

Healthy relationships education - it's not all about sex! A commentary on the importance of children's friendships within the pastoral curriculum

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Abstract

In this commentary we reflect on the recently introduced statutory framework for Relationships Education in primary education in England and welcome the inclusion of friendships on the curriculum. We suggest that the attention on some of the more controversial aspects of the framework has perhaps meant that there has been less critical consideration of the teaching of caring friendships.

Here we discuss evidence showing the importance of children's friendships for their school experience, wellbeing and later development and argue that sufficient time and effort should be incorporated into pastoral provision to attend to these topics. We outline some recommendations for practice based on using story-based material to engage children with the intricacies of friendship and equip them with the skills to manage these relationships effectively.

Keywords

Relationships education; friendship; middle childhood

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Introduction

The recently introduced statutory Relationships Education curriculum in England requires schools to include dedicated curriculum time on supporting pupils with the development of a range of relationships (DfE, 2019). Topics included in both the primary and secondary statutory curriculum focus on family relationships, respectful relationships, friendships, online relationships, and staying safe. The secondary curriculum also includes intimate and sexual relationships. Within the primary framework, we are particularly interested in the inclusion of ‘caring friendships’ in the curriculum. There is much research showing the value of children’s friendships for their development and wellbeing (e.g. Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020), and the primary school years see many changes in the nature, quality, and function of peer relations. During this period we typically see dyadic relationships becoming more stable and psychologically meaningful for children. Having a pastoral curriculum that supports these changes and helps children to establish good quality relationships with peers is therefore paramount for their school experience and future developmental outcomes.

In this commentary, we look at the statutory Relationships Education curriculum and reflect on how focus on controversial aspects of this has meant there has been perhaps less attention on how best to deliver the caring friendships unit within primary education. We will review evidence showing how important and developmentally significant children’s friendships are and propose some recommendations for educators to teach these topics effectively.

The statutory Relationships Education in England

Personal Social Health and Economic Education (PSHE) provides the opportunity for schools to teach children and young people valuable knowledge and skills to prepare them for life. In England, up until recently, it has been recommended but not mandatory. Whilst most schools have ensured that PSHE has a place in their provision, its status is sometimes de-valued

compared to other subjects (Formby & Wolstenholme, 2012) and teachers report having limited access to training on these topics (Davies & Matley, 2020).

As McLaughlin (2022) notes, there have been numerous educational reforms since 1972 that have impacted on the climate for pastoral care in England. Changing national concerns and government priorities have impacted on the expectations and content of the curriculum and expectations on schools. In this regard, the statutory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education policy published in 2019 (DfE, 2019) represents a notable shift to prioritise young people's relationships and health in the curriculum. It marks the first time that these topics are mandatory. The guidance focuses on the need to help pupils prepare for adulthood and make informed decisions about their lives, setting out specific topics that should be covered at primary and secondary level.

The new statutory framework has received attention in the sector, both in terms of the raised status of relationships education and the topics that are included. Indeed, there has been interest in the coverage of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) issues, sex and intimacy, and debates around parental choice. There have also been concerns raised about the teaching of inappropriate content and age suitability of sensitive topics, which are expected to be considered in a government review (see DfE, 2023).

In workshops we have run with trainee primary school teachers about the new statutory guidance, the focus of group discussions and questions often centres on teaching about sex and sexuality. It is interesting to note that PSHE is often seen to be synonymous with learning about puberty, sex and intimate relationships, which does not reflect the range of topics that the pastoral curriculum should cover. It may be reflective of teachers' relative comfort in teaching biological aspects of sex education, and the publicity that certain topics have received in the media and political discourse. It is clearly important to support teachers in

delivering quality sex education and tackling some of the issues and concerns surrounding the teaching of these topic areas. However, these aspects associated with the statutory guidance have perhaps overshadowed the other components that are included under the Relationships Education framework.

