

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Policy

Suggested steps to follow in developing and revising/updating this policy

1	Initiate and establish structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reference the key document Relationships and Sexuality Education Policy Guidelines 1997 which sets out a six step approach to developing an RSE policy. The material in this template is based primarily on these guidelines, with some additional material being included to assist schools in considering policy content. ▪ A committee, including representatives of teachers, parents/guardians and the board of management, should be established to develop the policy. ▪ Consideration should be given to including Senior Cycle students on the committee. ▪ Once selected, it is important to ensure that all the members of the committee are clear as to their role and function, i.e. to consult with the groups that they represent, as appropriate, and to reflect the views of those groups as accurately as possible.
2	Review and Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Study relevant documents (see RSE Policy Guidelines Step One and Resources Section). ▪ Review current provision (see RSE Policy Guidelines Step Two). This will include examining SPHE provision, the extent to which RSE is taught as part of SPHE and the extent to which it is taught in a cross-curricular way or through other subjects such as Religious Education, Science, Biology or Home Economics. ▪ Identify the issues that need to be addressed.
3	Preparation of draft policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Step 3 of the RSE Policy Guidelines will assist in preparing the draft policy. ▪ The prompt questions in the template below can be used in conjunction with the RSE Policy Guidelines.
4	Circulation/ Consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ With the approval of the board of management, circulate the draft policy and consult with school staff, students (e.g. through the student council) and parents/guardians (see Step 4 of RSE Policy Guidelines). ▪ Amend the draft policy as necessary in light of the consultation process.
5	Ratification and Communication	<p>Present the amended draft policy to board of management for ratification (see Step 4 of RSE Policy Guidelines).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Make provision for the circulation of the policy to staff, parents/guardians, members of board of management and arrange to provide it to the parents/guardians of newly enrolled students (see Step 5 of RSE Policy Guidelines). ▪ Communicate the ratified policy to other members of the school community.
6	Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implement the provisions of the policy (see Step 6 of RSE Policy Guidelines).

7	Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Check at regular intervals that the policy is being implemented and identify any issues arising.
8	Review, Evaluation and Revision	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Review and evaluate the impact of the policy at a pre-determined time, taking into account feedback from the school community and any developments that may have arisen.▪ Revise as necessary, in light of the review and evaluation process.

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Policy

Template showing issues to consider and prompt questions to assist in drafting the policy

Title

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Policy

Introductory Statement

An RSE policy is a written statement of the aims of the RSE programme, the relationship of RSE to SPHE, and the organisation and management of RSE within the school.

The introduction should state when the policy was developed, how it was developed and who was involved.

Scope

To what will the policy apply? The policy will apply to all aspects of teaching and learning about relationships and sexuality. Discussion about relationships and sexuality also takes place in classes other than SPHE/RSE; it is therefore important that all teachers are familiar with the RSE policy.

To whom will the policy apply? The policy will apply to school staff, students, board of management, parents/guardians, visiting speakers and external facilitators.

Rationale

Why is it necessary to devise a policy on RSE at this time?

- Sexuality is a key element of healthy social and personal development. Young people are exposed to a bewildering variety of messages about sexuality and sexual activity. Schools, in consultation with parents/guardians, need to reflect on how to provide for the needs of their students.
- The [Education Act, 1998](#) requires that schools should promote the social and personal development of students and provide health education for them.
- Section 4 of the Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools requires schools to have an agreed policy for RSE and a suitable RSE programme in place for all students at both junior and senior cycle. At Junior Cycle, the RSE programme is part of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE).
- Circulars [M4/95](#) and [M20/96](#) request schools to commence a process of RSE policy development.
- The effectiveness of an RSE programme is dependent on a collaborative policy process involving teachers, parents/guardians, members of the board of management and students.

Relationship to characteristic spirit of the school (school's mission/vision/aims)

- The policy committee needs to consider how the policy relates to the school's mission/vision/aims. For example, the RSE policy should acknowledge the

importance of SPHE/RSE being taught in the context of a whole school climate that is inclusive and respectful.

- The RSE policy should reflect the educational philosophy of the trustees and the core values and ethos of the school, as outlined in the school's mission statement.
- Spiritual, moral and ethical issues will arise when teaching RSE. The school's RSE policy should guide teachers in the treatment of such issues in accordance with the ethos of the school. It is important that teachers of RSE understand that their role is to express the views of the whole school community on these sensitive issues, and not their own personal views. In this regard, it should be noted that:
 - Schools are required to deliver all aspects of the RSE curriculum, including those in relation to sexual orientation, contraception, sexually transmitted infections etc. This can be done within a context in which teaching of the programme is informed by the school's ethos.
 - A school can express its ethos while at the same time facilitating students in discussing a range of views in relation to topics within the RSE programme.

Goals/Objectives

In precise terms, what is the policy intended to achieve?

