



# Relationships and Sexuality Education in Northern Ireland Guidance for Parents and Boards of Governors

We have produced this document to provide parents and Boards of Governors with an overview and guidance on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) within the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

## SECTION 1

### RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION (RSE)

Relationships and Sexuality Education is a lifelong process, encompassing:

- the acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills; and
- the development of attitudes, beliefs and values about:
  - » sexual identity;
  - » relationships; and
  - » intimacy.

RSE helps children and young people acquire age-appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills, and develop attitudes, beliefs and values about relationships, sexual identity, and intimacy. Effective RSE, which is taught in a sensitive and inclusive manner, encourages children and young people to value themselves as individuals, to develop and maintain healthy relationships with others, and to make responsible and well-informed decisions about their lives.

For children and young people, the learning process begins informally, with parents or carers, long before any education in a formal setting takes place at school. Sexuality includes all aspects of the person that relate to their sexuality; it may change, and it can develop throughout life. Sexuality is an integral part of the human personality and has biological, cultural, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions.

Relationships and Sexuality Education in **primary schools** provides children with opportunities to:

- value themselves as unique individuals;
- respect themselves and others;
- develop their own moral thinking and value systems;
- learn about friendships and healthy relationships;
- recognise their feelings and those of others, and learn to communicate those feelings;
- learn about the changes that occur as they progress towards adolescence, particularly the emotional and physical changes of puberty; and
- learn about keeping themselves safe, and know what to do or who to go to if they feel unsafe.

Relationships and Sexuality Education in **post-primary schools** builds on the learning experiences from the primary curriculum. It provides young people with up-to-date, accurate and accessible information about reproduction, sex, and sexual health matters. It does this in a way that is appropriate for an ever-changing world, both online and offline.

Relationships and Sexuality Education is most effective when it is taught in a sensitive and inclusive manner. It should be taught in a way that is appropriate to the child's emotional and physical age, and stage of development. All children and young people have the right to quality teaching and learning across the curriculum: Relationships and Sexuality Education is no exception. Without this provision, children are left with a learning and skills deficit, making them more susceptible to inappropriate behaviours, sexual abuse, and exploitation.

### 1.1 RSE and the Curriculum

Since the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum was introduced in 2007, Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) has been a **statutory component** of the following key areas of learning:

- Personal Development and Mutual Understanding in the primary curriculum;
- Personal Development and Home Economics statements of requirement for Key Stage 3; and
- Personal Development strand of Learning for Life and Work at Key Stage 4.

The content for each key stage is set out in [The Education \(Curriculum Minimum Content\) Order \(NI\) 2007](#).

### 1.2 RSE at CCEA

In 2015, we published updated Relationships and Sexuality Guidance for primary and post-primary schools. You can find this guidance below:

[Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) Guidance: Primary \(CCEA\)](#)

[Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) Guidance: Post-Primary \(CCEA\)](#)

CCEA has developed the [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) \(CCEA\) \(RSE Hub\)](#) on the CCEA website. It provides guidance on RSE and links to curriculum and support materials for teachers, and also for parents, carers, and Boards of Governors.

### 1.3 The RSE Hub

We continually update the RSE Hub to keep it current, providing links to background information, guidance, curriculum resources, and support organisations. This is to ensure that schools have access to a range of relevant resources and sources of support for the following priority areas:

- Consent
- Developments in Contraception
- Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse
- Healthy, Positive Sexual Expression and Relationships
- Internet Safety
- LGBTQ+ Matters
- Menstrual Wellbeing
- Social Media and its Effects on Relationships and Self-Esteem
- Special Educational Needs (SEN)
- Teen Parenting

Areas under development include:

- Period Dignity;
- Sexual Health around the area of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STIs and HIV); and
- the Impact of Online Pornography on the Lives of Young People.

#### 1.4 The RSE Progression Framework

We have developed the **RSE Progression Framework** which clearly sets out key themes to be covered at each key stage in detail. The framework includes the statutory requirements for RSE and provides a non-statutory progression pathway from Foundation Stage to Post-16. You can find links to internal and external resources supporting the delivery of the priority areas outlined below at [Relationships and Sexuality Education Progression Framework \(CCEA\)](#)

## SECTION 2

### IS THE TEACHING OF RSE COMPULSORY?

RSE has been a compulsory (statutory) component of the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum since 2007.

The statutory curriculum includes prescribed minimum content in relation to RSE. This is a minimum entitlement that all children should receive. 'Schools have flexibility to decide on how best to deliver RSE to meet the needs of pupils.' ([Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) in Northern Ireland](#)).

