



# Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)

Including Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

A guide for Christian parents



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# Introduction

**Parents may be worried about upcoming changes to Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). This booklet explains why.**

## ***What is changing?***

The changes are a result of revisions to the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum the Government expects state-funded schools to follow.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, this provides an opportunity for campaign groups and NGOs opposed to Christian teaching to push forward their controversial agenda in schools.

Changes to SPHE have already taken place for pupils who started Junior Cycle in September 2023. For Senior Cycle, the changes began in September 2024 and are to be implemented for year 5 from September 2027. Changes in primary schools are expected from September 2025.

Some of these changes risk promoting 'anything goes' sexual ethics and the idea that a person's 'true gender' is independent of biological reality.

But there are lots of good educational and legal reasons why schools must not interpret the new curriculum in this way, and parents have a vital role in helping ensure schools make good decisions. In fact, it is sometimes easier for parents to speak out than teachers.

## ***What can I do?***

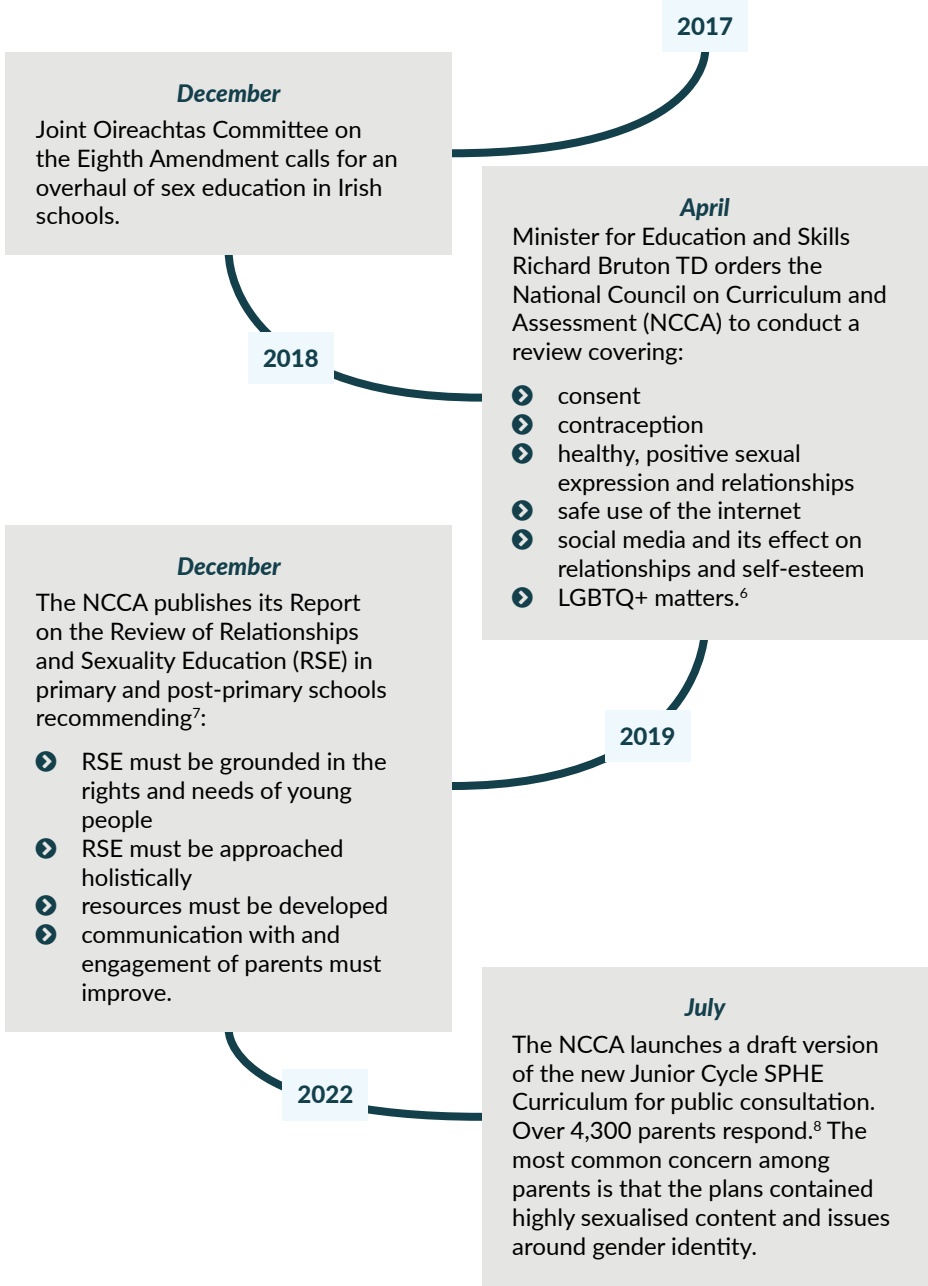
Irish<sup>2</sup> and international human rights law,<sup>3</sup> as well as the Bible,<sup>4</sup> recognises that parents are the primary educators of their children.

