



RELATIONSHIP AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN IRISH SCHOOLS



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The current Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme has been taught in primary schools since 1999 and secondary school since the year 2000. It is part of the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum.

The main RSE teaching manuals in primary schools were published in 1998, so adults who are now in their 30s will in fact have been exposed to much the same content and teaching methods as kids are today.

All schools have an RSE policy which is circulated to parents before being signed off on by the school's Board of Management. The policy is uploaded onto the school website. All teaching materials can be accessed online.

RSE covers a broad range of themes at primary level including friendship, self-identity, family, self-esteem, and growing up.

The themes of Growing and Changing along with Taking Care of my Body are flagged to parents and caregivers as containing sensitive, though age appropriate, lessons. A letter is issued in advance and parents and caregivers are invited to discuss any concerns. They can choose for their children to opt out of these lessons.

From the very beginning in Junior Infants, the correct biological terms for body parts are used in the classroom. A list of the language employed is made available to parents and guardians. The terms are often just used naturally in everyday situations without undue emphasis.

The lessons which are considered more sensitive have been taught in schools for decades. This content includes naming and understanding the function of male and female body parts and learning about the reproductive system and changes to the body in puberty. An understanding of sexual intercourse, conception, and birth is approached at the senior end of primary school. Often this is done through talks with outside speakers. In very many schools these talks will be delivered by a Catholic agency.

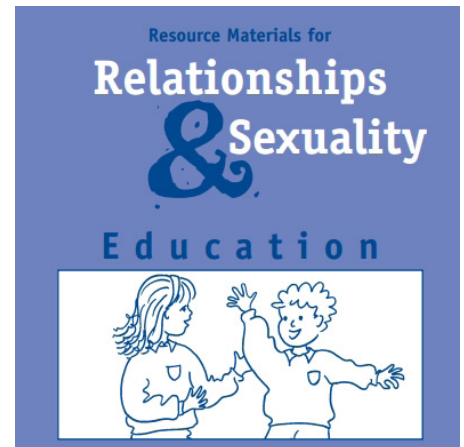


Fig. 1 PDST: RSE Book 1

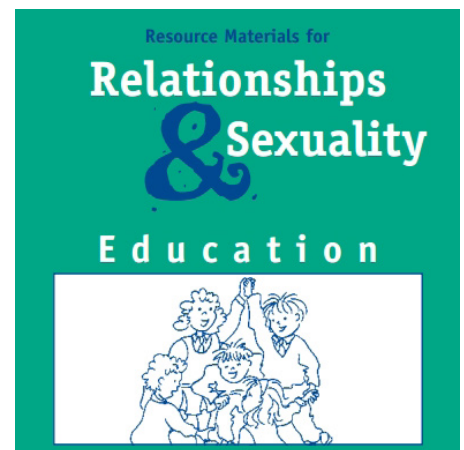


Fig. 1 PDST: RSE Book 2

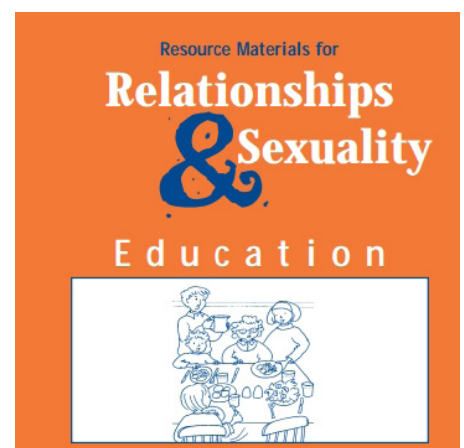


Fig. 1 PDST: RSE Book 3

RSE and Religious Ethos

The real controversy around RSE should be that it is not objective enough. It is restricted by reflecting the religious ethos of the school. A child or young person who is LGBTQ+ may not have their prospective sexual relationships acknowledged in over 90% of primary schools and over half of secondary ones.

When the review of SPHE was proposed, the Catholic Bishops moved very quickly to produce their own RSE programme, Flourish, for use in Catholic primary schools. Lessons begin and end with a prayer or religious reflection, and an introduction to the programme states that while children in the senior classes “will be aware the existence of LGBTQI and some may question their own identity in this regard”, it affirms that the “Church’s teaching in relation to marriage between a man and a woman cannot be omitted”.

No matter what the ethos though, schools are required by the Department of Education to be inclusive, to value diversity and to develop anti bullying policies that explicitly recognise LGBTQ+ bullying as behaviour that must be challenged.

It is obviously quite a contradictory position in which the State tries to cover itself while leaving teachers in the classroom, paid directly by the Department of Education, feeling unsure about what content they are “allowed” to teach in a denominational school.

