

Fostering relationships, expectations, and boundaries

Introduction

This material aims to support teachers in fostering positive relationships with the children in their class and offers practical advice on establishing expectations and boundaries for the SPHE/RSE lesson. The sections are as follows:

- Fostering positive relationships with and between children
- Strategies for developing positive relationships with the children in your class
- Setting expectations and boundaries
- How can I support parents?¹
- Further reading.

The learning and teaching climate that prevails in the classroom, and the relationships that the children experience and witness in the school, all contribute to their social, personal and health development (NCCA, 1999, p. 2). The SPHE curriculum provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect upon relationships, expectations, and boundaries in the context of their positive school climate—an integral part of how SPHE is taught (NCCA, 1999, p. 22).

Fostering relationships with and between children

The relationships you foster with the children are the foundation for establishing expectations and responsibilities. Fostering positive relationships include interactions that:

- demonstrate respect for all children as human beings and full members of society who have their own thoughts about the world, curiosities, and interests

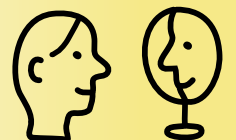
- show understanding, respect, visibility and acknowledgment of different family types, backgrounds and beliefs through your interactions and approaches to teaching and learning
- incorporate fun and playful pedagogies into your teaching of SPHE/RSE
- generate an approach that supports children's participation and engagement in SPHE/RSE lessons and discussions.

Teacher Snapshot



I believe establishing a strong and trusting relationship with the children first and foremost is important. This is not specifically related to SPHE/RSE but can have such positive effects on both informal and formal learning when topics or discussions arise. Sometimes, this can be challenging as the children in my class come from a variety of backgrounds, have diverse personalities and can present challenging behaviours. Spending time getting to know the child, and their home culture, is very important. Often, I feel like I have so much to learn, and I try to have an open attitude in my class, by being curious and open with the children through my teaching. The children become more responsive when they see that I try to get to know them and make these connections in my teaching.

Teacher Reflection



- What kind of relationships do you think are important to develop with the children in your class to support their engagement with SPHE/RSE?
- How does your pedagogy foster relationships with the children in your class?

¹ Parents refers to mothers, fathers and those with parental responsibility in different parenting relationships. This may include foster parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, legal guardians, and carers.

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Strategies for developing positive relationships with the children in your class

Demonstrate an interest and understanding of the different family backgrounds, values, and beliefs of children in your class: Considering the family types, backgrounds, values, and beliefs of the children in your classroom offers the opportunity to learn more through your interactions with the children.

Foster respect and understanding for diverse views and experiences: As a microcosm of the wider school community and the wider world, diversity is the norm in your classroom. As children grow in their awareness of the different life experiences present in their class, they may want to talk about them. It is helpful to plan for and allow these conversations to happen and to be prepared for the possibility of strong responses, while teaching children to respond respectfully when they disagree with the opinion of others. A key aspect of teaching SPHE/RSE is modelling respectful and inclusive behaviour grounded in a belief in the dignity, respect, and equal rights of every person.

Respond effectively to children: Modelling and scaffolding effective listening skills is an important part of fostering a positive child/teacher relationship. Sometimes children just want to be heard, and at other times it may be appropriate to be more solution focused. You could take time during discussions to brainstorm solutions together, encouraging the children to pick the best solution that might work for them.

Place importance on recognising and naming feelings and emotions: While teaching, you can name the feelings you pick up from children, for example, *it sounds like a few of you are worried about that... or you seem to be feeling very excited about....* This can help children who have difficulty in naming their emotions and recognising what they are feeling. It can be supportive for you to label and share your own emotions at appropriate times, e.g. *I feel very proud that so many of you put in so much work on your projects and I feel frustrated that some people are choosing to chat instead of listening to the instructions.*

Setting expectations and boundaries

Developing boundaries collaboratively gives a sense of shared responsibility and helps everyone feel safe and respected. Co-constructing the boundaries and expectations of the SPHE/RSE lesson with the children in your class can help establish positive relationships. At the start of the year, you can give opportunities for children to be actively involved in deciding their responsibilities for the SPHE/RSE lesson, including discussions about your role and their role in ensuring everyone feels safe and respected in the classroom. Throughout the year, you can provide regular opportunities to revisit these responsibilities, reflecting on what is working well and what might need improvement. You can use colourful and engaging displays to highlight the classroom responsibilities and show their importance in supporting participation and engagement. Some children may need further support in realising their responsibilities by incorporating goals into plans as part of the Continuum of Support. Restorative practice techniques² in supporting children's ongoing engagement with their classroom responsibilities can be particularly useful in fostering and strengthening relationships between children in your class.