Christian parents will want to establish their young children in biblical truth and make sure they are protected from teaching that could skew their developing view of the world.

Parents with older children and teenagers will want them to know that Christian views are respected, whilst enabling them to critically consider other views that exist in contemporary Ireland. They will also want to protect them from temptations they could face from cavalier approaches to sex education.

Parents have the right to withdraw their children from lessons.<sup>5</sup> This is an important backstop protection and discourages schools from taking a divisive approach. You need to be vigilant, but working with your child's school will minimise the need for withdrawal and can encourage schools to adopt an approach that benefits others.

# How did we get here?



2023

**May**

The final version of the Junior Cycle Specification is published. Some of the content on 'gender identity' has been improved, and sexuality and gender are no longer presented as the only things that determine someone's identity.<sup>9</sup>

**July**

A draft of the Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum is published for public consultation.<sup>10</sup>

**September**

Teaching of the new Junior Cycle Specification to first-year pupils in post-primary schools commences. It will be rolled out to second and third years as those year groups move up through the school.

**March-June**

A public consultation on the updated Primary School Wellbeing Curriculum Specification (which incorporates SPHE and PE) is carried out.<sup>11</sup>

2024

**August**

The final version of the curriculum for Senior Cycle is published. It includes some improvements to the wording around 'diversity', with more categories than just sexual orientation and 'gender identity'. Schools can begin implementing it from September 2024 if they wish to. There is a deadline of September 2027 to introduce it for year 5.<sup>12</sup>

**What next?**

The new Wellbeing Curriculum is expected to be taught in primary schools from September 2025.





# What are schools expected to teach?

## PRIMARY

In March 2024, a **draft** primary school Wellbeing Curriculum was published with the following learning outcomes under Emotional and Relational Education.<sup>13</sup> How they are interpreted is crucial. This is an excerpt for the topics where problems are most likely to arise.

		JUNIOR INFANTS TO SECOND CLASS		THIRD TO SIXTH CLASS	
		STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4
Relationships		Establish and maintain healthy relationships, including friendships, and the ability to work cooperatively with others, through teamwork, respectful interactions, demonstrating an understanding of consent, effective communication and practising conflict resolution skills with support.		Recognise the importance of and identify key aspects of healthy relationships such as consent, effective communication, mutual respect, trust.	Appreciate the value of and need for healthy relationships and evaluate key aspects of healthy relationships such as consent, effective communication, emotional intelligence, mutual respect, trust and compromise.
				Demonstrate a growing ability to cope with changing relationships, including friendships, practising strategies to navigate peer influence, both positive and negative, disharmony, and conflict.	Demonstrate the ability to manage changing relationships in various social situations, including friendships, by adopting strategies to navigate social influence and respond to interpersonal conflicts constructively.
		Recognise healthy and unhealthy behaviours in relationships, identify instances of bullying and abuse, including inappropriate touch, understand the wrongfulness of these behaviours, and know the appropriate safety-focused responses.	Demonstrate an understanding of healthy and unhealthy behaviours in relationships, identify instances of bullying and abuse, including inappropriate touch, understand the wrongfulness of these behaviours, and apply the appropriate safety-focused responses.	Distinguish between healthy and unhealthy behaviours in relationships, identify instances of bullying and abuse, including inappropriate touch, understand the wrongfulness of these behaviours, and apply the appropriate safety-focused responses with increasing confidence.	Recognise unhealthy and harmful behaviours in relationships, identify instances of bullying and abuse, including inappropriate touch, understand the wrongfulness of these behaviours, and confidently apply the appropriate safety-focused responses.

