

Guidelines

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Preface (Establish a committee to develop the policy)

The purpose of this booklet is to provide you with guidelines for the development of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy in your school. These guidelines promote a partnership approach among parents, teachers and school authorities. Each group will be invited to nominate representatives to a committee which will draft a policy statement. Having engaged in consultation with their various groups, the committee members will finalise the policy statement and submit it for approval to the school authorities. The final statement will be disseminated among the school community. Such an approach will ensure clarity and consensus on how RSE will be taught in the individual school. The school's RSE programme will be drawn up by the school staff and will be based on the policy statement and the RSE curriculum and guidelines developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Classroom materials will be available to teachers as a resource during this work.

This folder has been assembled in consultation with the partners in education, as follows:

- The Department of Education
- The Department of Health
- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
- The National Parents' Council - Primary
- The National Parents' Council - Post-Primary
- The Catholic Primary School Managers Association
- The Church of Ireland Board of Education
- The Joint Managerial Body for Secondary Schools
- Educate Together
- The Irish National Teachers' Organisation
- The Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland
- The Teachers' Union of Ireland
- The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
- The Irish Vocational Educational Association

Introduction

Relationships and Sexuality Education

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is a lifelong process of acquiring knowledge and understanding and of developing attitudes, beliefs and values about sexual identity, relationships and intimacy. This education is delivered consciously and unconsciously by parents, teachers, peers, adults and the media.

In Irish schools, RSE will provide structured opportunities for pupils to acquire a knowledge and understanding of human relationships and sexuality through processes which will enable them to form values and establish behaviours within a moral, spiritual and social framework.

This approach gives opportunities to children and young people to learn about relationships and sexuality in ways that help them think and act in a moral, caring and responsible manner.

At primary level, RSE aims to help children learn, at home and in school, about their own development and about their friendships and relationships with others. This work will be based on developing a good self-image, promoting respect for themselves and for others, and providing them with appropriate information.

At post-primary level, this means building on the primary programme and providing young people with information and skills to critically evaluate the wide range of information, opinions, attitudes and values offered today, and so make positive, responsible choices about themselves and the way they live their lives.

In the school setting, RSE will be taught in the context of Social, Personal and Health Education.

Social, Personal and Health Education

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) contributes to developing the work of the school in promoting the health and well-being of children and young people. This happens in the context of their emotional, moral, social and spiritual growth, as well as their intellectual, physical, political, religious and creative development. A supportive school climate, where the needs and well-being of all members of the school community are considered, is essential to the best possible provision for SPHE.

Social, Personal and Health Education looks at issues such as relationships at home and in school, building self-esteem, and learning skills of communication, decision-making and expressing feelings in an appropriate way. It also includes giving clear information on a range of topics, including healthy eating, alcohol, drugs, human growth and development, safety and social responsibility, and environmental issues.

Relationships and sexuality education - A Partnership between Home and School - The guidelines for policy development in this booklet are laid out in a series of steps:

Steps 1 and 2

are aimed at assisting you to clarify what is contained in the NCCA curriculum and guidelines and other documents, and what is already happening in your school

Step 3

contains the framework for the policy statement

Steps 4 to 6

provide guidance on what to do after the initial policy statement has been drafted.

Step 1: Study relevant documents

Over the past two years your school has received a number of relevant documents on RSE. These include:

[The Report of the Expert Advisory Group on Relationships and Sexuality Education](#)

This report was distributed to boards of management school authorities in January 1995 and has become known as the 'Blue Book'. The report formed the basis on which RSE is being introduced into Irish schools. Recommended reading: pages 6-8 and 16.

Department of Education Circulars

2/95 to Primary and [M4/95](#) to Post-Primary Schools in January 1995 explain the rationale for the introduction of RSE into schools and the manner in which the implementation process is to be managed.

9/96 to Primary Schools and [M20/96](#) to Post-Primary Schools summarise progress to date and outline plans for inservice teacher training.

Documents included in this folder:

[Relationships and Sexuality Education Policy Guidelines](#) - This document provides guidelines for the development of RSE policy and promotes a partnership between home and school.

The NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines for Primary Schools/Infants to Sixth - Pages 5, 7-9 and 49-54 will be particularly relevant for you in your policy-making role. You may also be interested in content (pages 13-46) and methodology (pages 55-68) or

The NCCA Curriculum and Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools - Pages 7-11 and 33-34 will be of particular relevance.

[Parents' Information Booklet, 'Going Forward Together'](#) - This booklet provides information on RSE for parents. It explains what and how children and young people may be taught and also answers commonly asked questions. It highlights how home and school together can support children's learning and it invites and encourages parents to become involved.

Step 2: Review current provision of SPHE/RSE

The aim in drawing up Relationships and Sexuality Education policy is to indicate how RSE will be implemented in the school. At the outset, the policy will outline what provision is being made for RSE and SPHE in your school. Most schools are engaged in some relevant activities and this section is intended to provide a summary of what is already being provided.

It should be possible to gather the information from the policy committee members' own knowledge, experience and observation of the work of the school. Additional information may have to be sought from parents, teachers or the school authorities through their representatives on the committee.

Your committee should gather information on how SPHE/RSE is already being made available to children through the formal and informal activities of the school.

Under formal provision, your school may be teaching SPHE/RSE through:

Specific programmes

Examples include initiatives developed by the Departments of Education and of Health - the Stay Safe and the Substance Abuse Prevention Programmes.

Existing school subjects

Elements of SPHE and/or RSE are being approached during such subjects as Biology; Civic, Social and Political Education; Guidance and Counselling; Home Economics; Physical Education; Religious Education; Science; Social and Environmental Studies, or during school-developed Social, Personal and Health Education programmes.

Special initiatives

Topics or projects which have an SPHE and/or an RSE component may have been developed as part of the Transition Year or Leaving Certificate Applied programmes in post-primary schools. At primary level, there are many local initiatives in place such as self-esteem programmes.

Regarding the above programmes, you might consider the following questions:

- What age pupils are catered for?
- How are the programmes organised?
- Who is responsible for their delivery?
- What time is allocated to them?
- What training and support is available for teachers?
- Have parents been involved? If so, how?
- How are such programmes reviewed and evaluated?

You should also assess if SPHE and/or RSE are offered to individual pupils:

- at primary level, through class teachers, teacher counsellors and the psychological service
- at post-primary level, through counsellors, chaplains, career guidance teachers, year-heads and pastoral care teams.

You should look at the level of home-school involvement, formal and informal, and list any parent education initiatives, such as, for example, a drugs awareness programme.

Your school may also support SPHE/RSE informally through creating a supportive school climate where the aims of the programmes are modelled. In looking at your school, you may wish to examine the following questions:

- Do people feel valued?
- Is self-esteem fostered?
- Is there evidence of respect, tolerance and fairness?
- Is a sense of responsibility fostered?
- Are high standards and expectations promoted?
- Is there open communication?
- Is effort recognised and rewarded?
- Are uniqueness and difference valued?
- Is conflict handled constructively?
- Are initiative and creativity encouraged?
- Are social, moral and civic values promoted?
- Is attention paid to the well-being of all members of the school community?

Step 3: Draft the policy statement

Your school policy statement could be drawn up under the following headings:

A School

Name, address, phone number, category and enrolment numbers.

B Our School Philosophy

The way you regard the range of needs of your children, parents and teachers within the school community defines your school philosophy, also known as the school's ethos or characteristic spirit.

Every school is different. A school's unique character is created by its pupils, parents, staff and management and their shared concerns and expectations; its denomination or ethos; its location, whether urban, suburban, provincial or rural; and its size. Out of this unique and ever-changing mix is forged the characteristic spirit of the individual school.

Equally, the manner in which you consider RSE policy will reflect your school's characteristic spirit. When drawing up RSE policy, it may be helpful to be aware that while the NCCA curriculum and guidelines provide the proposed content of programmes, you have discretion in deciding how your school's characteristic spirit will inform the teaching of a programme.

C Definition Of RSE

You could review the definitions in the NCCA curriculum and guidelines and the parents' booklet '[Going Forward Together](#)' and decide on the statement which best provides a working definition for you.