Objectives may include:

- The policy will ensure clarity and consensus on how RSE is taught in the school.
- It will articulate the relationship of RSE to SPHE.
- It will articulate the aims of the RSE programme.
- It will clarify the rights, roles and responsibilities of all within the school community, in relation to the RSE Programme, with particular reference to school staff, students, parents/guardians and the board of management/trustees.
- It will ensure that teachers, parents/guardians and students understand how the teaching of RSE is linked to the school ethos.
- It will provide information on the practicalities of delivering the programme.

Key Measures (content of policy)

It may be helpful to consider the following issues:

- A. Provision of Training and Staff Development**
- B. Inclusion of Parents/Guardians**
- C. Ethical/Moral Considerations**
- D. Practical Issues**

A. Provision of Training and Staff Development

- Has the school appointed a co-ordinator for SPHE?
- Is he/she clear about his/her role?
- Are teachers released to attend RSE training?
- Are teachers consulted prior to being timetabled to teach SPHE/RSE?
- Is consideration given to gender balance in the teaching of SPHE/RSE?
- Do all teachers of SPHE/RSE have access to the SPHE and RSE teaching materials (see Resources section)?

B. Inclusion of Parents/Guardians

- Are parents/guardians given information on the content of the SPHE/RSE programme?
- How can the school ensure that parents/guardians are kept informed? Possible methods include:
 - involving parents/guardians fully in the process of policy development

- inviting parents/guardians to a talk
- distribution of the RSE parent booklet '[Going Forward Together](#)'
- giving all parents/guardians a copy of the RSE policy
- providing parents/guardians with a summary of the SPHE/RSE programme in the school
- at the start of the school year, providing parents/guardians for each year group with a summary of those aspects of the SPHE/RSE programme which will be covered during the year
- giving parents/guardians access to the SPHE/RSE teaching materials.

Note: The [Education Act, 1998](#) (section 30, subsection (2)(e)) provides that a student is not required to attend instruction in any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parent or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years, the student. Hence, parents have a right to opt their child out of the sensitive issues in RSE if they wish to do so. It is the responsibility of the school to make alternative arrangements for the student in this situation. The school may wish to ask the parents to put their request in writing.

C. Ethical/Moral Considerations

RSE is a complex area of the curriculum. A school's RSE policy should provide guidance for teachers on the moral and ethical framework within which the programme will be taught. In this regard, the policy committee might wish to consider some of the following issues:

- **Answering Questions:** While it is important to create an environment in SPHE/RSE in which students can discuss issues openly, teachers may not be able to answer all questions asked by students and can set appropriate limits. Students may ask questions about issues which are not included in the curriculum, such as masturbation or abortion. On these, and on all questions, teachers should use their professional judgement, guided by the age of the students, the RSE curriculum and the RSE policy for the school.
- **Confidentiality:** While students should not be encouraged to disclose personal or private information in SPHE/RSE classes, there may be times when they do talk about their own lives. Confidentiality should be respected unless a teacher becomes aware that a child is at risk, in which case the appropriate action should be taken e.g. follow the procedures set down in the Child Protection Procedures and Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools or the school's Substance Use Policy, notify parents etc.

In cases of under-age sexual activity, P10 of the [Child Protection Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools](#) (2004) state: '*In all cases where a school becomes aware of underage sexual intercourse the school shall take appropriate steps to inform the child's parents.*'

It is important that students are made aware of the limits of confidentiality and that teachers do not give unconditional guarantees of confidentiality.

- **Sexual Activity:** The pace of social change in Ireland over the last number of years has been rapid. Parents, students and teachers can experience a sense of confusion in relation to sexual mores. The religious ethos of a school may seem to be in conflict with the lived experience of the students. The RSE policy statement should give teachers guidance on the moral and values framework within which the issue of sexual activity should be addressed. It is advisable for teachers to give young people information on the age of consent which, following the passage of the [Criminal Law \(Sexual Offences\) Act, 2006](#), is 17 years of age for both males and females.

- **Family Planning:** The post-primary RSE Curriculum Guidelines state that the subject of family planning should be covered within the Senior Cycle RSE programme. There is a lesson on family planning in the RSE Senior Cycle Resource Materials on P77.

The RSE programme requires that young people are provided with information about methods of contraception, but consideration needs to be given by the policy committee to the moral and values framework within which it is taught. Schools can use their discretion with regard to the age at which students receive any aspect of the RSE programme e.g. a school might decide to provide some information on contraception to students earlier than Senior Cycle.

- **Homosexuality:** The post-primary RSE Curriculum Guidelines include the subject of sexual orientation. There is a lesson on sexual orientation in the RSE Senior Cycle Resource Materials on P151. RSE training courses delivered by the SPHE Support Service provide teachers with further materials. A school may decide the topic needs to be addressed before Senior Cycle, especially if homophobic bullying is an issue.

