



Education whitepaper

Teaching Online Relationships- First-Hand Experience

Relationships Education is now a statutory requirement for all schools irrespective of their designation. This means curriculum change for maintained, non-maintained (independent), including academies and free schools, non-maintained special schools, maintained special schools and alternative provision including pupil referral units.

Document Date: April 2022

Author: Colin Green

Introduction

In the first major curriculum reform since 2014 schools have had to introduce a new subject for the first time since the national curriculum was launched. With regards to Sex & Relationships Education it is the first-time guidance has been revisited since 2000. The reasons behind this are simple and straight-forward.

As the DFE's guide for parents to 'Understanding Relationships and Health Education in your child's primary school' sets out, the world of young people looks very different to the way it did 20 years ago when this curriculum was last updated. These changes bring the content into the 21st Century so that it is relevant for children.

A key difference between the year 2000 and 2020 is the growth and influence of the online world. From gaming to social media, from friending to sharing, from accessing content to chatting, the online world has fundamentally changed the way relationships are conducted for our children.

The role of first-hand experience in learning

Whilst change accelerates and we live within dynamic times there are some constants. And one of those is the way children learn. Children acquire knowledge, understanding and skills in multitude ways, but central to it is first-hand experience. According to Carla Coward³ young children thrive on the exploration and discovery that shapes their knowledge and understanding of how and why things work.

Consider how children learn to swim or to become proficient at cycling safely. We wouldn't dream of the former being taught without taking children to a swimming pool. Yes, we may work on specifics, such as leg action, out of the water, but central to such teaching is time spent rehearsing, trying and failing, trying again, succeeding in the water. Similarly, we spend time taking children outside on their bikes to learn how to become safe, responsible road users. Consider in each case, how we not only teach and intervene in children's efforts but also how we minimise risk (shallow end, playground) during their early development before we expose them to greater risk as their skills and understanding develops (deep end, roads).

Instructing, modelling, scaffolding, and intervening are all key in the development of skills and understanding in these areas, but none operate without first-hand experience or without the opportunity to do it for themselves. According to Bruce, direct action physical and intellectual engagement with experiences, in addition to problem solving and repetition, ensures synapses become stronger.



