

## Responding to challenging discussions, topics and questions

### Introduction

This material aims to support teachers in responding to challenging discussions, topics and questions in SPHE/RSE. The sections are as follows:

- Strategies for responding to questions in SPHE/RSE
- Understanding the motivation behind questions
- How can I support parents?<sup>1</sup>
- Further reading.

The SPHE curriculum provides an important context for children's language skills and their vocabulary related to relationships and sexuality (PDST, 2018, p. 16). Through positive school climate, integration and discrete teaching, children become aware of the power and influence of language. Some topics can give rise to challenging questions and discussions and these provide opportunities for learning.

When facilitating discussions in SPHE/RSE, you will be aware of which topics are sensitive for you and the children you teach, and how your views on issues are influenced by your background, experiences, culture, religion, teacher education, and school culture. Your school SPHE/RSE policy may also detail strategies or guidance with which to align your approach to teaching SPHE/RSE.

### Strategies for responding to questions in SPHE/RSE

**Depersonalise your answers:** When challenging questions are posed by children you can adopt framing techniques to depersonalise your answers, such as *I read that/I saw in the news/research suggests that...* Framing answers in this way can help open up discussions with the children.

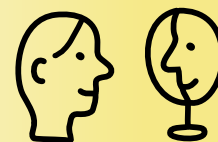
**Defer or follow-up on questions:** There may be situations where you wish to defer or follow-up on questions that you cannot answer straight away. This can be a useful approach that allows time to research or talk to a more experienced colleague and come back with an answer, if appropriate.

**Emphasise classroom responsibilities:** When introducing a potentially sensitive topic, you can remind children of the agreed classroom responsibilities around listening, responding, and asking questions, and that making personal or thoughtless remarks may offend or embarrass themselves and their classmates. Beginning each SPHE/RSE class with a reminder of these shared responsibilities can help focus on the intended learning.

**Respecting questions:** Discussions during SPHE/RSE can raise an array of questions. While there may be a variety of motivations behind questions, you can ensure that the children and adults in the classroom respect the questions by affirming and responding to them effectively, maintaining a safe space for all children to ask questions.

**Keep the curriculum in mind:** At times you may not be able to answer a particular question as it relates to learning for older classes and may not be age appropriate, however you can acknowledge the question and respond in an appropriate manner.

### Teacher Reflection



- Thinking about your own experience of teaching SPHE/RSE, what have you found to be the most effective strategy for dealing with challenging questions and discussions?

<sup>1</sup> 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



I feel one of the most important aspects of managing conversations is watching and being aware of my own reactions to topics, questions, and the use of language. I wasn't always aware of these, and when I began teaching, I might have rushed my responses or had a poor reaction. I often rushed through these discussions or avoided them very obviously and this told the children a lot. However, being aware of this and approaching it with a more open and considered perspective, I have been able to react more positively and take time to engage in conversations and tease things out. Another aspect is being adaptive and having conversations about RSE when they occur, even if unplanned. As I have improved in experience and confidence, I can see the links and make them through everyday conversations in class in an interpersonal and appropriate way. I would have put off talking about sensitive issues until the time of the year of the lessons, but now I try and take the opportunities as they arise and as a result these are now ongoing conversations.

## Useful phrases to facilitate challenging questions/discussions

### Reframing, emphasising, or focusing on key points

- *I noticed that a lot of you were...*
- *I hear some of you are saying...*
- *I hear what you are saying...*
- *I appreciate your honesty.*
- *Can you say a bit more about that?*
- *Share with me your thoughts about...*
- *Does anyone else have ideas?*
- *Does anyone feel differently about... (e.g. if something is said that is negative/unhelpful and trying to get balance)*
- *Can you think of a situation where you might think/respond differently? (introduces flexible thinking)*
- *How might someone your age...? (takes the focus of the individual feeling exposed)*
- *What do we already know about this?*
- *Can you give me an example?*
- *Are you saying...or...?*
- *Can you rephrase that, please?*

## Seeking clarification from children

- *I am curious about...*
- *I understand that is your experience and I was wondering could there be another explanation?*
- *I wonder what the other person might be thinking?*
- *What would that look like?*

## Questioning assumptions

- *That sounds like something that needs to be looked at more.*
- *What are the consequences of that assumption?*
- *What was the point of asking that question?*
- *Why do you think I asked this question?*

