



Spotlight issue

Sex/Gender

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.

Introduction

This Spotlight Issue is one in which we focus on a topic that is the subject of much broader public conversation than simply a consideration of what, why or how children learn. Other issues we have looked at such as *pornography* or *consent* are also debated widely, on those topics we found mostly consensus about the importance of talking and learning with our children so we can equip and protect them as they grow and look to their adult lives. Consensus on how parents have talked about sex and gender, and their views on learning at nursery or school, does not emerge from theChat.

How we understand and discuss sex and gender, and subsequently how this is reflected in schools - including but also beyond the content of what nursery or school would refer to as the RSHP learning - has led to many responses from parents.

For some parents there is a concern about giving children age-inappropriate or confusing messages about something that is immutable, their sex. This is seen as harmful, especially if the child or young person has other ongoing or past vulnerabilities, or their comprehension is impacted by learning disability.

For some parents the debates are somewhat overblown, they just want their children to be relaxed about ideas of sex and gender, to find their own way.

For parents of children and young people who experience some kind of distress or incongruence about their sex, or who identify as transgender or nonbinary, there are worries about how to support their child and protect them from negative views or behaviours.

For some parents these discussions are somewhat confusing, they do not feel confident about the language that is used and are concerned about saying the wrong thing because discussion seems too heated.

With respect for every opinion, it is also fair to say that some contributions to theChat are founded in misinformation and misunderstanding about RSHP learning at nursery or school – these are not the best of foundations if we are to promote, protect, and fulfil the education needs and rights of children and young people.

Learning at school

It may be helpful to describe what guides the learning that can happen in school when it comes to learning about what we refer to as sex and gender. Curriculum for Excellence is Scotland's curriculum, and it sets out how children and young people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes they need for life. The curriculum is defined as everything that is planned for children and young people – this includes curriculum areas and subjects. There are eight curriculum areas, one of these is Health and Wellbeing [health-and-wellbeing-eo.pdf \(education.gov.scot\)](https://www.education.gov.scot/curriculum/areas-of-scottish-curriculum/health-and-wellbeing) Within the Health and Wellbeing curriculum children and young people learn about Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP).

To support teachers to deliver the best RSHP learning a national teaching and learning resource has been developed for all schools. The Scottish Catholic Education Service have also produced material for the denominational sector.

The national RSHP resource is hosted here www.rshp.scot It is organised across 5 levels. In nursery and primary school there are three levels: Early (nursery/P1) First (P2, P3 and P4) Second (P5, P6, P7). In secondary school young people in S1, S2 and S3 might be expected to be learning at what is called Third/Fourth Level. When they move into S4, S5 and S6 they might be expected to continue at Third/Fourth Level and progress to learning in what is called Senior Phase. Learning at Senior Phase is an extension of earlier learning.

While the national resource offers a lot of learning activities schools are not required to deliver these lessons; they may choose to deliver some or all. But the topics can potentially form part of school-based learning.

What does the RSHP national resource contain in terms of teaching and learning about sex and gender?

For the sake of clarity some information about the content on the national teaching and learning resource at www.rshp.scot might be helpful. Content about sex and

gender is built from the idea that children can be any kind of girl or boy they want to be, meaning they should be free from stereotypes and sex-based limitations on their behaviours, friendships, play, learning or future aspirations (more on this language later). When children of primary school age have questions about what the term transgender means (and they do, they are not living in a bubble) the curricular material offers a short script (at Second Level so likely for 9-12-year-olds) that responds succinctly, truthfully and with respect for transgender people: you can find this here Second Level Learning Second Level - RSHP see Part 3 Transgender. This is the only mention of the term transgender in the primary school resources at www.rshp.scot

For young people in secondary school there is support for educators to ensure that young peoples' varied experiences and beliefs around sex and gender can be heard and respected. Their growing independence and exposure to the world via social media means that teenagers are engaging with these matters in spaces that the adults in their lives do not populate; the intent in terms of secondary schools is that teachers can listen and guide, helping young people to develop critical thinking, respect for others, and help seeking behaviours.

