

Edmund Rice Secondary School

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Policy



2024-2025

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Introductory Statement

Relationships and sexuality are vital components of healthy social and personal development, especially during adolescence, a period when physical sexual maturity begins. Recognising the need to adequately prepare adolescents to navigate these aspects of life, many parents and educators advocate for comprehensive guidance. Consequently, Irish schools incorporate Relationships and

Sexuality Education (RSE) as a formal part of the Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum.

This RSE policy outlines the goals of the RSE program, its integration with SPHE, and how it is organised and managed within the school. The policy was developed through a collaborative consultation process involving staff, the Board of Management, parent representatives, and student representatives. It aligns with our School Ethos and Mission Statement and adheres to the following circulars: M4/95, M20/96, C27/08, C23/10 ("Social and Personal Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education—Best Practice Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools"), and C37/10.

Mission Statement

Our mission statement permeates every aspect of school life. It reflects the vision of ERST in promoting full personal and social development of each student and striving to create an atmosphere where teaching and learning can excel.

"To provide a caring Christian community, which celebrates effort and talent in an environment of hope and happiness"

The creation of a safe and positive learning environment is at the heart of what we do. We want our students to achieve their academic potential and to leave the school with a skill set which prepares them for an ever-changing world.

Relationship of RSE to Our School's Mission Statement

The Edmund Rice Secondary School is dedicated to offering an education for all students through an inclusive and comprehensive curriculum. Our aim is to nurture every aspect of a student's development—personal, academic, physical, moral, and religious. The Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) program is integral to this mission, as it helps shape students' attitudes, beliefs, and values related to relationships, sexual identity, and intimacy, thereby enhancing their overall development. According to the Department of Education and Skills in Circular 0037/2010, all RSE topics, including those on Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), family planning, and sexual orientation, must be covered, regardless of religious ethos. In our commitment to fostering well-rounded growth, we ensure that Relationships and Sexuality are woven into the fabric of each student's personal development within our holistic educational environment.

What is Relationships and Sexuality Education?

RSE is a developmental process through experiential learning in which students participate to help cultivate a healthy attitude towards themselves and others, particularly in the area of sexuality and relationships.

Relationship and Sexuality education (RSE) aims to provide opportunities for students in the school to learn about relationships and sexuality in ways that help them think and act in a moral, caring and responsible way

Scope of Policy

This policy covers all aspects of teaching and learning related to relationships and sexuality within the Edmund Rice Secondary School. Discussions on these topics also occur in subjects beyond SPHE/RSE, such as Science, Biology, Religious Education and Home Economics, making it essential for all teachers to be familiar with the RSE policy. The policy is applicable to everyone in the school community, including teaching and non-teaching staff, students, the Board of Management, parents/guardians, visiting speakers, and external facilitators.

Rationale

- Sexuality is an essential part of healthy social and personal development. Young people are exposed to numerous messages about sexuality and sexual behaviour. Schools, in partnership with parents and guardians, must consider how best to address the needs of their students.
- Under the Education Act 1998, schools are required to promote the social and personal development of students and provide health education.
- Section 4 of the Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools mandates that schools develop an agreed Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) policy and implement an RSE program for all students in both junior and senior cycles. At Junior Cycle, RSE is integrated into Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE).
- Circulars M4/95, M20/96, 0023/2010, 0037/2010, and the Child Protection Circular 2011 call on schools to begin the process of developing an RSE policy.
- Circular 15/2017 outlines the "Arrangements for the Implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle" for the academic years 2017/18 and 2018/19.
- The school complies with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) Child Protection Procedures, adheres to the Children First Legislation (2017), and has a Child Protection Policy or Child Safeguarding Statement in place.
- The effectiveness of the RSE program depends on a collaborative approach involving teachers, parents, the Board of Management, and students.

Relationship of RSE to SPHE

The Draft Guidelines for RSE (NCCA, June 1995, 1.2) state that Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) is "spiral, developmental in nature, and age-appropriate in both content and methodology." The RSE program is structured to align with this principle. In addition to specific RSE lessons, SPHE addresses other areas crucial for developing a healthy attitude towards one's sexuality and relationships with others. SPHE covers topics such as self-esteem, assertiveness, communication, and decision-making skills, all of which contribute to the effectiveness of the RSE program.

The Department of Education Circular M4/95 acknowledges the rights and responsibilities of parents to provide for the religious, moral, intellectual, physical, and social education of their children. While RSE naturally begins at home, many parents seek support from schools in this area. Schools are therefore seen as playing a complementary and supportive role to the family. This goal is achieved through a collaborative process involving parents, school management, teachers, and where appropriate, students, in developing school policy.

