



# Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) Policy

*Portmarnock Community School*

Ratified by the Board of Management of Portmarnock  
Community School on: 15th October 2024

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## **Introduction**

Portmarnock Community School's RSE Policy was drawn up in consultation with:

- Our School's Mission Statement
- Department of Education Guidelines as set out in Circular M4/95, M20/96, C23/10 Social Personal Health Education (SPHE), Short Course: Social, Personal and Health Education for Junior Cycle and Relationships and Sexuality Education - Best Practice Guidelines for Post Primary Schools and C37/2010
- Guidance from the SPHE Department
- Guidance from the RE Department
- Consultation with all members of the school community

The Policy works in conjunction with the following Portmarnock Community School Policies:

- Child Safeguarding Statement and associated Risk Assessment
- Pastoral Care Policy
- Whole School Guidance Policy
- Religious Education Policy
- Anti-Bullying Policy
- Code of Behaviour
- AEN Policy
- AUP Policy

## **Mission Statement**

'To instil a spirit of intellectual enquiry and academic endeavour, to foster the desire for participation and challenge, and to build individual and compassionate men and women of character.'

## **Definition of Relationships and Sexuality Education**

"RSE is a lifelong process of acquiring knowledge, understanding and skills which enable us to develop attitudes, beliefs and values about sexual identity, relationships and intimacy" (DES 1997). Sexuality is a key element of healthy social and personal development in all our lives, but particularly important in the life of the adolescent.

At post primary level RSE aims to provide "young people with information and skills to critically evaluate the wide range of information, opinions, values and attitudes offered today, and so make positive, responsible choices about themselves and the way they live their lives." (RSE Policy Guidelines, 1997)

As a community school we wish to support parents/guardians in this important aspect of their child's education and preparation for life. In keeping with our mission statement, we believe we have a complimentary role in preparing young people for their place in society.

RSE class will provide structured opportunities for students to gain knowledge and understanding of human relationships and sexuality through processes which will enable them to form values and establish behaviours within a moral, spiritual and social framework.

Portmarnock Community School recognises that the national RSE policy is currently under review by the NCCA which commenced in June 2018.

## **Scope**

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/Careers&Guidance/RE/RSE - Biology, Science etc. It is therefore important that all teachers are familiar with the RSE Policy.

This Policy will apply to school staff, students, Board of Management, Parents/Guardians, visiting speakers and external facilitators.

## **Rationale**

Sexuality is a key element of healthy social and personal development. Young people are exposed to a 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 the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). At Senior Cycle the RSE Programme is part of the Careers & Guidance/RE Programme.
- Circulars M4/95 and M20/96 request schools to commence a process of RSE Policy development
- Circular 0027/2008 requires the Board of Management's responsibility for RSE Teaching
- Circulars 0023/2010 and 0043/2018 advises Best Practice for Visiting Speakers

## **The Aims of our RSE Programme**

- To help students to understand and develop friendships and relationships.
- To promote a healthy understanding of sexuality.
- To promote a positive attitude to one's own sexuality and in one's relationships with others. This will aid the development of personal wellbeing and enhance relationships with others.
- To promote knowledge of and respect for reproduction.

- To enable students to develop healthy attitudes and values towards their sexuality, in a moral, spiritual and social framework in keeping with our school ethos.
- To provide opportunities for students to learn about relationships and sexuality in ways that help them to think and behave in a moral, caring and responsible way.
- To foster self-esteem, self-respect and a positive sexual identity.
- To provide a programme, curricular and extra-curricular, which develops the whole person. It is acknowledged that in a course of limited duration these aims are aspirational.

### **The Objectives of our RSE Programme**

The RSE Programme in Portmarnock Community School should enable students to:

- Acquire the understanding and skills necessary to form healthy friendships and relationships.
- Develop a positive sense of self-awareness and the skills for building and maintaining self-esteem.
- Become aware of the variety of ways in which individuals change and grow, especially during adolescence and to develop respect for differences between individuals.
- Understand human physiology with particular reference to the reproductive cycle, human fertility and sexual activity and associated health consequences.
- Understand sexual development and identity and explore aspects of sexuality including sex roles, stereotyping, gender issues and cultural influences on sexuality.
- Develop a value system encompassing respect, responsibility, co-operation, honesty and fairness.
- Value family life and appreciate the responsibilities of parenthood.
- Develop strategies for decisions and actions consistent with personal moral integrity and be respectful of the rights and dignity of others.
- Develop skills for coping with peer pressure, conflicts and threats to personal safety.