This lesson - Third/Fourth Level learning: Boys, Girls and Stereotypes Third + Fourth Level - RSHP - is the only RSHP lesson in the secondary school elements of the national resource that addresses the kinds of ideas and debates on gender identity that young people will be encountering in-person or on social media. To support teachers to deliver this lesson the following guidance is given:

As you work through the slides maintain an openness to the differences of opinion or views young people will have, matters of gender and gender identity are played out in the media young people are engaged with. They might support or challenge the use of some of the language, they might have different views about gender and gender identity, all of this okay if managed within the normal parameters of discussions with RSHP learning – questions or challenges should not be personalised or unkind.

Connected to matters of sex and gender there are also lessons for secondary school pupils that address equality, rights, harassment and gender-based violence, found here:

- Third/Fourth Level Learning: Abuse and relationships <https://rshp.scot/third-fourth-level/#abuseandrelationships>
- Third/Fourth Level Learning: Equality, Feminism and Sexual Harassment <https://rshp.scot/third-fourth-level/#equality>
- Senior Phase Gender Equality <https://rshp.scot/senior-phase/#genderequality>

Are parents happy with their child's learning about sex and gender at school?

Before sharing direct quotes from small group chats and the national survey we can point to findings from the survey regarding views on teaching and learning at school that are relevant to our current considerations. It is helpful to keep these findings in mind.

When parents of children aged 9 to 12 years old were asked about primary school-based learning they responded as follows:

- 82.8% are happy that their child is learning about sex/gender-based stereotypes.
- 90.1% are happy that their children are learning about equality for boys and girls.
- 53.8% are happy that their children are learning about what transgender means.

When parents of young people aged 12 to 18 years old were asked about secondary school-based learning they responded as follows:

- 88.6% are happy that their child is learning about equality and rights for women and girls.
- 76.7% are happy that their child is learning about gender stereotypes/sex equality.
- 65.3% are happy that their child is learning about how people talk about gender, gender identity and equality and rights for trans people.

TheChat: Parents have talked about issues of sex and gender

An important consideration is that the comments we share here are not just about the part of the Health and Wellbeing curriculum we refer to as RSHP learning, and so we will share views and concerns about how schools approach the whole area of equalities and the rights of transgender people. It has not been the job of theChat to address this wider context, but it is reflected in parental views, and it is often difficult to separate out these wider views with specific comments on RSHP learning.

To start, some reporting on what parents have said about gender/sex-based stereotypes. It is often in the early years and primary school years that parents talk about stereotypes being imposed and resisted.

Thinking about my 8-year-old boy, he's always been into what might be categorised as 'girl's toys. But it's never really come up as an issue in terms of 'no you can't have those toys'. We are open in that way. And he hasn't ever questioned, it feels open that way. His dad has sometimes said 'oh isn't that for girls' but my child's response is 'it's just a toy, dad'. So, he's comfortable, happy with his choices. (Group chat 30)

Well sometimes it's a battle, my partner and that family have different ideas. But even now at the age of 12 it's still a battle with them, those stereotypes. I don't think I'll get anywhere with the older members of the family.

(Group chat 3)

Talk about friendships all the time. My daughter knows she is different to a boy and that is something to be celebrated and that although there are differences these are not negative, and she doesn't have to be "girly" and that girls like her who play football etc are not "boy like".

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

Have had many chats about this and use real life examples to illustrate what we're discussing (keeping it appropriate of course). Has been fascinating discussing this with my kids as you can see the impact of wider society on their thinking around things like gender equality.

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

Parents have expressed concerns about gender/sex-based stereotypes in school – and how these begin to inform or play into more serious attitudes and behaviours.

Schools aren't addressing the way things like play are gendered – boys playing football, girls standing in the corner. It's like the start of a gendered world.

(Group chat 4)

For older primary children there is a need to talk about girls' experiences, my daughter talks about being excluded or treated poorly by boys, this never happened before, gender stereotypes are creeping in and so it would be good to know how the school are dealing with this.