At Edmund Rice Secondary School, the RSE program is delivered within the broader SPHE framework. SPHE offers students a unique opportunity to build skills and competencies, learn about themselves, care for themselves and others, and make informed decisions about their health, personal lives, and social development. SPHE supports the school's efforts to promote the health and well-being of students.

Within this framework, the aim of RSE is to provide structured opportunities for students to gain knowledge and understanding of human relationships and sexuality. This education is designed to help students form values and behaviours within a moral, spiritual, and social context. The purpose of RSE is to help young people learn about relationships and sexuality in a way that encourages moral, caring, and responsible behaviour.

The school recognizes that SPHE also takes place through all interactions within the school community, reinforcing values of respect, care, and support throughout the learning environment.

Aims and Objectives Aims:

- Support students in understanding and developing friendships.
- Foster students' understanding of sexuality.
- Encourage a positive attitude towards and acceptance of sexuality.
- Promote respect for the opinions and perspectives of others.
- Provide opportunities for students to learn about relationships and sexuality.
- Inspire students to think and act in a moral, caring, and responsible manner.

Objectives:

- Ensure clarity and consensus on how RSE is taught within the school.
- Define the relationship between RSE and SPHE.
- Clearly outline the aims of the RSE program.
- Clarify the roles, rights, and responsibilities of all members of the school community, with a focus on staff, students, parents/guardians, and the board of management/trustees, regarding the RSE program.
- Ensure that teachers, parents/guardians, and students understand how RSE aligns with the school's ethos.
- Provide practical information on delivering the RSE program.

Key Measures

1. *Training and Development*
2. *Inclusion of Parents/Guardians*
3. *Ethical/Moral Considerations*
4. *Practical Issues*

1. Training and Development

The Board of Management and Senior Management Team are committed to ensuring access to CPD opportunities for all teachers involved in RSE and to providing relevant RSE school resources. Senior Management and the Board of Management facilitate teachers to participate in professional development opportunities, with due regard to the school budget and supervision/Substitution rota, and the need for the ongoing teaching and learning programme of the school to continue with as little disturbance as possible.

2. Inclusion of Parents and Guardians

It is recognised by the school that the parents/guardians are the primary educators of their children and their role in education concerning relationships and sexuality is seen by the school as very important. From 2024, parents/guardians will be asked to verify their consent for their child to participate in the RSE module through their school journals as opposed to issuing consent forms (see 'note' below).

A copy of this policy will be made available to any parent/guardian on request to the school office.

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. The school may wish to ask the parents to put their request in writing.*

Withdrawal from RSE

SPHE at Junior Cycle is a core subject in the curriculum. However, under the Education Act 1998, a student is not required to participate in instruction in any subject that goes against the conscience of the parents, or, in the case of students aged 18 or older, the student themselves. Parents therefore have the right to withdraw their child from some or all RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education) classes, though they are encouraged to provide alternative RSE at home. Parents are not required to provide reasons for their decision, and the school will respect this choice as their right.

If a student is withdrawn from RSE, parents must arrange with school management to ensure the student's well-being during those periods. The school cannot be held responsible for any information shared by other students regarding RSE content. Parents wishing to withdraw their child from the RSE module must meet with the principal in person each September to discuss the decision and make appropriate arrangements.

3. Ethical and Moral Considerations

RSE is a complex area of the curriculum. A school's RSE policy provides guidance for teachers on the moral and ethical framework in which the program will be delivered. Key considerations include the following:

Discussing and Answering Questions on Sensitive Topics: Class discussions will be general in nature and not personally directed, following agreed-upon class ground rules. Inappropriate questions will not be answered in class, whether from teacher to student or between students. Only questions directly related to the lesson content will be addressed. Teachers will use their professional judgment, guided by the students' age, the RSE curriculum, and the school's RSE policy, in deciding how to handle these questions. In some cases, the teacher may choose to answer a question privately after class. If a teacher is concerned about an issue that arises, they should seek advice from the principal.

Confidentiality: While a foundation of trust is essential in SPHE classes, students must be made aware of the limits of confidentiality. Teachers cannot provide unconditional guarantees of confidentiality. Students should understand that any issue may be reported to the principal in line with the school's Child Safeguarding Statement and possibly to parents if deemed in the best interest of the student. Teachers will inform students when confidentiality can no longer be maintained. The following limits of confidentiality apply:

- Child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual, neglect)
- Intent to harm oneself or others
- Substance misuse
- Underage sexual activity

If a teacher becomes aware that a student is at risk, they should follow the procedures outlined in the Child Protection Procedures and Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools (2017).

Sexual Activity: In today's rapidly changing society, parents, students, and teachers may feel uncertain about societal norms regarding sexual behaviour. RSE emphasizes the importance of consent. Teachers are advised to provide students with information about the definition and legal age of consent. According to the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017, consent is defined as, "A person consents to a sexual act if he or she freely and voluntarily agrees to engage in that act." The legal age of consent, as per this Act, is 17 for both males and females, applying to both heterosexual and homosexual relationships.