### **Guidelines for the Management and Organisation of RSE in our School**

Arrangements regarding the teaching of the programme and the deployment of staff will be made by the Principal.

Staff are encouraged to attend training and in-service in relation to RSE. The SPHE and Wellbeing co-ordinator works with RSE Teachers to promote and develop a programme to meet the emerging needs of our students.

#### Relationship of RSE to SPHE

The Draft Guidelines for RSE (NCCA, June 1995) state that Social, Personal and Health Education is 'spiral, developmental in nature and age appropriate in content and methodology'. The RSE Programme is designed to follow this principle and pattern. Apart from the specific lessons of RSE, SPHE covers other areas which would be pertinent to the development of a healthy attitude to sexuality in oneself and one's relationship with others. SPHE deals with many issues such as

self-esteem, assertiveness, communication and decision-making skills - all of which can contribute to the effectiveness of the RSE Programme.

Section 4 of the Rules and Programme for Secondary School 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 the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). It is the responsibility of the Board of Management to ensure that an RSE Programme is made available to all students.

In Portmarnock Community School, RSE is taught as an integral part of the SPHE programme which is a required part of the Junior Cycle curriculum for all students . This is also clearly expressed in DES RSE Policy (Circular 0027/0028)

The SPHE programme promotes the health and wellbeing of young people. Throughout all areas of SPHE students are encouraged to act in a moral, caring and responsible way and are given clear information, so that, in the context of their own lives, they can communicate effectively and implement informed decisions. Sexuality is a key aspect of development in the life of the adolescent and therefore along with the specific lessons of RSE, SPHE also covers areas which are relevant to the development of a healthy attitude to sexuality in oneself and one's relationships with others.

#### Currently Provided in PCS

*The RSE programme as taught in Portmarnock Community School is the programme laid out by the NCCA (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment).*

The school follows all themes outlined in both Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle RSE syllabi provided by the Department of Education

RSE at Junior Cycle is delivered as part of the SPHE programme and is allocated a minimum of 6 weeks. At Senior Cycle RSE is taught in Careers & Guidance/RE classes and is allocated a minimum of 6 weeks. This is a designated module in the R.E. programme.

At present:

- The school encourages parents/guardians to ensure that students participate in this programme as a way of supporting parents as the primary health educators of their children.
- An RSE programme which discusses relationships, values, peer pressure, conflict and decision-making.
- Student centred pastoral care structure supports including Principal, Deputy Principals, Year Heads, Wellbeing Tutors, Guidance and Counselling Team, Chaplaincy Team, Student Support Team, Additional Educational Needs Team, Head Girl, Head Boy and Senior Prefects,.
- Possibility of one to one conversations with the school Guidance Counsellors for students having difficulty settling into the school and other issues.
- A Code of Behaviour emphasising respect for the rights and dignity of others.
- Anti- Bullying policy published in the student journal and website.

- Education of human physiology and human reproduction – Science, Biology, Religion (senior cycle) and SPHE (junior cycle)
- Home Economics which discusses relationships within the family, maturity, adolescence and dealing with conflict, independence and responsibility.
- Visits by speakers on topics such as drugs and alcohol misuse, sexual maturity and relationships.

Portmarnock Community School - RSE Curriculum

Portmarnock Community School - RSE Curriculum	
Junior Cycle RSE Curriculum	Senior Cycle RSE Curriculum
<u>1st Year Relationships and Sexuality Module:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Me as unique and different</li> <li>● Friendship</li> <li>● Changes at adolescence (physical and emotional)</li> <li>● The Reproductive System</li> <li>● Images of male and female</li> <li>● Respecting myself and others</li> </ul>	<u>Transition Year RSE Curriculum:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Relationships</li> <li>● Staying Safe Online</li> <li>● Informed Consent - Introduction</li> </ul> <p>*Complemented by a dedicated RSE Module</p>
<u>2nd Year Relationships and Sexuality Module:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Understanding sexuality</li> <li>● Healthy Relationships</li> <li>● Building and Maintaining Relationships</li> <li>● Relationship Pressure and Consent</li> <li>● Sexual Health</li> <li>● Messages about Sexuality</li> </ul>	<u>5th Year RSE Curriculum:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Consent</li> <li>● B4U decide</li> <li>● Relationships</li> </ul>
<u>3rd Year Relationships and Sexuality Module:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Having a Friend and Being a Friend</li> <li>● The Relationship Spectrum</li> <li>● Sexuality, Gender Identity and Sexual Health</li> <li>● Media Influences on Relationships and Sexuality</li> </ul>	<u>6th Year RSE Curriculum:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family Planning</li> <li>● Pregnancy</li> </ul>

