

“What’s out there for  
**parents**, putting us in  
a better **position?**”

**PARENTAL NEEDS FOR ENGAGEMENT IN  
CHILDREN’S RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION**

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## **Acknowledgements**

This paper is dedicated to children and young people who have a right to be guided and educated with love, respect, and accurate information in their journey of sexual self-discovery.

“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all”

Aristotle (384 – 322 BC)

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## **Abstract**

The discourse on Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is situated in a political battle between the rights of children and the rights of parents. Current research focuses on the RSE needs of children and young people, and the barriers to good communication about RSE within families. This study will provide an analysis of parental needs in their role as RSE educators. This is an important enquiry given the substantial role parents have in imparting knowledge and values throughout their children's sexual development and because of the rights afforded to parents in the current educational policies in England.

Using focus groups and Grounded Theory Method, this study provides a theoretical interpretation of the needs of parents in their RSE role. Two focus groups with mothers (n=6 and n=7) and one with fathers (n=5) were conducted in two locations in England.

The study demonstrates the disjuncture between the afforded parental right to determine children's RSE and the education parents are able to provide their children. The findings suggest the explicit needs of parents to engage in children's RSE, and the implicit need for parent education in the comprehensive nature of RSE that rests in children's rights. To address these needs, this study recommends the concerted efforts in politics, policies and practice to develop effective and constructive strategies to engage parents in their RSE role that meets the needs of children.

Findings of fathers' conception of RSE greatly advances the understanding of how the gender perspective on RSE operates in the family.

Thus, this study contributes extended and new insights into how parents can be empowered to become effective RSE educators who will develop RSE in the family and ultimately benefit children and young people's development.

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## Acronyms

<b>DfE</b>	Department for Education
<b>GTM</b>	Grounded Theory Method
<b>HIV/AIDS</b>	Human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome
<b>ICPD</b>	International Conference on Populations and Development
<b>LGBT</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
<b>NC</b>	National Curriculum
<b>NATSAL</b>	National Survey of Sexual Attitudes & Lifestyles
<b>NGOs</b>	Non-Governmental Organisations
<b>PSHE</b>	Personal, Social, and Health Education
<b>RE</b>	Relationships Education
<b>RSE</b>	Relationships and Sex Education
<b>SRE</b>	Sex and Relationships Education
<b>SRHE</b>	Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights
<b>STIs</b>	Sexually Transmitted Infections
<b>UNCoRC</b>	United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child
<b>UNCRC</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>UNGA</b>	United Nations General Assembly
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>USA</b>	United States of America

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is a subject rarely out of public headlines. For years a political debate in England has centred around the profile of RSE and the related subject of Personal, Social, and Health Education (PSHE) within the National Curriculum (NC). The recent passing of the Children's and Social Care Act in March 2017, has for the first time given RSE full statutory status in the NC and across all schools. This development is celebrated by campaigners of rights-based RSE who for many years have campaigned for children's school education to include RSE that is evidence-based and comprehensive in content. However, a caveat within the new educational legislation continues to afford parents the right to withdraw their children from sex education within Relationship Education (RE) in primary school and from RSE in secondary school. This development posits RSE as being in tension within the public (school) and private (family) spheres, and constitutes the following overarching questions: If children do not receive RSE at school, are they given this education from their parents? If children do receive RSE at school, is their education developed at home through effective parental engagement?

### **1.1 Key concepts of historical developments and definitions of RSE**

On a global level, RSE is seen as an important educational intervention to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and as a tool for promoting reproductive health. As such, RSE has historically been a powerful method of population control focusing on intervention, prevention, and measures centring on reducing risk and improving health outcomes (Ponzetti Jr, 2016b). Since the emergence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s, RSE is experiencing a paradigm shift from a sexual health-outcome measure towards a rights perspective. This shift in attention was anchored by two global events: the International Conference on Populations and Development (ICPD) (UNITED NATIONS, 1994) and the Beijing Declaration (1995), both seen as instrumental in addressing issues such as gender inequalities, sexual rights, and education in the RSE rights discourse (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015). Thus, the rights

perspective of RSE has broadened its approach. It puts emphasis on the individual's sexual identity; rights and responsibilities; and gender equality and lifelong learning through acquiring knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

The development of RSE from a health-outcome perspective towards a rights perspective is evident in the four standard setting documents informing RSE programmes around the world (International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2009; Population Council, 2009; UNESCO et al., 2009; WHO Regional Office for Europe and BzGA, 2010). However, variations in RSE conception and rationale continue to exist along the developed health-rights continuum in different global and regional contexts.

Three typologies of RSE share similarities in definition, yet are distinct in their approach (Yankah, 2016): abstinence-only sex education focus primarily on abstaining from sex before marriage; comprehensive sex education teaches abstinence but includes learning about contraception and safe sex; holistic sex education includes elements from the aforementioned typologies but addresses the wider perspectives of sexual orientation, identity, and development. The variation of approaches is evident in the dominance of abstinence-only RSE in the USA (Kirby, 2011; Kirby, 2001; Kantor et al., 2008), the RSE provision driven by Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) by Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) in developing countries (Ponzetti Jr, 2016b), and the liberal, rights-focused holistic RSE predominantly developed in Scandinavian countries (Parker et al., 2009; Wellings et al., 2006). Nomenclature pertaining to the type of RSE practiced in England varies within literature, but "comprehensive RSE" is most commonly used. Although educational policies align themselves with holistic sex education values, the reality, practice varies due to the hitherto weak profile of RSE.

Children's rights to RSE along with access to sexual health information rest in human rights law as three independent rights; the right to sexuality, to health, and to education (United Nations General Assembly, 2010). This right is confirmed in the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). The rights of children to receive RSE can be seen in tension with the rights of parents to educate their children in accordance with their faith and family values. This is intersected and further problematised by the religious, cultural, and political affiliations that regulate the legislation, policies, and practices that can both

enable and restrict how, when, and where RSE is provided (Zimmerman, 2015). Although the aforementioned standard-setting RSE documents emphasise the importance of recognising the shared primary position of parents and schools in the shaping of RSE provision, within legislation parents are often afforded rights pitted against children's rights, creating tension as seen in the English context (Ingham, 2016). Pending the new UK legislation, currently only biological aspects of RSE are statutory under the NC in England, allowing local authorities and individual schools autonomy over the provision of the wider aspects of RSE (Department for Education, 2000). The delivery and quality of RSE in England, therefore, vary considerably, resulting in inequality in RSE provision and the failure to ensure a comprehensive education of children and young people (NCB 2016).

Although parents in the England support RSE in schools, many do not know what is taught (National Association of Head Teachers, 2013). Studies suggest that parents see themselves as their children's primary RSE educators (Morawska et al., 2015; Dyson and Smith, 2012; Flores and Barroso, 2017), and that children want RSE from parents (Turnbull et al., 2008) but regard school as their main source of RSE (Tanton et al., 2015). Evidence suggests that in reality parents remain inactive or reactive in their RSE communication due to lack of confidence, knowledge, and skills (Flores and Barroso, 2017). Although parenting education is an established and evolving practice, many believe that parenting is a naturally occurring skill and most parents do not engage in formal parenting education outside antenatal preparation classes or early childhood-education programmes (Ponzetti Jr, 2016a). Moreover, RSE for parents does not appear in educational curricula; evidence of policies and practices that engage parents in their children's RSE is sparse (Dyson and Smith, 2012); and the parental perspective and influence on the RSE discourse appear to be underdeveloped and under-researched (Turnbull et al., 2008).

## **1.2 Motivation for research**

In my professional practice as an RSE consultant and facilitator I work with educational establishments and their key stake holders to provide RSE in line with national guidance

and best practice. I have consistently encountered parents who have a poor understanding of the content, delivery, and arrangement of policies that frame RSE provision. Crucially, many parents feel ill-equipped to teach RSE themselves. Whilst current research centres on parent's views and attitudes towards RSE, or their ability to communicate with their children about sexuality, there remains a gap in our understanding of parents' needs in their role as primary RSE educators.

My professional experiences and reflections have thus given motive to this paper which aim to research parents' views of their own needs to become effective RSE educators and how these needs can be met. Findings will contribute to the RSE rights debate and academic discourse. Ideally, the findings will contribute to the forthcoming Department for Education (DfE) consultation on the drafting of the new RSE provision.

What follows in the next chapter is a review of pertinent literature leading to the development of the research questions that will inform the methodology of the qualitative research undertaken. The findings of the research will be discussed and a set of recommendations given in the concluding chapter.

## **Chapter 2. Literature review**

This chapter will first discuss the theoretical framework of childhood sexuality as a social construct applied in the context of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) educational policies. Emphasis will be placed on the RSE discourse in England but discussed in an international context. Pertinent aspects from the above are extrapolated to discuss the RSE rights discourse evident in international law and guidance and within academia that supports the rights of children to RSE which is often found in tension with the rights of parents to determine RSE for their children. Lastly, the chapter will review the literature discussing the role of parental engagement in RSE and the evidence of parent education in empowering this role. The chapter will conclude with the research questions that the present study will examine.

### **2.1 The framework of RSE provision**

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2009, p.2) broadly defines education about sexuality as an “age appropriate, culturally relevant approach to teaching about sexuality and relationships by providing scientifically accurate, realistic, non-judgmental information”. The delivery of RSE is furthermore recognised as situational and intersected by the interplay of social, economic, cultural, and political dimensions.

#### ***2.1.1 RSE in politics and policies***

Zimmerman (2015) refers to population groups with cultural and ideological perspectives on RSE that are often affiliated with politics and thus influence public institutions and policies reflected in the regulation and provision of RSE. The conflict evident across regions refer to what McKay (1998) defines as a conflict of ideologies. This conflict of opinions can refer to abstinence versus holistic RSE based on religious or moral convictions, or on the premise of childhood construction onto which RSE is projected. McKay argues that in Western democratic societies RSE is posited in an educational space where “moral pluralism is to be both respected and tolerated” (p.9),

but that in reality most RSE politics and policies continue to reflect ideological indoctrination.

As a result, RSE provision reflect social and cultural norms and varies globally and regionally. The politics and policies at state level driving or hindering RSE are well demonstrated in the USA, where government funded abstinence-only RSE continues to dominate despite evidence that comprehensive RSE is better at reducing risk-related practices (Kirby, 2011; Kirby, 2001). A longitudinal follow-up study of an abstinence-only RSE programme that included evaluations of both impact and implementation, found no impact on sexual abstinence between the sample and control groups - the age of first sex and number of sexual partners remained the same in both groups (Trenholm et al., 2007). The policy and practice of abstinence-only RSE appears to continue despite numerous studies concluding that comprehensive RSE has the support of the vast majority of parents in the USA (Eisenberg et al., 2008; Horn et al., 2015).

RSE policies in the European context show a less uniform approach, with practices reflecting multiple and diverse cultural, religious, and political influences. When Parker et. al (2009) conducted a comparison of RSE in 26 European countries, they found a variety of contextual, implementation, and outcome differences in RSE provision within regions. These variations reflect the political and religious norm systems operative in each country which determine the position of RSE on the health/rights continuum (Loeber et al., 2010; Olsson, 2016; Parker et al., 2009).

### ***2.1.2 Childhood sexuality as a social construction***

The relatively recent concept of the sexualisation of childhood, exacerbated by the prevalence of sex in the media, consumerism, and the commercialisation of sex, has given rise to increasing public and policy concern (Bailey, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010). The childhood sexualisation debate needs to be understood in the context of childhood sexuality as a social construct. The theory framing the present paper is Robinson's interpretation of Foucault's theory on sexual morality as a cultural relative (Foucault, 1990) together with her discussion on the governance of children's sexual subjectivity and the social construction of children's sexual knowledge.

Robinson argues that children's sexual subjectivity is constituted by contradicting discourses that perceive children as innocent and being in need of protection while simultaneously view children's sexuality as dangerous and in need of regulation. In addition to this self-conflicting view of children as sexual subjects, children are also assumed to be heterosexual and are subjected to heteronormative messages. When this is challenged by children's sexual behaviour, it is viewed as incongruent to the social construction of childhood and results in moral panic. Thus, Robinson frames sexuality as subjugated knowledge that both children and adults are conditioned to avoid. The social construction of both childhood and sexuality therefore acts as a measure of social control and governance.

Robinson's theory applied in the context of RSE allows us to challenge the heteronormative construction of the existing binaries of adulthood and childhood. At the point where the socially constructed "childhood innocence" is intersected by childhood sexual development, adults determine and regulate what constitutes appropriateness in children's sexuality education. The dominance of protection, innocence, and best interests of the child in childhood constructions are thus sustained through educational policies and practices, and in society norms in general. Applied to RSE from a rights-based perspective, Robinson's theory therefore argues that "children's access to sexuality education is an equity and civil rights issue" (Robinson, 2013, p.22).

## **2.2 The English context**

Up until now, RSE has been placed within the broader framework of PSHE, its relevance as a subject confirmed by publication of the Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) Guidance (Department for Education, 2000). However, only biological aspects of RSE have been statutory in the NC, with parents continually afforded the right to withdraw their children from any RSE outside the NC. Moreover, this means that the delivery of- and access to PSHE and RSE are inconsistent and patchy (Emmerson, 2015; National Children's Bureau, 2016; British Humanist Association, 2017; Ofsted, 2013). This inconsistency has been further complicated by the quadripartite school system in which

only state-maintained schools are required to follow all aspects of the NC. Subsequently this positions both PSHE and RSE on the margin of educational priorities, one that is narrow in scope and focused on a health outcome perspective (Abbott et al., 2016). This leaves children and young people with compromised physical, emotional and social education (Ofsted, 2013; Ingham, 2016).

Several concerns relating to the lack of relevant and effective RSE and PSHE are evident in the current RSE discourse in England. Abbott et al. (2016) argue that the lack of teacher training and poor status of RSE leaves teachers ill-equipped and too subjective in their RSE teaching. Furthermore, historic assessment of changes in young people's RSE needs through the results of the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes & Lifestyles (NATSAL) 2010-2012 found that although the delivery of RSE has increased, the content does not meet the needs of children and young people (Tanton et al., 2015). In their extensive qualitative synthesis of literature on children and young people's views of RSE, Pound et al. (2015) conclude that RSE is perceived as biased, negative, and heteronormative; that RSE programmes are lacking in effective student consultation, and that RSE does not meet the needs of children and young people.