(Group chat 5)

Though with the rise of misogyny more could be done to support boys in thinking about stereotypes. Homophobic slurs are still very common with the boys. Schools could do more on this.

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

I am concerned about omissions, rather than what they are doing. For example, are schools adequately addressing misogynistic things, incel culture etc in the teenage years. They should be educating and challenging on things like this.

(Group chat 5)

In other chapters reporting on theChat, we have explained that the intention of the phrase used - *that children are not limited by gender stereotypes, that they can be any kind of girl or boy they want to be* – is intended to explore how boys and girls can be limited or restricted in terms of activities, behaviours or interests simply by virtue of being a boy or a girl. However, in a climate where terms are easily misunderstood and amid wider conversations about how we talk about the lives and rights of transgender people, this expression has been interpreted by some respondents to the national survey as making a connection between childhood and being transgender. The comments that follow are shared to acknowledge that talking and learning about stereotypes is now more complex than it was.

The phrase 'they can be any kind of girl or boy they want to be' has connotations that I am not comfortable with, particularly in the current cultural climate of discussion around gender. I am happy for the school to discuss cultural stereotypes about boys and girls (e.g. pink vs blue), and to point out that we all have different interests and talents, and that this is okay (e.g. girls can enjoy cars/building and boys can enjoy dance/art).

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

I can't agree that young children are hearing things about gender. (Group chat 1)

I would not like to see any gender concepts presented to my daughter as I recognise that sex is binary and unchangeable, and gender is a social construct based on reductive stereotypes. I want my daughter to be happy being female but equally to know that she can be into pink and princesses, or blue and dinosaurs and still be an amazing, wonderful girl.

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

I think this is an important topic, however I am very much against my child learning others being 'unique' if that means they are claiming to be opposite gender or classing themselves as a 'they'.

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

My family doesn't believe in gender but know boys and girls don't have to fit into stereotypes.

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

I'd be concerned that formal support from schools and government bodies/ charities would be ideologically captured, as this questionnaire, including 'gender' in a question about friendships suggests.

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

It is essential that children learn that they can be any kind of girl or boy they want to be, but they can't change their biological sex!
(Survey response/parent of 9–12-year-old)

TheChat has given us insight as to how parents and children talk about sex and gender at home. There are, as one would expect, different views, reflected in what follows.

We haven't discussed or been asked about transgender identity as yet. Given the coverage in mainstream media I think this topic will be more difficult to discuss in detail. But basically, our message about respect, kindness and love remains at the centre.
(Survey response/parent of 9–12-year-old)

My youngest is 8 and he has brought up the trans subject, and it's because there is a youtuber that he follows, this youtuber talked about a friend who was transitioning to live life as a woman, different name and that kind of thing. So that brought up a lot of questions for my son. It wasn't what I was expecting at all, you know it's somebody on YouTube that I felt as relatively safe, I wasn't expecting it. He seemed open to the idea, but I was really thinking hard about how I was explaining it to him, he's 8, he still thinks he can be Spiderman if he wants to be. So, to say he can be anything he wants is quite, well he could take that far too literally, that he could go to school one day as a boy, the next as a girl. This just removes the gravity of that kind of situation for a person who is transgender, its life changing and a lot of psychological issues.

(Group chat 11)

I think children are more relaxed and open to diversity of people. The more they know, the more normal everything becomes, it's not controversial. I've talked about transgender issues with my kids, they just accept, that's alright. They will see things in the media, so I want them to be accepting. So, for example my son saw a gay couple on TV, and he said oh a boy can marry a boy, so I could just agree, yes they can. It was a moment of recognition, then he moves on, not a big deal.

(Group chat 25)

My child identifies as a boy but is pretty nonbinary in how he dresses and plays. He prefers to wear dresses and skirts. He is often misgendered, so we talk about that a lot and how it's ok to be different from others and that the other children are still learning that.