## Questions that seek to understand a viewpoint of perspective

- *Please explain why/how ...?*
- *What evidence is there to support what you are saying?*
- *On what authority are you basing your argument?*
- *Another way of looking at this is..., does this seem reasonable?*
- *Why are you saying that?*
- *What exactly does that mean?*
- *How does this relate to what we have been talking about?*

## Useful phrases to facilitate challenging questions/discussions

There can be different motivations behind questions and comments made by children in SPHE/RSE. For the most part, children will ask questions based on their natural curiosity about the emotional and physical changes that occur as they grow older, or that are based on the content of the curriculum and what is being taught. However, some children may pose questions that, for example, seek to shock and to use inappropriate or slang language; questions that are personal to you, themselves, or others. Identifying the motivations children might have in asking a question helps you to respond effectively to it.

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The following are examples of the types of questions children can ask:

**Am I normal? questions:** These questions usually focus on concerns about emotional and physical changes the children in your class may be going through. You can validate their concern by saying, for example, *many people worry that...* and give information about what they can expect to happen during this time in their life. You may find that a simple response is adequate or that some further teaching is needed on the issue or topic raised.

**Information-based questions:** Many questions will be in response to learning that you have planned as part of teaching SPHE/RSE, and can be dealt with directly in the context of the discussion.

**Shock value questions:** These questions can be asked with an intent to embarrass, or to create a disruption to the discussion. These kinds of questions may also contain slang or content inappropriate for the age and class level of the children. If such questions arise, you can respond but not engage directly with the question, or reword the question using correct terminology and connect it back to your overall approach to using language in SPHE/RSE. You can remind the class of the shared classroom responsibilities for these discussions, and you can follow your own behaviour management approach if there are continued questions that aim to disrupt the discussion.

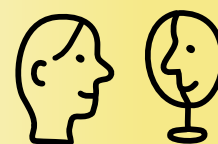
**Making connections questions:** Often children can make connections between a range of learning and other experiences with topics and issues related to SPHE/RSE. These questions give an opportunity to emphasise the integrated nature of SPHE/RSE in the lives of the children.

**Personal questions:** These questions can be directed towards you, each other, or themselves. You can use caution and judgement on whether it is appropriate to answer questions about yourself. Removing the personal aspects and answering the information aspect of the question can be the most supportive approach to the children in your class.

**Values-based questions:** Children sometimes ask questions framed with their own values, those of their peer group, or those related to their home

environment. A simple approach to values-based questions can be to affirm the child asking the question, recognise what the values-based content of the question is and, if appropriate, address it in the context of the school's characteristic spirit, or separate out the true motivation of the question and frame the response more factually. Some values-based questions can be referred to home.

### Teacher Reflection



- Thinking about the types of questions children have asked in your class, which types are you most comfortable answering and what strategies have supported you in your response?
- Reflecting on some of the questions that children have asked in your class, what motivations have been behind those questions and what approach have you taken to responding to them?

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## What's Next?

### How can I support parents?



**Home learning:** Sharing materials and information can support parents/guardians to continue discussions or answer questions related to the topics or issues. You could provide some of the prompts to enable parents/guardians to support these discussions.

**Communication:** You might consider organising an information workshop for parents/guardians to discuss the approaches, resources and methodologies that support topics and issues that arise in SPHE/RSE.

**Resources to share with parents/guardians:** The online SPHE/RSE toolkit provides resources to share with parents/guardians at each class level.

### Resources to teach SPHE/RSE

### Further reading



**SPHE/RSE online toolkit:** The following materials complement the strategies and approaches set out in this support material.

- Reflecting on my practice and exploring my experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs
- Fostering relationships, expectations, and boundaries
- Creating the conditions for positive classroom discussions

### Further resources on teaching controversial issues:

The following resources provide information to support your understanding of how to approach challenging issues and topics.

- Tackling Controversial Issues in the Citizenship Classroom
- Teaching Controversial Issues

**Language:** Sometimes challenging discussions and topics can relate to using language effectively. The following resource for teaching can help with using language in SPHE/RSE. BeLongTo LGBT terminology

## References

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

Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST). 2018. *Relationships and Sexuality Education Policy Guide for Primary School*. Accessed at [https://www.pdst.ie/sites/default/files/updated\\_RSE\\_Policy\\_Guide\\_2.12.2018.pdf](https://www.pdst.ie/sites/default/files/updated_RSE_Policy_Guide_2.12.2018.pdf)