

EMERALD STUDIES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION



# Reimagining Relationships and Sex Education

A Safe Uncertainty Approach  
to Adolescent Intimacies

EMILY SETTY AND JONNY HUNT

REIMAGINING RELATIONSHIPS  
AND SEX EDUCATION

# EMERALD STUDIES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

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# REIMAGINING RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION

A Safe Uncertainty Approach to  
Adolescent Intimacies

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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**Jonny Hunt** is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Social Sciences – Childhood and Youth Studies at the University of Bedfordshire and independent Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) Consultant. Jonny has spent the past 20 years working face to face with children and young people of various ages (from 4 years upwards) and the adults who support them; this includes training social workers, youth workers, teachers and parents around the most challenging of topics. Jonny specialises in delivering inclusive RSE, with a rights-based approach, encouraging both adults and young people to explore their attitudes and values to sex and relationships.

He has always had a particular passion for youth participation, and much of his work is specifically focused on ensuring young people's voices are heard when it comes to policy and practice that most affects them. <https://www.routledge.com/Sex-Ed-for-Grown-Ups-How-to-Talk-to-Children-and-Young-People-about-Sex-and-Relationships/Hunt/p/book/9780367641337>.

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# INTRODUCTION: CREATING SPACE FOR UNCERTAINTY

*All good Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) starts with questions. What is it we want for young people when it comes to their first experiences of intimacy? What is the purpose of RSE? Who is it for? Perhaps, the most important question to ask is: what are we doing as safe adults to help young people prepare for their future relationships?*

During the summer of 2023 we delivered a pilot RSE programme designed to address harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) and cultures among young people and in schools. The programme was based on the notion of helping young people develop critical thinking skills and providing them with the tools they need to navigate peer intimacies ethically, while being aware of their rights and responsibilities. These skills are commonly referred to as ‘sexual citizenship’ (Hirsch & Khan, 2020).

The pilot was delivered across two separate schools in England: one, a small independent school in London and the other, a comprehensive school in the New Forest. Both schools allowed us time with their staff and pupils over two days. They each organised a small group of around 25 students who were given two full days of RSE teaching alongside training and support for safeguarding and RSE teaching staff, as well as a parents evening, open to parents from across the school.

Our participatory approach was designed to respond to concerns that adults have about young people’s engagements with online content, while addressing the need for a broader, holistic approach to sex and relationships education that considers the interplay of influences and contexts in young people’s lives. The pilot put into practice the evidence gained from an evidence review into the nature and causes of HSB in schools and best practice for prevention and response that we had conducted previously for the Department for Education (Setty, Ringrose & Hunt, 2024), which included an exploration of the complex ways that digital technology influences young people’s relationships and sexual experiences. This evidence review was

commissioned by the DfE following revelations in the media of the *Everyone's Invited* web campaign initiated by University College London (UCL) student Soma Sara in response to her own and her friends' experiences of sexual harassment while at school. The aim of the site was to create a safe space where fellow students could anonymously post their experiences of sexual abuse and harassment. In the wake of the horrific murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021, and the public debate that followed, the website was inundated with thousands of disclosures explicitly exposing the extent of peer-on-peer harassment and sexual violence in schools. In response to the media interest, the UK Government commissioned a series of reports and reviews, of which ours was one.

Building on our DfE evidence review, we secured funding from the Economic and Social Research Council to explore police-school partnerships in addressing HSB in schools. During 2022–2023, we conducted research with schools, police and children's services, identifying both opportunities and challenges in the policing of HSB. Our findings emphasised the importance of relationship-based practice in the development and implementation of effective prevention and response strategies (Setty, Hunt & Ringrose, 2025a). We conceptualised HSB as rooted in the interactional cultures of 'sexual harm' among young people and within school environments (Setty, Hunt & Ringrose 2025b). We highlighted the importance of addressing HSB as a cultural issue, advocating for RSE that moves beyond simply raising awareness of abuse and unhealthy relationships to empower young people in developing and practicing ethical, responsible 'sexual citizenship' under the guidance of adults. Based on the evidence review for the DfE, we published an academic article contrasting our 'sexual citizenship' approach with dominant political and policy narratives around harmful sexual behaviours and cultures (Setty, Hunt & Ringrose, 2024).