The Department of Education requires all grant-aided schools to develop their own policy on how they will address Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) within the curriculum. 'A school's policy should reflect the school's ethos and should be subject to consultation with parents and pupils and endorsed by the Board of Governors.' (Relationships and Sexuality Education (Department of Education)). It should also reflect the moral and religious principles held by parents and school management authorities. A school's RSE Policy, curriculum design, content and implementation are evaluated by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

ETI reports its evaluation of safeguarding based on the evidence of the whole range of related policies, including RSE. You can find more information on how to deliver RSE in schools effectively in the ETI document [Relationships and Sexuality Education – ETI guidance \(Department of Education\) \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

#### 2.1 Why RSE is important

##### **Respects the rights of children**

The United Kingdom Government, including Northern Ireland, is a signatory to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It has agreed to uphold the rights of children and young people as set out in the Convention. This means that all children and young people in Northern Ireland have a right to a good quality education in accordance with the Convention.

### **Promotes a better understanding of diversity and inclusion**

Schools are increasingly diverse spaces, reflecting wider societal change. This includes the challenges of living in a digital online world. RSE should:

- foster respect for difference;
- challenge prejudicial attitudes; and
- promote equality of opportunity for all pupils.

### **Helps children to keep themselves safer in the digital world**

Technology plays an integral role in the lives of many children in Northern Ireland today: they use the internet to watch programmes, play games, listen and download music, carry out research for school, chat with their friends, and make new friends. However, whilst technological advancements provide many opportunities, along with opportunity comes risk: particularly if the children's activity is unsupervised. Cyberbullying, the use of chat rooms, online grooming and child exploitation, sexting, access to inappropriate content, the acting out of inappropriate sexualised behaviours, and the sending and receiving of explicit images are just some of the ways in which online and digital technology can negatively affect the lives of children.

Through Relationships and Sexuality Education, children and young people should be taught how to protect themselves in the digital world. The messages they are taught in school about how to behave safely and responsibly in the digital world will play a vital role in their lives. They should be taught to:

- identify potential risks to their safety;
- make informed choices and decisions; and
- develop awareness of strategies they can use to protect themselves.

### **Provides reliable, accurate and timely age-appropriate information**

There is great emphasis in **primary schools** on friendships and healthy relationships in Relationships and Sexuality Education. The RSE Progression Framework also outlines opportunities to learn and understand how and why the body grows and develops, and know how babies are conceived, grow, and are born. This knowledge forms part of the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding theme of 'Health, Growth and Change' in the latter part of Key Stage 2.

Every child is unique and develops physically and emotionally at his or her own pace. However, as the average age for puberty is 8–12 years old for girls, and 9–14 years old for boys, learning about puberty before its onset is recommended for Key Stage 2. The schools will consult parents or carers on how they will deliver the subject of puberty.

In **post-primary schools**, RSE provides opportunities for young people to critically evaluate the information available to them today, particularly the often distorted and inaccurate information about sex and relationships they are exposed to from social media and other unreliable sources. Relationships and Sexuality Education can lead to young people making informed choices and decisions by providing opportunities for them to examine their own values and attitudes in the light of those held by others. A deeper understanding of their own personal values and beliefs can help young people to clarify:

- why they think and behave as they do;
- separate fact from fiction;
- recognise prejudice; and
- respect the views, emotions and feelings of others.

### **Promotes the use of appropriate language**

Learning and using the correct terminology in Relationships and Sexuality Education is vitally important for children, as it helps them to talk about feelings, sexuality, relationships, growth and development with confidence. In the interests of child safeguarding, it is particularly important to use the proper biological terms for parts of the body with children from an early age, particularly private body parts and functions. To ensure consistency, all school staff should agree the key terms which they will use at the different key stages with pupils and share this information with parents or carers, so the same terms can be used at home.

### **Helps children to recognise inappropriate behaviour and touch**

Article 34 of the UNCRC enshrines all children's rights to be protected from sexual abuse and exploitation; however, the sad reality is that some children in Northern Ireland do experience abuse and exploitation.

Research has shown that it is usually children between the ages of 10–18 years old who are primarily affected and most at risk of child sexual exploitation (Beckett, 2011). You can access further information from [CJINI – Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland – Child Sexual Exploitation in Northern Ireland](#) (Criminal Justice Inspection Report for NI, 2020).