Whilst not to negate the vital importance of timely and quality education on intimacy and sexual matters, it is prudent to highlight that most of the relationships which children have now and into adulthood will not be romantic ones. In addition to familial ties, there are other relationships that are incredibly important for children's development and wellbeing, such as being able to establish mutually supportive social networks (Hartup, 1992; Jordan & Rees, 2020). Our focus in this commentary is on friendships, as we see the inclusion of this component in the statutory framework to be very positive and salient.

Why friendships matter

Connections with peers and being socially integrated is of central importance to children's experience. When asking them about well-being and what makes a happy life (Jordan & Rees, 2020), 'positive relationships' was at the top of the list. Classic work by Hartup (1992) points to the developmental significance of social relationships, and how well-functioning relationships are associated with a healthy functioning child. Within the social landscape, friendships are a unique type of relationship with others that deserve much attention in the pastoral curriculum due to their nature, complexity, and effects.

Children's friendships have been shown to impact markedly on developmental outcomes (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). Friendships have distinct features from other kinds of relationships in children's lives, including reciprocity, mutual affection and support, equal power and status, and trust. Through these characteristics, friends provide unique 'developmental advantages' and offer optimal contexts for social and emotional learning

(Glick & Rose, 2011; Hartup, 1992). Friendships can also provide children with emotional support and allyship, which have been found to be particularly relevant in relation to protecting them against involvement in bullying (Kenrick, 2021). Friendships are also important for how children feel about themselves, and good quality friendships can provide a sense of self-validation (Bukowski, 2001). Friendships provide the basis for later relationships meaning that what children learn from their peer relationships will have an impact in adulthood (Allen et al., 2020).

However, it is worth noting that poor quality friendships or friendships that might be deemed ‘unhealthy’ can have negative outcomes for young people, for example, research has shown that bullying can occur within friendships (Mishna et al., 2008). Further, the absence of friendships has concerning consequences. Loneliness is reported to be a ‘killer’ (Barber, 2023), and is associated with poor physical and mental health and poor educational outcomes (Eccles & Qualter, 2021). Chronic loneliness is associated with various adjustment problems such as school drop-out, mental health difficulties, medical problems and addiction, and evidence suggests that there may be long-term effects of experiencing loneliness in middle childhood even if this loneliness resolves later in pre-adolescence (Harris et al., 2013).

It is especially timely to attend to children’s social relationships as we emerge from the COVID pandemic. Many children were cut off from their peers for prolonged periods and may have missed out on the everyday opportunities to hone and practice their relationships with others on the playground. During COVID, loneliness and isolation was a key concern for children (NSPCC, 2020), and young people reported struggles coping with not seeing their friends (The Children’s Society, 2022). When discussing their experiences during the pandemic, children talked about the irreplicable nature of friendships and the unexpected benefits of school for socialisation (Lariviere-Bastien et al., 2022).

This reinforces the importance of school as a site for children's social development. At school, children are learning academically but also learning about social relationships and their identities. As such, relationships with peers and friendships need to have a core place on the pastoral curriculum.

Caring friendships within Relationships Education

We were very encouraged to see the inclusion of caring friendships as a distinct unit on the primary Relationships Education curriculum when it was launched. Our experience suggests that it cannot be taken for granted that children know how to make friends and that they will just work out how to navigate the challenges in friendships. We know that children come to school with varied life experiences, where they may not have talked about friendships or seen modelling of positive relationships. Therefore, children need guidance and space to think through how they may deal with things that happen in their friendships. Coverage of these issues within the classroom may serve to normalise the fact that friendships can change and may have ups and downs. It may also help children to understand the features and characteristics of friendships and recognise healthy and unhealthy relationships.

There is however an assumption that teachers know how to do this and are suitably equipped to deliver effective relationships education to meet children's needs. As such, pastoral aspects may receive less attention in teacher training, so it is important to understand whether teachers feel sufficiently confident in their abilities to address these issues with children in the classroom.

