

## What makes an inclusive SPHE/RSE classroom?

There is no such thing as a typical child or young person. Children and young people come to learning in SPHE/RSE from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences and with diverse identities. It's important to accept and celebrate each other and what makes us unique.

Think about all the diversities that are in your SPHE/RSE classroom - diversity of family backgrounds, abilities, gender identities, sexual orientations, socio-economic circumstances, cultures, beliefs, and much more.

**An inclusive SPHE/RSE classroom is one where students can encounter diversity in a respectful way. It is grounded in a view of the individual and individual differences as a resource that can enrich the lives and learning of each other.**

These **strategies** can help create a classroom where everyone has a sense of belonging.

- Develop caring relationships – get to know students' names as quickly as possible and show interest and concern for them both in and beyond your classroom.
- Establish a classroom contract and atmosphere that allows students to have honest discussions, be listened to respectfully and be open to hearing opinions and experiences that might be different to their own.
- Use respectful and compassionate language when talking about people and challenge students if they use disrespectful language or display discriminatory behaviours, even if they are 'joking' or 'slagging'. A good test for checking if language is/is not respectful is to ask the students themselves if they would like the word to be used to describe someone they love.
- If a class appears to be relatively homogenous (for example, in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic background, etc.), teach your lesson while imagining a more diverse environment. For example, imagine how would you feel if someone from another culture/group was 'a fly on the wall' observing the teaching and learning? This will safeguard against slipping into 'othering' language.
- Support students to develop attitudes, knowledge and skills for recognizing and addressing stereotypes, bias, unfairness and discrimination.
- When deciding on content and teaching methods, make sure to include different examples, scenarios, case studies, etc. that represent and reflect the spectrum of children and young people's lives, experiences and identities.
- Assume diversity in your student population, even if you don't see it – you may not see or be aware of many aspects of students' lives, identities or backgrounds. For example, teach with a consciousness that you have LGBTQI+ students in every class or students with LGBTQI+ friends, family or loved ones.
- Create an inclusive physical space by displaying images that reflect a diversity of young people's experiences, e.g. images of different family units, different kinds of relationships, information about youth services, health and wellbeing information, including information relevant for LGBTQI+ students.
- Allow all voices to be heard: Ensure that all students have equal opportunities to express their views respectfully and sensitively, bearing in mind students' differing levels of comfort, maturity and openness. Check in with them regularly that this is happening.
- Use inclusive, affirming and gender-neutral language.

## What makes an inclusive SPHE/RSE classroom?

### Watch your language!

Without being aware of it, teachers can often use language that excludes or makes some students feel uncomfortable or not valued. For example, it is not appropriate to use words such as ‘junkie’ or ‘alco’ when talking about drugs or alcohol. Equally when talking about mental health it is not appropriate to use terms like ‘crazy’, ‘psycho’, ‘weird’ and when discussing healthy eating avoid commenting on people’s body shape (positively or negatively) and never label people as ‘fat’ or ‘thin’ - instead speak about being ‘healthy/not healthy’. Also avoid heteronormative language and assumptions, such as referring to romantic relationships only in terms of boy/girl relationships and binary-based language that doesn’t take into account the fluidity of gender and sexuality.

These strategies might be a helpful starting point

- Use **plain English** when introducing and discussing topics.
- Avoid using the word ‘normal’, especially when talking about people. It usually implies a judgment on those who fall outside the category of ‘normal’. Instead talk about people generally or typically and always point out that a variation of experiences is the norm.
- Everyone makes assumptions – when you can, try to draw attention to your own assumptions in a way that models a willingness to correct yourself and then move on in a way that doesn’t make a big deal but is nonetheless genuine, e.g. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed that actually.”
- Point out when textbooks or resources do not reflect diversity and inclusion. In doing this, you are helping your students to develop a critical eye.
- Take up opportunities/teachable moments to prompt students to interrogate gender and other stereotypes. Discuss how these stereotypes can work restrictively in society in ways that have damaging effects and limit opportunities for everyone.

- When you greet your students for the first time, announce your name and pronouns (e.g. “My name is Ms Murphy and my pronouns are ‘she/her’”). This signals that you are cognisant and respectful of the fact that not everyone will use the pronouns that people expect or the name and pronouns that are on official records.
- Avoid unnecessary grouping students on the grounds of gender. Such language divides unnecessarily. It can overtly and subtly repeat assumptions and stereotypes about gender and it can also silence and exclude students who may identify as transgender, non-binary or intersex. For example, you could replace “boys and girls” or “lad and ladies” with phrases like “everyone” or “folks” and you can use “parents and carers” instead of “Mums and Dads”.

### Further useful resources

Check out [BeLong To](#) for further guidance on gender inclusive language.

Read more about [gender identity, the key terms and how to further support trans people](#)

People often conflate gender identity with sexual orientation. Gender identity is how a person experiences them-self as male, female, neither, or both while sexual orientation is about who a person is physically, emotionally or romantically attracted to.

### Other relevant topics

Considerations in choosing resources

How can I model positive relationships with my students?