Using inclusive and respectful language

Introduction

This material aims to support you in considering the importance of effective and inclusive language usage in SPHE/RSE and in the whole school environment. The sections are as follows:

- Why language use matters
- Language about relationships and sexuality
- Recognising the contested and challenging use of language
- How can I support parents?[1]
- Further reading

Snapshot from research

Language reflects values, attitudes, beliefs, prejudices, and principles. It not only helps to express a culture but influences and shapes that culture as well. It is essential that children are enabled to use language in a precise and appropriate manner (NCCA, 1999, p. 26). Language is central to enabling children to interact and engage with others, express their thoughts and feelings, and share their experiences. It allows them to formulate their thoughts, communicate their ideas and reflect upon their learning. Language used in SPHE/RSE can nurture children as unique and valuable human beings. It takes on particular significance in SPHE/RSE because of the ways it can be used or mis-used. It can have a significant effect on children's awareness of their own and other's identity and their knowledge and perceptions about their own bodies, especially as they grow and change.

Why language use matters

Using language effectively in SPHE/RSE can:

- Affirm children in their identity and in belonging to the school community
- Challenge children's assumptions and stereotypes
- Empower children to seek help when they need it
- Give children a positive understanding of their bodies
- Help children and families feel included in your school community.

Language is always changing and evolving. Therefore, it is helpful to view everyone in the school community as a learner when it comes to using it inclusively and respectfully. It is natural to make mistakes, what is important is that when a mistake is made you acknowledge this and actively seek to develop awareness and use of respectful and inclusive language for the future. However, changes to language can be contentious and contested and the latter part of this material addresses this challenge.

Teacher reflection
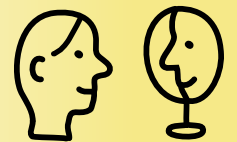
- Have you avoided certain topics because you were unsure of the appropriate language to use? If so, were there any resources/courses you found particularly helpful in developing your knowledge?

[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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Language about relationships and sexuality

Language related to relationships and sexuality occurs through children's everyday interactions both within and outside the classroom. Through teaching an inclusive and effective use of this language every day, rather than in once-off isolated lessons, you can begin to develop children's overall attitude to, and respectful use of, language especially related to relationships and sexuality.

The following areas are important aspects of language related to relationships and sexuality to be aware of and with which to develop your practice.

- **Anatomical language for body and growing and changing:** From an early age, children should be taught and encouraged to use the correct anatomical terms for the body and biological processes. Children absorb spoken and unspoken messages about their bodies and bodily functions. The classroom environment can provide a safe place for them to explore and learn how to use language about their bodies in a respectful way, for example, through playful activities such as bathing and dressing dolls in the infant classroom. This will support them as they grow and change to have healthy relationships with themselves and others.

- **Respectful language about relationships:** Often, language to describe relationships, or slang language that describes aspects of relationships, can be used in an incorrect way or in ways that hurt and diminish other people's experiences and identities. The correct use and understanding of the meaning of vocabulary can help children in their understanding of relationships.

- **Being LGBTI+ inclusive:** The language of sexual orientation can arise in a variety of contexts in your class. The context, and how the language is used, is important, as is how you respond. There may be times where specific language can be tailored to be more inclusive when, for example, talking about families, whether informally or formally, through the curriculum. By making your everyday language more inclusive you can create a climate which is responsive to LGBTI+ terminology. When children question or use LGBTI+ language incorrectly, take the opportunity to teach the correct use or definition of the term in an age-appropriate way. The 'Different Families Same Love' poster, developed by the INTO LGBT+ Teachers' Group, has age-appropriate terminology for the junior and senior stages of primary school.

- **A gender inclusive language approach:** Gender norms and expectations are a source of anxiety for some children and, thus, the language used around gender requires attention. A gender inclusive environment affirms all children and allows them to express their interests and find confidence in their strengths. It is important to challenge unhelpful gender stereotypes that relate to all genders and provide space for children to challenge their thinking about how they use language related to gender. Considering how you might respond to questions or comments related to gender will help you respond more easily when the situation arises. You may also need to be aware of your own use of language. Instead of calling the children to attention with "boys and girls …" get their attention in different ways. Make sure toys and activities in your class are open to everyone. Picture books are a useful resource to support children expanding their understanding and perceptions of gender. Be aware that for some children, their gender identity is evolving. This means that they may be transitioning from one gender to another, while for some other children, their gender can be a fluid, rather than a fixed concept. It is also important to note that gender identity is different to gender expression, for example that the way in which a pupil chooses to dress, wear their hair etc. does not necessarily indicate their gender identity.

- **Names and pronouns:** A child's name is an important part of their identity. If a child, through discussion with their parents, chooses to change their name and pronouns, it is important to respect these changes and to ensure that other children and teachers are aware of this and use them appropriately. When a child decides they want to use a new name and pronouns, you, and school leadership, in collaboration with the child and their parents, should meet and let the child decide if, or how, they want to let other staff and children know about a name or pronoun change. Any decisions about a child's identity should always be made in consultation with the child and their parents.