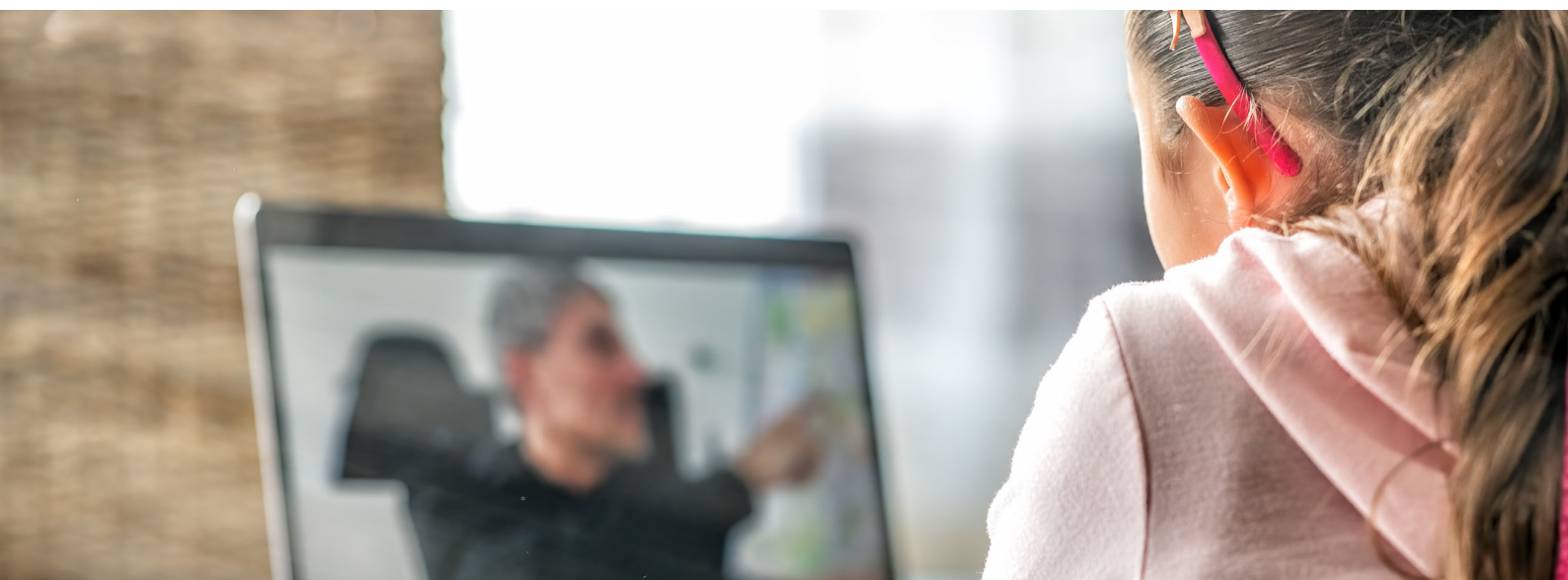
Present-day reality

Children don't operate in a vacuum of experience. They live real lives in the real world. They are constantly learning. Relationships exist whether we teach them or not, and children learn about them in the real world. This includes both online and offline.

Consider however how schools teach about offline relationships- how they teach kindness, trust, honesty, loyalty, respect. These are central elements to the primary curriculum and have been so, long before the national curriculum. These concepts were taught before circle time, relationships education or PSHE through the wider curriculum, through the ethos and culture of the school. Everyone was invested in teaching children standards of behaviour against a mutual code. Most teaching in such cases was extra-curricular, taking place in the dining hall, corridors and playground as much as it was done in the classroom. Every adult was and is engaged in shaping relationships, modelling, intervening, scaffolding.

Children also build their knowledge and understanding from the influences outside school, from families, friends and the wider community. Most of these experiences are positive and work alongside the input of schools. But alas there are those children who have little or no such positive experiences and have a clear disadvantage in acquiring the skills required.

Consider then, the online component and how children acquire their knowledge, understanding and skills in this context. What is the balance of positive influence? Who is undertaking the role of intervention, modelling and scaffolding? Are children regulated and moderated online or are they free to explore alone the Wild West Web as the NSPCC terms it?



Engagement with the social web is here to stay

Prior to the pandemic we saw year-on-year OFCOM report not only increased access to the online world but changes to the way children gained access and to what they were doing. Mobile devices were increasing considerably for all age groups. Social media and games were growing increasingly popular and the margins between the two were becoming less well defined with many gaming platforms also enabling chat, friending and shared play.

This did not abate during the pandemic, but matters accelerated, and families found that the Internet enabled children to stay connected. Instead of shying away from the online world families embraced it with enthusiasm. Primary-aged children were able to connect with their family and friends through Minecraft, WhatsApp, Snapchat to name but a few. And at the same time Tik Tok became mainstream. Dancing nurses and teachers popularised the platform with its easy to upload videos bringing joy across the nation. Children who had previously been encouraged to steer clear were now avid users.

As the pandemic subsides, even with the efforts of the online safety bill, ground will be difficult to regain. The genie is out of the bottle and won't readily disappear. Children's engagement with the social web is here to stay. And through every experience they have online, they will build their understanding, knowledge and skills of online relationships.

We cannot allow the unregulated online world to be the sole place children gain first-hand experience. We need the same levels of intervention in schools online as we do offline in influencing, shaping children's relationships and their understanding of appropriate behaviours.

How to teach using first-hand experience – blogs, forum, email and wiki

Schools therefore need to offer opportunities for children to learn about online relationships through safe, mediated online tools, whether it be Google Classroom, Office 365 applications or other proprietary software designed to enable them to connect and collaborate.

Given the growth of remote learning tools, during the pandemic, many schools now have access to platforms that enable children to connect, communicate and collaborate. These platforms give an ideal base for the teaching of online relationships and respect. They often come with moderation settings that allow for risk to be controlled and increased with experience, with audit trails to show who did what and when and with reporting features to support children concerned about their exploration of the online world. All they need are the opportunities to use them to support their growth and development as digital citizens.

Opportunities such as a class blog or forum enable children to communicate online to build and maintain relationships, to establish protocols and standards in ways that are not available without the effective intervention and modelling of teachers. Teachers cannot only set standards, but they can model behaviours, they can spot and reinforce positive behaviour whilst intervening where it is not. Such interventions are a natural occurrence daily in offline relationships in the playground, corridors, dining hall and in the classroom. Why not online?



03334 559424

info@neweratech.co.uk • neweratech.co.uk