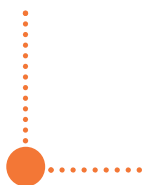


# Relationships and Sexuality Education

**Going Forward Together**

**An Introduction to Relationships  
and Sexuality Education for Parents**





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*Designed by Brian Kelly Design Associates*

## Introduction

As a parent, you are the first teacher of your child. Your hand on values and attitudes to each new generation of children. Your child's school aims to work

together with you in this important job. Schools have always offered more than the 3 Rs — *Reading*, *Writing* and *Arithmetic* — to children. School offers a chance for children to develop as well-rounded human beings.

A new programme for children is being started in schools to support this important work. The programme is called Relationships and Sexuality Education.

As a parent, you are invited to help decide how Relationships and Sexuality Education will be taught in your child's school.

The first step for you is to find out what Relationships and Sexuality Education is about. This booklet will help to answer some of your questions about the content of the new programme. It will also explain how you could become involved with the programme in your child's school.

### ***What is Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)?***

People need people. Being part of a family and having friends give us opportunities to love and be loved, to share thoughts and feelings, to belong. But just because we need to get on with others does not mean we automatically know how to.

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 others and providing them with appropriate information.

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At post-primary level, RSE aims to build on the primary programme and provide young people with information and skills to evaluate critically the wide range of information, opinions, attitudes and values offered today, in order that they will make positive, responsible choices about themselves and the way they live their lives.

RSE aims to provide opportunities for children and young people to learn about relationships and sexuality in ways that help them think and act in a moral, caring and responsible way.

In the school setting, RSE will be part of a wider programme of Social, Personal and Health Education.

## What is Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)?

Social, Personal and Health Education 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.

SPHE will shortly be introduced as a subject on the primary and post-primary curriculum. The content of a school's SPHE programme will include a wide range of topics such as healthy eating, alcohol, drugs, environmental issues, safety and social responsibility, as well as RSE.

The approach to teaching any of the topics in SPHE will involve giving students clear information, building up their self-esteem, and helping them to learn to communicate, to make decisions and to express feelings in an appropriate way.

## Why do we need RSE?

Many children get information and misinformation about relationships and sexuality from television “soaps”, in the playground, from older friends—in many settings and in many ways that parents cannot control and may not be too happy about.

Futhermore, children may be picking up messages from television, videos and films such as “aggression works”, “it’s



*okay to be dishonest if you're not caught", I can do exactly what I want, now!"*

There is a need to help children and young people to listen, to distinguish between differing points of view and to express themselves in an appropriate way.

An Advisory Group established by the Minister for Education in 1994 to advise on the introduction of RSE into schools quoted the following examples from research and common observation:

- ▶ *children receive informal and unsupervised information about relationships and sexuality*
- ▶ *such information may be inadequate and inappropriate*
- ▶ *young people are already exposed to a variety of sexual practices and attitudes through the media, particularly television, film and magazines*
- ▶ *children are maturing physically at even earlier ages*
- ▶ *the roles of women and men in society are changing*
- ▶ *there are health issues associated with sexual practice*
- ▶ *young people are becoming sexually active at earlier ages than in the past*
- ▶ *the nature of family life is changing in a way that places many pressures on children and young people.*

For these reasons, and because education is about developing skills for life as well as skills for learning, the Advisory Group concluded that there was a need for a soundly based programme of RSE in schools. As a response, the Department of Education asked the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to develop curriculum guidelines in RSE for primary and post-primary schools.



## RSE in the school

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*So what will children and young people learn?*

RSE will be provided throughout primary school from infants to sixth **class**, and will continue in post-primary school from first to sixth year. It will be a spiral curriculum. This means that it will return to similar topics each year. It will develop them to suit the age and maturity of the children.



**Topics for pupils from junior infants  
to second class will include:**

- ▶ *expressing opinions and listening to the opinions of others*
- ▶ *the different changes taking place in the children's bodies as they grow and develop*
- ▶ *caring for themselves regarding hygiene, exercise and sleep*
- ▶ *keeping safe, knowing what to do if they get lost*
- ▶ *recognising and expressing feelings like happiness and sadness*
- ▶ *appreciating and understanding family life*
- ▶ *making and having friends*
- ▶ *coping with "falling out" with friends*
- ▶ *making responsible choices appropriate to their age.*