Inclusion of Parents/Guardians

Parents are the primary educators of their children and their role in education concerning relationships and sexuality is seen by the school as being very important. The contribution of the School in this regard complements rather than replaces the role they play. Communication between

parents and school is therefore essential. A copy of the RSE Policy will be placed on the school website under school documentation for parents to access.

Parents are informed in advance of the delivery of the RSE programme and its contents via email. This ensures that they are aware of what their child is learning and it provides them with an opportunity to discuss with their child the topics that are covered in class.

Parents/Guardians of First Year students will be invited to an information evening in the school. As with all policies, Parents' Association representatives and the views expressed by parents will be taken into account when reviewing the policy.

### Withdrawal from the RSE Programme

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 eighteen years. This Act, along with DES Circular 0037/2010, allows parents the right to withdraw their child from the RSE programme in school. Parents/Guardians must notify the Principal in advance of their wish to have their child withdrawn from all or part of the Programme.

Issues such as overpopulation, ethics and birth control are met in a minor way in subjects such as Science, Geography and RE. However, as any discussion is limited and set within the context of the other subject concerned, it does not constitute part of the formal RSE Programme.

Parents/Guardians do not have to give reasons for withdrawal, but we respectfully invite them to do so - we aim to resolve misunderstanding if possible. The collaborative and supportive role of parents and school is emphasised in all areas of learning. Once a parent's request to withdraw is made, that request must be complied with until revoked by the parent, or when a student becomes 18 and can revoke it personally.

The School may not be able to provide alternative supervision during the RSE class, in which case a parent/guardian will be asked to facilitate in that regard.

### The Role of the RSE Teacher

The relationship between teacher and student is a core aspect of successful learning in all areas of education but this is especially true in RSE, given the personal nature of the subject. Students respond positively to teachers who show authenticity and empathy and who are willing to listen to and respect their views. At the same time the teacher must be able to set limits and boundaries. The following points should be considered by teachers of RSE:

- Ongoing professional development and training for all teachers of RSE/SPHE will support the effective delivery of RSE.
- Teachers assigned to teach RSE/SPHE must have an understanding of the range of active and experiential methodologies associated with education in this area.
- All teachers of RSE at Senior Cycle should inform themselves about the previous learning of students at Junior Cycle in RSE/SPHE and to what extent students are familiar with



participatory methodologies. If this is a new way of working for a group, participative methodologies should be introduced gradually and carefully.

- Teachers must be familiar with their school's RSE Policy, particularly with regard to some of the sensitive moral issues that may arise in a RSE class. A school does not have a right to omit any aspect of RSE. It is the responsibility of the RSE teacher to articulate the values expressed in the school's RSE policy in a way that is respectful to all. This can be done while also allowing students to express their views and opinions in a respectful way.
- The teacher is responsible for ensuring that the classroom is a safe environment for students. A way of fostering this climate from the beginning is to help students to establish ground rules for working together as a group.
- Teachers should be sensitive to the needs of students of all sexual orientations and gender identities.
- It may be necessary to set boundaries for students in terms of what can be discussed and what questions can be answered in an RSE class.
- Given the sensitivity of many of the topics in RSE teachers should be aware of the range of pastoral and counselling support available within the school and outside school.

## **Ethical/Moral Considerations**

### Confidentiality

At the beginning of each academic year and at regular intervals throughout the year students are informed that complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

It is school policy that in circumstances where a student is considered at some risk of any type of abuse or breach of the law, the teacher must refer this immediately to the Designated Liaison person or Deputy Designated Liaison person if DLP is not available. Teachers must indicate clearly to students when the content of a conversation can no longer be kept confidential. The student can then decide whether to proceed or not.

The Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017 states in 4.4.1 that

*Mandated persons who receive a disclosure of harm from a child, which is at or above the threshold of harm (Section 4.3), must make a mandated report of the concerns to Tusla. Children First National Guidance 2017 states that "mandated persons are not required to judge the truth of the claim or the credibility of the child."*

The Child Protection Procedures also state that if the school becomes aware that a young person is sexually active under the age of consent it has a responsibility to inform her parents. The legal age of consent in Ireland is 17 for boys and girls for heterosexual and for homosexual sex.

### Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex+ (LGBTI+)

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTI+) young people follow the same developmental challenges and pathways as those of their heterosexual peers. Additionally LGBTI+ students may have to cope with negative attitudes, discrimination and harassment directed towards LGBTI+ people.

Portmarnock Community School aims to ensure a positive school climate and culture where difference is welcomed. An LGBTI+ young person may wish to seek support or come out during their time in secondary school. A positive school climate and culture will provide an appropriate environment of support where an LGBTI+ person may choose to come out. RSE classes will promote this climate in all lessons and class discussions, thereby giving all students the educational support required while facing the challenges of adolescence.

The Equal Status Act 2000 to 2015 is the key piece of legislation protecting young people in school who are LGBTI+. The main provisions of the Act aim to:

- Promote equality of opportunity
- Prohibit discrimination on nine specific grounds (gender, marital status, sexual orientation, religion, age, race, membership of the Traveller community and disability)
- Prohibit harassment on these grounds and to prohibit sexual harassment.
- Require reasonable accommodation of people with disabilities. Allow for positive action.

In May 2012 the Department of Education and Skills established a Working Group on Tackling Bullying, including homophobic bullying, cyber-bullying and racist bullying.

Portmarnock Community School is mindful of the above in all aspects of school life and in policy formulation and implementation.

### Sexual Activity

Teachers will provide students information on the age of consent which, following the passage of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 2006, is seventeen years of age for both males and females. In the case of under-age sexual activity, the teacher should familiarise themselves with Section 4.2.2 of the Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools which states that:

*'Every registered teacher should note that as a mandated person the statutory obligation under the Children First Act 2015 to make a mandated report to TUSLA rests with the individual teacher and this applies regardless of whether or not the DLP reports the concern in question. However, a registered teacher who makes a mandated report jointly with the DLP meets his or her statutory obligations to report to TUSLA under the Children First Act 2015.'*

While a sexual relationship where one or both parties is under 17 years of age is illegal, when making a mandated report to TUSLA, it might not be regarded as child sexual abuse. There are certain exemptions from reporting underage consensual sexual activity under section 14(3) of the Children First Act 2015.

If a Teacher is satisfied that all of the following criteria are met, they are not required to make a report to TUSLA:

- The young person(s) concerned are between 15 and 17 years old
- The age difference between them is not more than 24 months
- There is no material difference in their maturity or capacity to consent
- The relationship between the people engaged in the sexual activity does not involve intimidation or exploitation of either person
- The young persons concerned state clearly that they do not want any
- information about the activity to be disclosed to TUSLA

In effect, this means that if all of the above criteria are met, the Teacher, as a mandated person, does not have to report consensual sexual activity between older teenagers as sexual abuse to TUSLA.

### Additional Educational Needs

Students with Additional Educational Needs may require more help than others in coping with the physical and emotional aspects of growing up. They may also require more support in learning what sorts of behaviour are and are not acceptable and in being warned and prepared against abuse by others. If learning activities are to be meaningful and achievable for all students, it is important that differentiated approaches and methodologies are used. Additional teaching and support in this regard may be delivered by the student's AEN teacher in consultation with the RSE teacher and as part of an overall Individual Learning Plan. It is the responsibility of the class teacher to familiarise themselves with the educational needs of the student.

### Offering Advice

The purpose of RSE is to provide a general education about sexual matters and issues and *not to offer individual advice, information or counselling on aspects of sexual behaviour*. Issues that arise in the RSE class will be addressed by staff in a professional manner that reflects the ethos of the school. If an issue arises in class, the RSE teacher may decide it necessary to inform the relevant Wellbeing Tutor, Year Head, Deputy Principal or Principal.

In some cases it may be necessary to refer a student to the school's Guidance Service/Chaplaincy service for further assistance.

### Explicit Questions

In RSE class it is important that we are particularly mindful of the various ranges of levels of maturity and experience among our students. It may not be appropriate to deal with some explicit questions that might arise in class. Teachers may choose to say that it is not appropriate to deal with that question at this time. When deciding whether or not to answer the question the teacher will consider the age and readiness of the students, the RSE programme content, the ethos of the school and the RSE policy.

