

Relationships and Sex Education Policy and Curriculum Outline

1. About this policy

Summerhill provides Relationships Education for pupils receiving primary education, Relationships and Sex Education for pupils receiving secondary education, and Sex Education to pupils of primary age beyond Relationships Education and relevant science teaching. These arrangements reflect the statutory requirements for Relationships Education at primary age and Relationships and Sex Education at secondary age under the 2019 Regulations, together with the statutory guidance's recommendation that Sex Education on conception and birth may also be provided at primary age.

This policy is made in accordance with:

- *the Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education (England) Regulations 2019;*
- *the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, as amended.*

In preparing and applying this policy, Summerhill has regard to:

- *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education: Statutory Guidance for Governing Bodies, Proprietors, Head Teachers, Principals, Senior Leadership Teams, and Teachers, Department for Education, July 2025, for introduction on 1 September 2026;*
- *The Independent School Standards: Guidance for Independent Schools, Department for Education, April 2026;*
- *Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026: Statutory Guidance for Schools and Colleges, Department for Education.*

This policy is applied alongside Summerhill's *Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy* and describes the school's approach to RSE, explains how the provision is organised and gives a brief outline of the curriculum. It is published on the school website and a copy is provided free of charge on request. Parents are consulted when the policy is developed and reviewed.

2. Summerhill's approach to RSE

Summerhill's approach to RSE is grounded in three core elements of the school's ethos: trust in the child; freedom, not licence; and the conviction that emotional wellbeing lies at the heart of education.

The General Policy Statement (A. S. Neill), the Summerhill General Policy Statement and the Policy Statement regarding Community Life set out the principles and practices through which this ethos is lived at the school.

For A.S.Neill, "education is living", and the child should be free to live their own life. This principle remains central to the school and therefore, pupils are given the time, freedom and opportunity to develop at their own pace, follow their interests, experience the full range of their emotions, and discover who they are and what they want to become.

Equality is an essential part of how Summerhill's trust in the child is lived in practice. Within this self-governing community everyone is experiencing equal rights. In the School Meeting, pupils and

adults can speak, vote, bring cases, question decisions and be held accountable by the community. Authority over community life is exercised collectively rather than imposed from above, while adults continue to carry their legal, professional and safeguarding responsibilities.

The principle of freedom, not licence, places each person's choices alongside the freedom and wellbeing of others. This has direct meaning for RSE. Pupils experience equality in relationships as the right to be heard, to express a boundary, to challenge unfairness and to expect that their feelings and wishes will be taken seriously. They also learn to listen, recognise the effects of their actions, respond to another person's needs and take responsibility when difficulties arise.

RSE at Summerhill is based on a whole-person view of the child. It considers emotional wellbeing, physical growth, identity, intimacy and sexuality as interconnected aspects of the pupil's life and of their developing understanding of themselves and other people. These areas are approached with openness, sincerity and acceptance. The school's culture is one in which nothing human is taboo, allowing pupils to raise questions and seek accurate information without shame, embarrassment or moralising. As A.S.Neill expressed it, "At Summerhill, nothing is unmentionable, and no one is shockable."

This open and unrepressed attitude supports pupils in developing confidence in themselves and in relating to others with honesty and mutual respect. It also helps them examine the influences they meet beyond the school. Edited images, commercial pressures, pornography and online material can create distorted expectations about appearance, intimacy, sexual behaviour and relationships. Summerhill's position is expressed in Zoë Readhead's words:

'All his life, my father spoke and wrote about the importance of children and adolescents developing a natural and healthy attitude towards sex and sexuality. Pornography, its content, and the viewing of it, is the very opposite of his ideas. It is not a question of morality but simply that viewing pornography at an early age can lead, among other things, to children developing very unrealistic and distorted views about sex and relationships. Further, by comparing themselves to the 'porn stars', boys can become concerned about 'sexual performance' and girls about 'body image'. At Summerhill we always try to offer a calm, balanced and honest attitude to sex.'