Concurrently, mounting evidence on the growing need to address children and young people's safeguarding issues continues to dominate the academic, public, and media discourse on sexuality. Topics such as sexual coercion and the exploitation and abuse of children (Berelowitz et al., 2014); children and young people's unregulated access to pornography (Martellozzo et al., 2016; Horvath et al., 2013; National Association of Head Teachers), and gender based sexism and sexual violence (Phipps et al., 2017) are all well documented.

### ***2.3.1 The future of RSE in England***

RSE provision in the English context presents a muddled and complex picture, due to the historically low profile of RSE within educational policies. RSE policies in England have only recently developed to reflect the paradigm shift from health-outcome intervention towards a rights perspective, as demonstrated by the recent decision by the Department for Education to make RSE a comprehensive and statutory subject across divergent educational institutions (Department for Education, 2017). This is a

result of longstanding pressure from national campaigns, supported by student and parent bodies, and increasing evidence in the political spectrum (Education Committee, 2015; Women and Equalities Committee, 2016). The 2019 academic year will see the introduction of statutory Relationships Education (RE) in primary schools and RSE in secondary schools in England. However, the new policy protects the rights of parents to withdraw their children from any element of RSE within RE in primary school, and SRE in secondary school.

At the time of writing the draft guidance and regulations of changes to educational legislation is under consultation with stakeholders and assumed to be ready for publishing in early 2018. According to the DfE's policy statement, the two key principles of statutory change include the rights of parents to withdraw their children from RSE elements in education because "parents should have the right to teach this themselves in a way which is consistent with their values" and RSE is "appropriate to the age of pupils and their religious background... [allowing] faith schools to teach these subjects according to the tenets of their faith, whilst still being consistent with requirements of the Equality Act." (Department for Education, 2017, p.4).

### ***2.3.2 Rights in RSE***

The development of an RSE rights perspective is therefore paradoxically pointed towards supporting the rights of parents to determine what right their children have to RSE. The aforementioned policy statement does refer to a future consultation on the age of a young person (who is not referred to as a child and is, therefore, inferred as being in secondary school) having the right to make their own decision regarding RSE provision. This will potentially prevent children outside this remit from accessing education on important issues such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights- a right which paradoxically is protected under the Equality Act 2010. From a children's rights perspective, the planned provision therefore continues to compromise the protection of the rights of children to have access to RSE and is in conflict with the rights ensured by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) to which the UK subscribes. The inadequate provision has been observed by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in its concluding observations in the Fifth Periodic Report of United

Kingdom (2016), in which it recommends that the UK make inclusive RSE mandatory in all schools (Para 63.b), and that the design of RSE reflect the views of children (Para 30.a).

Ingham argues that the decision to leave the rights status of RSE unchanged is “not only part of a move away from central direction for education in general, but also avoids the risk of upsetting the more extreme faith schools and religious parents.” (Ingham, 2016, p.448). These minority groups have a strong opposing voice to RSE in public debate, their arguments focusing predominantly on the risk of RSE eroding children’s innocence and strong support for the parental right to withdraw children from school RSE (Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, 2017; The Christian Institute, 2011; Wells, 2009).

### ***2.3.3 RSE provisions for parents***

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) Arts 3 and 5 require parties to support parents in their responsibility for the upbringing, development, and best interest of the child, while Art 18 (2) obliges parties to support parenting responsibilities and make provisions for parenting services. While in the English context parents are afforded the right to determine their children’s RSE in terms of reflecting religious norms and family values (Department for Education, 2000), it is pertinent to ask the question on which premises provisions are established to support parents in this role, and how these empower parents to be RSE educators to their children. The Department for Education’s (DfE) 2011 review of best practice in parental engagement (2011) found robust evidence for the positive relationship between parental engagement and educational outcome but a lack of evidence of programme evaluation. The SRE guidance (Department for Education, 2000) advises schools to work in partnership with parents and to provide regular opportunities for parents to consult on RSE policy and programmes, stating that this partnership will complement parents’ role as RSE educators. There is some evidence of schools’ good practice involving parents in RSE provision as well as attempts to share good practice across the country (Emmerson, 2013; Sex Education Forum, 2017). The importance of consulting with the wider community to strengthen a consistent values framework underpinning RSE, particularly with minority ethnic and religious groups, is recognised as further supporting the successful delivery of RSE to children (Blake and Katrak, 2002).

Evidence suggest that parents' role in RSE needs strengthening (Tanton et al., 2015) - however, no uniform strategic measure for evaluating the impact of provisions to engage parents in their children's RSE is evident in either current or future educational policy.

#### ***2.3.4 Evidence from international contexts in the rights discourse***

Research suggests that some parents' opposition to RSE in schools is associated with a lack of knowledge about what is contained in the RSE curricula. Horn et al. (2015) studied American parents' attitudes towards RSE at school through online surveys. This found that rating parents' views on types of programme (abstinence-only RSE, comprehensive RSE) did not align with a subsequent positive rating of RSE by topic, suggesting that parents' lack of insight about school RSE programmes obscures their actual support for RSE that includes learning about sexual identity and pleasure.

Similarly, a study from Croatia found a significant association between parental acceptance of RSE with the detailed publication of schools' curricula (Igor et al., 2015). The in-depth study addresses the complex relationship between sexuality, faith, and culture, and an acceptance of RSE. An interesting finding from this study relates to the connection between parents' religious affiliation and a familiarisation with the RSE programme, which did not reflect negatively on support of RSE. Moreover, the study recommends that the systematic dissemination of RSE curricula, public engagement, funding, and the use of media to build consensus in order to counter opposing views to RSE are all paramount for the successful implementation of RSE programmes.

#### **2.4 Parental engagement in RSE**

Central to my discussion have been questions about the basic premises, context, and content of RSE and about who is best able to provide it. Where schools offer a place for the formal education of RSE that relates to the concrete learning of the subject, the home and social environments are places where explicit and implicit messages about behaviour and values around sexuality are delivered to children (Shtarkshall et al., 2007). Regardless of the parameters implemented by policies and practices on RSE,

parents remain a child's initial and powerful messenger about sex, sexuality, and relationships. Whether parents actively engage in RSE or not, implicit education through attitudes and behaviour is observed by children and teaches them about sex (Ballard and Gross, 2009).

#### ***2.4.1 Parents as primary RSE educators***

Several studies find that parents see themselves as their children's primary RSE educators and school RSE as an important adjunct to their children's education (Morawska et al., 2015; Dyson and Smith, 2012; Flores and Barroso, 2017), and few parents believe that RSE is the sole responsibility of parents (DUREX, 2010). There is some evidence that parents discuss sex with their children (Thompson et al., 2015; Turnbull et al., 2011); however, despite parents' views on their important role in talking to their children about sex, many fail to do so (Davies and Robinson, 2010; Morawska et al., 2015; Stone et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2010). Barriers to talking to children about sex include lack of confidence (Dyson and Smith, 2012), discomfort (Morawska et al., 2015) and fear of being judged (Stone et al., 2013). A periodic national survey of teenage sexual behaviour in USA found that both parents and teens believe parents to be the dominant influence in teens' decisions on sex (Albert, 2012).

One of the most recently recognised barriers relate to parents' reluctance to start conversations with their children, which is manifested in the need to safeguard them by only engaging in reactive parent-to-child communication rather than pro-active engagement (Flores and Barroso, 2017). Safeguarding children from sexual knowledge relates to parental reluctance to address RSE with younger children for fear of eroding childhood innocence. Focus-group research with both parents and children studied the perceived and actual knowledge of communication about sexuality (Davies and Robinson, 2010). Findings suggest that the construction of childhood innocence hinders open communication between parents and children regarding children's emerging sexualities. In addition, it was found that children are capable and active in constructing their own sexuality and relationships, pieced together from available information and societal messages, often resulting in misinformation. Where children voice this knowledge, parents often fail to engage in communication to explore it further or to

correct misinformation, suggesting a gap in perceived and actual child knowledge of sexuality.

When parents do discuss themes around sex they more often refer to transmitting family values (Wilson et al., 2010; Dyson and Smith, 2012; Flores and Barroso, 2017). A recent survey by Sex Education Forum on children and young people's RSE provision found that just under half of respondents had talked to their parents about healthy relationships, sexual consent, and the difference between safe and unwanted touch, and 66% had not discussed sexual pleasure with them (National Children's Bureau, 2016).

Studies predominantly research parents' communication with teenagers about sex (Aspy et al., 2007; Flores and Barroso, 2017; Tanton et al., 2015) with a focus on the link between RSE and the impact on measurable health-outcomes (Aspy et al., 2007; Dilorio et al., 2003; Klein et al., 2005; Widman et al., 2016).

#### ***2.4.2 Role of gender and communication style***

One of the key concepts impacting how RSE is communicated is the gender relationship and the social and cultural environment in which values and attitudes are shared. In the present context, gender relationship pertains to both parents and children. Research shows that gender has an impact on parents' attitude to - and responsibility for communication about sex according to the gender of the children (Davies and Robinson, 2010; Flores and Barroso, 2017).

A retrospective study with young adults on their experiences of RSE found that young women are more likely than men to cite parents as a source of RSE, and that young men would have liked more information about sex from their fathers (Tanton et al., 2015). Mothers feature more prominently as the primary communicator of RSE in families (Davies and Robinson, 2010; Flores and Barroso, 2017), and the majority of communication takes place between mother and daughter (Thompson et al., 2015). Fathers are more likely to talk to sons than daughters, and daughters are thought to be in need of more protection than sons. This leads to children receiving RSE that differs in values and level of information (Dilorio et al., 1999) and to heteronormative and gendered messages from parents to children and the confirmation of stereotypical

values around girls' and boys' perceived sexualities (Flores and Barroso, 2017; Turnbull et al., 2011). Moreover, because boys receive less RSE at home, they seek information from less reliable sources, such as their peer group, the internet, and the media, resulting in boys using resources outside the home to inform themselves about sexuality (Flores and Barroso, 2017). In light of this, engagement in communicating about sex is strongly gendered. However, Davies and Robinson (2010) found that parents fear transgressing normative values and voice the need to address RSE as a counter to heteronormative messages of sexuality and gender.

### ***2.4.3 Parents' access to education and RSE resources***

As discussed previously in this chapter, the inconsistent nature of RSE policy implementation means that parental involvement in school RSE is not a reality for most. This is despite the support of such measures from campaigners and educational agencies (National Association of Head Teachers, 2013; Pshe Association et al., 2014; Sex Education Forum, 2017), and the provision set out in policy guidance (Department for Education, 2000). In the context of parent educational resources from the DfE, the inclusion of RSE is poor, as evident in the lack of reference to children's early sexual development in published guidance (4Children, 2015).

Evidence show that parents welcome the sharing of the resources used in school RSE and that it increases parental engagement with the school and the level of communication with their children on RSE topics (Alldred et al., 2016; Turnbull et al., 2008). This suggests that an interdisciplinary and integrated approach to RSE between school and families can strengthen the parental role and further children's overall learning in RSE (Pop and Rusu, 2015; Turnbull et al., 2008; Walker and Milton, 2006). In addition, when parents are engaged in school RSE they also require good communication from school around RSE topics and the mode of delivery as well as a sensitivity to family values (Dyson and Smith, 2012; Emmerson, 2013) However, there is little published about how established programmes of parental engagement in school RSE are implemented or evaluated leaving a gap for further research (Turnbull et al., 2011; Walker, 2004).

There is agreement among sexuality experts that RSE should start early and that families are the most influential educators in early years (International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2009; Population Council, 2009; UNESCO, 2015; UNESCO et al., 2009; WHO Regional Office for Europe and BzGA, 2010). Parents are expected to be knowledgeable about sex and able to provide education to their child. However, generations of parents have had little experience of RSE from home or school themselves and are ill-equipped to take on the role of teaching their own children (Dyson, 2016).

Evidence of formal RSE parenting programmes outside the school remit are available from the USA. One example is the The Family Matter Programme - an evidence based intervention to provide parents with skills and resources to protect children from risks associated with sex which primarily focus on the teen child (Ponzetti Jr, 2016a).

Evidence around formal RSE for parents in England is sparse and rarely appears in educational curricula. Speak Easy, a UK Family Planning Association programme is an exception. It's relevance in raising parental confidence in communicating about sex has been evaluated as effective in its approach (Kesterton and Coleman, 2010; Ramm and Coleman, 2008) but despite its positive impact is not a readily available programme and relies on local government or organisational funding. The barriers to parental RSE are additionally based on practicalities such as job and child care responsibilities (Ballard and Gross, 2009).

## **2.5 Development of the research questions**

International and national campaigns, supported by academia, continue to offer evidence to support the rights of children to receive holistic RSE that reflect their needs. The rights discourse in RSE has a strong foundation within international policy development. However, in the English context, despite the recent changes in educational policy to strengthen the rights of children to receive RSE, the rights of parents continue to take precedence. This appears to be a reflection of the heteronormative governing politics and policies informed by the opposition to RSE from minority groups.

RSE educational policies and guidance recognise and encourage parental engagement. However, because of the inconsistent and low profile of RSE, parents are generally unaware and disengaged in schools' RSE provisions and are offered little education and guidance themselves on how to teach RSE to their children. The existing literature on RSE for parents has a number of limitations: 1) although numerous studies assess the determinants for parent-child RSE communication, they are dominated by researching effective communication between adults and teens and the impact on reducing risks associated with sexual behaviour; 2) although research that elicits parents' views and attitudes on RSE argues for improved parental engagement, few studies evaluate the impact of curriculum based parent RSE programmes; 3) there is little evidence of researching parental needs in realising their capacity and potential for being their children's primary RSE educators; 4) the gender differences influencing parental RSE are under-developed and under-researched.

There is therefore a need to 1) examine the RSE needs of parents with younger children (as opposed to teens); 2) clarify and challenge the existing boundaries to the provision of- and access to parental RSE; 3) re-examine and challenge the heteronormative construction of childhood sexuality pervasive in the political discourse impacting RSE provisions. In light of the literature review the present study will address the following research questions:

***RQ1: Do parents understand the RSE provided by school?***

***RQ2: What are the provisions needed by parents to fulfil their role as their children's primary RSE educators?***

These questions are posed in a small-scale qualitative, empirical research study using focus-group discussions with parents. The following chapter will account for the methodology decisions and methodology proceedings used for this study.