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

If 'transgender' comes up, sure. Whatever that is supposed to mean. Men and women are born boys and girls. If they 'feel' more or less male or female at different times in their lives, that is totally cool and normal. No need to stick any label on it, thank you.

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

I teach my child that everyone is deserving of equal respect, including herself. I teach her no one can change their sex, and our beliefs are not hateful. I teach her how to give and also expect respect around sex and gender.

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

I am pre-emptively highlighting that girls cannot become boys, and vice versa, because if he becomes indoctrinated by anti-scientific transgenderism, then conversion therapy ban legislation will make it illegal for me to counterbalance after the fact.

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

We talk a lot about how trans rights are under attack.

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

Parents have also said that they can be unsure and confused by the conversation or debate that is going on.

The gender conversation has been so politicised with both a capital and small P that I am not sure the correct semantics to hold the conversation.

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

Transgender is something I do not feel I fully understand as yet. I have mixed feelings about this.

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

Don't really understand the wider gender identities that are now being used.

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

A common theme running through theChat has been the need to improve school/home communication, in this regard about how (and how much) children and young people talk and learn about these matters in school.

I would like to know more about how transgender topics are taught. I am absolutely happy for my child to be taught that some people are transgender and that no-one should be discriminated against in any way because of their gender identity, but would like this to be balanced with facts about how rare it is to be transgender, that changing gender has major health and emotional implications and that it is not a path to start down without professional support and much consideration. I would like it to be made clear that there are many ways of being a male and a female, and that the stereotypes of these are only one narrow way of being.

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

I am happy for my children to be aware of transgender people and be respectful, but I do not think they should spend a lot of time learning about this - I don't think it is relevant to the vast majority of primary aged children.

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

For some parents school has a role in promoting understanding and acceptance of transgender people and protecting children with transgender parents.

I think introducing at a young age the idea of transgender and homosexual people being simply another way that people can be is really important - this is what stops hatred and bigotry getting a chance to develop in the first place and grow.

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

I want teachers to be comfortable and confident talking to children and young people about trans identities. It might not be their story, but they need to do it.

(Group chat 4)

There is a child in their class who is non-binary, they shared how they wanted to identify, it's a lovely class, and with a bit of explanation from the child, supported by parents and the school, it went well for them all, just positivity. It helped us talk to our children about that idea of being an ally, we talked about Pride with him.

(Group chat 25)

I would want the same inclusive message being delivered from day one and teachers need to be informed and inclusive. My child has a right to know about different genders including trans and I want them to be understanding and kind.

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

One of my sons (age 5) is exploring feelings of not being a boy or a girl and playing with gender expressions of both. It is important for us that he is allowed to explore and talk about these things without stigma or overthinking it.

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

I am surprised by the numbers of children say at high school that are identifying differently. The school really embraces that, and kids just get on with it, no one seems stigmatised or picked on.

(Group chat 33)

Schools are very good these days at teaching children to accept differences, so for example our wee girl is autistic and there are other children with other additional needs and the school is very good at helping children understand, and the kids are just good themselves at understanding that children are different. Once they get that understanding that we are all different, as they start to grow and find out people are gay or make different choices in life, they can be quite accepting of it. It's like a different culture these days. Kids are just more accepting. There was one wee boy at one of my kids' schools who started to come in and dressed as a girl. The kids were curious, but they were fine with it. It was some of the adults who got all bothered about which toilet this wee one would use. For the children, their pal was happy, they accepted it.

(Group chat 33)

As his parent, before I came out as non-binary, he didn't have much of sense of defined gender rules anyway – so he would have played dress up in a dress or been outside getting muddy. So, when I explained me being non-binary he was just accepting, he was probably at an age where it could just wash over him. Going to nursery has brought up images I suppose of what a more 'standard' family might look like, but we have lovely friends who have non-traditional families, so he's not too alone in that regard. He's on a journey with us. But I am aware that in school, there are lots of things that feel like they are not inclusive yet, maybe not enough on different families, certainly nothing trans specific, yet this is part of his family. So, I don't want that not to be seen. His world needs to be seen in school. At the age he is at, he has no shame, he is just loved by two people. But I am conscious that out there, I can't always protect him, there might be things that make him feel ways that we don't want him to feel.

