

Using a wide variety of active methodologies to meet the needs of the children in your class

Introduction

This material aims to support you in using a wide variety of active methodologies in your SPHE/RSE lesson to meet the needs of all children in your class. The sections are as follows:

- A range of active methodologies
- How can I support parents?¹
- Further reading.

The active methodologies used to teach SPHE/RSE are crucial to the effectiveness of the learning that takes place. The emphasis in teaching SPHE/RSE should be on active learning where children are given opportunities to be actively engaged in their learning at different levels (NCCA, 1999a, p. 54). Active learning can contribute significantly to fostering self-confidence, self-discipline, and self-control by allowing children to discover the learning for themselves. Active learning enables the construction of new meanings and new understandings and encourages children to take increased responsibility for their own learning. Most importantly, it encourages children to make meaningful connections with their own lives and experiences and to transfer learning to different situations.

The creation of a positive school and classroom climate that supports the use of active methodologies is important. Within this climate, pupils are valued, cared for and respected. Teachers provide experiences that foster their pupil's self-confidence and self-esteem and pupils are encouraged to voice their opinions confidently through encouragement and positive teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships.

A range of active methodologies

Choosing the most appropriate active methodologies will depend on several factors, for example: the availability of space; whether or not you are teaching in a multi-class context; the age of the children; and what is suitable for particular issues and topics. You can consider providing a range of active methodologies for children throughout the year and ensuring that children have sufficient practice with methodologies before they are used for sensitive topics or issues. The SPHE curriculum provides a range of examples of how active methodologies can be used and is a good starting point when beginning to work with these methodologies.

Play: Child-led play offers children opportunities to co-operate, negotiate, make concessions, assert themselves, resolve conflicts, manage risks, and appreciate the dynamics of group interactions. During child-led play, the teacher provides children with the support, props, time, and space to develop their play. This role involves many dimensions, such as when to intervene and when to stand back. The teacher takes time to observe, consult, plan, and participate in play. Through play, opportunities arise for children to learn that people disagree and that resolving disagreements often means adjusting to recognise and appreciate the other person's point of view. As a teacher, these opportunities provide teachable moments to support children to come up with solutions to the conflict. Another example of an opportunity that may arise is when the children are washing or changing the dolls in the home corner. The teacher, as a co-participant in the play, could offer the correct names for the body parts of the dolls, in a natural, meaningful and playful way. Play provides children with many opportunities for learning about SPHE/RSE, as children naturally bring their interests and curiosities into the play, often without you having introduced the topic at all in 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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Teacher Snapshot



As an infant teacher, I found that play provides children with opportunities for learning about RSE, often without you having introduced the topic at all in class. For example, if someone's mum is pregnant, the children may play getting a new baby and being doctors and nurses. However, I found I had to be aware of gender stereotyping that may happen in play and I had to ensure all the children in my class had a chance to engage with the different roles. I once had a boy who always told the girls that they had to be nurses because he was the doctor. This type of play is a fantastic opportunity to teach and learn about RSE. You just need to run with the topic by providing relevant props – plain white tee shirts for doctors' and nurses' uniforms, poster of my body parts on the wall, anatomically correct dolls and dolls that reflect different skin colours, facial expressions and physical disabilities, nappies, baby clothes, etc.

Talk and discussion: There are many examples of active talk and discussion methodologies. Some examples include:

A walking debate: This is a useful and fun strategy to develop children's communication and critical thinking skills. Having pinned three signs to the wall (Agree, Disagree and Not Sure) the teacher calls out the motion for a debate and all students must move to the sign that corresponds with their opinions. The children are then called upon to explain/justify their position. Children can signal a change of opinion by physically moving towards a different position.

Carousel discussion: A carousel discussion is a cooperative learning activity that can be used to reinforce learning at the end of an SPHE/RSE lesson or to activate prior knowledge at the beginning of a lesson. The teacher splits the class into small groups and creates several numbered stations around the classroom (the number of stations is dependent on the number of groups). Each station has a large piece of paper with a question written on the top of it. Each group of children begin at a different station. The teacher sets a timer, and the children stay at each

station for that set period of time. During their time at each station, children read the question and then add their own ideas/answers to the paper. When the timer goes off, they move to the next station. As children move around the stations, they are able to see what other groups have written. Once the children have visited all the stations there is a short discussion facilitated by the teacher.

Circular brainstorms: Children sit in a circle. The teacher begins with a theme, question or problem for the children to consider. The children take a moment to think about the question in silence and write their idea/response on a piece of paper. One child is chosen to start the process by reading their initial response while the other children listen. Once this child is finished speaking, the child sitting to their right contributes an additional point, idea or thought. Working clockwise around the circle, each child either speaks or writes a single idea—ideally one which has not yet been mentioned—until a full circle has been completed. The teacher records the main points raised and the session is concluded with a whole-class discussion.

Circle work: Sitting in circle formation encourages good communication and reflects the principles of sharing, equality, and inclusion, as well as a sense of caring for each other. Circle work lends itself to engaging children in critical thinking. The teacher can use appropriate questioning to help children explore and challenge ideas and concepts. This is especially helpful for children who are engaging with challenging or sensitive issues and topics.