## **Chapter 3 Research methodology**

This chapter introduces the research methodology used for this study. It will describe the rationale for the application of Grounded Theory Method (GTM) both as a research strategy and as a method for data analysis. An account of the pilot study that resulted in modifications to the methodology will be explained. This is followed by a description of the techniques used for the sample selection and an introduction of the focus-group compositions. Detailed accounts of the data collection and analysis which generated the emerging categories will be demonstrated. A discussion of the ethical considerations and an account of the strengths and limitations of the research method will conclude this chapter.

### **3.1 Research strategy and design**

As demonstrated in the literature review of this paper, two research questions are posed: 1) Do parents understand the RSE provided by school? 2) What are the provisions needed by parents to fulfil their role as their children's primary RSE educators? These questions are inherently related to perceptions and values that are linked to a specific cultural setting corresponding to parent' beliefs, moral codes, and the RSE they themselves have experienced. Therefore, to address the research questions in this study, a qualitative research approach for eliciting parents' understanding of their own role and their needs to fulfil this role, was chosen.

Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) approach was applied to this study, both as a research strategy and as an analytical framework. GMT originates in Glaser and Strauss' book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) which links theory directly to the generated data and therefore "grounds" theory in the data. GTM went on to develop after a divergence between the two founding authors, with an extensive application of Strauss and Corbin's perspective of GTM that stresses the active role of the researcher in obtaining theory from data (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Charmaz (2006) argues that these approaches take a positivist stance, and instead advocates the application of a

constructivist approach to GTM where the researcher and the subject embark on a shared process of constructing reality.

To answer the research questions posed in this study, it was paramount to apply a methodology that would lend itself to clarifying parental concepts around Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). Thus, the research methodology in this study is guided by Charmaz' interpretation of GTM that provides a framework for "analytic tools and methodological strategies that we can adopt without endorsing a prescribed theory of knowledge or view of reality"(Charmaz, 2006, p.117).

### **3.2 Research method**

In line with the above research strategy, focus groups were used to gather data for this study. Published research using focus groups as a method of generating data that explores participants' feelings, attitudes, and perceptions is increasingly evident within health-related areas of study (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1998; Wilson, 1997). The focus group is a form of group interview that is distinguished as a method by the explicit use of group interaction to gather data (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1998). It is a popular research model used in social sciences, and a tool proven effective in studies examining parental views on RSE such as Davies and Robinson (2010) and Dyson and Smith (2012).

The role of the moderator of focus-group interviews is to facilitate a discussion that will elicit individual and collective perspectives. Any given group will inherently be unique in terms of personalities and group dynamic. The focus-group moderator, therefore, has to straddle two positions: to facilitate and prompt the discussion towards answering the research questions while relinquishing some control to allow group interaction to generate data. Through my professional role I have extensive experience of working with groups in formal and informal settings, and thus possessed many of the skills needed to conduct focus-group interviews. A semi-structured approach to the focus group with several prompting questions was therefore planned.

### ***3.2.1 Pilot study***

A pilot study was conducted with a group of fellow students from the university to test the specific structure of the research method. The forming of a working agreement was well received and aided the ensuing group discussion. Paper and pens were available and the participants were encouraged to add notes and ideas during the meeting. It was hoped that this would guide the discussion as well as enhance the formulation of themes for the transcript in the form of a visual illustration. The constructive feedback from the pilot-group members highlighted that this had the potential to over-represent views of participants with more confident writing skills, as well as being too prescriptive and narrow in exploring views. The pilot study engaged the participants in questions on how to elicit certain factors relating to the demographic of the sample. It was suggested that asking for personal information, such as age and the cultural and educational background of the participants, could be too intrusive in a focus-group setting. Instead, I decided to devise an opening question that would elicit aspects of background information from the participants. The pilot was, therefore, a valuable process in testing the effectiveness and appropriateness of the semi-structured focus-group approach while developing the introduction prompting questions.

### ***3.2.2 Sample selection***

Although GTM lends itself to theoretical sampling, whereby an initial set of analysed data and emerging theory leads to further sampling, time constraints meant that this approach could not be fully employed. Instead a generic purposive sampling method (Bryman, 2015) that incorporates a fixed manner and criteria for the focus-group samples relating to the research questions was employed. This approach was supplemented with the addition of snowball sampling - a form of convenience sampling - in which an initial group of participants disseminated the study information to others. This enabled the study to generate enough information from a unit of analysis to address the research questions.

As a mean of context sampling, two contrasting residential areas of Southeast England with different socio-economic profiles and cultural populations improved representation of participants. Two areas in England relatively close in geographical

proximity were selected for the study: two focus groups in Kent, a county in England associated with a high socio-economic population, and one focus group in London, in an area associated with a rich and mixed ethnic and cultural diversity. In response to researching needs of parents with younger children rather than teens, one sampling criterion was specified at the outset: the participant had to be a parent or carer to child/children aged between seven and 14.

Purposive stratified sampling of geographical area and gender was used to establish three different focus groups to generate data for meaningful analysis. The decision for sampling gender-separated groups was made on the basis of wanting to elicit views from participants who could potentially be inhibited by the presence of the opposite gender. This is particularly valid for the views of minority groups, whose religious doctrine may prevent topics of sexuality from being discussed in gender-mixed groups. Another decisive factor was to extract data which would allow for a gender comparison. Therefore, the gender division of the focus groups was a response to needing to safeguard the integrity of participants as well as enriching the data analysis.

Initial contact by email to the head of PSHE or pastoral care was made to several schools, of which four agreed to partake. The gatekeepers sent an invitation, including the research information (Appendix A), to parents with the instruction to respond directly to me if they were interested in attending the focus group. Two schools generated enough parental response to form two groups of mothers: Focus Group 1 Kent (F1) and Focus Group 2 London (F2). As already evident from previous studies (Flores and Barroso, 2017), engaging fathers in RSE research can be difficult, and this also became apparent during the sampling period of this study. With the assistance of a school nurse who had access to several schools, the focus-group research information was disseminated across a larger geographical area, resulting in the forming of a group of fathers, Focus Group 3 Kent (F3). See Table 1, below for focus-group overview.

**Table 1 Focus groups (3.2.2)**

FOCUS GROUP	F1 Kent	F2 London	F3 Kent
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	6	7	5
GENDER	Female	Female	Male
NATURAL GROUP?	Yes, all participants were parents from the same school	Some participants knew each other	Some participants knew each other
MODE OF SAMPLING	School as gatekeeper	School as gatekeeper and an element of snowballing	School nurse disseminated an invitation to fathers across several schools
TYPE OF SCHOOL	Independent	Academy but three participants were parents from a neighbouring primary school	Mix of independent and state schools

### 3.3 Focus-group composition

The emergent and theoretical categories in this study are based on a unit of data formed of three different focus groups that each provided their own unit of analysis. It is important for this study to acknowledge the different focus-group compositions and the three unique sets of data from which different categories could emerge. This was a relevant observation evident from the focus-group field notes and visually reflected in the group's colour-coded data in the Microsoft Word Matrix of codes, themes, and categories (Appendix B). For example, the F1 discussion centred around the use of language and terminology and the need for early RSE; the discussion in F2 followed the trajectory of family and religious values, and F3 focused on the male-female dynamic within the family and the particular role of fathers in RSE. A detailed description of the focus-group environment and dynamic is accounted for in Appendix C. See focus-group composition in Table 2, below.

**Table 2 Focus-group composition (3.3)**

PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYM	GENDER AND AGE OF CHILD/CHILDREN	PARTICIPANT INFORMATION IMPACTING OWN RSE
<b>F1 Kent</b>		
Kathy	2 boys (7, 10)	Catholic Convent school – no RSE.
Erica	2 girls (9, 11) 1 boy (4)	Catholic Convent school. Basic RSE from Biology and abstinence-only RSE.
Julia	1 girl (8) 1 boy (11)	Basic RSE from Biology.
Angie	1 girl (6) 1 boy (9)	Abstinence-only RSE from parents. Pornographic material.
Sarah	2 girls (10, 11) 1 boy (6) 1 stepson (20)	Basic RSE from Biology and abstinence-only RSE from mother. Information from friends.
Jennie	3 boys (9, 11, 13)	Abstinence-only RSE in Christian/medical household. RSE in relation to human reproduction and related terminology.
<b>F2 London</b>		
Chloe	1 boy (14)	Scottish. Book about menstruation from mother. Basic RSE from Biology.
Amana	2 girls (4, 15) 2 boys (9, 12)	French. Strict catholic upbringing with no RSE at school or at home. Converted to Islam as an adult.
Mishal	6 girls (10 months, 7, 8, 12, 13, 16)	Islamic upbringing in UK. Religious book on changes in puberty.
Saalima	2 girls (13, 19) 3 boys (6, 8, 10)	Islamic upbringing. Moved to UK from Bangladesh aged 10. Religious book on changes in puberty. Basic RSE from Biology.
Kim	2 girls (13, 15) 1 boy (8)	1 <sup>st</sup> generation Asian American. RSE at school, none at home.
Ella	1 girl (12) 1 boy (10)	Buddhist upbringing in Taiwan. Attended Christian school. Basic RSE from Biology, none at home.
Luna	1 girl (11) 1 boy (15)	American. Basic RSE from Biology. Educational books and exposure to pornography/erotic reading material.
<b>F3 Kent</b>		
Nick	3 boys (10, 15, 18)	English single-sex independent boarding school. Basic RSE from Biology. Pornographic material shared with friends.
Gary	1 girl (9) 2 boys (7, 18)	Basic RSE from biology at co-educational state school. Biology RSE from mother. Older brother a source of RSE.
Richard	2 boys (10, 15)	English single-sex independent boarding school. Basic RSE from Biology. Information from friends.
Tom	1 girl (4) 2 boys (7, 10)	Afro-Caribbean background. Limited RSE at single-sex school. Pornographic material. Information from friends, and older brothers.
Toby	1 girl (8) 1 boy (10)	Basic RSE from Biology and abstinence-only RSE from mother. Information from friends.

### **3.4 Data collection**

Each focus-group meeting was moderated by me and assisted by an RSE colleague who acted as a research note-taker. The three focus groups were conducted in a similar fashion, using the same focus-group instruction (Appendix D). The participants were sent information sheets (Appendix A) and consent forms (Appendix E) at the time of registration, and these documents were also available at each focus-group meeting. A working agreement was introduced at the beginning of each meeting and reiterated at the end to reinforce its significance (Appendix F). The paramount function of the working agreement was to establish confidentiality within the focus group aiding the open and safe discussion of emerging themes.

To address the research questions, a semi-structured approach and a careful consideration of the moderation was applied. Every participant was invited to introduce themselves and state the age and gender of their children, followed by a brief description of their own RSE. The latter yielded important information about participants' cultural heritage and reflections on their own education, and gave context as to how they educated their children. This process of data collection was aided by the use of open-ended questions to allow participants to express views without constraint (Charmaz, 2006). Dominant views or participation was challenged through careful moderation and less confident participants were encouraged to share their views. Each focus-group meeting lasted 90 minutes and was audio-recorded to collect data from the discussions. Both myself and the note-taker documented extensive field notes on the group dynamic and climate of interactions among the participants. This approach supplemented the recorded data and was particularly helpful in the process of knowledge formation that is particular to focus-group research (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1998).

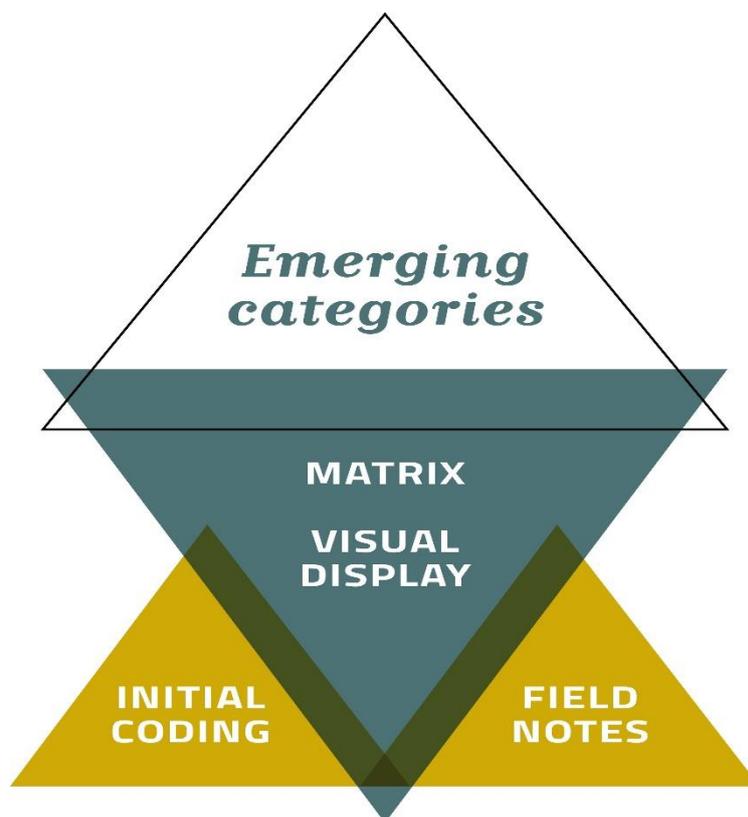
### **3.5 Data analysis**

Charmaz (2006) recommends that the researcher both conducts the research and the transcription of audio recordings, as these are inherently linked. Thus, in line with GTM, the transcription of the audio recordings took place as soon as possible after each

meeting (see Appendix G for example pages from each focus group). Each transcript was coded, using pen and paper and the line-by-line method, and supplemented by the creation of memos and notes in the margin. This process allowed for themes and categories to emerge, some appearing from direct quotes and others emerging as abstract concepts.

For the first two focus groups, these themes were noted on two different coloured post-it notes arranged into categories on large boards (Appendix H). Later, as this process became an elaborate visual display of a brainstorm, a matrix was created using Microsoft Word software, in which the existing and developing memos, themes from further data collection, and coding were systematically placed together with quotes and comments from the different focus groups (Appendix B). This process helped to synthesise the large collection of analysed data into emerging categories (Figure 1 (3.5)). According to Charmaz (2006), at reaching this stage of analysis, existing literature will help to development arguments and discussion on the basis of the research findings.