Despite growing recognition of the need for high-quality RSE, recent developments risk narrowing its scope and overburdening educators. Teachers are increasingly expected to address deep-rooted social issues – such as misogyny, online harms, image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) and the impact of pornography – while navigating politically charged debates around LGBTQ+ inclusion and age-(in)appropriate content. This is all taking place in a context of limited training, resources and institutional support. Understandably, many educators feel overwhelmed, underprepared and disheartened.

RSE often feels quite reactive in its approach, as we saw recently by the response to the Netflix drama *Adolescence* which sparked a national conversation. Following its release, there were calls to screen the show in schools to 'raise awareness' or 'wake up' young people – particularly boys – to the realities of contemporary gendered scripts. Clearly, these screenings would

take place in RSE, which seems to be where the issue of the day is shoehorned into the timetable. This is not an unusual response to any contemporary social problem or *moral panic* – that is, a situation where a group or practice is framed as a threat to societal values, triggering heightened media attention and disproportionate responses from institutions (Cohen, 1972) – concerning young people. We have seen this before in response to influencers like Andrew Tate and the revelations of Everyone’s Invited campaign into sexual harassment in schools. Before that, it was county lines and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). While we agree that these topics should be discussed as part of comprehensive RSE, our fear is they are often treated as little more than the flavour of the month, tacked on to an assembly or tutor time, with little consideration of how they fit into the broader scheme or programme.

We argue that evolving iterations of contemporary concern are symptoms and panic buttons rather than causes – they reflect deeper problems embedded in our society and that trigger adult anxiety about the ‘state’ of young people. When RSE is used as a reactionary tool, however, it risks reinforcing a top-down educational approach in which adults seek to impose their pre-determined messages onto young people, rather than engendering any real critical engagement or genuine dialogue.

In many settings, the teaching of RSE tends to emphasise binary, black-and-white messages, framing issues in terms of right or wrong, healthy or unhealthy, legal or illegal and reinforcing the notion there are – or should be – simple answers to complex socio-relational problems. This often reflects a ‘banking model’ of education (Friere, 2020), where the teacher is positioned as the authority who deposits information into students, leaving little space for discussion or challenge. We believe this model is not fit for RSE.

We recognise that while so many educators who work in the field of RSE, safeguarding or pastoral support are passionate and desperate to help support the young people they work with, at times they can feel isolated and unprepared. For many of us, the world young people are navigating feels alien and unfamiliar – we didn’t, for example, have to contest with being ‘Insta-ready’ as teenagers. We forget that most educators who stand at the front of the classroom have never been on the other side of the desks; having little experience of receiving quality RSE themselves, they are now expected to impart wisdom to a room full of teenagers. This is made more ironic by the fact that most of us do not have our own house in order and are certainly not qualified to be relationship experts, if our personal lives are anything to go by. This is one of the strengths of the Netflix series *Sex Education*, embodied by the character Jean Milburn, played by Gillian Anderson. Jean is a licenced sex

therapist and mother of main protagonist Otis; yet she is hopeless at managing her own relationships.

Rather than considering this a limitation and evidence of educator's inadequacies, we advocate for a change in how we conceptualise the role to one of facilitator. It is not our responsibility to provide young people with prescriptive answers and solutions. Instead, we need to hold young people's anxiety in *not knowing* – spending time exploring the 'grey' and helping them find comfort in discomfort. While it is, of course, important that young people understand legal frameworks around issues like the age of consent, legal knowledge alone does not equip them to navigate the relational, emotional and situational complexities they encounter in real life and will have little impact on helping them know when they are ready for sex or how to navigate consent at a party when they are with someone they fancy.

In this book we are offering an alternative.

During our pilot programme, we interviewed many of the young people who took part in the teaching. We were particularly struck by what one of the girls said on our final day. She explained that in her experience of RSE at school, it was always something done in the summer term, in the last few weeks after the exams were out the way. She asked, "why should we, as students, value RSE, when you – the adults: teachers, management, parents – clearly don't. . . it feels like an add-on rather than something important". This is a sentiment that has been hard to shift and returns us to the question of what we want from RSE.