It is a positive development that greater inclusivity has become a reality in most schools. The use of picture books and stories that don’t just centre on Mammy and Daddy in a three-bedroom house acknowledge the differing realities and families that children experience.

Suitable reading lists and catalogues have been developed by library staff, Children Books Ireland, BeLonG To and other organisations. These books are not on the school curriculum, but they can be useful in the classroom, in just the same way that if an infant class was learning about the farm the teacher might seek out Farmer Duck by Martin Waddell.



Curriculum review

A controversy around RSE has been sparked by the fact that the curriculum is under review. The review process began in 2018 and included consultation with teachers, young people, parents, and organisations. It involved online surveys, focus groups, written submissions, and symposiums. Consensus was strong around the need to modernise the curriculum and make it more relevant to the needs of young people today.

An updated Junior Cycle SPHE course is now completed and will be introduced in September 2023 for first year students. The new course will include content that was identified during the consultation. It strongly reflects students' desire for more information and for more support around the issues of consent, pornography, and LGBTQ+ identities, gender & sexuality.

This content is for secondary school students. Of course, it will not involve young people watching pornography in school. Instead, space will be created to allow discussion on how pornography can distort sexual relationships, can impact on body image and in some cases normalise sexual violence.

A draft Senior Cycle SPHE programme has just gone out for consultation with a closing date for submissions of 18th October 2023, while in Primary Schools it is intended that SPHE and RSE will become part of a new Wellbeing curriculum, a draft of which will be put out to public consultation in 2024.

The draft for Senior Cycle provides for a mandatory 60 hours of SPHE for 5th and 6th year students. Rather than being addressed in stand-alone lessons, LGBTQ+ identities and experiences will be integrated into the teaching and learning which centres on themes like fostering healthy relationships, signs of abusive relationships, pornography, sexual health, and challenging gender stereotypes and Gender Based Violence.

As with SPHE at other age levels, RSE is just one aspect of the broader SPHE curriculum which includes topics like health and wellbeing along with rights and responsibilities heading into adulthood.

Schools provide factual information in a safe, supportive environment. Teachers have built relationships with their students and families and are trained to judge how best to impart information to particular groups of children and young people.

Young people, however, may not ask a huge number of questions or seek information around issues of sex and sexuality within the classroom setting. The biggest role that schools often play is guiding their students towards reliable sources of information and safe ways to explore their sexuality.

The most significant barrier to doing this is the denominational nature of our school system. In ensuring the Far Right fail in their attempt to censor content in schools and to promote homophobia and transphobia, the control exercised by the Catholic Church over this part of the curriculum must also be tackled by demanding a full separation of Church and State in education.

This Book is Gay

A lot of interest has focused on one book, *This Book is Gay* by Juno Dawson. It was written for teenagers who are LGBTQ+ or who are interested in finding information on these topics. It is not on the primary or secondary school curriculum, but it deserves to be on any list of recommended reads for young adults. It is well written, informative, non-threatening and funny.

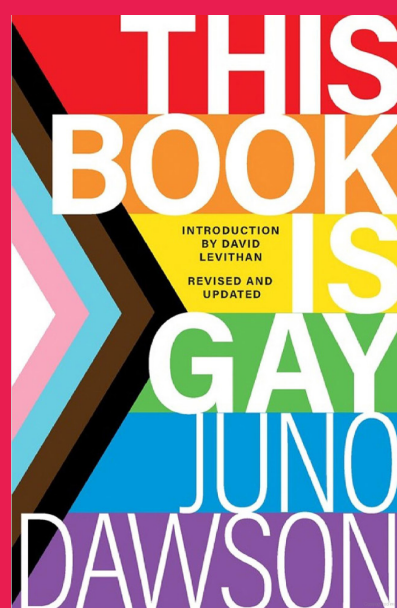
Many people who have been vocal in their views on this book have not even read it and unfortunately are taking at face value concerns that are being whipped up on social media.

One of the chapters, “The Ins and Outs of Gay Sex”, includes information on anal sex and oral sex. Many books on puberty available in bookshops and libraries contain this information too. Like this book, they tend to be categorised as young adult nonfiction.

The value of this book is reflected in its appearance on umpteen Rainbow Reads/ Diversity, Inclusion and Representation Reading Guides. The content includes advice about coming out to friends and family, how to understand and deal with bullying and discrimination, safety guidance around online dating or sex apps, understanding labels and stereotypes.

Every topic is covered in a non-directive way, presenting both sides where appropriate and all the way through promoting safety and respect. In comparison to trawling through the internet for information.

The reason this book is being targeted is quite simply because it was written by a transwoman, and it celebrates LGBTQ+ identity in a positive way.





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