(Group chat 4)

Parents have shared concerns that vulnerable children and young people (who may have disability, trauma or who may be lesbian or gay) can be influenced by learning about transgender identities, that they may understand this as a suggestion that they might be transgender.

Concerns around transgender due to the amount of children (esp girls) who identify as boys and their additional needs not being explored such as ASD, trauma, childhood sexual abuse - see CASS review. Also, as a parent of a

flamboyant gay boy, I worry in other circumstances he would be encouraged to view himself as trans. I worry that long fought for women's rights are being lost and that the narrative that you can change your sex is given to children, while sex is immutable, and we should encourage our children to not try to fit into regressive stereotypes.

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

I'm conscious of children being introduced to ideas that hadn't occurred to them before, like fashions and trends, for example gender fluidity.

(Group chat 5)

But it's important that we don't plant seeds, when they get older yes, they will talk about gender and who they want to be or be with, I totally get that, but I think sometimes there are seeds planted, and you ask yourself 'would that child have thought that a boy could become a girl?' and all that stuff. Maybe there is too much information. I'm keeping it to, this is who you are, this is who your friends are and keeping it respectful. Another thing could be that an older sister wants to say change something about who they are, well at that point it would be relevant to talk about it in her life, but until its relevant they don't always need to know and might not understand. So that's what I'm saying about planting seeds that aren't relevant or can't be understood.

(Group chat 1)

I would just say though, about things coming up at school about identity, that our foster child who has autism had an input about all different kinds of sexuality and gender identity. And it was only some years later – we didn't even know this talk had happened – when something difficult happened, that because they take everything so literally that they took that conversation at school literally, and they thought they had to be in one of those categories, to fit in to something, and so they had spent all that time thinking 'oh I have to be one of those things'. So, throwing things at kids, on social media or whatever, leaves them thinking 'well maybe that's me, maybe I can be that'. So, when that comes up as a carer, you have to go all the way back and sort that out.

(Group chat 33)

It is not within the purview of theChat to address current Scottish Government guidance on supporting young people who are transgender. But some of the views and concerns expressed so far are informed by a view on this guidance. In response to a broader question posed in theChat, about trusted sources of support for parents, this parent responded as follows.

I actually don't fully trust any of these, I would always have said NHS, local council and school, but I have spent the last few years really engaging much more critically about government funding and where that goes and (organisation named) and other similar organisations having too much power and influence in education. We are now at a stage where we have awful Transgender Guidance in schools that is basically written by (organisation named) with an SG logo, schools are told to implement and then when challenged, say it comes from SG and they are following instruction, then when SG are challenged, they say it is up to local authorities how they implement! I have real lack of trust now and like to look at multiple and wide sources of information to ensure I am getting a full picture and can reach my own unbiased conclusion.

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

The parents of transgender young people have shared how they talk and support their child, they have also shared worries about their child's experiences outside the safety of home.

My daughter is transgender, so it is a topic that is openly discussed in my home.

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

As the parent of a trans child, I am terrified that the pervasive transphobia and misinformation will stop teenagers being able to discuss and seek support. It is becoming acceptable to treat kids like mine as inherently a danger to others and this must stop.

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

My son has faced a lot of homophobia and transphobia in school, which is incredibly discouraging to see.

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

There is a toxic environment around the issue of gender identity that is impacting negatively on trans children and adults, important to keep this discussion open and collaborative.

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

We are raising a non-binary child, and feel it is important that they receive positive messages and information about LGBTQ+ relationships, as well as information about same-sex sexual activity, dealing with transphobia/ homophobia, and staying safe as an LGBTQ+ young person.

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

This LGBTQ stuff. There's a lot of hate about that around in school. Like people shouldn't be telling young ones they can be this, they can be that. But I can assure you, I've got a child who is transgender and if the school had informed me more than I was informed then, my child wouldn't have suffered mentally as much as he did growing up, because I would have been more aware, and I wasn't aware. It was hidden from me.