Sexual Orientation: The post-primary RSE Curriculum Guidelines include the topic of sexual orientation. The school may choose to address this issue before Senior Cycle, particularly if homophobic bullying is a concern. Teachers do not promote any particular lifestyle as the only acceptable one. Discussing sexual orientation provides an opportunity to dispel misconceptions and address prejudices. These discussions should be appropriate to the age of the students. The Equal Status Act 2000 and the Equality Act 2004 prohibit discrimination on nine grounds, including sexual orientation. The exclusion of this topic from schools can send negative messages. Any student grappling with their sexual identity should be protected from harassment, embarrassment, or isolation and offered support from the Student Support Team.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs): Although raising awareness of STIs is one of the objectives of the Second Year SPHE/RSE syllabus, this topic is mainly covered in the Senior Cycle. Given the rising rates of STI transmission, it is essential that this subject is addressed in schools.

Sexting, Sexual Imagery, and Pornography: In today's digital age, young people are increasingly exposed to sexual imagery online. A Secondary School Digital Trend Report released in January 2018 revealed that 13% of secondary students had sent a nude or semi-nude photo of themselves. Unfortunately, once shared online or via mobile, the sender loses control of the content, which may be circulated beyond its intended audience, either online or through mobile devices. Sending explicit images can increase the risk of victimization, such as cyberbullying, harassment, or even blackmail. It is important to note that the sharing of explicit images of minors falls under the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998. Self-produced explicit images exchanged by minors under 17 could be classified as child pornography. Therefore, educational programs should help adolescents critically assess the risks associated with sexting. Additionally, students must learn how to avoid exposure to other sexual imagery and pornography and understand the implications of viewing such content.

Family Planning and Contraception: The post-primary RSE Curriculum Guidelines stipulate that family planning should be covered in the Senior Cycle. Students should be provided with information about various methods of contraception, including Natural Family Planning. Topics like contraception and abortion will be discussed in an ageappropriate, open manner, presenting all sides of the issues in a non-directive way. Schools have the discretion to decide at what age these topics are introduced.

4. Practical Issues

Curriculum and Class Organisation:

Junior Cycle

All Junior Cycle class groups have two 40-minute periods of SPHE per week. RSE is included as a module within the SPHE programme.

Senior Cycle

At Senior Cycle, Transition Year classes have a six-week period after the Christmas Mid-Term where RSE is taught as part of Religious Education. This six-week period is made up of two 40 min class periods.

For Fifth- and Sixth-Year classes, RSE is taught in one 40 minute period over the course of the whole school year.

The teaching methods for the RSE module are based on sound pedagogical principles, similar to those used in SPHE and other areas of the curriculum. Class sizes are determined by the base class.

Visiting Speakers: While most of the RSE programme is best delivered by teachers who are familiar and trusted by the students, visiting speakers can also enhance the quality of the programme. The SPHE and/or RSE Coordinator will provide visitors with a copy of the RSE policy well in advance of their visit. Any external speaker or group visiting the school must adhere to the guidelines of good practice as outlined in Section 7 of the SPHE Handbook. Programs and events delivered by visitors or external agencies should use evidence-based methodologies with clear educational outcomes. These programs should be delivered by qualified individuals who specialize in working with young people. Evaluation and Vetting of the speakers is compulsory.

Promoting Equality at the School: It is crucial that the equality promoted between students of varying sexual orientations in the context of RSE is reflected throughout the school community. Men and women should share equal responsibility in promoting and facilitating RSE, ensuring that both parents and students see this equality in action. The Equal Status Act 2000 and the Equality Act 2004 prohibit discrimination across nine grounds, including sexual orientation. It is important that issues such as homosexuality are discussed clearly and openly in schools.

Guidelines for Students with Special Educational Needs: To make learning meaningful, relevant, and achievable for all students, teachers must respond to student diversity by using differentiated approaches and methodologies. Students with special needs may require additional support in coping with the physical and emotional aspects of growing up. They may also need guidance in understanding acceptable behaviour and in being warned and prepared against potential abuse. For more information, refer to the *NCCA Guidelines for Teachers of Students with Mild General Learning Disabilities: Post-Primary (SPHE)*.