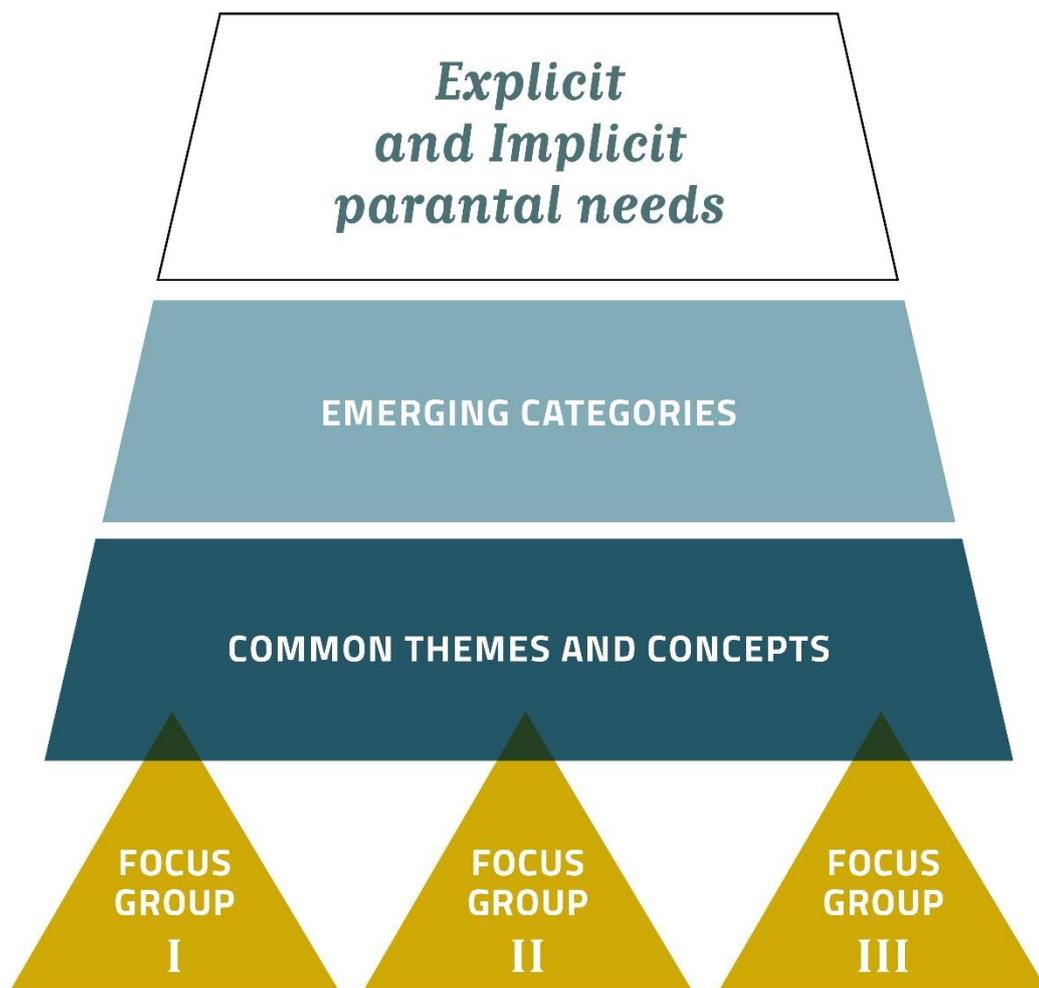
**Figure 1. Graphical representation of the coding process (3.5)**



### **3.5.1 Emerging categories from data**

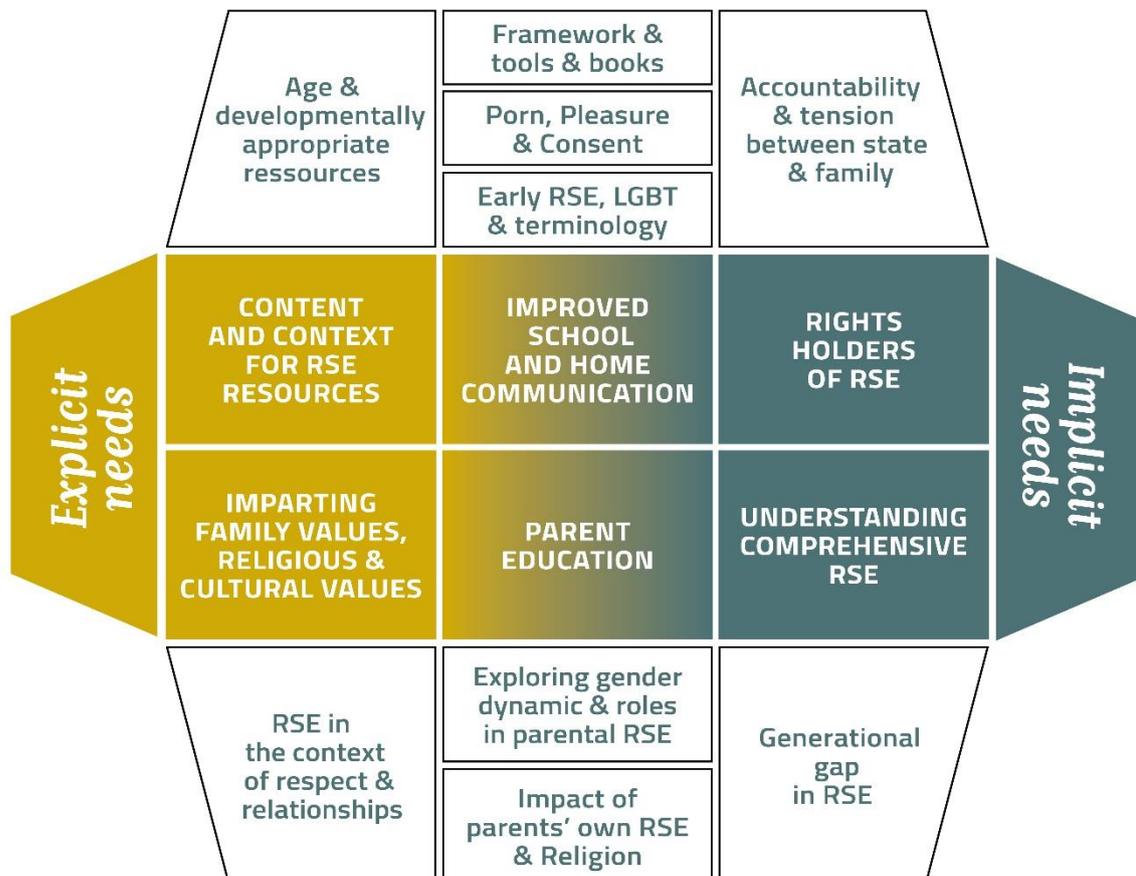
In GTM grounded categories emerge from the data during the data-analysis process. This process refers to the constant comparison of data, or codes, and of the developing categories, which in turn will generate theoretical categories and concepts (Charmaz, 2006). The focus groups provided a large pool of rich and intricate data depicting parental views, attitudes, and understanding of RSE. To develop the objective of this study, data was selected to answer the identified research questions. From the reflection and interpretation of the different focus-group compositions emerged the substantial overlapping of codes, memos, themes, and concepts, creating context for the emerging categories as seen in Figure 2 (3.5.1).

**Figure 2. Context for Emerging categories (3.5.1)**



This resulted in a combined unit of analysis with confluence of emerging categories that presented as a platform for integrated analysis from which two areas of parental needs, explicit and implicit, could be conceptualised. In providing context to the research questions, related characteristics of categories were arranged into the two sections for analysis. Where parents in all groups voiced their explicit needs, the implicit needs are based on my interpretations. For example, parents explicitly asserted their need for resources to engage with RSE at home, but the implicit need for parents to understand comprehensive RSE is a direct interpretation of the data from the focus-group discussions. Some categories share a platform with both the explicit and implicit needs. An example is the need for parent education, clearly voiced by parents, and also an implicit need evident in their lack of understanding of comprehensive RSE. A visual demonstration of the emerging categories is shown below in Figure 3 (3.5.1).

**Figure 3. Emerging categories from common themes, linked to the concepts of explicit and implicit parental needs (3.5.1)**



### **3.6 Ethical considerations**

After application to King's College London E&M Research Ethics Panel (REP) Reviewer a full ethics approval was granted in January 2017 (Appendix I). No ethical concerns were raised at approval stage, as the application had considered precursory details of any safeguarding issues that might have presented during the research. These included the very small chance of parents bringing forth personal issues that might have raised safeguarding concerns; for example, their own past history or present situation that could be related to RSE, although this was thought an unlikely occurrence in a focus-group environment. The development of the working agreement that preceded all focus-group discussions acted as an additional tool to signpost possible concerns towards appropriate action. In addition, through my professional role I am experienced in dealing with any concerns. If needed, I would follow safeguarding and child-protection policies, procedures, and contingencies from my own practice and that of the school or local authority where the focus group took place.

While the use of my private home (for F3 Kent) was unconventional practice, the safety and comfort of the participants were paramount and protected by the abovementioned safeguarding parameters.

Any pre-existing relationships with focus-group participants were solely based on a professional interaction in which general information on RSE had previously been given by the researcher to parents via events organised by schools. The risk of pressure to partake was therefore minimal and was not foreseen as posing an ethical issue. To safeguard the rights of the participants, a clause was included in the focus-group information document as well as in the consent form that enabled the participant to withdraw their consent up to one month after the focus group was conducted. In order to protect the anonymity of all participants, pseudonyms were used in all transcriptions and participant quotes. As described, the working agreement ensured as best as possible the confidentiality of information among the participants, although absolute confidentiality was impossible to guarantee as it remained subject to the participants adhering to the working agreement and the confidentiality discussed within.

### **3.7 Strengths and limitations of the research strategy**

Barbour and Kitzinger (1998) remind researchers to consider the focus-group context and the cultural, religious, and institutional features which can suppress the expression of certain views. To this point the working agreement enabled a discussion that would safeguard the participant's free expression of views while being supported by my own experience and skills in moderating discussions on RSE topics. Both added strength and weight to the research method.

Due to practical restraints, the sample size and area was limited to two locations in England. However, with the diverse background of the participants good representation was addressed.

Triangulation of the research could have added depth to the collective data and thereby enhanced the data analysis. However, due to the time restraints and remit of this study, the element of triangulation was omitted.

My professional role in RSE practice carried a risk of influencing the interpretation of the data. The presence and support of the note-taker at each focus-group meeting and during the transcription phase helped me to realign my approach towards that of an objective researcher, for example by explaining the rationale in focus-group management and by sharing reflections during the data analysis.

In summary: the methodology chapter addressed the research strategy and design, the research method, the sample selection, the data collection and analysis, the ethical considerations, and the research limitations. The following chapter will address the analysis of the research findings in the context of the literature review and the research questions.

## Chapter 4. Findings and discussion

This chapter provides a detailed account and discussion of the findings from the three focus groups. The interpretation and analysis of findings will be discussed under three emerging categories: 1) content and context for Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) resources; 2) school-home communication; and 3) parent education. These are supported by extracts from the transcripts and examined in the light of relevant literature. Framing the discussion are the two research questions: 1) Do parents understand the RSE provided by school? 2) What are the provisions needed by parents to fulfil their role as their children’s primary RSE educators?

### 4.1 Identified categories for analysis

The six emerging categories identified for analysis and discussion are listed in Table 3. The two implicit needs 1) parental understanding of comprehensive RSE; 2) rights holders of RSE, will be considered within the discussion of the other themes.

**Table 3 Identified categories for analysis (4.1)**

EXPLICIT NEEDS	EXPLICIT NEEDS WITH IMPLICIT ELEMENTS	IMPLICIT NEEDS
Content and context for RSE resources	Parent education	Rights holders of RSE
Imparting family, religious, and cultural values	Improved school-home communication	Understanding comprehensive RSE

#### 4.1.1 Content and context for RSE resources

##### *Starting RSE early*

Similar to the findings by Turnbull et al. (2011), starting RSE with younger children (i.e. preschool children) was important to parents in all three focus groups. Although many

parents acknowledged that they found it difficult to know how early RSE should start, they nevertheless saw it as a continual and evolving topic important for the development of children's RSE at home:

*I think if you have had the conversation when they are young it's less weird when they are 14...so I think that would be important, starting young. (Nick, F3)*

*I feel that children should be introduced early [to RSE themes] and often...if we do it young...it is going to be normalised and it is going to spiral through as they're growing older, and they can learn more things as they go. (Luna, F2)*

### *Practical resources*

In line with other research exploring parental engagement in RSE resources (Wilson et al., 2010) the findings of this study show that parents already use a variety of opportunities at home such as the birth of a baby and romantic movie scenes. Echoing previous research on parental access to RSE resources (Allred et al., 2016), parents voiced a need to access age-appropriate and practical resources, such as books and visuals, which would help them engage in RSE at home.

*In terms of resource... a book or a video that's age appropriate... so the child and adult can watch it together... and that can prompt or initiate some discussion. (Tom, F3)*

Whereas previous research have focused on the barriers to RSE communication between parents and children (Ballard and Gross, 2009; Dyson and Smith, 2012; Wilson et al., 2010), by applying the question of parental *need* in this study, a key finding was the parents' explicit need for guidance and frameworks to help them explore the wider implications of holistic RSE, enabling them to place these in the context of children's sexual development.