**Topics for pupils from third to sixth classes will include:**

- ▶ *caring for themselves regarding hygiene, exercise and sleep*
- ▶ *keeping themselves safe*
- ▶ *changes in their bodies as they mature and develop*
- ▶ *how babies are conceived and born*  
*(5th/6th class programme)*
- ▶ *their feelings and the appropriate expression of these feelings*
- ▶ *extended family relationships*
- ▶ *making healthy and responsible decisions*
- ▶ *the nature of friendship*
- ▶ *handling conflict in friendships*
- ▶ *evaluating the portrayal of relationships and sexuality in the media.*



**Topics for Junior Cycle students will include:**

**Human growth and development:**

- ▶ *an understanding of physical and emotional changes at puberty*
- ▶ *fertility, conception, pregnancy and birth*
- ▶ *sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS*
- ▶ *an awareness of the consequences and implications of sexual activity*

**Human sexuality:**

- ▶ *understanding and respecting what it is to be female or male*
- ▶ *an appreciation of the roles of women and men in society*
- ▶ *awareness of discrimination*
- ▶ *personal safety*
- ▶ *sexual orientation*

**Human relationships:**

- ▶ *developing skills regarding making and maintaining good relationships and friendships*
- ▶ *family roles and responsibilities*
- ▶ *group behaviour and resolving conflict*
- ▶ *an understanding of how peer pressure works*

**Topics for Senior Cycle students will build on...**

elements covered in Junior Cycle and will treat issues in ways suitable for the young adult.

Topics will include:

**Human growth and development:**

- ▶ *fertility and family planning*
- ▶ *a deeper understanding of pregnancy and the developing foetus*

**Human sexuality:**

- ▶ *treating women and men with equal respect*
- ▶ *sexual harassment*
- ▶ *sexual abuse, rape, legal rights: voluntary and statutory agencies*
- ▶ *making moral and healthy choices regarding sexual activity*

**Human relationships:**

- ▶ *an awareness of what constitutes a loving relationship*
- ▶ *the long-term commitment involved in marriage*
- ▶ *parenting and family life.*



### *Is RSE not already being taught in schools?*

Yes, in some cases, where schools began offering Social and Health Education as a response to the changing needs of children and young people, RSE may have been part of these programmes. Because there are links between RSE and other subjects, some aspects may already be taught as part of the daily programme in your school. In primary school, for example, your child may learn about elements of RSE through Physical Education (PE), Religious Education (RE), the Stay Safe programme, Social and Environmental Studies, and through anti-bullying and positive behaviour programmes. Post-primary pupils may learn about aspects of RSE in PE, RE, Home Economics or Biology.

In introducing RSE, schools may need to review and reorganise their existing timetable to ensure that all children and young people have access to the formal RSE programme.

RSE is also offered informally to pupils through a caring and supportive school atmosphere. It is fostered in positive relationships among home, school and community. It may also be organised in co-operation with other agencies, such as the local health services.

### *How will RSE be taught?*

Successful RSE programmes help young people to participate more enjoyably in their own learning. Suitable teaching

methods include group discussion, role play and project work. RSE will be taught in ways that give your daughters and sons opportunities to discuss attitudes, beliefs and values and to develop the skills necessary to make informed, moral decisions about their lives.

***Will children have RSE textbooks?***

RSE classroom materials for teachers will be made available to schools. These lessons, which have been prepared by experienced teachers, will give a range of teaching options for each school according to their individual school's policy. The materials are for use by the teacher, who in turn may distribute some elements for students' use. Because the emphasis in teaching RSE is on discussion, reflection and classroom participation, student textbooks are of limited use.

***Have teachers received training to teach RSE?***

Yes. A specialist RSE Training Support Service for Schools was established to plan and implement an extensive teacher training programme. This programme has been underway since March 1996. One of the important matters highlighted during training has been the role of parents, as educators of their own children, in helping to support RSE in schools.



### **The links between school and home**

#### ***Does RSE happen only in school?***

No. Informal education for RSE begins from the moment your child is born. Everything you do as you interact with your children gives messages about human relationships in the broadest sense.

For example, how you smile at, talk to, cuddle and bathe your baby; how you dress and toilet-train your toddler; how you talk to your child about his or her body and how it works; how you encourage and answer questions; how family members get on with one another — all these colour children's attitudes towards themselves, towards others and towards the wider world.

The RSE school programme will therefore build on what children experience at home and outside school.

#### ***So what is going to happen next in my school?***

The first step for schools in introducing RSE is to draft an RSE policy statement. This statement will outline how RSE will be implemented in your school. A committee, representing parents, teachers and the management authorities will soon be elected to draft this statement. You may be invited to a school meeting at which two parent representatives will be elected

to the committee. Later, you will receive a draft copy of the committee's RSE policy statement and you will be given opportunities to respond to it with your comments and views. These will be considered by the committee before a final RSE policy statement for your school is produced.