The relationships through which pupils grow are formed within an international boarding community of different ages, sexes, nationalities, cultures, languages, social backgrounds, personalities and experiences. Living closely together brings affection, friendship, disagreement, privacy, difference, vulnerability and responsibility into ordinary daily life. **Pupils learn how their conduct affects other people and how relationships are sustained through attention, communication, fairness and repair.**

The structures of the self-governing community make this learning active and shared. The School Meeting provides a place where the effect of conduct can be described openly, different accounts can be heard and decisions can be made by the community. The elected Ombudsmen Committee gives pupils an immediate and accessible means of seeking help with personal disputes. Ombudsmen listen with care, compassion and impartiality to those involved, support communication and help them reach a resolution or bring the matter to the Meeting when wider consideration is needed. Other elected committees give pupils responsibility for decisions and tasks that affect other members of the school. **Through taking part in these structures of self-government, seeking their help or seeing them operate, pupils develop a practical understanding of voice, fairness, accountability and care for the community.**

Living together with equality and care requires respect for each person's choices. *Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026* states that “*Consent is about having the freedom and capacity to choose.*” This formulation appears within its safeguarding guidance on sexual consent, but the same underlying principle is also reflected more broadly in the statutory guidance on Relationships Education and RSE through its treatment of permission, personal boundaries, consent and choice. **At Summerhill, the principles of non-compulsion and freedom of choice apply throughout school life, including the ways in which pupils engage with RSE. They give practical effect to respect for pupils’ freedom and capacity to choose and are both an essential expression of trust in the child and a fundamental means of safeguarding their wellbeing.**

Respect for consent requires attention to the full context of a person's communication, not to words alone. At Summerhill, this principle applies throughout relationships and community life. **The community is sensitive to the different ways in which a person may express a boundary or show that they are uncomfortable or unsure.** Communication may take the form of words, hesitation, withdrawal, silence, tone or visible changes in emotion or behaviour. Pupils and adults learn to notice these expressions, check what another person wants, respond with care and look out for one another. This accords with the statutory guidance on Relationships Education and RSE, which places consent alongside kindness, attention to another person's needs and vulnerabilities, and awareness of differences in power.

Adults are available to offer sincere guidance, factual information and practical support. Staff approach these conversations openly, honestly and professionally. Whatever their personal views on the matters being discussed, they are expected to follow the school's philosophy and to respond in accordance with it, this policy and the *Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy*.

Summerhill's approach combines the relationships and responsibilities of community life with accurate knowledge, considered conversation and access to trusted adults. It supports pupils in understanding themselves and others, developing healthy and fulfilling relationships, recognising harm and seeking appropriate help.

3. How RSE is provided

The statutory guidance requires schools to distinguish Relationships Education from Sex Education so that pupils and parents understand what is being taught and the content to which withdrawal rights apply. Summerhill makes this distinction within the curriculum outline in Section 7 and within the information provided to parents before planned chats. The full arrangements for withdrawal, including the rights of parents and pupils, are explained in Section 5.

Relationships Education develops the understanding and capacities pupils need for family life, friendship and relationships with other people. It includes kindness, communication, privacy, personal boundaries, bodily autonomy, online relationships, recognising harmful or unsafe conduct and knowing how to seek help. Relationships Education may include sensitive safeguarding subjects while remaining distinct from teaching about the details of sexual activity.

Sex Education concerns teaching about sexual and intimate relationships and human reproduction. At primary age, the statutory guidance identifies conception and birth as the recommended focus of Sex Education beyond Relationships Education and the relevant science curriculum. At secondary age, Sex

Education forms part of RSE and includes intimate and sexual relationships, readiness, sexual consent, contraception, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and sexual and reproductive health.

At Summerhill, community life is itself a principal means of providing Relationships Education. The school curriculum explicitly recognises learning through the School Meeting, school laws, committees, boarding, play, friendships, shared responsibilities and the ordinary situations that arise from living together. Through these different aspects of school life, pupils construct, apply and deepen their understanding of boundaries, privacy, consent, fairness, conflict, care, responsibility and seeking help. Because this learning arises in real situations, it can be addressed when it is relevant and revisited as pupils' understanding develops.