*We need a book like the one What to Expect When You Are Expecting<sup>1</sup>. And there needs to be one with how to deal with puberty, and what*

---

<sup>1</sup> *What to Expect When You're Expecting* is a popular pregnancy guide written by Heidi Murkoff and first published in 1984

*questions they are going to ask you. What to expect from puberty!  
(Jennie, F1)*

*I think a framework that says, you know, your child is getting to a certain age where they are curious about certain things... then you start to have those conversations and how you may want to broach that conversation. (Tom, F3)*

This indicates a much broader parental interest in children's sexual development that extends beyond the barriers preventing engagement in RSE communication. It is a reminder that parents do feel central to their children's RSE, but also that they lack understanding of children's sexual development in theoretical frameworks. Practical frameworks with indicators for parental engagement were of particular interest to fathers. The group identified this as a "male and practical approach" that they were familiar with in their professional lives, as exemplified in this discussion from F3:

*Gary: Yeah, I think you need to have some sort of practical guide on what type of things you should be talking about at what certain age... You know, you get these things at work... where you are doing someone's appraisal... practical little things to make it an ideal conversation.*

*Toby: We are being quite male about it, aren't we: We need a solution and structure...*

Whereas fathers expressed their need for structure and practical resources in the contexts of age-appropriate RSE, mothers voiced a specific need for resources that would foster a shared and age-appropriate vocabulary that incorporates an emotional-development context, as seen in these examples:

*Yeah, wouldn't it be nice to have some kind of guidance in terms of emotional maturity. (Julia, F1)*

*...they [children] need to have a much broader range of vocabulary for emotions... They are not words we have encouraged them to, sort of, talk about. You know, jealousy or, um, sort of lust or love. So, they don't...we don't use those words in a day-to-day conversation. (Erica, F1)*

The findings of gender differences in approach to RSE adds complexity to the gender discourse in RSE that identifies parents' position within the family structure as a factor influencing RSE provision Walker (2004). Fathers' professional lives outside of the home

clearly influenced their approach to RSE, as evidenced by their wish to apply a practical tool such as an appraisal, while mothers voice their need to develop an emotional context. An interesting observation is fathers' acknowledgement of their approach as typically masculine, whereas mothers made no reference to gender in this context. This was an unexpected, but significant finding on gender provision of RSE, given that many of the mothers had fulltime work outside the home in a professional environment similar to the fathers'. This finding adds weight to the gender discourse in parental RSE at home, and additionally suggests the potential of workplace provision of RSE for parents.

### *Terminology and consent*

Learning about correct terminology and consent is topical and frequently discussed across academia, politics, and the media as being a precursor to keeping children safe from sexual exploitation and important for forming healthy relationships (Bobier and Martin, 2016; Haberland, 2015; Pound et al., 2015; Pshe Association et al., 2014; Women and Equalities Committee, 2016). The findings from this study show that parents also linked early RSE and the use of correct terminology to safeguarding and consent.

*If they know the correct biological term they've got... the right terminology to ask for help, or to know that something is not right.  
(Erica, F1)*

However, starting RSE early and introducing correct terminology for sexual anatomy was seen by a mother in F2 as robbing children of their innocence - a view that was challenged by another participant who related correct terminology with bodily autonomy, as seen in the following exchange:

*Saalima:...it's not very appropriate for my children to know about certain things, and it starts from reception [in school], from what I know.*

*Moderator: What specific things is it that you find that they are learning that's inappropriate?*

*Saalima: Um, my six-year-old obviously felt embarrassed to see somebody else's part, whether it's a cartoon... whatever – he couldn't describe it.*

*Moderator: So, it's about their bodies? Naming body parts?*

*Saalima: It was naming the body part, yeah... because the last few years we'd be like 'birdy birdy' and 'tinky winky'... when we share that much information to youngsters... we're robbing their innocence away from them from such a young age.*

*Moderator: [to other participants] What is your view on that?*

*Ella: I think you should just let them know... it's just your body part. You go to hospital then you can tell your doctor where it's wrong... I think it's good to know... because it's a medical way, so I think there's no proper age.*

Saalima's views exemplifies the opposition by religious minorities to children learning the terminology of sexual anatomy (Halstead, 1997; The Christian Institute, 2011). Furthermore, the use of the rhetorical argument that RSE robs children of their childhood innocence is a reflection of the "deeply entrenched value in hegemonic discourses of childhood" (Davies and Robinson, 2010, p.249) to protect children from sexual knowledge. However, most parents in the focus groups acknowledged the importance of teaching children about consent:

*I want my kids to be fully aware that consent is paramount... sex is great and lots and lots of fun if you consent, and no one has the right to touch you, and no one has the right to force you and you have to be 100% comfortable – and I absolutely want that taught. (Julia, F1)*

Parents mostly challenged the normative equation of childhood innocence with sexual ignorance but appeared to do so out of necessity of protecting their children from sexual exploitation as a safeguarding measure. The findings reveal parents' blurred views on gauging a balance between protecting childhood innocence and education on sexuality, as seen in the mothers' discussion on the national campaign to educate parents in talking about personal safety with their children. This exemplifies how construction of childhood innocence is a hindrance in effective RSE communication (Davies and Robinson, 2010). Parents were unsure about the right approach and balance in communicating consent in the context of sexual exploitation. The following is

a comment from F1 where mothers were discussing PANTS<sup>2</sup>, a parental tool for talking about safeguarding and consent with young children:

*When the girls were younger the NSPCC was running PANTS... you must teach your children that pants are private... which I think is a fantastic sentiment... but actually caused a little bit of difficulty... 'Why are my pants private?'... Well, there are people in the world that might be trying to do things to you, and that's the bit that then becomes really tricky because they start to worry too much. (Erica, F1)*

#### *Pleasure and positivity*

In contrast to Flores and Barroso (2017), who found that mothers framed RSE communication with risk aversion, the results from this study found that mothers expressed the need to convey positive messages about sex:

*I think it's really, REALLY important that they... know what's acceptable, what's positive about sex, and what isn't. You know... it's why we're all here – it's one of the most positive things [laughs] there is. (Chloe, F2)*

Although mothers wanted to engage appropriate terminology in relation to sexual pleasure and female sexual anatomy, they acknowledged their lack of comfort and skills in communicating about pleasure and masturbation with their daughters:

*Lady words are quite tricky though... yes, they know the word vagina, but actually vagina is only a bit, it's quite complicated, isn't it? (Jennie, F1)*

*I think they [daughters] ought to know that it [masturbation] is very natural and they shouldn't feel shame... I don't really know how to broach that. (Sarah, F1)*

The reluctance to communicate about sexual pleasure corresponds to the 66 % of children and young people who reported not having had conversations about sexual pleasure at home (National Children's Bureau, 2016). Conversely, mothers from F1 were

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<sup>2</sup> PANTS is an online resource for parents to teach children that their body belongs to them and they should tell an adult if they are upset or worried.

much more inclined to have conversations about masturbation and use correct terminology with boys, which they reasoned to be a result of the external nature of male sexual anatomy and the assumption that boys naturally assert their sexuality through masturbation:

*I think it's easier with boys, that whole masturbation conversation.  
(Jennie, F1)*

The disparity between communicating pleasure with boys and girls is in line with the social construction of childhood sexuality (Robinson, 2013) and corresponds to the heteronormative and gendered messages about sexuality found in other studies (Flores and Barroso, 2017; Turnbull et al., 2011). This finding is frequently evident in my own practice when I facilitate children's learning about puberty. Both boys and girls are more familiar with terminology pertaining to male sexual anatomy and openly relate the theme of masturbation to boys while at the same time lacking the terminology around female sexual anatomy and pleasure. Evidently RSE at home fails to address female sexual pleasure as equal to that of male pleasure.

*Julia: My son is always there with his willy... but if I am being honest about it, in our house it's always jokes or references, it's always [about] men. (Julia, F1)*

#### *Impact of Pornography*

Parents discussed children's access to the internet and its impact in the context of RSE. They saw the internet as a gateway to uncensored information about sex and pornography and they generally perceived this as a pervasive and negative informant of sex and gender; They also voiced their need for help in addressing this with their children:

*[The internet] is tremendous when it is empowering but if it puts children under any kind of pressure to think... that it is normal that kids have anal sex before 16... actually, is that shifting the balance away from empowering them... are they going to be more promiscuous because they think that's normal?... Giving the emotional language to choose is what really matters... How do we do that in this era of sharing? (Jennie, F1)*

Parents linked pornography with unrealistic perceptions of sex and women's bodies, peer pressure, and gender inequality. They furthermore perceived this to be an area of RSE that needs developing at school and at home, as mirrored in a recent survey on parents' views on pornography (National Association of Head Teachers, 2013). Similarly the concerns about the negative impact on children's views when exposed to pornography is voiced by children themselves and linked with the lack of education about the issue from both school and parents (Martellozzo et al., 2016).

*Chloe:...for boys to know that [in pornography] that's not what women's bodies are like, that's not what sex is like, that's not what women are like I think is ABSOLUTELY vital, you know, as the parent of a son.*

*Amana: Yeah, that's why I think the school should talk about this... telling them that it's... not realistic, what you can see online... They should do a topic about that, you know. Several lessons to educate them.*

Where mothers sought help in their role of protecting their children against the impact of pornography, fathers had a more relaxed and accepting attitude. Interestingly, mothers wanted help to address inequity in learning about pleasure through language while the group of fathers implicitly addressed pleasure in the context of pornography for the male gaze. Fathers generally perceived pornography to be a normal part of male education about sex, reflecting on this through their own experiences of pornography when growing up:

*...You've gone through this evolution of pornography is part of male growing up, you know, so there's already that dynamic in there, so that's not just a big issue, cause it's there in the background even if it's not explicit, it's you know, it's kind of accepted. (Tom, F3)*

However, fathers also discussed the gender differences in perception of pornography while acknowledging the potential damage it has on gender equality in relationships. Despite their acceptance of pornography as part of boys' and men's sexual awareness, they showed reluctance to engage in the parental role of educating their children about pornography, leaving this for mothers to do, as seen in this extract from F3:

*Tom: ...I think there is a slightly different dynamic [to] how men look at pornography... So, my wife, I know she kind of broached the conversation. I was kind of much more blocking it out [inaudible]: you know, I'll do the WiFi... she wanted to have that conversation... it's kind of back to allowing everybody to step in where they feel it's most appropriate.*

*Nick: I think blokes are...kind of more laissez-faire about it [pornography]. I mean, I was definitely with my kids going: "Nah – they'll work it out. They'll be fine". And my wife's going: "Nah nah... you know you've got to at least try to engage about that"... I think dads are much more inclined to go: "I'll set the parental controls. That's my contribution to this."*

In addition, when fathers did engage with teaching about the impact of pornography, they did so primarily with their sons:

*Nick: Pornography: I'm really sorry – that's a really male thing... Therefore what is [name of wife] going to say to the boys about pornography other than, you know... I mean, she'll have a view, but I think I might have a more realistic, practical view of it.*

*Moderator: But what about telling your daughters, if they see porn as well, how are they – as a woman how they would feel seeing that?*

*Tom: It's a good question. I don't know how a woman... so even how my wife will view pornography isn't the way that I will view pornography... I don't know what impact it would have on her seeing certain images.*

### *Gender approach*

The question from the moderator about educating daughters about the impact of pornography generated discussion among the fathers about the gender differences in approach to RSE, parental responsibility, and family relationships. Similar to other literature (Dilorio et al., 1999; Flores and Barroso, 2017; Wilson and Koo, 2010), findings from this study suggest that fathers are less likely to engage with their children's RSE than mothers. Interestingly, the fathers also challenged their own perceptions of a gendered approach to RSE:

*Toby: Why is there an assumption that [it is] the male that has to do the male child talk? Is that just me? Does anyone have an older daughter?*

*[Silence]*

*Tom: I think there is an assumption that women deal with girls and men deal with the boys. That's just...*

*Nick: I don't think that is necessarily right... the dad shouldn't be able to, you know, divest themselves of the responsibility of doing this [RSE] because I think that is cowardice and just not right...*

Corroborating Nick, Richard's comment further linked gender roles and inequality with heteronormative expectations in general, suggesting that fathers recognise the need to challenge gender inequality with their own children:

*You have got to look at the pressures within society on how not just pornography, but all things out there, and what that is showing boys what women look like, and relationships and sex etc... Girls compared to boys and [gender] roles... and that kind of pressure. (Richard, F3)*

Although these findings reiterate the current evidence of mothers as the main RSE provider (Davies and Robinson, 2010; Flores and Barroso, 2017), they show evidence of fathers' awareness of the need to challenge transgressing normative values and messages on sexuality and gender being given to their children. The key observation is that fathers discussed their role as RSE educators in the context of the relationship with their partners whereas this was not discussed among the mothers.

*...My daughter is going to learn a lot more about how I treat my wife... in your own relationship with your partner in front of the children, you know, you learn in a much better way than that. (Tom, F3)*

Furthermore, fathers discussed the importance of RSE in the context of lifelong learning, an emerging area in literature (Pop and Rusu, 2015) with a level of reflection and insight that appears under-researched in academia:

*...We probably do think about it [RSE], how important it is, relative to how little time we actually allocate to talking about it and thinking about it in a context with either wives or children or other people. It's something that everyone seems pretty engaged with, and doesn't sound like there's a huge amount of direct time spent to talk about it, or dialogue with anyone, really. (Gary, F3)*

This challenges the narrow impressions we have of mothers as being the gatekeepers to children's RSE, perhaps as a result of the gender disparity in

parental participation, resulting in difficulty accessing fathers' views on the topic (Flores and Barroso, 2017). There is thus a potential to harness insight into the sparsely researched area of fathers' RSE communication with their children - an area of academia with emerging interest and research (Wilson and Koo, 2010).

### *LGBT*

Despite the tolerant views of most parents towards LGBT issues, they voiced their need for help and information to address these issues with their children:

*“Why does someone have two mummies, or two daddies? How did two daddies get a child?” Things like that. These are the things we didn't grow up with, and it wasn't open, and if I had a format I could follow I would feel more comfortable, I think, talking to them about it. Kim (F2)*

Saalima (F2) contributed her views on teaching about transgender in RSE:

*They [school] talk about the whole sex and gender change, is the problem I had with gender changes and a few other things.*

But later in the discussion, despite her religious belief on expression of sexuality, Saalima acknowledged that her children are tolerant of relationships outside the heteronormative, as seen in this extract:

*We went to Morocco recently and... how do you say it? The man that dresses up woman: trans... yeah. My 10-year-old understood that this is... somebody it could be gay or could be somebody who's quite feminine... So yeah, they understand... They know what's going on. (Saalima, F2)*

The following extract from F3 highlight the societal acceptance of LGBT issues but also the concerns about how to deal with this if presented in a parental context, as mirrored in a recent study (Denes and Afifi, 2014). Interestingly, Toby acknowledges the need for parent education on LGBT:

*Nick:...if he [son] came to me and said: dad, I'm gay, I've got absolutely no idea of how I would deal with that...*

*Toby:...there needs to be some guidance... Would I be so open-minded with a child experimenting with gender change?... I'm not sure I am comfortable with that. And what do you do?... I mean, how on earth*

*would you deal with that?... That comes back to the point of educating us, isn't it?*

#### **4.1.2 School-home communication**

Parents identified children's RSE at school as a specific source of information through which they themselves could gain education and insight into RSE provisions and the peer culture pertinent to RSE among children.