If a teacher becomes concerned about a matter that has been raised he/she should seek advice and take appropriate steps as outlined in The Department of Education Circular 0081/2017 on Child Protection Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017 and the School's Child Safeguarding Statement and Risk Assessment (all documents are available on the school website).

### Out-of-School Factors

The School recognises that many out-of-school factors affect the development of a positive attitude to relationships and sexuality during adolescence - media, social media, access to explicit material, peer expectations and social circles. The School cannot take responsibility for what is discussed among students outside of the RSE lesson. However, the RSE Programme attempts to heighten students' awareness of the influence of these forces on the development of their values and attitudes. Thus empowering them to make informed decisions and choices.

## Using Guest Speakers and Others

It is school policy that most of the RSE programme is best delivered by teachers. Circular 0043/2018 states “The qualified classroom teacher is the best placed professional to work sensitively and consistently with students and he/she can have a powerful impact on influencing students’ attitudes, values and behaviour in all aspects of wellbeing education.” If outside agencies or guest speakers can enhance the quality of the provision of the programme then they may be considered in addition but not instead of the planned RSE programme in the school.

In line with Circular 0043/2018, *Best Practice Guidance for Post Primary Schools in the use of Programmes and/or External Facilitators in Promoting Wellbeing consistent with the Department of Education and Skills’ Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* the following should be considered when supplementing or complementing wellbeing promotion:

- Does the programme and/or external facilitator address an identified need?
- Will the programme be delivered to class groups with the involvement of school staff?
- Does the programme enhance protective factors which predispose students to positive outcomes in the face of adversity?

When engaging external speakers the staff member who books the visitor will provide them in advance of the visit with a copy of this RSE policy. Once approval has been given by the Principal the organising teacher will also make the speaker aware of the ethos of the school and the manner of delivery of the RSE Programme.

- External facilitators must be compliant with the school’s Child Safeguarding Statement and other relevant school policies and procedures.
- Programmes used must be delivered by facilitators who are qualified to work with the specific area of content and with students for whom the programmes are designed.
- Relevant school staff should be informed of the details of the programme being provided prior to the visit.
- External facilitators must always work under the guidance and supervision of the relevant classroom teacher who will remain in the room for the duration of the visit unless the speaker is vetted by the school prior to their visit. If vetted, the classroom teacher may not remain in the classroom.
- It is the responsibility of the person organising the external speaker that the content of the programme and the method of delivery is suitable for the student needs and appropriate for the age group.
- The programme will then be evaluated by the teachers and students with regard to the subject matter, methodology and messages communicated after the programme has been delivered.

## **Implementing, Monitoring, Reviewing and Evaluating the Programme**

This Policy is ratified by the Board of Management and is the agreed Policy of Portmarnock Community School. All Teaching staff will need to be familiar with this Policy and aware of any changes implied in curriculum delivery. The School will facilitate participating teachers in taking part in ongoing professional development so as to provide the proper delivery of the RSE programme. It will also ensure that appropriate teaching materials which have been identified by staff as useful and approved by the Principal are available for delivery of the programme.

Portmarnock Community School's SPHE Department maintains an updated record of CPD courses attended by staff. All SPHE staff are encouraged to register with the SPHE website ([www.sphe.ie](http://www.sphe.ie)) for CPD opportunities. Where possible, staff will be given opportunities to attend further professional development courses. Information received at CPD will be made available to all relevant teachers through subject department meetings at the beginning of the academic year.

The SPHE Team meets five times a year for subject planning and information sharing. At these meetings the SPHE Coordinator will update SPHE Department members in relation to CPD training available and updates relating to the curriculum etc and will complete a review at the end of the academic year.

The School will continue to offer support to parents as the need arises and ask parental opinion to help review the policy. The School has core and supplementary resources available to all SPHE and RSE staff.

All resources are made available on the staff Google Drive and hard copies are located in the staff room in the SPHE section. Staff may also avail of web based resources for class planning. All staff are encouraged to harness the valuable IT resources available. As the need arises, the SPHE department will identify necessary resources for their subject and submit requests to the Principal.

The teachers involved in the delivery of the programme will evaluate the RSE programme each year and modifications may be made if this is considered desirable for an effective delivery of a relevant programme within the provisions of this policy statement.