You might like to consider the following boundaries and expectations for use in your own classroom:

Agree to use inclusive and respectful language together: Agree with the children on the need for, and importance of, respectful language when communicating. For example, this could include agreeing the use of the correct terms for the topics. Some children may use 'slang', which presents an opportunity for learning and allows you to address any inappropriate language used. It may be useful to remind children that when discussing people's identities, it is respectful to use the terms which the individual prefers to describe their interests or experience.

Show openness while respecting boundaries: Agree with the children that they can be open and honest but not directly discuss their own or others' personal/private lives when it comes to sensitive topics, issues, or concerns. Issues can be discussed in general, but discussions should not identify anyone. Equally, the children should not put anyone 'on the spot' by drawing unnecessary attention to any individual in the class.

²This approach is the promotion and enhancement of skills, such as empathy and problem solving.

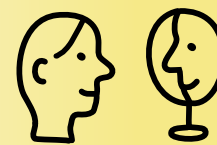
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Ensure children are aware that some questions might not be answered in class: Make children aware that occasionally you may not be able to answer questions for a variety of reasons. Let them know that this is not because their question is wrong, but it might not be on the school curriculum or may be learning for an older class. However, let them know you will do your best to respond to their questions.

Tell children when to share their learning and when not to: Support children's awareness that the curriculum is developed to be age-appropriate, and so topics are sequenced and taught at the right time for their age and class. By sharing the learning from the classroom with a parent/guardian, or with a trusted adult, children can deepen their understanding. Occasionally, you may need to remind children that the topics presented to them in class are for their class only and should not be discussed or shared with younger children in the school. This might be particularly relevant in a multi-grade class where children learn aspects of RSE in smaller groups and subsequently return to learning other aspects together.

Allow children a right to pass: Develop the shared understanding that taking part is important, however, everyone has the right to pass on answering a question or participating in an activity.

Teacher Reflection



- What role do you believe children should have in developing classroom responsibilities?
- What kinds of responsibilities do you value in your classroom?
- Are there other responsibilities you believe to be important?
- From your experience, what responsibilities do children respond well to, and what requires more time and support? What approaches do you find helpful here?

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What's Next?

How can I support parents?



Home learning: Providing written activities can provide a stimulus for children to discuss the classroom and school responsibilities with their parents.

Communications: You could share with parents regularly how their children are demonstrating classroom responsibilities, and how this is having a positive effect on their learning, especially in SPHE/RSE. Sharing the school SPHE/RSE policy can help build partnerships with parents and support their understanding of how SPHE/RSE is approached in your school.



Further reading

Resources to teach SPHE/RSE: The SPHE toolkit provides links to the Walk Tall resource. This resource provides a number of units/lessons that can foster and maintain strong relationships with and between children. [Resources to Teach SPHE/RSE](#)

Positive school climate: The SPHE Teacher Guidelines (1999) provide further details on how to foster a positive school climate, which is integral to SPHE/RSE. [SPHE Teacher Guidelines](#)

Restorative practice: The Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST) has created numerous support materials on restorative practice, that can be a helpful starting point for considering this practice for your classroom or school. [PDST Restorative practice resources](#)

Collaborative learning: Collaborative learning approaches and methodologies can support the development of relationships in your class. The following resources provide further information and activities: [PDST Promoting group work, collaborative, and cooperative learning in the primary school](#)

Behaviour support: Some children may need extra support to help establish relationships. The National Education Psychological Service (NEPS) provides resources to support teachers and Special Education Teachers in this regard.

[A Continuum of Support: Guidelines for Teachers](#)
[A Continuum of Support: Resource Pack for Teachers](#)

Special Educational Needs: The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) provides a variety of resources to support fostering relationships with children through learning. [Resources on 'General Support for Learning' for a teacher who teaches children in Primary School](#)

Loss and bereavement: Children may experience loss or bereavement, and this can affect their relationships in school. The Childhood Bereavement Network provides resources and supports for teachers.

[Teachers: a Unique Resource](#)

References

NCCA. (1999). [Social, Personal and Health Education](#). Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.