*School is very important, because school is where kids are getting their information, not just officially but from, you know, other kids... (Chloe, F2)*

Importantly, RSE at school would initiate RSE communication at home and, similar to other literature (Dyson and Smith, 2012; Morawska et al., 2015), parents recognised schools as an important source of RSE education for both children and parents. However, parents sometimes felt that they were subjected to initiating RSE with their children without prior information from the school on the content and agreed terminology to do so:

*So actually for [school] to raise [RSE] meant that I then had to talk about it. And then I realise, you know, how important it was to give them the right terminology. But... I want to know what you've [school] already covered with them... what do I need to cover? (Kathy, F1)*

Moreover, parents found the level of communication between school and home to be inconsistent and outside the context of a wider educational framework. This correlates to the patchy provision on RSE for children in England and the inconsistent status of PSHE and RSE in the NC (National Children's Bureau, 2016; Ofsted, 2013) despite guidance for parental engagement in educational policies (Department for Education, 2000). Parents in this study voiced the clear need to have more information and engagement from school that explained the RSE programme within a broader curriculum:

*It would be helpful just to know roughly what was going to be covered... I would like to see a really comprehensive... well-being section on the curriculum... for somebody to sit down with parents at the beginning of the year and say: this is what's on the agenda for reception programme, this is what's on the agenda for the year 1 programme, etc...(Julia, F1)*

In contrast, religious mothers in F2 generally expressed their opposition to RSE at school and in particular to how schools communicate the teaching of RSE. The mothers felt that school held back the information they needed to consider their consent for RSE - a tension reflected in the current RSE rights discourse among the minority groups opposing RSE (Ingham, 2016) and in Walker's (2004) reflections on teachers withholding information in fear of offending religious parents:

*Saalima: ...the way our school was doing it, it was right under our nose. We didn't even KNOW about it... it's a horrible way to be teaching children without the parents aware.*

*Amana: Yeah, because the law is that, you know, that parents should be informed.*

*Saalima: Should be.*

*Amana: But in practice it's not, it's not what it is.*

Interestingly, apart from Saalima, Amana and Mishal in F2, parents did not explicitly place their discussion within a rights framework. However, the findings give an insight into the RSE rights discourse with greater perspective than political and religious rhetoric. Regardless of how much weight parents place on their right as primary RSE educators, they want to be better informed by schools on children's RSE in order to understand its comprehensive nature and the strategies and programmes that inform its provision.

#### *Imparting religious and family values*

Parents from across all three focus groups agreed that the most important parental role was to impart family values on RSE to their children, findings mirrored by Dyson (2012) and in Flores and Barroso's recent review of RSE literature (2017). Teaching children respect, responsibility, and honesty were seen as a cornerstone to relationships education. There was agreement in all three focus groups that these secular values should be taught in school as well as at home regardless of religious views. However, parents were unsure about how respect was taught in RSE at school and how to apply learning about respect in the context of RSE at home:

*I think teaching kids about respect is the key thing. Respect for themselves; their own body; respect for others; respect for consent... and I think we need information to be able to do that. (Chloe, F2)*

Similar to Dyson and Smith (2012), this study found that parents needed the reassurance that whoever teaches children RSE in school has the necessary skills to educate while being sensitive to the diversity of cultural and religious backgrounds of children and their families.

*I would like to know what's being said at school... So that, you know, if you just accidentally get a teacher that might have a negatively biased opinion [of values in RSE] and not even be aware of it, that... you can kind of mitigate that. (Angie, F1)*

*Yeah, I think the school gonna teach this sex education is too general, but they should mention that in different culture, different background they have different, um, idea... so when you meet up someone who is from different background you should respect, yeah. (Ella, F2)*

In line with religious parents' dissatisfaction with school communication, they did not agree with sharing the responsibility of RSE with school. They felt that the responsibility rested with parents and that their religious values were not appropriately recognised or respected in school RSE. There was, however, evidence of differing views among the Muslim mothers on the content and level of information that children should have from parents:

*Saalima: I'm a Muslim. I want to teach them my version of sex education, not somebody else's version... And I think school and the government should respect that... sex education should be left for the parents to teach them [children] and just the basic, the science part...*

*Amana: But you have a role, I think, even beyond science... in terms of protecting young children... so that's the thing I really believe is important in sex education for all the children... to protect them from the dangers, you know, of society.*

As the only Muslim mother to do so, Amana distinguished between religious doctrine and cultural taboo in Islam in relation to RSE. Her understanding of RSE aligns with the less vocal minority within her faith (Halstead, 1997) which suggests a potential for

developing in the RSE rights discourse to include a broader understanding of how religious parents can challenge the interpretation of religious doctrine on sexuality.

*...taboo is in the culture, it's not in our faith... I see that Muslim cultures, they are very traditional, and it is against the teachings on Islam because Islam is going to be open, you know, sex education is in the Koran. (Amana, F2)*

Furthermore, Saalima in F2 voiced her fear of schools using pornography as a teaching resource and of RSE promoting sexual promiscuity, a misconception that contrasts with academic findings (Kirby, 2011; Kirby, 2001). On probing by the moderator, Saalima equated educational resources with “pornography” as seen in this exchange:

*Saalima:...I feel that there's a lot of pornography being involved in the sex education, which is supposed to be purely about science...*

*Moderator: Sorry, do you mean pornography as part of the sex education?*

*Saalima: Yes... and in primary schools.*

*Moderator: So how is that done?*

*Saalima: Um, they were showing explicit things on... their screen and the materials that they use... um, it's not very age appropriate.*

*Moderator: Sorry. So, what you are saying is the material, the resource that school is using in SRE is explicit so when you say pornography that's what you mean?*

*Saalima: Yeah.*

Although pornography is not acceptable in Islam, Halstead (1997) acknowledges that sex and diagrams about sexual anatomy do not offend Islamic values about decency and modesty. Rather, religious doctrine has created what Sanjakdar (2011) calls the ‘Null Curriculum’- the taboos of gender and sexuality that are avoided and thus implicitly seen as inappropriate. This suggests a need for parents to explore the value of RSE within their religious doctrine; to acquire an understanding of the provision of comprehensive RSE that is inclusive of learning about different cultural and religious values; and to have opportunities to familiarise themselves with RSE teaching resources. These findings suggest that parents are not aware of the values underpinning RSE at school despite guidance for schools to consult and share RSE

policies with parents (Department for Education, 2000; Pshe Association et al., 2014); they also provide a strong indication that this area of practice does not meet the rights and needs of parents to engage in school RSE.

#### **4.1.3 Parent education**

Participants were invited, in their introduction to the focus group, to reflect on their own RSE as children which contributed insight into the varying origins and quality of RSE they themselves had experienced. Most wanted their own children to receive better education than they had had, as found in other pertinent literature (Dyson and Smith, 2012; Eisenberg et al., 2008; Flores and Barroso, 2017).

*...the majority in this room, we seem to have been like, sorely missing any kind of really like good information, so how can we then kind of mitigate that, as a generation? Where we can be the ones that are better informed, therefore we can better inform our children? (Angie, F1)*

Another key finding from this study is that parents across all three focus groups expressed the need for organised parent education to empower themselves to become better RSE educators to their children.

The majority of parents found that school would be the obvious place to learn about their children's RSE, have their own needs considered, and further their own RSE.

*"This is what we taught them, this is the information they've got" and also that the school might listen to what parents feel their kids need... what are the gaps in our knowledge. (Chloe, F2)*

Fathers agreed that parent education was needed and also discussed the barriers of time constraints, lack of access and willingness, and the stigma that can be attached to "seeking help". Similar to Dyson and Smith (2012), fathers in this study realised the value of the focus group and the need for further parent RSE to benefits the whole family unit, as seen in the following extract from F3:

*Toby: This [focus group] in itself is education...*

*Tom: Would I sign up to this now I've experienced this [focus group]? I could do this once every... six weeks or something... I've got some stuff now that I'm going to go and... talk to my wife about... Do I see the*

*value in investing time in doing something like this? Yes, I do... and actually, as a resource it's probably better than anything that I'd get out of... a book or, um... a video... I mean, you know, what's more important than... helping develop ourselves to develop our children and our family units?*

One parent recognised the value of learning RSE together with children, and that this would encourage and facilitate effective communication. Although potential for parents and children learning together is evident in a case study of parental engagement in children's emotional literacy (Adams et al., 2010), it is an area of RSE that in current literature appears underdeveloped and would make an interesting and pertinent area for future research in the parent-child dyad.

*I think having a session with the children, I know it's a bit out there, because if they [children] know, that we now know, what they know... then there can be a dialogue. (Erica, F1)*

Although school was recognised as an important institution from which parents could be empowered to be RSE educators themselves, parents equally placed importance on learning in parent groups and having support from their local community. Parents suggested that groups could be initiated by school but be self-governed by parents:

*...the school should set up a parent group where parents could then talk independently... Just a parent organisation. (Luna, F2)*

The support of faith groups to empower parents' efforts in RSE and where ideological positions on RSE can be discussed was suggested in F2. But it appeared that the taboos surrounding RSE make such an initiative difficult realise. Amana asserted her right to educate her children and her efforts to engage other mothers from her local faith community:

*I would need more support from... having classes about sex education... I knew I had a right to withdraw [child] from [RSE]... I wanted to do it differently and I asked other parents if they would be interested and there was only... two other girls and one didn't come to the group, so I felt left alone... I think people with similar, um, ideas or beliefs, they should be more involved... because we have to educate our children, we cannot just not talk about it... the more naïve our families are, the more*

*at risk, so we have to do, you know, to do our part in our communities.*  
*(Amana, F2)*

Zimmerman (2015) discusses parent RSE in the community in terms of powerful institutions with political or religious affiliation influencing educational policies that could potentially further the divide between the polarised spheres of family and state responsibility. In the English context, with policies affording parental rights over children, the proliferation of community-based RSE therefore poses concerns of inadequate provision based on perspectives without scientific validation or evidence-based best practice (Pop and Rusu, 2015). To implicitly further RSE rights for children through parent education in the community, an interdisciplinary approach to programme planning, therefore, needs to be carefully considered and implemented (Walker and Milton, 2006).

#### 4.2 Key Findings

A summary of the key findings from this study are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4. Key findings of parental needs from focus groups (4.2)**

Access to RSE resources	Challenging the interpretation of religious doctrine on sexuality	Understanding the concept of holistic RSE and the themes within	Guidance and frameworks in the context of children's sexual development
Improved school-home communication	Organised RSE for parents	Exploring gender approach and responsibilities	Challenging the heteronormative construction of childhood sexuality

In summary, this chapter has provided an in-depth account of the findings from the focus groups and discussed these within the context of literature and the research questions. The next chapter provides a summary of the study and will discuss the implications and limitations of the study with recommendations for actions and future research.

## 5. Conclusion

The departing question for this study emerged from the tension found in the Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) rights discourse in England in which the current RSE provision and the imminent changes to educational RSE policies continue to afford parents the right to determine their children's RSE provision. By positing parents as their children's primary RSE educators, I posed the question on how children's rights to RSE can be upheld. The literature review examined how the theory on the construction of childhood sexuality influences the educational policies that regulate RSE, and how that creates a foundation on which the tension between parental and children's RSE rights discourse is positioned. Where current research into parental engagement in RSE focuses on communication between parents and children, often in relation to a health-outcome measures, this study posed questions about the extent to which parents are supported in their primary role and the needs they have to fulfil this role. By applying the research questions in a qualitative empirical study, using focus groups and Grounded Theory Method (GTM) with groups of parents, the findings advance what is known about parents' needs by addressing questions directly to parents and thus contribute new understandings of and insights into parental needs.

### 5.1 Implications of findings and recommendations of actions

*What is out there for parents in terms of education, putting us in a better position? (Gary, F3)*

Fathers' contribution to this study greatly advances the understanding of the gender perspective in RSE. Their frank and open discussion provided a rare insight into how men conceptualise RSE within families, in particular through their openness in exploring how RSE in their own relationships are governed by gendered parameters. This study shows that fathers appreciated the opportunity to share experiences and views, which generated a great deal of reflection. The male perspective on RSE is an untapped area of research into parental engagement in RSE which presents great scope for future

investigation into the complexities of gender relations within RSE and the development of lifelong learning about sexuality.

This study demonstrates the disjuncture between the afforded parental right to determine children's RSE and the education parents are able to provide to their children. In order to further children's rights in RSE it is critical that the parents' role is supported by opportunities both for parents to understand the principles behind holistic and rights-based RSE and for parent education that meets their needs. These opportunities need to be anchored in educational policies that incorporates parental capacity building, but crucially, in order for opportunities to be realised, they need to be implemented in practice and communicated effectively to parents.

Programmes should be delivered in both schools and communities, and also, where feasible, in the workplace, which would greatly enhance the uptake of working parents. The content of programmes should reflect themes from holistic RSE with opportunities to re-examine the intersection of religion, heteronormative constructions of childhood, and children's sexual development. As pointed out by Shtarkshall (2007), the competing and juxtaposing RSE discourses of religious, conservative, and liberal institutions can be challenged by agreement on the mutual values underpinning holistic RSE and constructive educational programmes. Fundamental to such provisions is the interdisciplinary approach employed in a strategic design, implementation and evaluation of programmes. If such provisions serve to strengthen the current political support of parental rights, then they could polarise the rights discourse further. Provisions need to be built on a children's rights trajectory that supports parental capacity, building on their understanding, knowledge, and skills to further the rights of children to receive RSE that meets their needs. Furthermore, for programmes to be successful they need to be built on partnerships that foster trust and communication between RSE provider and parents (Walker and Milton, 2006). Evidence from the international context suggest that the concerted effort in disseminating the RSE curricula raise public awareness and build consensus (Igor et al., 2015), and would be a supporting contribution to the successful implementation of RSE programmes in England.

