

Vegan-Inclusive Education: An Interview with Ruth Jenkins
From Vicky Simpson and Jared Piazza, PHAIRSociety.org
[The Society for the Psychology of Human-Animal Intergroup Relations]
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Raising a vegan family can, at times, feel isolating. For me (Vicky), this becomes particularly apparent when broaching the topic of vegan inclusivity with staff at my children's school. Thankfully, I discovered Ruth Jenkins at [Vegan Inclusive Education](http://Vegan-Inclusive-Education.org), who has created a concise guide for schools, outlining simple steps that can be taken to ensure vegan pupils' needs are met. Ruth has kindly agreed to discuss her own personal journey towards promoting vegan inclusivity in education, and why there is still so much work to be done before vegan children feel fully supported and safe in [schools across the UK](#).

Ruth, could you briefly introduce yourself?



Ruth Jenkins, Programme Co-ordinator at Vegan-Inclusive Education

I'm Ruth Jenkins. I'm not an academic – my undergraduate degree was in geography, but I trained as a chartered accountant and now work as a finance director for an environmental charity. My research interests stem from my experience as a mother trying to help my vegan son when he started school. I'm the Programme Co-ordinator at [Vegan-Inclusive Education](http://Vegan-Inclusive-Education.org). I'm also part of The Vegan Society's [Education Network](#) and a Director for [Pro-Veg UK](#).

You set up *Vegan-Inclusive Education* (VIE) to help support vegan children in schools. Tell us about the origins of VIE, its aims, and why it is such a worthwhile venture.

When my son started school I found it really challenging to manage all the issues arising for him as a result of his veganism. With the school refusing to offer vegan lunches, showing him fishing cartoons (fish are his favourite animal), running a chick hatching project, sending him home with books about how to cook meat and eggs... so many different challenges! It felt overwhelming to address them as a parent. I was really mindful that I wanted to create a strong relationship between my son and his school. I was worried that by intervening on each issue I might jeopardise that relationship – being seen as “that annoying vegan parent” – and tarring my son with the same brush. I realised that this is the predicament faced by so many vegan parents, where our children are likely to be the only vegan in the school or classroom. What I wanted was an independent source of information to provide support to schools to become more vegan inclusive. I wanted back up. That's why I formed [Vegan-Inclusive Education](http://Vegan-Inclusive-Education.org) (VIE).

Pupils or parents can log their school at www.vieducation.co.uk/pupils. I'll pop a letter and [pack](#) in the post to their school. The letter explains why vegan-inclusive education is important and the pack is full of easy steps to make things better.

Parents who would rather deliver the pack in person (to chat about it with teachers) can request a pack directly, by emailing me contact@vieducation.co.uk.

The feedback I've received from parents suggests they find the pack useful leverage. It boosts their confidence to make an approach to their school, and it feels less confrontational. Parents can feel assured that they have conveyed a lot of important information about vegan inclusion without being seen as lecturing, over-demanding, or unreasonable. Each time a teacher learns about vegan inclusion, we are normalising the presence of vegans in society, and making schools a safer place for future cohorts of vegan children.

You conducted an extensive survey in 2021, examining the experience of vegan children in primary and secondary schools right across the UK. What did you do and what did you find?

The survey came about because of the fabulous contributions from several individuals. I especially need to thank Educational Psychologist, [Hayley Lugassy](#), for her work making the survey so rich. Two-hundred and fifty-two vegan pupils completed a survey to capture their day-to-day experiences as vegans in school. The results showed that the challenges vegan children face are widespread. Fewer than 40% of respondents felt welcome as a vegan pupil in their school, and less than 40% felt safe. Only 13% felt valued. If pupils do not feel welcome, safe, or valued, they will not be able to learn at their best. 73% of respondents had been teased and 42% bullied for their vegan beliefs at school. In both these cases, **a quarter of the perpetrators were teachers or school staff**. Of those teased or bullied, only 25% said their school had been swift and helpful to tackle the issue.



A 2021 UK-based survey found that many vegan children don't feel welcome or valued by their schools. Photo by [Taylor Flowe](#)

Most vegan pupils (54%) said they had experienced no vegan school-meal option. This is a serious problem. Schools have a duty of care to all children under their supervision to ensure everyone has access to belief-appropriate nutritious food.

In terms of an inclusive curriculum, vegan exclusion is frequently experienced in cooking (63%), nutrition lessons (48%), on school trips (43%), in science classes (33%), and on topic work (25%). Reviewing these five key areas for inclusiveness would make a massive difference. Finally, 85% of

respondents had felt discriminated against because of their vegan beliefs at school. The most common emotions experienced were feeling misunderstood (53%), frustration (52%), sadness (51%), a heightened sense of difference (49%), anger (40%), and anxiety (39%). These emotions distance students from the teachers and impair education.