		JUNIOR INFANTS TO SECOND CLASS		THIRD TO SIXTH CLASS	
		STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4
Human Development		Begin to recognise the stages of human development and the factors that promote growth, appreciating that growth takes place at different rates for everybody.	Demonstrate an awareness of how the human body changes as they grow, appreciating that growth and development takes place at different rates for everyone, and reflect on personal growth.	Demonstrate a growing understanding of the physical, social, and emotional changes that happen during puberty.	
		Develop an awareness of human birth and identify the care and conditions babies need to help them to grow and develop.	Begin to understand that birth, life, growth and death are all part of the human life cycle.	Demonstrate a growing understanding of the human life cycle through identifying the stages and sequence of development of the human baby from conception to birth, and describe the changes that happen to a woman's body during pregnancy.	Acknowledge that individual variations in growth and development are to be expected, recognising that hormonal changes during puberty signal a change in a person's reproductive capabilities.
		Name parts of the body using appropriate anatomical terms, such as penis, breasts, vulva, vagina, identifying private body areas, boundaries, and recognise appropriate private and public behaviours.	Use anatomically correct terms for the body parts, recognising that some parts of the body are private, distinguish between private and public behaviours and discuss the importance of respecting body boundaries.	Discuss the importance of adopting a positive attitude to their changing body, recognising that individual variations in growth and development are to be expected, and identify a trusted adult from whom they can seek support.	Recognise the importance of adopting a positive attitude toward their changing body and support systems during puberty, including credible sources of information and seeking support from a trusted adult.
Identity		Develop a growing sense of self-identity and self-worth, exploring their unique qualities, abilities, talents, and interests, recognising similarities and uniqueness in others.		Demonstrate increasing self-awareness and self-confidence, recognising and accepting their unique qualities, while also demonstrating acceptance and respect for uniqueness in others.	Recognise, value, and respect their unique qualities, cultivating a confident, positive sense of self, and demonstrate acceptance, respect and compassion towards diversity in others, fostering inclusion.
				Demonstrate awareness of the factors that can contribute to their self-image, self-worth, and an evolving sense of identity and identify ways to nurture a positive sense of self-worth.	Demonstrate deepening understanding of the factors that can influence their self-image, self-esteem and sense of identity and practise ways to nurture a positive sense of self-worth.

		JUNIOR INFANTS TO SECOND CLASS		THIRD TO SIXTH CLASS	
		STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4
Family		Acknowledge one's place and contribution within their family unit and demonstrate an awareness of the diversity of family structures,* how family members care for each other, and the differing roles of family members.	Appreciate the uniqueness of their own family unit, recognise the diversity of family structures* and reflect on roles and responsibilities within their family and the part each member plays in promoting harmony.	Recognise the ways in which families can contribute to personal values, decisions, and sense of identity.	Demonstrate an awareness of how social and cultural norms can influence family life, how these have changed over time, and critically consider media portrayals of families and family life.
				Understand that families are structured in diverse ways,* demonstrate an awareness of the variety of influences that can affect families, such as change, loss, bereavement, illness, and stereotypes, and explore ways family members can promote gender equality through roles and responsibilities.	Discuss characteristics of healthy family life, identify new responsibilities they can take on, appreciating that roles and responsibilities change as they grow, and develop strategies to manage conflicts and misunderstandings that can occur in families, particularly during puberty.
<p><i>*Diversity of family structures refers [to] the range of ways families are formed and structured, such as mother-and father-headed families family, co-parenting families, one-parent families, same-sex parent families, extended families, stepfamilies, adoptive families, foster families, and more.</i></p>					
Rights and Fairness		Begin to develop an understanding of rights, equity, fairness, fair play and their importance.	Demonstrate an appreciation of the importance of rights, equity, fairness, and fair play.	Describe the importance of rights, fairness, equity, and equality.	Appreciate the importance of rights, fairness, justice, equity, and equality, and discuss the nine grounds under which discrimination is prohibited in Ireland.
		Identify examples of fairness in their own lives and begin to demonstrate fairness in interactions and activities in a variety of contexts.	Identify examples of fairness in their own lives and the lives of others and demonstrate fairness in interactions and activities in a variety of contexts.	Recognise examples of inequality and discrimination and explore appropriate responses and actions to stand up for oneself and others.	Examine instances of inequality and discrimination, explore people or organisations who promote human rights, and propose appropriate responses and actions to challenge discrimination and promote social justice.

