

What makes a safe SPHE/RSE classroom?

In SPHE/RSE, children and young people are learning important, and sometimes challenging things about themselves and others. It is a subject that can arouse strong emotions, reactions and feelings of anxiety, embarrassment and vulnerability, among others. Therefore, it is important for all children and young people to have a safe environment to share their questions, and learn and participate without feeling singled out. (UNESCO *International technical guidance on sexuality education*, 2018, p.96)

This sense of safety can be achieved in a number of ways.

From the outset, it is important to be clear about

1. My boundaries as a teacher of SPHE/RSE
2. Ground rules for how the class will work together
3. Child protection.

1. My boundaries as a teacher of SPHE/RSE

Maintaining professional boundaries is an essential part of your work as a teacher. Boundaries shape our relationships with students, their parents/care givers and our colleagues. Maintaining boundaries doesn't mean that your relationships are cold or detached. You can and should develop friendly and trusting relationships with your students – remembering you are not their 'friend'.

It is important for the teacher to show their humanity and humour and sometimes sharing a life experience can be helpful too. This needs to be done judiciously, so that you are not left

feeling exposed, and the students don't think your way of responding to a situation is the only way. We are all human and may have things going on in our lives (past or present) that need to be kept separate from our work in the classroom. Maintaining professional boundaries means staying 'in role' as teacher at all times and protecting your students from unhelpful or inappropriate exposure to your personal/professional challenges or emotional difficulties.

Another key aspect of maintaining professional boundaries is an awareness of the limits of your role as a teacher, a willingness to admit you are not an expert on all topics and knowing when to call upon the expertise of others (including in the case of child protection concerns).

Don't aim to bring students to a set destination: They are all on a journey and you can only guide them on theirs.

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2. Ground rules for how the class will work together

Remember that some topics may be difficult or challenging for some students depending on their life experience. Establishing ground rules may make it easier for such students to safely participate. Ground rules make explicit the roles, rights and responsibilities of all involved in the learning relationship. They also ensure respect for people's privacy and establish appropriate boundaries for what should and should not be raised in classroom discussion.

When agreeing ground rules for the SPHE/RSE class it is important that:

- Students are actively involved in deciding the ground rules
- Ground rules are stated in the positive, use 'I' statements and should be few in number
- Students understand how keeping these rules will help everyone feel safe and respected in the classroom
- The ground rules are referred to regularly in order to positively reinforce them and they may be revised, or if necessary, renegotiated.

Getting started!

Brainstorm with the group possible ground rules. To prompt this process, first ask some questions 'What would help to make you feel comfortable and safe participating in this class?' And 'What would make it uncomfortable for you and prevent you from participating?'

Once the ground rules have been agreed, children and young people can be assured that this classroom is respectful, and safe, and that

Ground rules – some prompts

Below are some examples of matters which could arise when agreeing ground rules.

Openness while respecting boundaries: I will be open and honest, but I understand there will be no pressure to discuss my own or others' personal/private lives. I will not use names or descriptions which could identify anyone.

Listening respectfully: I will listen respectfully to other people's point of view. While I understand that it is okay to disagree with or challenge another person's point of view, I will not make fun of, or put anybody down.

Right to pass: Taking part is important. However, I have the right to pass on answering a question or participating in an activity.

Notice when I'm making assumptions or judgements about people: I will try to listen attentively and understand why people think and feel as they do, especially when it's different to the way I think and feel. I will notice the assumptions or judgements that I make and try to listen and understand how people can have different values, attitudes, life experiences or feelings.

Using language: I will use respectful language and the correct terms for the things we will be discussing rather than the slang terms, as some people can find that offensive. If I am unsure of the correct term I can ask the teacher.

Asking questions: I will not set out to ask questions or make comments that would deliberately try to embarrass or hurt anyone else. (You might also consider making a question box available for anonymous questions.)

Sharing time: I agree to allow silences to develop so that others have the opportunity to have their voices heard.

their needs matter. You, their teacher, can feel protected too once the students are clear about the referral procedures required by the Child Protection Guidelines.

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3. Child protection

During SPHE/RSE lessons students can disclose personal stories and information. It is important to create awareness about the importance of protecting our privacy and sharing in an appropriate manner that doesn't leave us feeling vulnerable or exposed. This can be done by adhering to ground rules and boundaries for classroom discussion. Where students need to follow up after class and talk privately (with you or another member of staff) then this can be mentioned and encouraged.

Confidentiality within the context of the SPHE/RSE classroom needs to be discussed fully with students. The discussion might include the following:

- What is said in the group/class stays in the group, and this is true for the teacher too.
- Students shouldn't talk specifically with names when retelling stories to protect privacy.
- Reassure students that they will not be asked to share their own personal stories in class. Neither should they share personal details or experiences that might leave them vulnerable.
- Let the students know what topics you will be covering beforehand. It can be helpful for students who might feel vulnerable to have the space to prepare themselves for certain topics.

- Students need to know that there are **limits to confidentiality** and teachers cannot give unconditional guarantees of confidentiality. Explain that in some circumstances, as their teacher you may need to seek advice or tell someone about an issue raised in class. Students need to know that a teacher is obliged to share information with staff members with safeguarding responsibilities if they think any student is at risk or in danger. Explain when the referral procedures/Child Protection Guidelines within the school come into play.

Information about your safeguarding responsibilities can be found here:

[Training and Resources](#)

[Key questions and answers in relation to Child Protection](#)

Other relevant topics

- Dealing with challenging conversations
- Dealing with disclosure about sexual abuse