

Rt Hon Justine Greening MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT



Cc Prime Minister Theresa May MP

14 February 2017

Dear Justine,

Ensuring young people develop the knowledge and skills to form healthy relationships

We are writing to you on Valentine's Day to ask the government to bring forward legislation that will help give young people the knowledge and skills to have respectful, healthy loving relationships throughout their lives.

Cupid started with a bow and arrow. More recently a sealed-with-a-kiss-card was the Valentine's Day communication of choice. Today the smartphone rules supreme and, as well as some cute messages, children will be receiving snap shots of private parts, links to porn sites and material that most parents would rather not contemplate.

Children and young people today are subjected to pressures in and outside school that are seriously affecting their mental health and changing their perceptions of what is normal in relationships. Girlguiding found in 2014 that 59% of girls and young women aged 13–21 had faced some form of sexual harassment at school or college. Another study found almost all (96%) of gay pupils hear homophobic language such as 'poof' or 'lezza' in school (Stonewall, 2012). More recent statistics show one in five girls are sent unwanted pornographic images (Girlguiding, 2016). School leaders report that sexting is endemic, and research by Ofsted in March 2015 found less than half of schools had implemented an acceptable policy for technology in school and that training for teachers in this area was inconsistent.

Parents, teachers and health experts understand that burying our heads in the sand is not an option. The Chairs of five cross-party select committees agree and have recommended that schools should be required to deliver age appropriate sex and relationships education to every child and young person. Most recent of these was the Women and Equalities Select Committee after it heard alarming reports of endemic sexual harassment of girls in schools – behaviour that adult women in decent workplaces would not have to put up with.

You have an opportunity to better protect children by bringing forward new legislation in the Children and Social Work Bill to ensure children are taught at school about what makes a healthy loving relationship.

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This teaching needs to be age appropriate and evidence based, it should refer to the law on sexual consent and abuse, it should be informed by new technologies and it should be surrounded by specific teacher training. This training will build confidence in staff to run schools which do not tolerate harassment and instead, nurture equality. It must be part of a whole school approach whereby safeguarding and bullying policies are updated and staff able to refer cases of concern for specialist support.

We recognise that discussion about the role of schools in educating children and young people on matters related to morality and relationships is fraught, but repeated opinion polls show a very large majority of British parents and British adults believe every young person should receive this type of teaching at school. Parents want to offer support to their children but many don't know their Snapchat from their Instagram. They are first to recognise that trained teachers would help keep their children safe.

We hope the Government will show our children and young people some love this Valentine's Day by giving them access to the support they need to navigate the modern world, protect themselves from abuse and develop healthy relationships.

Yours sincerely,



Sarah Green and Rachel Kryz, Co-Directors, End Violence Against Women Coalition
and

Rt Hon Maria Miller MP

Sarah Champion MP

Caroline Lucas MP

Stella Creasy MP

Baroness Lorely Burt

Dame Vera Baird QC, Chair of the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners

Kate Williams, Editor, Mumsnet

Girlguiding's Advocate Panel

Laura Bates, Founder, Everyday Sexism Project

Jane Lees, Chair, Sex Education Forum

Polly Neate, CEO, Women's Aid

Diane Whitfield and Dawn Thomas, Co- Chairwomen, Rape Crisis England and Wales

Joanna Sharpen, Policy Manager, AVA (Against Violence and Abuse)

Sandra Horley CBE, Chief Executive, Refuge

Yvonne Traynor, CEO, Rape Crisis South London

Mary Mason, CEO, Solace Women's Aid

Dionne Nelson, Acting CEO, Women's Resource Centre

Sheila Coates MBE, Director, South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre & Essex Rape Crisis Partnership

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