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Recognising the contested and challenging nature of language

The language we use is reflective of the values and beliefs we hold. For this reason, asking a person to change, adapt or consider their language can be an emotive subject. A situation may arise whereby a member of the school community may disagree with the use or promotion of inclusive and respectful language in your school. While contestation or objections about language may be raised because of a person's genuinely held perspectives, the dignity and respect of the children in your school should be at the heart of your response to such contestations. Every school operates within its own context and will require an individualised response when such challenges arise. However, there are some ways that your school can give a clear and consistent message about the importance and value of using and promoting inclusive and respectful language.

- **School policies:** School policies reflect the values of the school and serve as the foundation for a culture in which inclusive language is promoted and used across the school community. It is important that your school's policies convey the importance of inclusive and respectful language. A first step in creating a school that fosters inclusive and respectful language might be to review and examine the language used in current policies, for example the school's Anti-Bullying Policy and the Code of Behaviour, to ensure they promote an inclusive school culture. To do this you might consider setting up a representative working group (parents, teachers, children), running focus groups with parents, teachers and children or using questionnaires. The challenge for schools is often not the writing of policies, but rather operationalising polices. Therefore, while reviewing/ writing a policy consider how it will be 'lived out'. One practical example of 'living out' this approach is to consider the language you use in correspondences with parents, for example in your enrolment forms. Be mindful of differing family types and rather than asking for a mother's name and father's name, consider asking for parent's names.

- **Taking a whole-school approach:** The most effective way of supporting a whole-school approach to using inclusive language is to integrate it into the daily interactions across the school community – between members of staff, children, parents and the wider community. Whole-school activities designed to increase awareness of the school's commitment to inclusive and respectful language are effective. Events like Anti-Bullying Week can present excellent opportunities to share the school's stance with the whole-school community. As well as annual events, it is also important to promote inclusive and respectful language through the curriculum in an integrated and consistent manner.

- **Classroom approaches:** As a primary teacher, you are uniquely positioned in children's lives as you often see a child every day and form strong relationships with your pupils. Consequently, you may observe the impacts of intolerant, derogatory and discriminatory language on children who are subjected to it. A safe classroom environment is one in which inclusive language is promoted while intolerant, derogatory or discriminatory language is examined, questioned and challenged. The creation of such spaces contributes to a school culture of inclusion and respect. While polices may give guidance, the language, attitudes and behaviours modelled by teachers will have a far greater impact and can support an inclusive school culture. Remember that there may be children in your class who may find it challenging to use inclusive and respectful language. For example, some children are very literal in their understanding and use of language. It is important to recognise that these children may require additional time and support to understand why we use certain language. Where possible, therefore, recognise and use teachable moments to explain why we use the language we do.

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- **Communicating the importance of inclusive language with parents:** Make an effort to involve all members of the school community in developing policies and procedures that reflect a commitment to inclusive and respectful language. Once policies have been reviewed, they should be shared with parents. This can be done through information evenings, during parent teacher meetings, through the parents' association, through the school website and through the words and actions of adults working in the school. Be cognisant of parents who may experience literacy difficulties and of parents whose first language may be different to the language of instruction in the school. On a more ongoing basis, consider inviting parents to be part of whole-school events that promote inclusive language and share children's learning in this area with them so that they know that inclusive and respectful language is valued and promoted at school. For example, if your school is taking part in the 'Different Families Same Love' competition the children could bring their creations for the competition home to share with their parents.

What's Next?

How can I support parents?

Home learning: You might consider letting children take some resources related to SPHE/RSE home to support engagement with parents.

Communications: Sometimes it can be difficult to conceptualise how SPHE/RSE is taught and sharing links or examples of resources used can support parents in understanding. Be clear about the language taught in RSE lessons (for example the correct anatomical names). This will enable parents to reinforce the learning at home.

Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks is a resource developed by the HSE to assist parents teaching their child about RSE concepts and topics. It uses inclusive and respectful language and could offer support to parents when discussing RSE with their child.

Further reading

BeLong To: BeLong To provides an online resource and a training platform to consider some key areas of practice in creating LGBTI+ Inclusive Schools.
- LGBTI+ Inclusive Schools
- LGBTI+ Inclusive Language
- All Together Now

Busy Bodies - A booklet about puberty and adolescence for you and your parents

Gender Equality Matters (GEM)
- Classroom materials
- Multimedia resources
- Massive open online course

LGBT Ireland:
- Transgender people and gender expression

INTO LGBT+ Teachers' Group:
- Different Families Same Love Resources
- Addressing LGBT+ identity based bullying
- Good teaching/learning practice videos

NCCA (1999), *SPHE Teacher Guidelines*, Department of Education and Skills, Dublin.

Respect - Creating a Welcoming and Positive School Climate to Prevent Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying

TENI: Resources and information on helpful definitions related to gender.
- Helpful Terms and Definitions – TENI

References

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