The research data we are currently collecting with primary trainee teachers shows low confidence in teaching PSHE, reflecting already published research from pre-service secondary teachers (Evans & Evans, 2007). This has provided the impetus for us to develop

resources to support teachers in their delivery of the ‘caring friendships’ unit of Relationships Education in primary schools.

In our research on friendship in middle childhood, we found that the quality of reciprocated friendships was important for children’s self-worth (Maunder & Monks, 2019). We used the Friendship Qualities Scale (Bukowski et al, 1994) to measure the quality of children’s relationship with their ‘best’ friend. The measure captures distinct characteristics of the friendship we would associate with a good or ‘healthy’ friendship, such as companionship, help, security, closeness and (low) conflict. In our subsequent work, we have taken these friendship quality dimensions and used them to design themed lessons covering different elements of friendships (Maunder & Monks, 2023). Using a story-structure, we have designed a fictional school class with recognisable characters and friendship scenarios that map onto the statutory requirements. Each lesson is centred around an illustrated story depicting a different friendship challenge. Structured lesson plans set out a range of facilitated class activities to help children engage with the situation and reflect on key learning. The materials are based on good practice guidance in teaching relationships education (Mason & Woolley, 2019; Pugh & Hughes, 2021), and have been reviewed by experts in the field. Feedback so far suggests that the illustrated story format, plot structure and teacher guidance is well received by staff and helping them to cover the requirements in an accessible and engaging way. This suggests that there is value in using theory and research into children’s friendships to develop informed educational materials for practice.

Recommendations

Based on our academic interest in children’s friendships and work developing curriculum materials to support schools, we propose several recommendations for educators in their teaching of friendships within their pastoral provision.

First, we recommend steering away from surface level engagement on friendship within the curriculum materials. It's not sufficient to simply describe what friendships are and consider 'nice' behaviour or being a good friend. This is a vital starting point, but children need scaffolding to explore the finer complexities of these relationships. As children move through primary school their friendships are becoming more sophisticated, and they are encountering psychological aspects around intimacy, new emotions, conflicts, in-groups and out-groups. This needs to be reflected in the coverage of topics within the curriculum on friendships. The material needs to be authentic and relatable so children can draw parallels between what they are learning and their everyday experience with their peers at school. For example, one of the things teachers noted was how they liked the coverage of 'everyday niggles' within friendships as this resembled what they frequently observed within their classrooms. This included fall-outs, changing friendships, trust, secrets, and making new friendships. Whilst common, these friendship challenges are highly significant to children and often strongly felt.

Second, we recommend incorporating stories into teaching on friendships. It is common practice within PSHE teaching to use scenarios and case studies to help children consider hypothetical situations. This can provide a safe space to explore possible actions and circumstances in a distanced way without personal disclosures (PSHE Association, nd). To take this further, we suggest that stories involving characters and their wider lives will help children to identify more and follow the trajectory of the relationships being depicted. Through story, children can engage with the plots and empathise with the characters, facilitating their emotional engagement with the issues being explored. Fiction can be a powerful tool to increase social and emotional skills through connection to the characters as extension to the self - a process of 'dual empathy' by engaging in personal processing whilst also feeling through characters (Dill-Shackleford et al, 2016).

Our third recommendation is the use of evidence-informed resources. These materials should account for the complexities and challenges that children might face in their friendships. Resources should also have been reviewed or ‘trialled’ by educators in the classroom and reflect what we know about good practice in pastoral education.

Our final recommendation is that it is important to examine the link between teaching and children’s outcomes. It is vital that we evaluate the impact of teaching within the Relationships Education curriculum. In our work, we are examining not only changes in children’s understanding/learning around aspects of ‘caring friendships’, but also exploring the impact that this has on their feelings about their relationships and their own behaviours within relationships.

Concluding remarks

Having ‘caring friendships’ on the statutory framework for schools is an important move, and a good opportunity for schools to fully embrace children’s social lives at school and give friendships the attention in the curriculum which they deserve. We have set out some recommendations to educators to inform the delivery of this material in primary classrooms.

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