Through Relationships and Sexuality Education in **primary school**, children should develop an understanding of their own uniqueness. It is also vitally important that they know and understand that, even though they are young, their body belongs to them and them alone. When children learn about 'keeping safe' through boundaries and positive consent, it helps them to recognise what constitutes:

- appropriate and inappropriate behaviour;
- appropriate and inappropriate touch; and
- unwanted attention, or attention that makes them feel uncomfortable in any way.

Children must also learn what to do, and who to go to, if they feel unsafe at any time.

In **post-primary schools**, RSE provides a safe environment for pupils to explore sexual and relationship violence and helps them to recognise and challenge inappropriate and unwanted attention from others.

It is also important that teachers encourage pupils to challenge the 'blame' that can be attached to victims of sexual abuse and domestic and/or sexual violence in a relationship. They should challenge this particularly with female victims, who are often blamed for factors such as how they choose to dress, or their alcohol intake. Through Relationships and Sexuality Education, pupils will develop:

- a deeper knowledge and understanding of personal safety; and
- the importance of having equal, mutually respectful, consensual, non-exploitative, and non-violent relationships.

Pupils will also develop the resilience to work their way through difficult situations and find out where to access help and support.

### **Increases young people's awareness of sexual health**

In **post-primary schools**, Relationships and Sexuality Education is an important vehicle for:

- increasing awareness of issues such as contraception and fertility;
- improving the sexual health and wellbeing of young people; and
- reducing unplanned teenage pregnancy and rates of sexually transmitted infections.

Research repeatedly shows that quality Relationships and Sexuality Education can delay sexual activity amongst young people.

## **SECTION 3 PARENTS AND RSE**

Relationships and Sexuality Education is a lifelong process which begins in the home. The home exerts a major influence on all aspects of a young person's life, particularly in the sphere of RSE. It is understandable that many parents and carers are anxious about when, what, and how their children will be taught in RSE. Concerns range from parents or carers thinking that their child is too young to participate in these classes, to worrying that exposure to sex-related issues will lead to their child becoming more sexualised. Schools should consult closely with parents or carers to allay these fears and support them to keep their children safe outside of school hours.

Schools may employ strategies such as:

- providing up-to-date parent or carer-friendly information leaflets, which would encourage parents or carers to discuss any issues which may arise in the classroom with their children;
- holding awareness-raising workshops; and
- sharing resources to educate parents or carers on, for example, how to ensure that their children are using social media safely and responsibly.

Parents or carers should be aware that a school's teaching of RSE will be complementary and supportive of their role as lead educators in this sensitive area. This teaching will be delivered in the context of the school's distinctive ethos.

Schools should consult with parents, as well as the Board of Governors and, if age appropriate, pupils, on the development and review of the school's RSE Policy. In most cases, parents and carers can find the RSE Policy on the school's website.

### **3.1 Withdrawal from Relationships and Sexuality Education**

In Northern Ireland, parents or carers have the right to have their children educated according to their wishes. Therefore, whilst there is no legislative provision permitting parental withdrawal from sex education, schools can grant these requests on an individual basis. Schools and Boards of Governors should consider how they can support parents or carers who choose to withdraw their child from all or part of Relationships and Sexuality Education.

If a parent or carer expresses the wish to withdraw a child from all or part of Relationships and Sexuality Education, they should be encouraged by the school to discuss, and to consider, the potentially detrimental effect that this can have on the child. The discussion should centre on the possible social and emotional effects of withdrawal on the child. It should also focus on the likelihood that the child will hear their peers' version of the RSE lessons, rather than the original safe and reliable source of the teacher.



## SECTION 4 BOARDS OF GOVERNORS AND RSE

The Board of Governors for any school are responsible for establishing the strategic direction and taking corporate decisions in relation to their statutory functions. The Guide for Boards of Governors published by the Education Authority for Northern Ireland states that 'the role of the Board of Governors and the Principal is to exercise their respective functions in relation to the school so as to ensure that the revised curriculum (including the teaching of RSE) is effectively delivered as required by law.' You can find an executive summary of the duties of the Governor's role at [A Guide for Governors – Education Authority Northern Ireland \(eani.org.uk\)](#)

When schools are developing, revising and updating their school policy on RSE, they should consult the CCEA Primary and Post-Primary RSE Guidance [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) Guidance: Primary \(CCEA\)](#) and [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) Guidance: Post-Primary \(CCEA\)](#).

Section 5 of each Guidance document provides a policy format for RSE.