Why do you think vegan children seem to be at risk of discrimination and bullying, not just by their peers, but also by teaching staff?

I think any perceived “difference” can be an underlying reason for discrimination and bullying, but I think veganism can be even more triggering because of the effects of [cognitive dissonance](#). I think it’s really important for schools to understand the relationship between cognitive dissonance and risk in relation to vegan inclusion. Vegans know all about cognitive dissonance, even if they have never heard the phrase. If someone has two conflicting beliefs, like “I love animals” and “It’s OK to eat animals”, then when a situation comes along that forces those conflicting beliefs to the fore, the tension that results can make them feel stressed, irritated, and unhappy. If a person fails to resolve the tension (e.g., by changing their behaviour), it’s quite normal for the individual to blame those feelings on something or someone else. The easiest target for that displaced blame is the person allegedly “causing” the conflict: the vegan pupil who might not have even said anything, but who triggers the conflict by [the simple fact](#) of their vegan identity.

What this means for vegan pupils is that teasing and bullying is a common risk, perhaps even more so than for other beliefs that do not trigger cognitive dissonance. So schools need to understand the risks to vegan pupils, and educate and train their pupils and staff accordingly.

What are some of the barriers to a more vegan-inclusive education in the UK?

Most education professionals do not think about veganism as an issue of inclusion. While, morally, I believe education professionals should treat it this way, most don’t realise that there is also a *legal* basis for this. In the UK, “ethical veganism” has been recognised as a [philosophical belief](#), protected under the [Equality Act 2010](#). This means state schools in England, Scotland and Wales have a Public Sector Equality Duty to act inclusively in relation to this belief.



Ethical veganism is recognised as a ‘philosophical belief’, one of the nine protected characteristics under the UK’s Equality Act 2010. Photo by [Kenny Eliason](#)

But even once schools are convinced morally or legally that vegan inclusion is important, it is still very hard for them to act inclusively if they are not aware of the challenges faced by vegan pupils. Most

schools don't have a vegan teacher who can explain the issues arising to the wider staff. The [packs](#) I send through VIE aim to help raise awareness of those challenges and how to solve them.

The Vegan Society's [Education Network](#) is also doing some awesome work, and have produced a guide for educators on how to support veganism in education: [TVS Education Booklet A5 DIGITAL.pdf](#) ([vegansociety.com](#)). Sharing these resources with your teachers is a great way to break down these barriers.

Do you think the school curriculum in the UK goes some way in discouraging plant-forward diets as a viable option for children? Where do you think changes need to be made?

The curriculum isn't very helpful, but I think the main problem is the *inertia* of educational approaches – that is, the temptation to maintain the status quo out of convenience. Plant-forward diets fit in brilliantly to a diverse array of curriculum areas from nutrition to geography, biology to religious and philosophical education. But teachers tend to repeat teaching lessons in the same way, year upon year. I think there is a huge opening for supporting schools to understand the power that plant-forward diets have to protect their pupils' health – both directly (where we know whole food plant based diets are protective in terms of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and certain cancers), and in terms of limiting the negative impact of our food systems on the environment and climate breakdown.

“Because our children need a healthy and safe planet to live on, vegan inclusion turns out to be a matter of child protection, not just for the vegan pupils of today, but for all of our children.”

Ruth Jenkins

The guidance notes that accompany the curriculum could also be usefully updated to ensure vegan-inclusion (for instance, the notes endorse chick-hatching projects as a good example of how to teach KS1 children about animals). I hope that the Education Network can push for a review of the guidance notes in terms of the Public Sector Equality Duty in relation to ethical veganism.

Finally, there is a need to push for change in relation to government regulations around school meal requirements, which make it compulsory to serve meat and dairy as part of the menu for state schools. For this reason, I'm a passionate supporter of Pro-Veg UK's School Plates programme: [School Plates: Case Studies – ProVeg UK](#). It's an exceptionally powerful use of nudge theory to nudge school meals in a plant-forward direction.

What are some “next steps” for VIE?

I'm really enjoying working as part of the [TVS Education Network](#) – I feel an amazing sense of power and optimism, with so many researchers, educators and change-makers coming together to push for change. We've been working on template letters to help parents ask for what they need in schools, and we'll keep adding more this year. They're available [here](#) (at The Vegan Society). I'm also currently working on a carbon campaign to make school meals an area of climate activism for schools, and I'm keen to get some articles about the legal basis for vegan inclusion and the risks associated with cognitive dissonance, into the education press this year.

How can our readers best get in touch with you and learn more about Vegan-Inclusive Education?

[Improving Vegan Support in UK schools](#) - contact@vieducation.co.uk.

I always love to hear from people!