This community provision also includes ready access to trusted adults. Pupils may raise questions, ask for information or seek support from any member of staff they trust, including their houseparents. Books and other resources are available within the school, and relevant scientific teaching contributes factual knowledge where appropriate. Together, community life, boarding practice, School Meetings, houseparent care, staff availability, safeguarding practice and the RSE curriculum form the combination through which relationships are supported at Summerhill.

Alongside community life, Summerhill provides planned *Relationships and Sex Chats* and *Online Safety Chats* each term. These chats give pupils structured opportunities to develop accurate knowledge, learn relevant language and law, consider different experiences, and ask questions. They are adapted to the pupils' ages, understanding, development, and individual needs, and they have a conversational form in which scenarios, discussion, books, and other appropriate resources may be used to support understanding. Planned RSE is delivered by permanent members of staff who have been trained to lead these chats.

Relationships and Sex Chats form one part of the wider provision through which Summerhill covers the statutory Relationships Education and RSE content and they are available to pupils on the same voluntary basis as other classes at Summerhill. Nonetheless, the majority of pupils choose to attend. Pupils who wish to use the school's internet are required to attend the Online Safety Chats. **Where a pupil does not attend a particular Relationships and Sex Chat, or chooses to engage with a topic in another way, the school ensures that the relevant content can still be encountered through these different routes.** Core topics are revisited, and provision may also take the form of a smaller follow-up chat, an individual conversation, an alternative session, or a short resource followed by discussion. The approach reflects the pupil's age, development, understanding, communication and individual needs.

RSE is made accessible to pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and the content and method of provision are adapted appropriately. This may be achieved through the conversational form of the chats and other appropriate forms of provision as described above.

An anonymous-question box is also available to pupils. It is checked before the chats and the questions submitted are addressed during them. This gives pupils a private way to raise matters they would prefer not to ask aloud and allows the facilitator to prepare a clear and developmentally appropriate response. Section 4 explains how personal questions, difficult questions and safeguarding concerns are handled.

Summerhill therefore provides RSE through the connected elements of community life, planned chats, individual and small-group conversations, accessible resources and relevant learning elsewhere in the

curriculum. Together, these elements enable pupils to encounter the required RSE content in breadth and depth, and to develop understanding that extends well beyond it.

4. Questions, confidentiality and safeguarding

Pupils may ask questions that go beyond the RSE provided by the school or relate to content from which they have been withdrawn. **These questions are responded to calmly and with an emphasis on supporting the pupil.** A member of staff may answer the question, encourage the pupil to speak with a parent or another trusted adult, or direct them to an appropriate source of support. The school recognises that leaving such questions unanswered may lead pupils to seek information from unreliable or inappropriate sources, including online.

RSE conversations are handled with respect for pupils' privacy. Personal information is shared only on a need-to-know basis. Where a pupil expressly asks for information not to be shared with their parent or guardian, the school will respect that wish unless there are reasonable grounds to believe that the pupil does not understand the consequences, or that disclosure would be in the best interests of the pupil or other children. Staff cannot promise secrecy where this could compromise a pupil's safety or welfare, and pupils are made aware of these limits.

Where a pupil seeks advice or practical support relating to contraception or safer sex, staff respond calmly, without judgement and with the pupil's safety and wellbeing as the first consideration. As stated in the school's *Community Life Statement*, sexual intercourse is not permitted at school. This does not remove the school's responsibility to support safer choices. Whatever their personal views, staff are expected to ensure that the pupil receives appropriate information, support and access to condoms where needed. Where relevant, pupils are reminded of the UK law and of school rules. Any circumstances that raise a safeguarding concern, including concerns about coercion, exploitation, age, capacity or differences in power, are dealt with in accordance with the Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy.

Where any question, observation or disclosure raises a concern about a pupil's safety or welfare, staff will act without delay and in line with the school's *Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy*.

5. Parents, pupils and withdrawal from Sex Education

Parents are informed at least two weeks before a planned Relationships and Sex Chat of the content to be covered and the member or members of staff who will deliver it. On request, parents may also view the detailed curriculum content documents for primary and secondary pupils, the full list of RSE resources and all teaching materials used in the provision. **Parents wishing to view these documents or materials should email their request to the school office, which will arrange access.** Parents may share comments, concerns or feedback with the school, and these will be considered. Responsibility for determining the curriculum remains with the school, in accordance with its legal duties, the statutory guidance and the school's ethos; consultation does not give parents a right to determine or veto curriculum content.

