

Parents lose right to withdraw children from sex education lessons

By [Daily Mail Reporter](#)

Last updated at 3:16 PM on 05th November 2009

Parents are to lose the right to withdraw their child from sex education classes when the youngster reaches 15, the Schools Secretary announced today.

The move means all teenagers will receive at least one year's worth of lessons covering sex, contraception and relationships before the age of consent.

Faith schools will not be able to opt out of any part of the new statutory curriculum, Ed Balls also confirmed today, although they will be able to teach topics within the 'tenets of their faith'.



Compulsory: All teenagers - including those in faith schools - will receive at least one year of lessons covering sex, contraception and relationships

So-called Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education is to become compulsory in both primary and secondary schools from September 2011, and will be enshrined in new legislation.

Under current rules parents have the right to withdraw their child from sex education classes up until the age of 19.

Mr Balls said that only a 'very small minority' of parents choose to exercise this right, and over the past few months issues have been raised about the age at which parents should still be able to exercise it.

'What's happened over the past few decades is that the English courts have been

saying it is important to strike a balance of the capacity of the young person to make their own decisions and the rights of the parents,' he said.

This has informed the health service's approach to contraception and approaches to education, Mr Balls added.

He said that it 'doesn't make sense' in new legislation to retain parents' right to withdraw their child up until the age of 19, given that teenagers can vote at 18, and the age of consent is 16.

A survey commissioned by the Government to gauge the opinion of parents reveals that four in five agree that children should attend sex education lessons, although almost a third (30 per cent) said parents should always have the option to withdraw their child, no matter how old the youngster is.

Under the new curriculum, pupils as young as seven will learn about puberty and the facts of life and five-year-olds will be taught about parts of the body, relationships and the effects of drugs on the body.

Once they reach secondary school, pupils will learn about contraception, HIV and Aids, pregnancy and different kinds of relationships - including same sex unions and civil partnerships.

But schools will be allowed to teach the subject 'in line with the context, values and ethos of the school'.



Schools Secretary Ed Balls says only a small minority of parents choose to withdraw children from sex education

It means that children at some faith schools could be taught that their religion frowns on the use of contraceptives at the same time as learning about condoms. Giving an example, Mr Balls said: 'It is open to faith schools to teach what they believe, according to the tenets of their faith, that pupils should not have sexual relationships outside of marriage.'

But faith schools will not be allowed to refuse to teach about contraception on the grounds that they don't believe in sex before marriage, he said.

'You can teach the promotion of marriage, you can teach that you shouldn't have sex outside of marriage, what you can't do is deny young people information about contraception outside of marriage.'

Mr Balls said there was no indication that more parents of children at faith schools would choose to withdraw their child once the new curriculum comes into force.

He said that just because parents want children to be taught according to their faith, 'it doesn't mean they don't want them to be taught something that's important'.

Lisa Power, head of policy at the Terrence Higgins Trust, said: 'Young people have said they need more support around sex and relationships and the Government has recognised this.'

'Here at Terrence Higgins Trust we often see the results of ignorance and poor education so we're glad the Government is tackling this issue.'

'It's vital that young people growing up in the UK, with all the mixed messages they get from the media and their peers, are well educated about the realities of sex and relationships.'

A spokesman for Kids in the Middle, a coalition of family and children's organisations, said: 'We believe that children and young people should be able to explore the relationship issues that affect them at home and at school.'

'Relationship and sex education can help them form safe and happy relationships, and develop the skills and capabilities that will allow them to succeed and thrive. We welcome the commitment of Government to strengthening relationship and sex education in schools, and we will continue to campaign for teachers to have the resources and training to deliver it to high standards.'

Jane Lees, chair of the Sex Education Forum, said: 'All children have the right to learn about their bodies, growing up, relationships and sex, at school and at home.'

'Making PSHE statutory will be an excellent opportunity for schools to build their relationship with parents, ensuring that together they can help children and young people learn how to be healthy and stay safe.'

Chris Keates, general secretary of the NASUWT teaching union, said: 'The decision to make PSHE a statutory entitlement must now lead to a detailed consideration of the role that suitably qualified support staff and other members of the wider children's workforce, such as health and social work professionals, will need to make in supporting schools in this area of work.'

'Teachers simply do not have the capacity to absorb and cope alone with another statutory requirement.'

'Allowing parents to withdraw their child from sex and relationship lessons up to the age of 15 does not, however, sit well with a statutory entitlement.'

'If it is important enough to be a statutory provision, then it is important enough for every child to receive it.'

'This is the only part of the National Curriculum from which parents have a right of withdrawal.'

Liberal Democrat children's spokeswoman, Annette Brooke said: 'Ministers' acceptance that high-quality personal and social education should be compulsory is long overdue.

'The Government has failed to treat Britain's soaring teenage pregnancy rate with the urgency it deserves.

'If properly taught, sex and relationship education can be used to empower young people and enable them to make their own decisions without feeling pressurised.

'It is essential that steps are taken to ensure that those involved in teaching sensitive issues are properly trained. In some cases it may be more appropriate for relevant professionals to be invited into schools to discuss these matters with children.'

Rt Revd John Saxbee, Chair of the Church of England's Board of Education, said he welcomed the decision to make PSHE compulsory.

'Our schools will continue to explore a range of views on the topics covered in PSHE, including those relating to Sex and Relationships Education, and these discussions will be set firmly within the framework of Christian teaching.

'We recognise that families play a crucial role in this area and parents will wish to have full information on how their child's school intends to discuss these topics, as well as the ability to withdraw their children from lessons if they object strongly to the proposed plans.

'The Church has encouraged the Government to retain the right for parents of students in any school to withdraw their child from sex education lessons, up to the age of fifteen. At that point, students can rightly expect to be provided with greater access to information about sex and relationships in a way that helps prepare them for adult life.

'It is important to note that all students already receive some sex education through the biology curriculum, for which there is no right for withdrawal.

'Giving all students aged fifteen and above access to factual information and the opportunity to discuss relationships in a supervised setting seems a responsible and appropriate response to a context where these topics are widely discussed among young people.'