The findings from this study serve as a parental needs assessment and can provide evidence in the forthcoming consultation by DfE (2017) on the content of the new regulations and statutory guidance of RSE. Interestingly, the focus groups themselves exemplify an effective way to engage parents and can be effectively replicated in localised settings in order to further explore the needs of parents.

## **5.2 Limitations**

This study has several limitations. Firstly, although the parents in the focus groups gave a relatively fair representation of cultural/religious, and socio-economic background, they did not represent single parents, parents of disabled children, carers, or parents from the LGBT community. Contributions from these groups would have significantly illuminated a wider set of parental needs to inform the implications and recommendations. Research into the needs of marginalised groups is, therefore, indicated. Secondly, although fathers were well represented in this study, their contribution to the data stemmed from a homogenous group, and the findings would have benefitted from a more diverse group of fathers. Third, the remit of this study did not allow for triangulation of research methods, which could have contributed more data. Further research to include a wider population of parents that is supported by a quantitative element would greatly enhance this area of research.

The departing focus of this research was my own professional role and practice in the field of RSE. My dual role of researcher and practitioner therefore interchanged as well as co-existed during the research. This had a tremendous potential for both my professional development and for the depth and quality of the data analysis. However, a level of researcher reflexivity demands an awareness of the role and the pre-existing knowledge the researcher brings to any given group (Bryman, 2015; Charmaz, 2006). As such, I acknowledge the implications my role brought to the construction of knowledge through my professional relationship with the subject of RSE.

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## Appendix A. Focus-group information sheet

### INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS



REC Reference Number: LRU-16/17-4106

### YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMATION SHEET

#### Parents' views of Sex and Relationship Education

##### Invitation

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project, which forms part of my MA research in International Child Studies at King's College London. You should only participate if you want to; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in anyway. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

##### What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is to provide a better understanding of how parents/carers view Sex and Relationship Education (SRE). Only some aspects of SRE are mandatory in the Science Curriculum. Other aspects of SRE are delivered in different ways and at different times among UK schools. **I am specifically interested in parents' needs in the role as their child's SRE education.**

The research will involve you in a focus-group discussion with a maximum of 8 participants per group. There will be one group for men and one for women. The research will be conducted at your child's school or at another venue, at a date and time that is most convenient to participants.

##### Why have I been invited to take part?

I am inviting parents/carers from two different schools to take part in this study. The research will therefore be conducted at two different sites.

##### Do I have to take part?

No, participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part. You should read this information sheet and if you have any questions you should contact me for any further information or clarification. Even if you decide to take part, you can withdraw from the study at any time within a month of the focus group taking place, and without giving any reason for doing so.

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form. I will then discuss the focus-group procedure with you and arrange the focus-group discussion at your child's school at a date and time that is most convenient to all participants.

The focus-group discussion will take approximately one and a half hour and be based on the focus-group topic guide, but it is designed to be flexible so as to meet your needs. The discussion will be recorded, subject to your permission. All recordings of data on audio-equipment will be deleted after transcription. Even if you have decided to take part, you are still free to stop your participation at any time during the focus group and to have research data/information relating to you withdrawn without giving any reason within one month of the focus group taking place.

Refreshments will be provided during the discussion.

### **What are the possible benefits and risks of taking part?**

The information I get from the study will help to further understand the factors that shape SRE in the UK. You will also have an opportunity to discuss your views on SRE and get an understanding of other parent's/carer's perspectives. The only disadvantage to taking part in the study is that you will be donating around one and a half hour of your time to take part.

There are no foreseeable risks in participating in the study.

### **Will my taking part be kept confidential?**

Each participant is responsible for keeping the group discussion confidential. Each focus-group discussion will start with a very clear working agreement that will explain the importance of anonymity and confidentiality and is designed to make the discussion feel safe and comfortable. What is said in the discussion is regarded as strictly confidential and will be held securely until the research is finished.

All data for analysis will be anonymised. In reporting on the research findings, I will not reveal the names of any participants or the school you are connected to. At all times, there will be no possibility of you as individuals being linked with the data.

The only exception to confidentiality is if you tell me something that puts yourself or someone else at serious risk. You would still not be identified in my report, but if I am worried about anyone's safety I would need to follow the safeguarding procedures in the school and/or the university.

The UK Data Protection Act 1998 will apply to all information gathered within the interviews and held on password-locked computer files and locked cabinets within King's College London. No data will be accessed by anyone other than me; and using false names will protect anonymity of the material. For example, extracts from the discussions will be presented in the study but your name will not be mentioned in any

part of the study, and you will not be able to be identified. No data will be able to be linked back to any individual taking part in the interview.

**How is the project being funded?**

The researcher is funding the project. The King's College London Research Ethics Committee has approved the study.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

I will produce a final report summarising the main findings, which will be sent to you. I also plan to disseminate the research findings through publication and conferences within the UK.

**Who should I contact for further information?**

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact me using the following contact details:

Email: [Joan.reed@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:Joan.reed@kcl.ac.uk)

Email: [yoan@teachinglifeskills.co.uk](mailto:yoan@teachinglifeskills.co.uk)

**What if I have further questions, or if something goes wrong?**

If this study has harmed you in any way or if you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the study you can contact King's College London using the details below for further advice and information:

Dr. Tania de St. Croix

School of Education, Communication & Society

Faculty of Social Sciences & Public Policy

King's College London

Email: [Tania.de\\_st\\_croix@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:Tania.de_st_croix@kcl.ac.uk)

**Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research.**

## Appendix B. Example page of Microsoft Word matrix

<p>Wants to be open but worried about age appropriate language and terminology          Muslim mother feeling embarrassed using terminology. Unable to voice "sex" and a general lack of terminology relating to SRE: Gina and tentacles F2 p12          No confidence to do SRE at home, lacking tools and language          Importance of correct terminology of sexual anatomy early          Linking correct terminology to consent and safeguarding F1 p30          But ill-equipped and unsure about age appropriateness          Uses correct terminology but finds it hard to put into relationship context          Voicing the need for quipping children with critical lens to negotiate sexualised world and online content and engage in open communication F2 p17          Places importance on parental need to practice SRE and associated terminology F2 p34          Lack of comfort and skills to approach female pleasure          Lack of terminology and knowledge about female sexuality/anatomy          Easier to talk to boys because of their obvious sexual anatomy          Sexual anatomy easier with boys. "lady words" difficult and complex, especially when teaching boys F1 p31-32          Needs education on terminology and skills in talking about female sexual anatomy</p> <p>Wants to be open but is reactive          Being reactive: I guess we didn't initiate stuff, we sort of just went along with everyday life          Be led by children's needs.          Uncomfortable when child asks SRE question or wants more information when some SRE is given.          Embarrassed when child relates new SRE learning from parent into family context          Hiding behind biology- easier than teaching emotional vocabulary F1 p32          Confident in Islamic teaching being reactive and controlling information given F2 p37          Comfortable using biology to explain sex but difficulty when needing to put into context of relationships</p> <p>Bought an RSE book for son and left it around for him to read, checking later but approach and response uncomfortable F3 p9          Being proactive in RSE an evolving practice          Although parental attempt to communicate SRE, frustration of trying to communicate SRE with children at home, and getting little response          Being led by the child: hearing curiosity and responding F3 p11          Empowering daughters to have high self esteem and delay sexual relationships till later, however, realising that communicating is better than not knowing if she does</p>	<p>Language/terminology</p> <p>Masturbation/pleasure</p> <p>Reactive</p> <p>Proactive</p>	<p>Communication</p> <p>Reactive, Proactive Communicating of SRE</p>
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## **Appendix C. Description of focus-group environment and dynamic**

### ***F1 Kent***

F1 was sampled using an independent school where I have a professional working relationship as an RSE consultant and facilitator. I am, therefore, perceived as a trusted member of the school's teaching resource. The school acted as a gatekeeper and disseminated the focus-group information to parents. Apart from Angie, who was from New Zealand, all other participants were British white Caucasian. A couple of the participants were friends, but the group did not present as a close group with pre-determined ideas of RSE. The group could, however, be regarded as a homogenous group of mothers with a high socio-economic profile due to the choice of independent school over state school. The focus group was conducted in a small room within the school premises. Two late coming participants briefly interrupted the introduction to the focus group. However, they were soon settled, briefed on the working agreement, and introduced to the other participants after which the discussion could continue.

### ***F2 London***

F2 was sampled using a London Academy as a gatekeeper and disseminator of the research information. The Academy had recently introduced formal RSE outside the Science Curriculum and the research information was shared to parents along with information regarding the school's RSE programme. The information was further shared to other parents of a neighbouring primary school via snowballing sampling. The ethnic, cultural, and religious background of the participants were diverse with only one participant born in England. The group could, therefore, not be regarded as a homogenous group, although two of the participants were friends (Mishal and Saalima) who presented with assertive opposition to RSE. No information was given to the socio-economic status of the participants although, evidently, several participants had attained high levels of education. The focus group was conducted in a medium-sized room in a neighbouring community centre a short walk away from the school. This was not ideal for several reasons which impacted on facilitation of the focus group: it

disrupted the gathering of participants in the school's reception area as several participants were arriving late and were not given the right information about the venue; the community centre was not manned by a receptionist, which meant that latecomers were not appropriately signposted; access to the room was cumbersome (four flights of stairs). In addition, one latecomer (Mishal) arrived with three young children of which the youngest was in a pushchair and had to be helped carrying the pushchair to the fourth floor. Further delays ensued because Mishal had misunderstood the nature of the meeting and had to be briefed about the research and the consent needed for partaking as well as arranging the two older children safely outside the room. Mishal's baby frequently cried during the meeting, disrupting the flow of discussion somewhat. Because of the ethnic and cultural make-up of the group various accents and levels of spoken English (for several, English was a second language) did at times pose a challenge to the moderation of the focus group. Despite the teething problems and delays, the group eventually settled and briefed on the working agreement. The discussion was often dominated by Saalima and Mishal, which necessitated careful moderation to include other participants' views.

### ***F3 Kent***

This group of fathers was sampled in Kent through the help of a school nurse known to myself in a professional capacity. The school nurse acted as a gatekeeper and disseminated the focus-group information to fathers across a small number of schools. All participants were British white Caucasian apart from Tom, who had Afro-Caribbean roots. It became evident that all the fathers were the main breadwinners, working outside the family home, with high educational attainment and jobs in the corporate and professional environments. Three of the participants were friends, but the group did not present as a close, with pre-determined ideas of RSE. They could, however, be regarded as a homogenous group of fathers with a high socio-economic profile due to the pre-dominant choice of independent school over state school. The focus group was conducted in my own home due to the lack of a particular school attached to the sampling. In using a private sphere, ethical considerations were reflected upon but no concerns were found, as the relationship between participants and researcher was

based on a professional situation. A comfortable and inviting room, with no interferences or disruptions, created a relaxed and conducive environment. The working agreement and the ensuing discussion were very effective and little moderation was needed. Nick and Tom occasionally dominated the discussion, however this did not exclude any of the participants. The group worked with a sense of synergy that perhaps reflected their very similar use of vocabulary, common social status, and a common level of humour.

## Appendix D. Focus-group instruction

### *Focus-Group script and prompting questions:*

- Introduction of myself and note taker. Working with schools and families delivering Relationships and Sex Education. Currently completing MA in International Child Studies, King's College London. Small scale research looking at parent's views of RSE. Research tell us: that children and parents want parents to be a primary source of RSE together with schools. I am particularly interested in what the needs are for parents to fulfil this role.
- Thank you for participating today. I will be asking some questions and will moderate the discussion.
- This is my colleague - she will take some notes that will help the transcription of our discussion.
- This meeting will be audio-recorded. You should all have read and signed the consent form that explains confidentiality of your contribution. You can withdraw your contribution up to one month after today. All personal information will remain confidential. Your name will not appear in any written material. Your anonymity will be maintained. All research material will be destroyed on the completion of the research. Are you all happy with this? Any questions?
- Several focus groups are planned. I will combine the data from all groups for analysis.
- If I ask a question while you are talking, I am not being rude; I am just making sure that everyone has a chance to talk and that we discuss all of the issues.
- Please turn off your mobile phones.
- Begin by making ground rules: ROCK
- Get started by everyone telling their name, the number, age, and gender of children. Please can you also very briefly tell us if you had any RSE yourself as a younger person and where you got RSE from.

### Questions 1-5

1. **Prompt:** *Research tell us that children and parents feel that RSE should be part of both home and school, but research also suggest that parents don't always have the right skills and tools to do so. What do you think of this? Probe: Can you tell me some of the needs you have to fulfil the role as an educator of RSE?*
2. **Prompt:** *How do you think you could become a better RSE educator to your child? Probe: What would you need and where/what/how would you get these needs met?*

3. **Prompt:** *What should be included in a possible intervention/programme/project to help parents in their role as their children's RSE educator? Probe: What would this intervention/programme/project look like? What would be important to you?*

4. **Prompt:** *Research into RSE often focuses on parents of teenagers and RSE as a risk reducer. As a parent of a younger child, what focus in parent RSE research would you like to see? Probe: What is missing in how parents of younger children talk about RSE?*

5. **Prompt:** *Do you feel central and fundamental in your child's RSE Probe: If yes, can you share what makes you feel this way? If no, can you share what it is that makes you feel this way?*

**Additional prompts:** Can you tell me more about that? Can you give me an example? I don't want to leave you out of the discussion, what do you think? What is the specific thing you are trying to say? We need to keep the group discussion moving, perhaps you can tell me more about this after the group?

**Closure** Are there are final questions? (*Respond to questions*) Thank you for participating in the focus group today. Your contribution is very valuable. We are excited to learn about what you think.

## Appendix E. Focus-group consent form

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.