## JUNIOR CYCLE

### ***Learning outcomes (Post-primary 1st Year – 3rd Year)***

Like other Junior Cycle 'short courses', the NCCA recommends that SPHE receives a minimum of 100 hours teaching over the three-year cycle. RSE is only one of four strands and concerning content could arise elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> The full list of content can be viewed at [curriculumonline.ie](http://curriculumonline.ie) under: Junior Cycle > Short Courses.



The intended learning outcomes for RSE are:

- 3.1 reflect on the values, behaviours and skills that help to make, sustain and end relationships respectfully with friends, family and romantic/intimate relationships.
- 3.2 examine benefits and difficulties experienced by young people in a range of relationships – friendships, family relationships, and romantic/intimate relationships.
- 3.3 identify signs of healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships.
- 3.4 appreciate the importance of setting healthy boundaries in relationships and consider how to show respect for the boundaries of others.
- 3.5 consider the importance of taking care of their reproductive health.
- 3.6 appreciate the breadth of what constitutes human sexuality, and how sexual orientation and gender identity are experienced and expressed in diverse ways.
- 3.7 explore the pressures to become sexually intimate and discuss ways to show respect for people's choices.
- 3.8 appreciate the importance of seeking, giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships, from the perspective of building caring relationships and from a legal perspective.
- 3.9 explain the importance of safer sexual activity with reference to methods of contraception and protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- 3.10 discuss the influence of popular culture and the online world, in particular, the influence of pornography, on young people's understanding, expectations and social norms in relation to sexual expression.
- 3.11 demonstrate how to access and appraise appropriate and trustworthy advice, support and services related to relationships and sexual health.<sup>15</sup>



## SENIOR CYCLE

### **Learning outcomes (Post-primary 5th & 6th Year)**

The NCCA recommends that SPHE receives a minimum of 60 hours learning over the two-year cycle. The intended learning outcomes for RSE are:

#### SENIOR CYCLE SPHE

- 2.1 demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating effectively, navigating difficult conversations, preventing and managing conflict and dealing with break-ups.
- 2.2 reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity, and those of others, can influence the dynamics of families, friendships and romantic relationships.
- 2.3 discuss the need for consent and the importance of care, respect, empathy, trust and mutual pleasure within a sexual relationship.
- 2.4 examine how both positive and harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online, and in society and discuss strategies for challenging and changing harmful attitudes and narratives.
- 2.5 identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control.
- 2.6 explore the root causes and consequences of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV), and outline the supports and services available, and protections under the law.
- 2.7 investigate the possible influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations and what supports are available for those impacted by pornography.
- 2.8 discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape, and what to do and how to seek support if they or someone they know has experienced any of these.
- 2.9 understand the components of sexual health including fertility across the life-cycle, reproductive choices, sexual functioning, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health information and services.<sup>16</sup>





# What are the risks?

## **Anything goes**

Sex within faithful man-woman marriage is part of God's good creation and the only appropriate context for sexual activity. The new curriculum's emphasis on the 'range of relationships' and 'breadth of what constitutes human sexuality' is more in keeping with an 'anything goes' approach, with consent as the *only* moral criterion for sexual intimacy.

Marketed as 'sex positivity', this approach holds that any and all sex acts must be affirmed and celebrated as long as there is consent and precautions are taken to minimise risks to physical health.<sup>17</sup> It inevitably leads to long-held norms and boundaries for sexual behaviour being undermined by cavalier attitudes to what is age-appropriate. However, there is no requirement for schools to adopt a 'sex-positive' approach and individual schools have considerable discretion as to how they deliver the SPHE curriculum. This can be influenced by parental input (see page 21: What questions should I ask?).