There is useful information on how Boards of Governors should deliver RSE in the 'Governors' section of the [statutory guidance](#) for the Department for Education (DfE) in England. In this guidance, it states that a Governor is responsible for ensuring and monitoring that:

- all pupils make progress in achieving the expected educational outcomes
- the subjects are well led, effectively managed and well planned
- the quality of provision is subject to regular and effective self-evaluation
- teaching is delivered in ways that are accessible to all pupils with SEND
- clear information is provided for parents on the subject content and the right to request that their child is withdrawn
- the subjects are resourced, staffed and timetabled in a way that ensures that the school can fulfil its legal obligations.

Please note that, in Northern Ireland, there is no legislative provision permitting parental withdrawal from sex education; however, schools can grant these requests on an individual basis.

### 4.1 Engaging with pupils

Ensuring that pupils are involved in the developing and reviewing of a school's Relationships and Sexuality Education policy is vital. Engaging young people in ongoing evaluation and review of the Relationships and Sexuality Education provision ensures that it meets the needs of all pupils and that it remains current. Young people are more likely to engage with, enjoy and value a programme of RSE which has been tailored to meet their needs, and one to which they feel a sense of ownership.

## SECTION 5

### FURTHER INFORMATION ON RSE PRIORITY AREAS

**Consent:** This area of CCEA's RSE Hub signposts to resources and guidance information that can help teachers, parents/carers, children and young people to explore issues around consent, and how to stay safe. These include ideas on stereotypical behaviour, misogyny, and the impact of non-consensual behaviour. [Consent \(CCEA\)](#) also provides links to organisations which offer advice and support.

**Domestic and sexual violence and abuse:** This area of the RSE Hub signposts to resources and guidance information for teachers, parents/carers, and children and young people on domestic and sexual violence and abuse. [Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse \(CCEA\)](#) also provides links to local organisations that can offer confidential advice and support to children and young people, and families.

**Healthy sexual expression and relationships:** [Healthy, Positive Sexual Expression and Relationships \(CCEA\)](#) signposts to resources and guidance information that can help teachers, parents/carers, and helps children and young people to explore how to build positive relationships and recognise and respond to age-appropriate behaviours.

**Internet safety:** [Internet Safety \(CCEA\)](#) signposts to resources and guidance information for teachers, parents/carers, and children and young people on internet safety issues. It also provides links to organisations that can offer advice and support. We are currently developing guidance and resources on the area of the impact on young people who access inappropriate online material.

**LGBTQ+ matters:** [LGBTQ+ Matters \(CCEA\)](#) signposts to resources and guidance information for teachers, parents/carers, and children and young people on LGBTQ+ matters. It also provides links to local organisations that can offer confidential advice and support to children and young people, and families.

**Menstrual wellbeing:** [Menstrual Wellbeing \(CCEA\)](#) looks at what should be taught about menstrual wellbeing in primary and post-primary schools. It also signposts to resources and guidance information for teachers, parents/carers, and children and young people on menstrual wellbeing, period dignity and period poverty.

**Social media and its effects on relationships and self-esteem:** This area of the RSE Hub signposts to resources and guidance information for teachers, parents/carers, and children and young people on social media issues. [Social Media and its Effects on Relationships and Self-Esteem \(CCEA\)](#) also provides links to organisations that can offer advice and support if something does go wrong with social media, and young people find themselves as victims of cyberbullying or other forms of online harassment.

**SEN:** RSE is a priority for all pupils, and this includes learners with SEN who have social, emotional and mental health needs and/or learning disabilities. It is important that learners with SEN have access to RSE which is appropriate to their age and ability. [Special Educational Needs \(SEN\) \(CCEA\)](#) signposts to resources and guidance information on RSE and SEN for teachers, parents/carers, and children and young people with Special Educational Needs.



**Teen parenting:** RSE provides an opportunity to help young people to consider their roles and responsibilities as potential future parents, ensuring they are prepared for the challenges that parenthood brings. [Teen Parenting \(CCEA\)](#) signposts to resources, and guidance and support information on parenting generally, as well as teen parenting.

## **SECTION 6**

### **RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY (RSE) GUIDANCE FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS – 2021**

The following online documents have been prepared for Boards of Governors, Principals and Teachers in Catholic Primary and Post-Primary schools in their work in the area of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE): [Relationships and Sexuality \(RSE\) Guidance for Catholic schools – 2021 – Catholic Schools' Trustee Service \(catholiceducation-ni.org\)](#)