D Relationship Of RSE To SPHE

The material in the accompanying documentation which outlines how RSE relates to SPHE will provide you with information for discussion. You will need to state why it is important, in your school, to teach RSE in the context of SPHE.

E What The School Currently Provides

This section will be based on your assessment of existing provision, both formal and informal (Step 2). It would be helpful for readers if you name a number of programmes, and cite a few examples of SPHE/RSE in action in your school, rather than confining yourself to statements which may be vague or too general.

F The Aims Of Our RSE Programme

You will find guidance for this section in the 'Blue Book', page 17, and in the NCCA curriculum and guidelines for primary schools on page 9 and for post-primary schools on page 10.

G Guidelines For The Management And Organisation Of RSE In Our School

The NCCA RSE curriculum and guidelines outline the content and methodology to be used in the teaching of RSE programmes. It is the task of your policy committee to discuss, in consultation with the school community, how the NCCA curriculum and guidelines are to be implemented in your school. In this context, issues such as confidentiality, parents' rights and responsibilities, including the withdrawal of pupils, visiting speakers, sensitive issues, class groupings and multi-class situations may arise. Arrangements regarding the teaching of the programme and the deployment of staff will be made by the Principal. The policy development process allows for issues of concern to each of the participating groups to be raised, discussed and decided upon. In this way, there will be clarity and consensus among all members of your school community on how such issues are to be approached in your school, and the school staff, in particular, will be guided in approaching these issues when drawing up the school's programme.

By its nature, RSE explores issues which give rise to differing views and sensitivities. Schools, depending on their characteristic spirit, may differ from each other in the way in which they wish to deal with issues such as describing sexual intercourse, teenage pregnancies, separation and divorce. It will fall to your RSE policy committee, again with the fullest co-operation possible within the school community, to decide how you wish to deal with such issues in RSE.

H Provide For Ongoing Support, Development And Review

It would be important that your policy statement includes provision to support teachers, pupils, parents and board members involved in RSE at policy and programme level. This could include making a commitment to:

- ensure access to in-career development opportunities for teachers and the policy committee
- support efforts of parents to provide educational opportunities for other parents
- provide relevant RSE school resources.

The draft policy statement should spell out how the policy and programme will be reviewed by the partners. It could also state in writing that any amendments necessary as a result of such review will be undertaken.

Step 4: Publicise/amend and finalise the draft policy

When the draft policy statement has been drawn up, the policy committee will need to take steps to ensure that it becomes known among the school community. The following processes are recommended:

- Refer the draft policy statement to the school authorities for approval and dissemination among parents and teachers.
- Consult parents' views on the draft policy statement. This could be done formally through general or class-based meetings for parents; more informally through meeting parent representatives on the board of management, meeting parents' association representatives, through sending a copy of the draft policy home and inviting responses, through home-school-community liaison teachers, or by offering individual parents the opportunity to respond in person, in writing or by means of a questionnaire.
- Consult teachers' views on the draft policy statement. This could be done by general meetings involving all teachers, with additional smaller meetings for teachers most closely involved with teaching RSE.
- Seek opportunities to involve pupils, as appropriate. This may include meetings with year-heads or class tutors, the student council or school prefects and initiating age-appropriate classroom discussion at primary and post-primary levels.
- Discuss all comments, opinions and suggestions received, and amend the draft policy statement as appropriate.
- Present the amended draft policy statement to the school authorities for discussion and approval.

Before completion, your amended policy statement should explain how this statement was drawn up. This would include details on the formation and membership of the RSE policy committee; meetings held; people consulted; how the draft was circulated to parents, teachers and the school authorities; some sense of the amendments received; and how the document was reviewed and presented for approval to the school authorities.

Step 5: Circulate the RSE policy statement

When the school authorities approve the draft document, it becomes the school Relationships and Sexuality Education Policy statement, and should be circulated among parents and teachers.

Step 6: Initiate the RSE programme

Your RSE programme will be drawn up by school staff in line with the NCCA curriculum and guidelines and your own RSE policy.

Before they are implemented, programmes should be available in the school for parents who wish to see them.