn't impact badly on how they interact with others.
(Group chat 12)

Parents can also be concerned that if their child shares a faith-based perspective they might experience negativity.

My concern is that my child would be punished or ostracised for our faith-based beliefs.

(Survey response/parent of 12 -18-year-old)

Parents have talked about how communication between home and school, respectful of faith-based perspectives, can have positive outcomes.

Overall, my child's school is very open to parents' questions, taking feedback and open to learning different approaches that would suit various pupils, numerous open discussions and workshops have been arranged for all parents and male parents and carers encouraged to attend. The most recent being menstruation. The school also arranged for girls and boys to be taught separately which I feel is positive, inclusive of faith and is more likely to result in parents' interest and co-operation and build rapport between staff and parents/carers, this was a really positive outcome for staff, pupils and families.

(Survey response/parent of 9–11-year-old)

Personally, I like when the school says this is what we are teaching and when and this is what we are using. With enough in advance, it makes you feel like if you have questions, or you are concerned then you have time to approach the school. but for families with a cultural or faith concern about what the school is teaching, maybe instead of a one size fits all, maybe give the content to the parents and we can decide if it's something we want to use, it's up to us to teach them alongside what we believe at home. Maybe if there was more feeling of choice there would be less resistance.
(Group chat 9)

During small group chats and via the national survey there have been parents that have challenged the idea that religious views should influence teaching and learning in school. This parent put it this way:

I am uncomfortable with any religious influence this curriculum. I do not want any information being missed or changed due to influences of any faith.
(Survey response/parent of 6–8-year-old)

For those parents with a religious affiliation, they have asked that consideration of their faith-based perspective be included when schools plan and deliver RSHP learning.

I also feel there is promotion of Inclusivity on LGBTQ, menstruation, pregnancy etc which is important but a lack of inclusivity on learning approaches in respect of gender and faith which could be applied. E.g. children of Islamic/Jewish/Catholic etc faith given opportunity to learn in same sex classes, education on how their faith practices apply to topics such as menstruation, pregnancy and birth, the importance of being inclusive and non-discriminative but also the right to have opinions valid to each individual respected. I feel constructive communication needs emphasised in how to have healthy discussions which validate all individuals' views that are varying but lessons in how to do these with respect and without discrimination.
(Survey response/parent of 9–12-year-old)

Maybe the school could recruit people and train them to deliver this learning who are Muslim too. So, people trained in this field.
(Group chat 36)

Can't we divide the curriculum so that our beliefs can be understood. It's not all delivered as 'one thing' so why can't the curriculum be divided in a way that still can be beneficial to a family where they are not comfortable with some of the detail but do want them to have the basic understanding for say things like social media, about understanding their body, the basic things they need for life. But not too much. You can involve parents and families in sorting this out. So, we don't feel like we have to withdraw consent for the whole curriculum.
(Group chat 20)

As we have discussed in other chapters of the Chat, parents have said that better home/school communication might ally some fears or address myth or misconceptions.

So, I come at my Catholicism from maybe a more modern perspective, I think there's certain aspects of the religion that are quite antiquated, particularly stuff around RSHP learning or LGBT education but there are legitimate concerns when you come from a different religion or culture. But it's the nefarious individuals that latch on those legitimate, small concerns, and they inflate them. You know we are quite transparent in Scotland. As a parent I can go online and see what's being taught in school. And those people that say things, they are sometimes using examples from other places, they don't want parents to know that its available for them to see, what's actually taught.
(Group chat 30)

In small groups chats and in open text responses as part of the national surveys parents whose children attend schools in the denominational sector have also talked about learning at home and at school, and how learning is informed by faith. Schools in the denominational sector can draw on teaching and learning materials from the national RSHP resource at www.rsHP.scot or from resources provided by the Scottish Catholic Education Service <https://sces.org.uk/health-relationships/> and here <https://sces.org.uk/equality-learning-and-teaching/>

There are parents who have talked positively about learning in denominational schools when it comes to topics of interest to the Chat; teaching and learning is seen as foundational for a life guided by faith.

Need more Roman Catholic schools as they have/are the best cadre in teaching these topics based on law, faith and approach towards a family. Most importantly they are the best in helping teenagers with decisions and responsibilities that come with such choices that teenagers are faced with.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

I feel the Catholic schools should continue to have a differed sex education curriculum based on the beliefs or our religion.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

My child is at a Catholic school, our faith is important to us and most of these topics are not appropriate.