This policy statement, having been approved by the management authorities, will become the basis for implementing your school's RSE programme.

### *How exactly can I have a say?*

There are many ways you can influence the formulation and implementation of RSE policy:

- ▶ *by attending school meetings at which parents will be elected to the RSE policy committee*
- ▶ *by going forward yourself for one of the positions or by nominating another parent for election*
- ▶ *by voting for the parent representative(s) of your choice*
- ▶ *by studying the draft policy statement when you receive it and by using the channels provided to express your views*
- ▶ *by availing of the opportunities offered to you to examine RSE programme materials in the school.*

### *Is there a role for the parents' association in RSE?*

Very much so. Parent associations may wish to plan parent programmes in connection with RSE, and the National Parents' Councils Primary and Post-Primary are developing resources to assist parent associations in this work.

*How can parents help each other in supporting  
their children's learning in RSE?*

Parents learn from each other by talking, listening, sharing experiences and giving advice and support. There are many ways in which parents can create opportunities to help each other in supporting their children and young people in the RSE programme.

The following are some suggestions:

- ▶ *Encourage attendance at parent association and/or school meetings on RSE; be there together.*
- ▶ *Talk to your parent representatives on the policy committee; if you are a representative, find out what other parents want for their children in RSE.*
- ▶ *Read this booklet and any other RSE documentation with other groups of parents. You could do this in each other's homes, in a room in school, in the local "centre" with groups of friends, or with parents of your child's classmates.*
- ▶ *Visit the local library and bookshops to look for suitable RSE material.*
- ▶ *Share information on books and materials for adults and children.*
- ▶ *Find out about National Parent Councils' plans for parent programmes on RSE; attend and encourage others to go along too.*

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## **Some issues parents have raised**

### **Will RSE lead to a loss of innocence in children?**

No. However, we should distinguish between innocence and ignorance. Lack of correct and appropriate information can leave your child vulnerable, confused and anxious.

On the other hand, providing information, combined with opportunities for discussion and decision-making within a moral framework, can be very helpful and valuable.

Offering your child RSE will help foster happiness, hope, wonder, appropriate trust, idealism and enthusiasm; these are the attractive features of childhood which we associate with innocence.

It is important that children learn the appropriate vocabulary for discussing aspects of life related to sexuality, growing up and their bodies' physical changes so that they can communicate confidently about themselves.

When children begin school, it is not unusual, indeed it is quite normal, for them to have other names for their genitals. However, the use of proper terms for parts of the body and bodily functions should be encouraged from the earliest age, so that these terms are given a status and an acceptability.

As children get older and become comfortable with these words, they can discuss aspects of their growth and development with greater ease. They are also less

likely to resort to inappropriate or vulgar language when referring to the body and bodily functions.

***Will RSE help children to make responsible choices?***

Yes. The choices and decisions we make in our lives are influenced by the values we hold. We receive these values from our religious and cultural traditions but also from our family, school and community.

The methods used to teach RSE create opportunities for children and young people to discuss attitudes, beliefs and values about many issues and to develop the skills to make informed and responsible choices and decisions.

***I'm not sure I want my child to participate in RSE***

If you are concerned about any aspect of RSE, perhaps your first step will be to discuss these concerns with your child's class teacher or principal at primary school, or with the class tutor or principal at post-primary level.

If you choose to provide RSE at home, your rights as a parent with regard to your child's participation in the school's RSE programme will be respected.

The way in which RSE is being introduced offers you the opportunity to participate fully in planning what happens in your child's school. We encourage you to become involved in developing your school's RSE policy statement and later to look at your school's programme.

It is your *responsibility* to know what is planned before making up your mind about the RSE programme.

*My children attend a two-teacher school.  
Will they be taught RSE at the same time?*

Some aspects of the programme will be taught to the whole class. The school's policy will decide how provision will be made for specific aspects of the programme; for example, issues relating particularly to the fifth- and sixth-class programme.

#### *A final word*

Nobody pretends that being a parent is easy these days, but it does give us an opportunity to journey and learn with our children-from which we can all benefit. As you will see from this booklet, the process for introducing RSE into schools has been designed to take account of parents' wishes and we hope that the school-based element of the programme will support you in this important aspect of your child's education and preparation for life.



# *G o i n g   F o r w a r d   T o g e t h e r*

If you would like further copies of this booklet *Going Forward Together*, contact your local school **or**

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## *N o t e s*