A parent who wishes their child to be withdrawn from Sex Education should make the request to the Principal. Before deciding the request, the Principal will discuss it with the parent and, where appropriate, the pupil, to understand what is being requested and to clarify the nature and purpose of

the curriculum. This discussion may include the benefits of receiving Sex Education and the possible effects of withdrawal.

Parents may request that their child be withdrawn from any Sex Education provided at primary age beyond Relationships Education and relevant science teaching, or from some or all Sex Education provided as part of RSE at secondary age. They may not request withdrawal from Relationships Education or from content taught as part of the science curriculum. In relation to a secondary pupil, the Principal may refuse a request in exceptional circumstances, such as where there are safeguarding concerns or a specific vulnerability affecting the pupil.

From three terms before a pupil turns 16, the pupil may choose to receive Sex Education despite an earlier parental request for withdrawal. Pupils are made aware of this right, and the school will arrange for the pupil to receive the provision if they choose to take part.

Where a pupil is withdrawn from Sex Education, the school will ensure that the pupil still receives appropriate, purposeful education during the period of withdrawal.

6. Responsibility and review

The Principal, acting as proprietor, has overall responsibility for this policy and any subsequent revisions of it. The Principal is responsible for ensuring that RSE is provided consistently across the school and for managing requests for withdrawal from Sex Education in accordance with Section 5.

The members of staff trained to lead Relationships and Sex Chats are responsible for planning and delivering them in accordance with this policy, the curriculum outline and the detailed primary and secondary content documents. In considering the provision, the Principal and the trained staff review whether the required content is being covered, whether the content and materials remain accurate, balanced, accessible and appropriate to pupils' ages and development, and whether pupils' questions and feedback indicate that any part of the provision needs further attention. This review concerns the quality and completeness of the provision and does not involve an assessment of pupils.

This policy and its curriculum outline are reviewed annually, and sooner where changes to legislation, statutory guidance, safeguarding arrangements or Summerhill's provision make this necessary. The detailed content documents, list of resources and teaching materials are considered as part of the review so that they remain consistent with this policy.

7. RSE Curriculum Outline

Below is a brief outline of the broad areas covered by Summerhill's RSE provision. Summerhill has separate detailed curriculum content documents for primary and secondary pupils. These set out the individual curriculum points and identify how each is provided through community life, planned chats and relevant teaching elsewhere in the curriculum.

7.1 Primary Relationships Education

Primary Relationships Education covers:

- families and people who care for pupils;

- caring friendships;
- respectful relationships;
- equality, difference and stereotypes;
- communication, conflict and repairing relationships;
- privacy, personal boundaries and bodily autonomy;
- bullying, including online bullying;
- recognising harmful or unsafe relationships;
- knowing how to report concerns and seek help;
- respectful and safe online relationships;
- growth, puberty, menstruation and the correct names for body parts, where these form part of Relationships Education or relevant scientific teaching.

7.2 Primary Sex Education

Where Sex Education is provided to primary pupils beyond Relationships Education and relevant scientific teaching, it is identified separately in the information given to parents before the chat. The withdrawal arrangements in Section 5 apply to this content.

7.3 Secondary Relationships and Sex Education

Secondary RSE develops the areas introduced during primary education and covers:

- families, committed relationships, marriage, civil partnership and parenting;
- friendships and other respectful relationships;
- romantic, intimate and sexual relationships;
- equality, identity, sexuality, difference, stereotypes and prejudice;
- consent, boundaries, privacy, communication and differences in power;
- readiness for intimate and sexual relationships and the choice whether or when to have sex;
- the law relating to relationships, consent and sexual behaviour;
- contraception, pregnancy and pregnancy choices;
- sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, safer sex and testing;
- sexual harassment, sexual violence, domestic abuse, harmful sexual behaviour, grooming and exploitation;
- pornography and its influence on attitudes, expectations, body image and relationships;
- recognising harmful or abusive behaviour, reporting concerns and seeking help;
- puberty, menstruation and reproductive development.

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Document history

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