The [Equal Status Act, 2000](#) and the [Equality Act, 2004](#) prohibit discrimination across nine grounds, including sexual orientation. Consideration needs to be given to the messages that are conveyed if the subject of homosexuality is not discussed in a clear and open way in schools. However, teachers will need guidance from the policy committee on the parameters within which such a discussion will take place.

- **Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs):** While awareness of STIs is one of the objectives of the Second Year SPHE/RSE syllabus, STIs are mainly addressed in Senior Cycle. There is a lesson on STIs in the RSE Senior Cycle Resource Materials on P103. Given that rates of STI transmission are increasing, it is important that the subject is addressed in schools.

D. Practical Issues

Some of the practical issues which the policy may need to address are:

- Is SPHE timetabled in all Junior Cycle classes?
- What provision is made for teaching RSE to Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Years?
- What size will the class groups be for RSE/SPHE?
- Will boys and girls be taught together for all aspects of RSE?
- The role of outside speakers. Are outside speakers aware of the schools RSE policy and the SPHE Visitor Guidelines (these are available in the SPHE Handbook for Schools www.sphe.ie)?
- What provision is made for children with special needs?
- How will the needs of students who may be pregnant be addressed?
- How will the school address any parental requests for the withdrawal of students from the RSE programme?

Links to Other Policies and to Curriculum Delivery

Identify any links to related school policies

School policies need to be consistent with one another, within the framework of the overall School Plan. Relevant school policies already in place, being developed or reviewed, should be examined with reference to the RSE Policy and any implications which it has for them should be addressed. Similarly the implications of other school policies for the RSE policy also need to be considered.

The following policies may be among those considered:

- Child Protection Policy
- Guidance Plan

- Anti-Bullying Policy
- Substance Use Policy.

Identify any links to curriculum delivery

- In post-primary schools, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) must be timetabled as part of the Junior Cycle core curriculum. SPHE provides students with opportunities to develop the skills and competencies to care for themselves and others and to make informed decisions about their health, personal lives and social development. This includes providing information on relationships and sexuality.
- The SPHE Senior Cycle syllabus currently being developed will incorporate Senior Cycle RSE.
- Aspects of RSE are delivered across the curriculum, through subjects such as Religious Education, Science, Biology and Home Economics. Schools need to ensure that all students receive a full and balanced RSE programme from First Year through to Sixth Year.

Implementation Arrangements, Roles and Responsibilities

Identify who will be assigned the role of co-ordinating implementation of the policy.

For each of the actions to be taken to implement the policy, specify how and when it is to be implemented.

Name the people who have responsibility for implementing each action and specify their roles e.g. principal, class teacher, other staff members who have specific responsibilities (e.g. year head, class tutor, SPHE co-ordinator, Home/School/Community Liaison co-ordinator etc.), other.

Ratification & Communication

When the finalised draft policy has been ratified by the board of management, it becomes the school's agreed RSE Policy. It should then be circulated within the school community. The entire teaching staff should be familiar with the policy and aware of any changes implied in curriculum delivery.

Parents/guardians should be informed of the RSE Policy from the time of enrolment of the student.

Prompts

- State when the board of management officially ratified the policy.
- State what steps will be taken to communicate the ratified policy to members of the school community and to new applicants on enrolment.

Implementation Date

Decide upon a date from which the policy will apply.

Monitoring the implementation of the policy

The implementation of the policy should be monitored.

- Who will do what and when to confirm that the actions/measures set down under the policy are being implemented?

Reviewing and evaluating the policy

The policy should be reviewed and evaluated at certain pre-determined times under the direction of the board of management. In practice, this process might be co-ordinated by the policy committee in consultation with the wider school community. Ongoing review and evaluation should take cognisance of changing information, guidelines, legislation and feedback from parents/guardians, students, teachers and others; for example the SPHE co-ordinator could have the role of monitoring aspects of the policy. The policy should be revised as necessary in the light of such review and evaluation and within the framework of school planning.

Prompts

- At what intervals will the operation of the policy be reviewed with a view to amending it, if necessary?
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- Identify some practical indicators that will be used to gauge the impact and effectiveness of the policy. Examples might include the extent to which:
 - RSE is being successfully taught through SPHE for all relevant students
 - where SPHE may not be timetabled, e.g. at Senior Cycle, that these students are receiving RSE
 - resource material is available to teachers
 - appropriate in-service for teachers is available and relevant teachers are availing of it
 - students are aware of the policy
 - parents/guardians are aware of the policy
 - positive feedback is received from teachers, other school staff, students, parents/guardians, members of board of management and trustees.
- Consider whether any of the following could support the process of review and evaluation:
 - a confidential survey of students and staff
 - feedback from student council or student body, mentors, prefects
 - parent/guardian feedback, including at parent/teacher meetings
 - a comment/suggestion box.