## **Normalises pornography**

Easy access to pornography for children is a major problem. But addressing pornography in a context which sidelines long-held moral considerations, while affirming all sexual desires, runs the risk of encouraging children to watch pornography. Rather, schools should give plain warnings of the dangers of pornography, explaining how watching it fuels sex trafficking and abuse, as well as its devastating effect on the lives of those involved in its production, and the risks and consequences of normalising it for the viewer.

## **Ignores marriage**

Marriage is not mentioned in the curriculum documents. This is a glaring omission, given it is the prime example of a sexual relationship in Ireland as in the rest of the world, not to mention the substantial evidence of its wide-ranging benefits.<sup>18</sup> The Constitution requires the Irish State to protect it from attack, and the 2024 referendum demonstrated that the Irish public clearly want it to continue to recognise the distinctiveness of marriage (see page 19).

## **Promotes gender ideology**

Transgender ideology holds that people have a ‘gender identity’ which is independent of the biological sex of their bodies.

The curriculum promotes this highly contested ideology by defining ‘gender identity’ as “a person’s felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex registered at birth”.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, it is likely that many schools will teach transgender ideology as if it is fact.

Children could be encouraged to try to determine this ‘identity’ according to subjective feelings or whether their interests line up with stereotypically masculine or feminine traits – in some cases, leading to them rejecting the reality of their bodies. This could fuel the already exponential rise in children pursuing social transition, which has set so many on a course towards often irreparable physical and psychological harm, including infertility, via puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones and even surgery.

For years, leading clinicians in Ireland’s National Gender Service raised serious concerns about the automatic affirmation of children and teenagers’ belief that they are of a different gender.<sup>20</sup>

In April 2024, the UK’s Cass Review concluded that this whole field of healthcare is based on “remarkably weak evidence”.<sup>21</sup> In response to these findings, one of these clinicians, Dr Paul Moran, wrote: “Irish schools should not be taking the lead in the social transitioning of children. The Department of Health should reconsider some of the overly affirmative educational and training materials it is sending to schools and the prominent role it has given to activist organisations in policy development and teacher training.”<sup>22</sup>



# BUNREACTH NA hÉIREANN

## CONSTITUTION OF IRELAND

### THE FAMILY | *ARTICLE 41*

1

- 1° The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.
- 2° The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.

...

3

- 1° The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack.

...

### EDUCATION | *ARTICLE 42*

- 1 The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.

- 2 Parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.

...

- 4 The State shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation.

...

### RELIGION | *ARTICLE 44*

- 1 The State acknowledges that the homage of public worship is due to Almighty God. It shall hold His Name in reverence, and shall respect and honour religion.

2

- 1° Freedom of conscience and the free profession and practice of religion are, subject to public order and morality, guaranteed to every citizen.

...

- 3° The State shall not impose any disabilities or make any discrimination on the ground of religious profession, belief or status.



# What questions should I ask?

Asking good questions can prompt a school to consider issues it may have overlooked and help it to implement SPHE teaching in a better way. You could have a word with the teacher at home time, or drop an email to the school.

## Did you know?

Schools have discretion in how they deliver the SPHE curriculum. As Education Minister, Norma Foley said: “Schools have the autonomy to choose or not to choose the textbook so long as it meets the curriculum demands”.<sup>23</sup> The NCCA’s online SPHE toolkit states: “The resources listed are not intended as exhaustive or prescriptive as each teacher/school and class will decide what resources are best suited to their needs.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, schools can decide what resources they will use to deliver the SPHE curriculum.



Norma Foley

## Impartiality

As pupils grow older, a good education should expose them to a range of fairly presented viewpoints and help them to critique those views. Where available, objective evidence should be considered. Pushing one viewpoint on a contested issue is indoctrination, not education. The NCCA identifies key skills to be developed through the curriculum, including in SPHE. These skills include:

- “Thinking creatively and critically”;
- “Discussing and debating”;
- “Developing a positive disposition towards...reasoning” and
- “Making considered decisions”<sup>25</sup>

This requires schools to present a range of views and facilitate critical analysis, debate and discussion. Schools should not be promoting views with which Christians disagree, rather they should be fairly presenting the range that exists – including a Christian view. This approach respects parents because, while it makes children aware of other points of view, it does not set out to undermine the views of parents.