*If we recognise sex as a critical life skill that helps foster relationships, build intimacy and that provides personal connection and a sense of self, we need to ask ourselves, what are we doing as the safe adults in our children's lives to help them prepare?*

In the chapters that follow, we offer a different way forward. Drawing on research, pedagogy and practice, we set out a model of RSE grounded in safe uncertainty, a framework first articulated by Barry Mason (1993) within the context of systemic family therapy. Mason developed safe uncertainty as a way to help practitioners hold space for complexity, remain open to multiple perspectives and avoid prematurely closing down meaning or action. In this book, we develop and apply the concept for the context of RSE, identifying how safe uncertainty can support an approach that embraces ambiguity, centres relationality and equips both educators and students to engage ethically and reflectively with the realities of sex, intimacy and power. This book

does not promise easy answers. Instead, it provides practical tools, conceptual frameworks and real-world examples to support educators in creating spaces where uncertainty is not feared, but used generatively to build trust, connection and critical thinking. To find out more, and to join us in developing and applying safe uncertainty in RSE, visit [www.re-imagining-rse.org](http://www.re-imagining-rse.org) or follow us @ReimaginingRSE.

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# RETHINKING RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION AND ADOLESCENT INTIMACIES

Every day, young people are navigating relationships, sex and identity, often without the tools they need. The adults around them aren't always much better equipped. Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) tends to offer rules, risks and clear lines: safe or dangerous, right or wrong, healthy or unhealthy. But real life isn't like that. It's full of grey areas, mixed messages and situations that don't fit neatly into categories.

This book argues that we need to stop thinking that uncertainty is the enemy. In fact, uncertainty is where the learning happens. It's where empathy, reflection and growth begin. We introduce the idea of safe uncertainty: a way of doing RSE that recognises life's messiness and gives young people – and the adults who support them – the tools to navigate it. Rather than handing down answers, we can encourage young people ask better questions. By framing uncertainty as a natural and necessary part of adolescent development, we advocate for an RSE that is done *with*, not *to*, young people.

We've seen the power of this approach in action. After reflecting on our pilot RSE programme in 2023, we realised the essential element involved creating open, reflective spaces where young people could identify and embrace uncertainty, profoundly transforming how conversations about sex and relationships are held between educators and young people. When young people were given space to speak freely, reflect openly and wrestle with uncertainty, something changed. They listened more. They shared more. They took each other seriously. Safe uncertainty isn't just a theory; it's something we've watched work.

It's natural for educators of young people to feel anxious at the thought of facilitating conversations about sex, especially in current polarised times.

Educators are on the frontline, expected to tackle everything from pornography to gender identity, often with little time, support or training and under a microscope of media scrutiny alongside safeguarding responsibilities. This book is for you. This book is for anyone trying to make RSE more meaningful, whether you're a teacher, policymaker, youth worker, parent or, like us, wear multiple hats. We don't profess to give you all the answers, but we will offer a way to hold space for the questions that matter.

In an uncertain world, we recognise the reassuring appeal certainty offers, especially when trying to provide the information to keep children safe. We aren't arguing that certainty is always harmful but that it can be misleading when applied too rigidly. Teaching young people that there's always a clear answer may offer reassurance in the short term, but doesn't reflect the world they live in. Relationships are messy, identities shift, people are complex and do not always act rationally or in their best interest, particularly when it comes to sex. Safe uncertainty offers an honest starting point: a way of saying, "It's okay not to know yet, and here's how we can think through it together."

## RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION FRAMEWORKS

Let's start with the bigger picture. In England, RSE became a statutory part of the curriculum in 2019–2020, a major step forward. Yet implementation has been uneven, with many schools facing limited training, inadequate resources and cultural resistance (Cumper et al., 2024; Ponsford et al., 2024).

Too often, RSE is framed as a way to prevent harm: teen pregnancy, STIs, abusive relationships. These are important goals. But if we only teach young people what *not* to do, we miss the chance to support them in figuring out what they *do* want: connection, care, respect, pleasure, autonomy. England's guidance tends to emphasise safety, legality and harm reduction, especially around consent and digital behaviours (Setty & Dobson, 2023b). While these are necessary, they rarely allow space for self-reflection or navigating emotional nuance.

Other parts of the United Kingdom take a different approach. In Wales and Scotland, RSE is more clearly rooted in a children's rights framework and aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Daly & Heah, 2023). Parents in Scotland can technically withdraw their children, but guidance strongly supports young people's right to learn. In Wales, there is no opt-out at all. In England, by contrast, parental rights continue to dominate, with legal provision to withdraw children from sex education up to three terms before their 16th birthday (DfE, 2019).