

How can I model positive relationships with my students?

At the heart of all learning and teaching is the relationship. Here are some ways you can create and model positive and supportive relationship when teaching SPHE/RSE.

Show you care.

Get to know students' names as quickly as possible and show interest and concern for them both in and beyond the classroom

Be a good listener.

Think about yourself as a young adult. Did anyone make you feel truly listened to? If so, what did they do? Copy this! Be open and interested. Imagine what life is like for children and young people in many different circumstances. Show empathy but avoid intensely questioning or probing personal stories. Don't put anyone on the spot. Just listen attentively, be interested and show you care.

Validate their feelings.

Voice the feelings you pick up without targeting a specific student (e.g. 'It sounds like a number of you are worried about that.'). Remind them that worrying is normal and some stress can even be helpful – motivating us to seek support or take action to care for ourselves or others.

Focus on their strengths and capabilities.

Encourage them to reflect on their personal strengths and how these can help in challenging situations. Remind them of times they may have already coped during challenging times and ways they show resilience.

Help students find solutions and ways of coping together.

Include opportunities for students to engage in problem solving and find solutions together. Brainstorm ideas together, resisting the urge to jump in or interrupt with prescribed solutions. Encourage them to pick the best solution that might work for them. Allowing students to find coping mechanisms themselves or in groups will help them repeat it in the future and build efficacy.

Assume diversity as the norm within every classroom.

So you should assume that there are a diversity of sexual identities and gender identities in every classroom as well as diverse religious, ethnic and socio-economic identities. When planning for teaching and learning it can be useful to ask yourself 'how would a child/young person who is LGBT (or has LGBT family members) experience this lesson? Would they feel included?'

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Show respect and understanding for diverse views.

Children and young people bring different life experiences to the classroom and hold a range of values, beliefs and opinions. As children and young people grow in their awareness of these different life experiences they want to talk about them. It is important to plan for and allow these conversations to happen and to be prepared for possible strong responses on one side or the other. The resources in this toolkit provide advice on how to manage these situations.

Help them to understand feelings.

Remind students that feelings are neither good nor bad. And all emotions, pleasant and unpleasant are like waves, they come and go. They are not a permanent state. Being able to acknowledge our emotions and talk to someone about them can make it easier to cope with unpleasant emotions. Encourage them to talk to their parents or other trusted adults.

Show empathy when dealing with upset.

If a student becomes upset, let them know that this is very normal and understandable. Check in with them about what they need at this time. For example, they may need a private space to avoid feeling embarrassed in front of their peers. They may choose to stay in the class or in their small group. By handling these occasions in a supportive but enabling way, not only are you building a safe and inclusive classroom environment, you are also enabling the young person to learn self-care.

As always, seek support from the school's structures such as the Student Support Team, if you have ongoing concerns about a particular student. If you have child protection concerns report to the designated liaison person (usually the principal) in the school.

Other relevant topics

Teacher as facilitator

What makes a safe SPHE/RSE classroom?

What makes an inclusive SPHE/RSE classroom?

Dealing with challenging conversations

Dealing with disclosure about sexual abuse