Younger children will not be able to engage in critical analysis to the same extent. This is one important reason schools should save contentious topics until children are older.

## Ask...

- How will the school ensure pupils are exposed to a range of views on contentious issues, such as gender and sexual ethics, and how will it make sure these different views are presented fairly?
- How will the school ensure it is respecting my views as a parent?
- Will the school be using any external groups to deliver SPHE lessons?

**Remember:** Some teachers are simply unaware of mainstream Christian beliefs on these issues. Be prepared to explain to them in a positive and reasonable manner. It is important to help the teacher understand them clearly, but also to show by how you speak that they can be presented sensitively.

## *What if...*

The school says: *"It's not appropriate to present Christian views to pupils who are not Christian"*?

You are not asking them to promote Christian views. You are simply asking them to fairly present a broad range of views so pupils can make up their own minds. To do otherwise is to promote secular views that would not be appropriate for Christian pupils. In addition, the Christian view that it is not possible to change sex, for example, is held by many of all faiths and none.

## Respect different beliefs

The NCCA specification for Junior Cycle SPHE states:

NCCA  
specification

*“Thinking creatively and being open to the viewpoint and perspective of others is also encouraged”.*

*“Students learn to express ideas and emotions clearly and respectfully and develop empathy by listening to different perspectives and experiences and showing concern for the feelings of others.”<sup>26</sup>*

Teachers should manage classes so that your children feel able to express their beliefs about sex and relationships, confident that they will be listened to with respect. That respect should be modelled by the way teachers speak about a range of viewpoints in their teaching. Spend time talking over issues with your child before the lesson, so they can clearly and respectfully express a Christian view in class.

### **Compelled speech**

The right not to express a view is also protected under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (the right to a private and family life). Schools must not compel any pupil to express their personal beliefs if they would prefer not to. This can include requiring a show of hands for or against a contentious issue.

Likewise, no one should ever be compelled to express support for a belief that they do not hold. That would be a clear breach of their rights under Articles 9 and 10 of the Convention (freedom of expression and freedom of thought, conscience and religion). This was at the heart of The Christian Institute’s historic UK Supreme Court case on behalf of Ashers Baking Company.<sup>27</sup>



### **Ask...**

- How will you ensure my child does not feel excluded or marginalised because of his/her beliefs?

## Child protection and safeguarding

Teaching on the topic of gender requires particular care. Schools should ensure that teaching does not encourage pupils to believe they are 'trapped in the wrong body' or to harm themselves through hormonal or surgical interventions. The landmark Cass Review found no clear evidence to support claims that social transition in childhood leads to positive mental health outcomes,<sup>28</sup> rather that it can produce anxiety and fuel the desire to access puberty blockers.<sup>29</sup> Evidence that puberty blockers<sup>30</sup> or hormones<sup>31</sup> are of benefit is scant, while there is evidence that there is potential for harm.<sup>32</sup> The Review states that "the importance of what happens in school cannot be under-estimated".<sup>33</sup>

For more information on the Cass Review, see our publication:  
*A turn in the tide? Understanding the Cass Review.* ▶

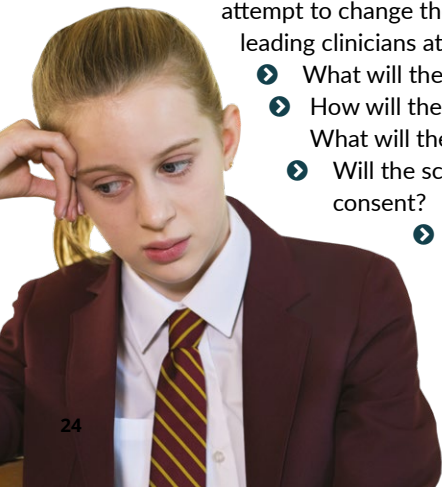


Similarly, schools must not expose pupils to online pornography or inadvertently signpost them to it, and all their teaching must be appropriate to the age and developmental stage of the children.