(Group chat 38)

In the introduction to this Spotlight Issue, it was said that some parental views shared with theChat have gone beyond what might be considered comment on the RSHP lessons in a school. Some parents shared a belief that a 'trans agenda' or 'transgender ideology' is being taught in school.

Language is incorrect and should state sex stereotypes and sex-based violence. Transgender ideology should not be taught in school as it is a highly contested belief and if taught as fact is telling lies to children which can lead to actual harm as evidenced by increasing numbers of young detransitioners.

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

I have concerns about the trans agenda being taught, and biological truths being ignored.

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

Take gender ideology out of the classrooms. It confuses and brainwashes children. Teaching them that they can change pronouns and gender is wrong. Especially when excluding the parents. But also, spend school hours on actual schoolwork and not on something that is based on political correctness and is not factual. I speak from experience what harm the pushing of the gender agenda does to children.

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

My biggest (and probably only concern) with RSHP is the introduction of gender identity. As a single mother of a daughter, I believe in the non-controversial fact that sex is binary and that human beings cannot change sex. I reject the concept that a male pupil can "become" a female pupil and should be included in girls' spaces and obviously this extends into adulthood and numerous other scenarios and risks. Gender identity is not fact and I feel I am a reasonable parent with reasonable beliefs, but I will remove my daughter from future gender identity lessons as I don't believe RSHP has the balance right in these lessons, which is a shame as I'm very supportive of the resource and the transparency of it. I am teaching my child already some low-level messages around this area and will continue to do so, however in light of the Cass Report I am hopeful that when she is in upper primary school there will be a noticeable shift in what is being taught in this area.

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

Earlier in this chapter we clarified the content of the national resource at www.rshp.scot However, we have heard as part of the Chat that parents believe that young children are being introduced to concepts like being gender-fluid or told in nursery or school that they can change their sex/gender.

I don't want my kids to learn anything regarding gender fluidity at nursery or school age.

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

A child does not need to be told at a young age they can be any gender they want. I'm sure you know where I'm going with this when it comes to relationships & sex. Nothing is age appropriate in schools these days & I will be removing my child from certain lessons.

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

Parents have shared a belief that teaching and learning about being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender has gone 'too far'. (The idea of promotion of homosexuality is discussed in [Spotlight Issue: Some people are lesbian, gay or bisexual](#)).

As a family, we understand & respect everyone's right to be themselves. We have no prejudices. However, we are concerned about the amount of discussion & prominence sexuality, gender & transgender etc has in school life. There are a lot of mixed messages in school & it seems at times that there is some favouritism towards those who identify as transgender etc. we also feel that education in school in regard to LGBTQ etc has now become promotional rather than educational.

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

Where there is a lack of communication and engagement between home and school myth and misinformation fill the gap (For more see [Spotlight Issue: Myth, misconception, misinformation and disinformation](#)).

The school doesn't tell you anything. So, you just get gossip from other parents about what's going on. Chit chat about what they are getting. You hear anything that's in the news, so like what's going on in parliament with the gender change. I heard that in one school they showed a graphic video of a sex change. I hear that's what they seem to be concentrating on, it's all about gender, that's what I hear, and everything else falls by the wayside. So, it's all about whatever policy is being talked about by government, that's what they are teaching about.

(Group chat 15)

Teaching and learning about sex and gender as part RSHP learning in nursery or school is, as described earlier, limited. But parental concerns reflect a wider debate about sex and gender which means that schools face challenging questions: Are they doing enough to acknowledge and protect the rights of minorities? Are they overstepping and advancing ideas that are harmful? TheChat has captured a range of views from parents, these give us insights into how broader debates, perfectly legitimate opinions, and misinformation, can inform what parents think about RSHP learning. The one major concern would be that the overt focus on this one topic runs the risk of undermining confidence and support for RSHP learning.