Critical thinking using picture books: Picture books are suitable for children of all ages, encouraging discussion, reflection, and learning. High-quality picture books provide a safe space for children to engage and consider concepts through a fictional lens, while also connecting their own experiences with those presented. Picture books can be a valuable resource for teachers in supporting an inclusive approach to representing the different cultures, backgrounds and experiences of children and families in their classroom.

Written activities: Particular types of written activities provide opportunities for exploring issues and aspects of SPHE/RSE. Surveys, checklists, and questionnaires are useful ways of provoking children's thinking. Reflective writing, based on activities, is also a useful way for

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children to reflect and think about the learning as it relates to them. Projects are a useful written activity that can encourage the development of several skills, while supporting meaningful learning experiences related to issues and topics in SPHE/RSE. Where possible, written activities should aim to develop children's higher-order thinking skills.

Project-based learning: In this methodology, children gain understanding and skills by working on a project for an extended period of time. Children work together or individually, to investigate and respond to engaging questions, problems and challenges. Project-based learning often focuses on solving real-world problems and children show their learning through the development of some form of output (e.g., a presentation, a video, a document) that illustrates their learning. This form of learning can help to develop children's critical thinking, creativity and communication skills, as well as their ability to work with others.

Using fictional scenarios or case studies: Many children favour teaching and learning approaches that allow them to discuss real life questions that are relevant to their present and future lives. However, creating some emotional distance is also important. For this reason, framing lessons around fictional scenarios or case studies (either fictional or real) which children may be able to identify with can be highly effective. In such instances, children can be encouraged to consider the situation from a characters' perspectives, or provide advice to a character in the scenario, or solve a problem/arrive at a solution in the scenario. This methodology can also prompt children to empathise with the feelings or situation that the characters find themselves in. This exploration of 'something happening to someone else' is quite different from talking about their own experiences and can support a safe learning environment.

Role-play: Role-play provides active learning situations that explore human relationships, behaviour and events and allows children to act out and make sense of real-life situations: this is especially important in supporting the cognitive and affective needs of children in SPHE/RSE. Through role-play, children can express their present feelings, understanding and knowledge, and are led to new feelings, new understanding, and new knowledge. Children can also dramatise a variety of solutions and outcomes to decision making which can form the basis for reflection and discussion.

Teacher Snapshot



I often use methodologies that I have an interest and experience in. I particularly feel comfortable using the Arts to explore topics and issues in RSE. I use drama, visual arts, and music. I find they work particularly well because I have confidence in using them, and the children can pick up on that. I often reflect on the content that needs to be taught and develop ways to incorporate the learning into drama, art, or music activities. While talk and discussion in the senior classes can be challenging at times, I find that the context of the questions and the conversations with and amongst the children is more relaxed and appropriate when I have well-structured and engaging activities using methodologies the children have experience in.

Using visual media: Pictures, photographs, visual images and videos may be used in a number of different ways in SPHE/RSE. Children need to develop skills of discernment and critical analysis to deal with much of the conflicting information and misinformation that they receive from various sources. Pictures and photographs are a powerful means of provoking a reaction or arousing interest in a particular topic or subject. Examining visual images enables the children to:

- explore bias
- question the content of an image
- explore different points of view
- compare their own experience with reality
- explore attitudes and understanding of certain concepts
- examine stereotyping and the similarities and differences between people.

Pictures are a helpful means of presenting sensitive or controversial information to children. For example, the teacher could use appropriate pictures to help children understand different family types, diversity, and to challenge stereotypes and bias.

Quiet time and visualisations: Using methodologies such as 'quiet time' and 'visualisations' is a great way for children to begin to recognise the benefits of taking time to be silent, still and calm. These methodologies can enable children to slow down,

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improve their focus and awareness and take a break from their busy day. During quiet time, children are offered an opportunity to focus on becoming quiet and still and concentrate on their breathing (NCCA, 1999b, p. 37). Visualisation is a teaching strategy that can be used to explore fears or anxieties in a non-threatening way; to create a vision of what we want to achieve to help commit ourselves more fully to goals; to prepare for stressful or challenging situations by imagining our success in advance; to increase self-awareness and maintain self-esteem by visualising past successes and can be used to open or close a session by creating a sense of calm and relaxation. Visualisations should take place in a relaxed, interruption-free environment. During guided visualisations, the teacher reads from a script in a clear and calm voice. When closing a visualisation exercise, give the children time to gently 'come back' to the present. Sometimes it is helpful to count from five to one to signal the end of the visualisation, and to allow children to make eye contact with other children before moving on. See the further reading section below for examples of guided visualisations.



Further reading

Aistear support materials for 'play' in the early years of primary:

- [Learning through play](#)
- [Wendy Lee - The power of play in building empathy and social competence \(Video\)](#)

Resources and supports: The PDST (Professional Development Services for Teachers) have produced a number of resources to support the teaching of SPHE.

- [Active methodologies](#)
- [Introduction to SPHE](#)
- [Pictures, photographs, and visual images](#)
- [Guided visualisations: Breathe Self-regulation and Relaxation Techniques for Children](#)

References

NCCA. (1999a). *Social, Personal and Health Education*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

NCCA.(1999b). *Social Personal and Health Education Teacher Guidelines*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

What's Next?

How can I support parents?



Home learning: You might consider providing activities using active methodologies, such as using pictures and photographs.

Communications: In advance of teaching certain aspects of SPHE/RSE, it might be beneficial to share some examples of the active methodologies you will be using in your classroom with parents.