The age of consent is 17. This is to protect young people, and schools must not undermine this protection by encouraging or normalising sexual activity below the age of 17.

### ? Ask...

- ▶ What processes and procedures does the school have in place to make sure teaching on gender does not encourage children to reject their own body or attempt to change their sex, particularly given the concerns expressed by leading clinicians at the National Gender Service?<sup>34</sup> (See page 18)
  - ▶ What will the school be teaching about gender and when?
  - ▶ How will the school teach about pornography, and at what age? What will the key messages be?
  - ▶ Will the school's teaching be in line with the law on the age of consent?
  - ▶ Will the school be using any external groups to deliver lessons on these topics? If so, which ones?





## ***The significance of marriage***

Marriage reflects the relationship between Christ and the Church<sup>35</sup> and is established by God for all people as part of his good creation.<sup>36</sup> It is therefore not surprising to find that the evidence is consistent with Christian teaching that sexual activity should be reserved for man-woman marriage.

On the whole, children brought up by their married parents achieve more educationally, are healthier and are more economically productive.<sup>37</sup>

While there is a need for sensitivity, young people must not be denied objective information which will inform some of the most important decisions they will make in their lives. Marriage is increasingly becoming confined to wealthier segments of society. It is those children who have not had married parents who most need to know about the benefits of marriage, otherwise this cycle is perpetuated.

Schools need to help pupils develop an understanding of the nature and distinctive characteristics of marriage, as well as its significance for children's upbringing and for society. The 2024 referendum result clearly shows that the public want the State to continue to recognise the distinctive character of marriage. This needs to be respected by the education system.

### Ask...

- What will you be teaching about marriage?
- Will you be providing objective teaching about the evidence for the benefits of marriage?



## Religious foundations of schools

The legal duty to provide moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students, and health education, to which SPHE contributes, is set out in Section 9(d) of the Education Act 1998:

Education Act 1998

- 9.— A recognised school shall provide education to students which is appropriate to their abilities and needs and, without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, it shall use its available resources to—
- ...
- (d) promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school...

The 'characteristic spirit of the school' is defined in Section 15(2)(b) of the Act, which sets out the functions of the school board:

Education Act 1998

- 15.—
- ...
- (2)(b) uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school...

The overwhelming majority of schools in Ireland have a religious patron – usually Roman Catholic. (Roman Catholic teaching on sexual relationships is very similar to Protestant doctrine.) Schools, Boards of Management and patrons may be reluctant to insist on compliance with these legal duties, but parental concerns can give them greater confidence to uphold their religious and moral teachings in the delivery of SPHE, and parents can help hold them to account.

## Ask...

Of school staff:

- ▶ In what ways is the school having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school in its provision of SPHE?
- ▶ Will SPHE respectfully present personal and social teaching consistent with the religious foundation of the school?
- ▶ Will SPHE lessons focus on the centrality of marriage when discussing sexual relationships?

Of school board members:

- ▶ How are you ensuring the characteristic spirit of the school is being upheld in SPHE teaching?
- ▶ What actions are you considering taking that will give you confidence SPHE teaching upholds, and does not undermine, the religious foundation of the school in relation to moral issues?
- ▶ Are you ensuring that marriage is central in the teaching of sexual relationships in SPHE?

Of patrons:

- ▶ What use are you making of the provisions in Sections 9 and 15 of the Education Act 1998 to ensure SPHE teaching is not undermining the religious values in which parents want to bring up their children?



# What else can I do?

Along with asking questions, there are other ways to hold the school to account that can deter bad practice and benefit other children as well as your own.

## **Ensure you're consulted properly**

Section 9(d) of the Education Act 1998 requires schools to:

Education  
Act 1998

*"promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, **in consultation with their parents**".*

This clearly applies to the teaching of SPHE, including RSE.

***Consultation with parents does not mean merely informing parents. Schools must seek parents' views and give them proper consideration.***

Because of the changes to the curriculum, schools are likely to be revising their approach to RSE. This means they should be consulting parents. It is worth asking teachers, head teachers or parents on the school's board of management when this consultation will take place. You may even be able to make suggestions for helpful questions to include.

