

General Information about Relationships and Sexuality Education across Primary and Post-Primary Schools

What is Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)?

Since the late 1990s, RSE has been a compulsory part of the primary and post-primary curriculum and is an aspect of a subject called Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of relationships and sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people, in an age-appropriate manner, with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will enable them to develop self-awareness and self-esteem; realise their health, wellbeing and dignity; develop positive and respectful, social and intimate relationships; consider how their choices affect their own wellbeing and that of others; and understand their rights and responsibilities in relation to themselves and others.

What learning is contained in RSE?

RSE is concerned with helping children and young people learn how they can create and maintain healthy, positive relationships—with self, family, friends and other relationships (including as they mature, romantic relationships).

When is the right time to start teaching RSE?

Learning about our relationships, our bodies, and sexuality is a lifelong process, where learning in school begins in the early years and continues until a young person leaves post-primary school. How and what we teach in RSE is very much dependent on the age and the context of the learners. In the best circumstances, RSE in schools will complement the work of parents¹ and will gradually respond to the questions and needs of children and young people as they grow in understanding about themselves and their relationships with others.

What do we know about what young people need?

The following extracts are taken from the NCCA's *Report on the Review of RSE in Primary and Post-Primary Schools* and provide a summary of what students told us about their needs.

Students agree that RSE is important: There is unanimous agreement among students about the importance of RSE. They want schools to provide comprehensive, relevant and age-appropriate RSE throughout all stages of education.

Students want a more holistic approach to teaching and learning in RSE: Within both primary and post-primary contexts, students are unhappy with RSE that focuses mainly on biological facts (for primary students 'the talk' and for post-primary students, information on conception, contraception, STIs) and fails to provide opportunities to discuss the emotional aspects of growing up and forming healthy relationships. They also observe an emphasis on the risks and dangers associated with relationships and sexual activity at the expense of exploring the healthy, positive or enjoyable aspects.

Students want a safe space for learning in RSE: Students want a safe and inclusive environment where they can discuss, ask questions and talk about all aspects of relationships and sexuality. They want more than scientific information and facts (which they say they can access readily).

Students want to experience learning that is relevant: Older students spoke about the need to discuss 'real-world' topics openly and honestly within the context of rights and responsibilities, attitudes and values (with respect being most frequently mentioned). Across all ages, students felt that lessons were often 'babyish' and 'out of touch' with their needs. Furthermore, they remarked that they find lessons in RSE overly repetitive, with themes such as bullying, and alcohol revisited from year to year without suitable progression being built in.

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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Students feel that teachers play a key role in quality RSE: For students, the key enabler to a quality experience of RSE is the teacher. Students recognise the importance of a teacher who is comfortable and confident in teaching the subject, has a good relationship with the students, and can facilitate learning in a positive and participative manner.

(*Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education in Primary and Post-Primary School*, NCCA, 2019, p. 25)

What are the benefits of RSE as part of the school curriculum?

Research indicates that children and young people benefit from learning about relationships and sexuality as part of a carefully-planned curriculum in an age- and developmentally-appropriate manner. Quality RSE acts as a protective factor because it provides a space where appropriate information can be shared, negative social norms can be addressed, and children can be supported in making healthy choices based on values of respect and care. Technology is omni-present in the modern world and can be a source of information, and misinformation, about relationships and sexuality. As children and young people are exposed to more and more information, learning about relationships, sexual health and sexual expression within a safe classroom setting has never been more important. In developing the curriculum, significant work goes into ensuring that learning is age-appropriate for the child at any given stage of their learning. Choices about what to include in the curriculum are based on research and best practice as well as extensive consultations with parents, teachers and children/young people themselves. Within the classroom, the teacher has flexibility to judge how particular topics should be taught, so that learning takes place in a way that is meeting the needs of the children.

How can RSE support children and young people's decision-making?

The emphasis in RSE is about balancing the emotional and relational aspects of human development. Research shows that learners who take part in RSE at school are more likely to delay sexual activity until they are physically and emotionally mature enough to be able to manage sexual relationships, compared to those who have not

taken part. In addition, children and young people are safer when they have experienced good-quality RSE, as it gives them a language and framework for understanding what healthy relationships look like and it supports help-seeking behaviour if they or a friend need support or sexual health advice.

What are parents saying about what their children need, and how can schools support this?

Parents are generally in agreement on the importance of age-appropriate and relevant relationships and sexuality education, both at home and in schools. They are acutely aware of the many pressures faced by young people growing up today and most regard schools as uniquely positioned to provide a space where children can discuss the various aspects of relationships and sexuality in an informed, thoughtful and open manner alongside their peers. Specifically, parents want RSE to enable their children to take care of themselves and others; gain awareness and acceptance of self and others; develop responsible decision-making skills; and learn how to build and sustain healthy and respectful relationships. While most parents recognise their role as the primary educators of their children and want to help their children to develop positive and healthy attitudes to their bodies, relationships, and sexuality, they often struggle to know how to approach these conversations with their children. A range of short booklets to support these conversations are available at www.sexualwellbeing.ie.

Can parents withdraw their child from RSE?

Parents are the primary educators of their children and important partners in the education process that happens within schools. While Relationships and Sexuality Education is a mandatory part of the curriculum in schools, parents have a right to request that their child opt out of RSE, as is their right with any aspect of the curriculum.

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When will there be an updated curriculum?

The NCCA is committed to developing an updated integrated curriculum for RSE and SPHE spanning both primary and post-primary education. Work on updating the junior cycle SPHE/RSE curriculum will begin in autumn 2021. When junior cycle is completed, the focus will move to senior cycle and then the primary curriculum. As this work develops, there will be a great deal of engagement with the key education stakeholders as well as opportunities for public consultation. All of this feedback will inform the final curriculum. Keep an eye on our website to find out about developments and to have your say.

What is the role of parents in the development of an updated curriculum?

The National Parents Council, (Primary and Post-Primary) is represented on the SPHE/RSE development groups. In addition, we welcome parents into conversations and consultations as draft specifications are developed. This is facilitated in a variety of ways—through meetings with representative groups, through focus group and advisory group meetings and through public consultation events and surveys, publicised via the NCCA website and social media.