Resources

- **Junior Cycle:** “You’ve Got This” 1, 2 and 3 Textbooks.
- **Senior Cycle:**
- SPHE Resource materials for Relationships and Sexuality Education prepared by the NCCA and approved by the Department of Education and Science (1999)
- Trust (RSE) Senior cycle
- On your own two feet
- B4U Decide
- Growing up LGBT
- Cancer Awareness Programme
- Mental Health Matters
- Be safe Be wise **Web sites:**
- www.sphe.ie
- www.pdst.ie
- www.sess.ie
- www.healthpromotion.ie
- www.webwise.ie
- www.thinkcontraception.ie
- www.tes.ie
- www.ted.ie
- www.Kahoot.ie
- www.mentimeter.ie
- www.teni.ie
- www.crisispregnancy.ie
- www.glen.ie
- www.belongto.org
- www.sexualwellbeing.ie

Edmund Rice Secondary School will purchase appropriate RSE teaching materials which have been identified by staff as useful and which have been approved by the principal, within the normal budgetary framework and as general school resources allow.

Current Provision

<p>Junior Cycle</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendships and Relationships • Self-Esteem • Puberty • Identifying and Labelling parts of the male and female reproductive system • Functions of parts Identified • Conception • Consent • Sexuality
<p>Transition Year</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What we value in relationships • Healthy Relationships • Self-Esteem • Understanding Boundaries • Consent • Sexuality and Orientation
<p>Fifth Year</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships • What we value in relationships • Healthy relationships • Self-Esteem • Communication • Assertive Communication • Understanding Boundaries • Human Sexuality • Accepting Sexual Orientations • Implications of Sexual Activity • Identifying harmful sexual Behaviour
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influences and Values • Consent • Image Based Sexual Abuse • Keeping Safe Online
<p>Sixth Year</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy relationships • Self-Esteem • Sexuality

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|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding and Communicating Boundaries • Consent • Human Reproduction and Fertility • Contraception • Sexually Transmitted Infections • Pregnancy • Pornography • Keeping Safe Online |
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Links to other Policies and Curriculum Delivery *Links to*

Related School Policies:

All school policies must align and be consistent within the framework of the overall School Plan. Relevant policies that are either already in place, under development, or undergoing review will be examined in relation to the RSE policy, ensuring any potential impacts are addressed. Similarly, the implications of other school policies and guidelines/plans on the RSE policy must also be considered.

The following school policies complement the aims of the RSE policy:

- Child Safeguarding Statement
- Anti-Bullying Policy
- Code of Conduct
- Substance Misuse Policy
- ICT Acceptable Use Policy
- Health and Safety Statement
- Data Protection Policy
- Critical Incident Management Plan

Curriculum Delivery:

Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) plays a vital role in supporting the school's efforts to promote students' health and well-being. This education contributes to their emotional, moral, social, and spiritual growth, along with their intellectual, physical, political, religious, and creative development. Part of this includes providing students with information on relationships and sexuality.

SPHE covers topics such as relationships at home and in school, building self-esteem, and developing skills in communication, decision-making, and expressing emotions appropriately. These areas are essential to the effectiveness of the RSE programme. Additionally, aspects of RSE are integrated across other subjects in the curriculum, including Religious Education, Science, Biology, and Home Economics.

At ERSS, we aim to ensure that all students receive a comprehensive and balanced RSE programme from First Year through to Sixth Year.

Child Protection

This policy is cognisant of all aspects of our current Child Protection Policy. The school follows the DES child protection guidelines and has a child protection policy with the Principal as Designated

Liaison Person (DLP) and the Deputy Principal as the Deputy DLP. Where a child protection concern is raised, the procedures outlined in the schools Child Protection Policy will be followed.

Implementation Arrangements, Roles and Responsibilities

All partners, including Board of Management, Parents/Guardians, School Management and teaching staff, have roles and responsibilities in ensuring the implementation of the RSE Policy in our school. Teachers delivering the RSE programme attend CPD provided by the SPHE support service.

Monitoring Evaluating and Reviewing

This policy will be made accessible to school staff, the parents' association, and members of the school community. The principal will oversee the implementation of the policy and report any necessary updates to the Board of Management.

The policy will be revised as needed based on reviews and evaluations, in alignment with school planning. The Board of Management will review and adopt the policy annually. Continuous review and evaluation should consider evolving information or guidelines (e.g., from the Department of Education and Skills or the Department of Children and Youth Affairs), relevant legislation, and feedback from parents/guardians, students, school staff, and other stakeholders.

The RSE program will be reviewed and evaluated annually by the SPHE team, with input from students included as part of the review. The RSE policy will also be reviewed in accordance with the Edmund Rice Secondary School's Development Plan, under the supervision of the SPHE coordinator.

Approval:

This policy has been distributed to staff, parents and students for their approval. Amendments have been made after consultation with these stakeholders.

This policy has been ratified by the Board of Management of Edmund Rice Secondary School, Carrick-on-Suir.

Chairperson: 

Date: 28/11/2024

This policy will be due for review on: Dec 2026