(Survey response/parent of 9–11-year-old)

Both children are practicing Catholics and have been brought up with Catholic values, supported by their Catholic high school experience.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

Other parents have questioned whether learning in denominational schools meets their child's needs.

The faith school frames RSHP in the context of loving relationships and marriage. Whilst this sits well with my values, I also feel strongly that it doesn't prepare pupils for the real world and online sex material.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

Despite my child attending a Roman Catholic high school, I would like them to learn about all the topics mentioned in this questionnaire.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

It's like what they hear at school, it's unrealistic, so I have to be realistic and tell them what they need to know. It's up to me to give her life information. It's okay for the school to say God doesn't agree with this or that, but that's unrealistic. If we hide stuff and go 'oh we don't talk about that because God doesn't talk about sex', they're gonna go on Google or YouTube, it'll be the wrong stuff, and they'll go through like with unrealistic expectations. That's what I had. My first experiences were terrifying, horrific. I don't care whether a school is Catholic or not, I'm Catholic, but it's got to be realistic. All this 'wait until secondary school' isn't good enough.

(Group chat 26)

Attends a Catholic school so anxious does not receive adequate information in school.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

I am concerned by the lack of detail which I think is given in the Catholic curriculum "God's Loving Plan". I understand there is a large discrepancy between what my child in a Catholic school learns in comparison to non-denominational schools. This includes content and the age it is introduced - later in Catholic school.

(Survey response/parent of 9–12-year-old)

Very anxious about the lack of learning at her Catholic school. Previously opted out of 'God's loving plan' in primary school as felt it did not align with our family values.

(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

Parental concerns can relate to specific topics.

I think Catholic schools should teach more about contraception and sexual health. I understand that it goes against faith, but children are influenced by social media these days and not just what they are taught in school.

(Survey response/parent of 9–12-year-old)

My son is in a faith school however I don't want that to dictate his learning, particularly around contraception and sexuality.

(Survey response/parent of 9–12-year-old)

Where there are perceived gaps in learning, parents have identified that learning at home can address these concerns.

I am happy for my child to learn about all the topics however I am not a fan of the approach in my son's Catholic school. I find it focuses on religion too much rather than being factual and so I give further education on this at home.

(Survey response/parent of 9–12-year-old)

I have no idea what my child is being taught at school about his body or relationships. I presume that being at a Catholic school as he gets older, I will need to educate him more about these issues in terms of giving him clear, evidence-based information. There are a lot of wonderful benefits of a Catholic education that I believe in, and that I experienced myself, but a huge downside is their unrealistic teachings on sex outside of marriage, although I have no recollection of ever being told this in school. It was more an absence of information around contraception and relationships etc. I will ensure that my child is aware of how to keep himself and others safe, including around negotiating consent, no matter what his school teaches. I have no embarrassment around this and believe it will be my job, rather than the school's.

(Survey response/parent of 3–5-year-old)

I see these issues as being fundamental parts of my child's health and wellbeing development and I'm aware that much of what they might be exposed to is not necessarily evidence-based or appropriate. I am keen to counteract that in as gentle a way as is possible. My child has been baptised Catholic and attends a Catholic school but as parents (also brought up Catholic) we do not agree with the church's teachings on sex and relationships, and therefore I am keen to counter that from an early age, but in an age-appropriate way.
(Survey response/parent of 3–5-year-old)

Parents have expressed the view that learning across denominational and non-denominational settings should be aligned.

I believe religious schools should not be able to opt out of teaching any information about sexual health and wellbeing. My son attends a Catholic school, and his education is highly impacted by religious factors. Children do not choose which school they attend and may not agree with their parents' views on the subjects or religious beliefs.
(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)

I don't think it should matter if you go to a Catholic school or not a Catholic school. I think there should be a standard that every child gets. And they're not getting that. It should be universal.
(Group chat 26)

I'd like my daughter to learn all these things but am concerned they are not covered in her denominational school. If I at least knew what was/wasn't covered I could try to plug the gap. Info would be ideal. I'd like most of this learning to be compulsory regardless of religious school.
(Survey response/parent of 12–18-year-old)