Title of Study: \_Parents' views of Sex and Relationship Education\_\_\_\_\_

King's College Research Ethics Committee Ref: LRU-16/17-4106

Please tick or initial

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

**I confirm that I understand that by ticking each box I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked boxes mean that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element I may be deemed ineligible for the study.**

Please tick or initial

1. **\*I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated [INSERT DATE AND VERSION NUMBER] for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and asked questions which have been answered satisfactorily.**

**\*I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data within one month of the focus group taking place.**

2. **\*I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be handled in accordance with the terms of the UK Data Protection Act 1998.**

3. **\*I understand that my information may be subject to review by responsible individuals from the College for monitoring and audit purposes.**

4. **I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications**

5. I agree that the research team may use my data for future research and understand that any such use of identifiable data would be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee. (In such cases, as with this project, data would be identifiable in any report).

6. I consent to my interview being audio recorded.

7. I agree to maintain the confidentiality of focus-group discussions

8. I understand that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed during the focus-group discussion, but that all possible arrangements, such as the development of a working agreement, that all participants will agree to, will take place prior to the focus-group discussion.

---

Name of Participant

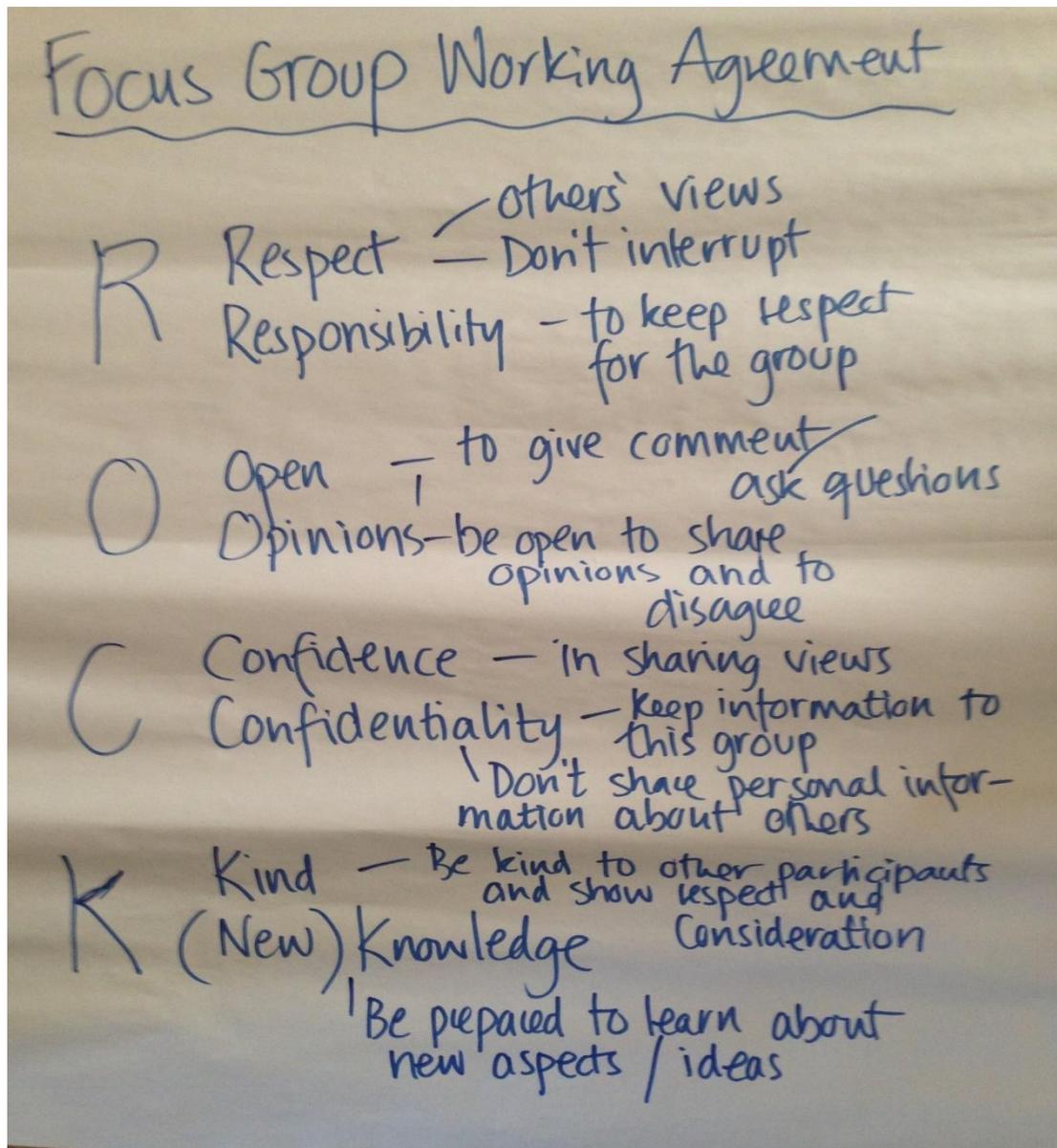
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Date

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Signature

## Appendix F. Focus-group working agreement



## Appendix G. Example pages from focus-group transcripts

### *Focus Group 1 Kent (F1)*

JULIA: There is a [*pause*] a, I don't know who they are...can we just call them they. But they suggest that in year 1, you should be referring to a penis and a vagina....do you think that is too much, I mean....

JENNIE: Do you mean call it penis instead of willy

ANGIE: It's kids, though isn't it, it depends on them

JULIA: I must say it's only now that my son would even be able to get the word out of his mouth. You know it's Biology

Several other responders: Yeah

ANGIE: Willy was fine, like is it actually necessary to have that vocabulary? As long as they're comfortable within themselves with what they're saying, isn't that the...

KATHY: I think that it would be good that they knew the right words

Several other responders: Yeah

KATHY: Because my kids went around referring to peanuts for quite a while

[laughter]

And I was like [*whispers penis*]

[laughter]

And I didn't know, I don't really want to raise this in case of, you know. But I think actually, why not let them know the right words, but at home you can still call them, whatever.

ERICA: I think it's fine. If they know the correct biological term they've got.... But you have got children that need to alert an adult, to be specific, they've got the right terminology to be able to ask for help, or to know that something is not right

KATHY: And it takes the taboo away from the word. You don't have to call it, you know at home, as long as they know what the right word is, whereas my kids have only really, you know, since that moment in the bath, you know that was the first time we, and then we drew pictures and read it out and stuff like that. But I think it would be really helpful to raise it early so that it's not an issue, so by the time that we get to year 4 or 5, yeah, I know that word, but we call it such and such home, isn't that, I think that's a really good idea.

JENNIE: Lady words are quite tricky though. Like me with 3 boys, yes, they know the word vagina, but actually vagina is only a bit, it's quite complicated, isn't it? In short of, either splaying forth and showing them, which probably isn't right

[laughter]

Or getting out a book, and at what point do I get a book?

ANGIE: I use a [inaudible]

SARAH: Do you?

ANGIE: Yeah, I do truly! Ears and stuff like that. And he is going, what are you doing? And I'm like, this is a natural thing that I have to do to look after myself, darling, because otherwise they hurt, so he is like full on. We, the other day disassembled a tampon so he could see exactly the process of how it explodes.

### ***Focus Group 2 London (F2)***

LUNA: But how can school support the parents?

AMANA: That's the problem. That's very tough one. Because sometimes in the primary school they had a workshop about, you know, e-safety, so it was very useful but in the end the advice was: talk to your children about these things. But in some families, I think, most teenagers won't talk to their parents because they know that their parents will not approve of, you know, what they're doing, so they are, like, you know, scared that, you know, they're going to be told off, or... We should be open and we should not judge them, but it's difficult, you know, because we would be scared [laughs], you know, if we see when they post images of them online, and it's... yeah. I think it's a real problem, you know, that we need help with.

CHLOE: I agree with everything you said [laughs]. I think that, yes, getting the basics and things, but I think in primary school they tend to get the point[?]. But I think, um, the online world and, uh, the access to pornography and, um, and... What I feel is, I've got very, we've got very, sort of, strong boundaries around technology at home but, it's, it's REALLY difficult because, according to my son, you know, we're unusual. And I know, because we keep his phone in our room at night, and there are messages pinging up, kind of, you know: if we had the sound on it would just ping all night from, um, other kids taking... And, and I feel there's only so much you can do as an individual [*uplifts*]? Because your kids are only as safe as the kid with the most lax parent or the most naïve parents, the parent who doesn't know that, doesn't know that they can access pornography on their phone, that doesn't know, doesn't know that somebody will pass it around the class and there will be peer pressure from other boys to look even if they don't want to...

AMANA: um hmmm

CHLOE: ...and for boys to know that that's not what women's bodies are like, that's not what sex is like, that's not what women are like I think is ABSOLUTELY vital, you know, as the parent of a son.

AMANA: Yeah, that's why I think the school should talk about this, you know, the damages of pornography, not just, you know, telling them that it's, it's not, um, realistic, what you can see online. Not just saying this. They should do a topic about

that, you know. Several lessons to educate them, like they do about, uh, alcohol or, you know, smoking.

CHLOE: Drugs.

AMANA: Yeah. It's so important.

CHLOE: Yeah. Because the online thing: it's the addiction of this generation, I'd say.

AMANA: Yeah.

CHLOE: You know. More so than drugs and...

Moderator: So. this is really interesting. You're raising points of a lot of the influences that our children are under from the outside, outside the family. What would you think you would then need to address this as a parent? What would be helpful?

ELLA: Mmmmm. I think because it's impossible to stop those social media, it's impossible, so

and... rather than... because I don't like them to go behind us, find it themselves because they need guidance, to be honest, yeah? Um. Especially about sex and pregnancy, everything, that's why so many young child, they get pregnant, become pregnant at 12-something, because they are curious but their parent... they don't dare to ask parents or maybe parents don't want to talk about it but so they find their own way to... to get it, so basically, it's not the proper way to know.

Moderator: So, what you're saying: if you don't have parents with tools and skills, the child will find out from somewhere else.

ELLA: Yeah. [*others chiming in "yeah"*]

### ***Focus group 3 Kent (F3)***

TOBY: I think we're focusing on one moment, in, in life but what you should really be looking at as a whole is the constant reinforcement of, you know, being a decent human and having the traits of respect like you just mentioned. That is a constant flow of information to your kids...

GARY: Yeah.

TOBY: ...rather than it being focused on that one...

RICHARD: Yeah, the big set piece, as they say. Yeah. The on-going drip-feed of, of stuff, relevant bits and pieces, is much more healthy.

TOM: I think but that's, I think that's the key point. Because if you look at the, the sex side as a function of the relationship it's a smaller component of something, so I think a) you know, demonstrating that

RICHARD: Yeah.

TOM: ...in your own relationship with your partner in front of the children, you know, you learn in a much better way than that. And it's, again that's the context,

right. If you go in straight for the jugular and you start trying to talk about sex out of context – again, if there's no context, it's like, you know: “When people love each other that's what happens blah blah blah... you know, yes, you can have sex outside of that but is that really healthy?” and that opens up questions, you know. And that's a question that can be asked to our daughters and sons. I think that's a thing that's useful. Because technology is technology, whether it's 8mm film, video recorders, internet, texting, Snapchat, whatever it is going to be, you know, if you've got that foundation there and set, then the technology is just, you know, you can...

???: Yeah...

TOM: ...you can defend against that.

NICK: Well, you've got to accept that that's going to happen.

TOM: Yes.

NICK: You know, you can't prohibit... you know, I couldn't have a conversation with my kids saying, you know: obviously you did the right thing with the WIFI router to not make it too easy but they're much cleverer than me so I'm sure they can get any images or any content that they want, but it's, it's almost accepting that is going to happen, so how do you equip them to deal with stuff that they might see which you don't agree with or you, you think is totally abhorrent and it doesn't reflect your values or your whatever, but it is being able to go... for them to be able to see it for what it is and not: “That is how I need to conduct a sexual relationship.” And I think that's, those are... that's the important bit, and I think that's not the big set piece, like you said, that's the drip-feed of values and relationships and respect for people and respect for yourself that, that happens, that should happen over time. But frankly if you haven't had it by the time they're 15, you haven't... I don't think that means... you've got to try, you've got to keep trying, haven't you. You know. I'm due a sit-down with my 15-year-old 'cause, 'cause... just am, you know. And I'm dreading it but at some point, we've got to have conversations about things, and he's not stupid, so he's put... already the barriers are up – he's not going to make it easy for me. So, there might be something on the radio that I go can: “Oh! What do you think of that?” And he knows where... he knows what I'm doing, he's gonna, you know...

[Laughter]

RICHARD: That is interesting. It raises some central, big questions. I work very long hours, especially Monday to Friday, and weekends as well, and um, um, it comes back down to, actually, that relationship. You know, if you are the person that's just... thank you [handed some coffee]... just there day to day with your son, if you've got that proper on-going day-to-day relationship I guess it becomes much easier in that kind of context. Um. In reality for me to have this kind of conversation with my 15-year-old, or indeed my 10-year-old.

## Appendix H. Emerging themes and categories



## Appendix I. Ethics approval

Dear Joan

12 January 2017

LRU-16/17-4106 - Parents' views on Sex and Relationship Education

Thank you for submitting your application for the above project. I am pleased to inform you that your application has now be approved with the provisos indicated at

the end of this letter. All changes must be made before data collection commences. The Committee does not need to see evidence of these changes, however

supervisors are responsible for ensuring that students implement any requested changes before data collection commences.

Ethical approval has been granted for a period of one year from 12 January 2017. You will not be sent a reminder when your approval has lapsed and if you require

an extension you should complete a modification request, details of which can be found here:

<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/research/support/ethics/applications/modifications.aspx>

Please ensure that you follow the guidelines for good research practice as laid out in UKRIO's Code of Practice for research:

<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/research/support/conduct/cop/index.aspx>

Any unforeseen ethical problems arising during the course of the project should be reported to the panel Chair, via the Research Ethics Office.

Please note that we may, for the purposes of audit, contact you to ascertain the status of your research.

We wish you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

E&M Research Ethics Panel REP

Reviewer \_\_\_\_\_

Major Issues (will require substantial consideration by the applicant before approval can be granted)

Minor Issues related to application (the reviewer should identify the relevant section number before each comment)

Minor Issues related to recruitment documents

Information sheet

In section 'Do I have to take part?' clearly state "No". Also inform participants that they can withdraw from the study at any time within a month of the focus group taking place without giving a reason.

Advice and Comments (do not have to be adhered to, but may help to improve the research)