### **Tips**

Request that the school:

- gives parents a list of proposed learning outcomes;
- asks if they or their children have religious or philosophical beliefs about these issues;
- asks how it can accommodate these to ensure the teaching is appropriate for them;
- asks for parents' views on where in the cycle it is age-appropriate to teach a topic, and how the content can be presented in an age-appropriate way.

The NCCA curriculum does not specify the recommended age for teaching particular topics within each cycle. There is also a range of possible interpretations over what

each learning outcome actually requires. Content must be appropriate to the age and maturity of students, but what is 'age-appropriate' is a subjective judgement on which parents will differ wildly from sex education campaigners. A consultation could ask parents for their views on what is appropriate at different ages. Parents usually know their children best and it is their judgement of what is appropriate for their age and maturity that is most likely to be reliable.

**Effective consultation ensures the school is abiding by its legal obligations under the Constitution and the Education Act. It enables the school to adopt a better approach, taking account of parents' insight into their children's needs. It is important for schools that parents and pupils have confidence in the teaching. By taking parents' views into account, the school is less likely to adopt an approach that leads to children being withdrawn from lessons.**

## ***Get informed***

### *SPHE and RSE policies*

It is a common practice for schools to publish their SPHE and/or RSE policy on their website. This policy should set out the approach of the school, how teachers should handle questions from students, how parental requests for pupils to be withdrawn from lessons will be handled, and provide an outline of what will be taught and when. If you are considering which school to send your child to, look at these policies.

If the policy raises questions for you, then do follow them up with the school, whether you already have children at the school or are considering the school for your child.

**Schools need to know if their policy is causing parents concern.**

### *Asking for more information*

Education is a partnership between schools and parents. Schools should always welcome parents who want to know more.

Schools will have a programme of study or similar document which sets out what will be taught and when. It may have pre-prepared lesson plans and various educational materials used to support this teaching. You can ask to see these. The only reason to refuse this request is when an individual teacher's lesson plan contains personal information about other children.

The law allows parents to withdraw their children from teaching on conscientious grounds. In order for them to exercise that right – whether or not they choose to use it – **schools must allow parents to know what is being taught.** This also enables parents to talk to their child about the issues that concern them.

## Contribute to school evaluations

Schools are required to carry out self-evaluations on a four-year cycle.<sup>38</sup> According to the inspectorate, it is important schools seek the views of parents in reviewing their RSE programme, making use of the guidelines for self-evaluation.<sup>39</sup> These guidelines state they “enable [parents’] fullest participation in school self-evaluation”.<sup>40</sup>

Schools use a framework called ‘Looking at Our School’ (LAOS) to conduct self-evaluation. LAOS guidance states:

LAOS guidance

The framework “...***maintains that the most powerful agent of improvement is a well-integrated system of evaluation that combines the external perspective with the reflective and collective insights of school leaders, teachers, parents and pupils***”.<sup>41</sup>

Schools should be regularly seeking parental views on a variety of topics, including RSE and SPHE, but there is nothing to stop parents being proactive in sharing their views.

## Take opportunities during school inspections

One of a school inspector’s tasks is to assess the school’s work on self-evaluation and improvement. Guidance for schools on self-evaluation gives the following statements to describe ‘highly effective practice’:

- The school’s leaders “value and support partnership with parents as a means of supporting pupils’ learning and wellbeing. They build and maintain very constructive relationships with parents which impact positively on their children’s learning”.
- “The board of management and the principal facilitate and support the parents’ association to fulfil its partnership and advisory role, and to operate as an inclusive forum, supporting the involvement of all parents.”

If this does not describe the school’s work with parents, you could consider raising it with inspectors, providing them with evidence. However, do try to resolve any issues directly with the school first.

## **Raise concerns**

### **Speak up sooner rather than later**

It is easier for the school to make changes when it is still deciding on its approach. Informal conversations with a teacher, especially in primary schools, are a good start. Don't assume teachers will be hostile. Some will also be concerned about what they are being asked to teach, but may be worried about the impact on their employment if they speak up. By expressing concerns as a parent, you make it easier for them.

### **Be precise**

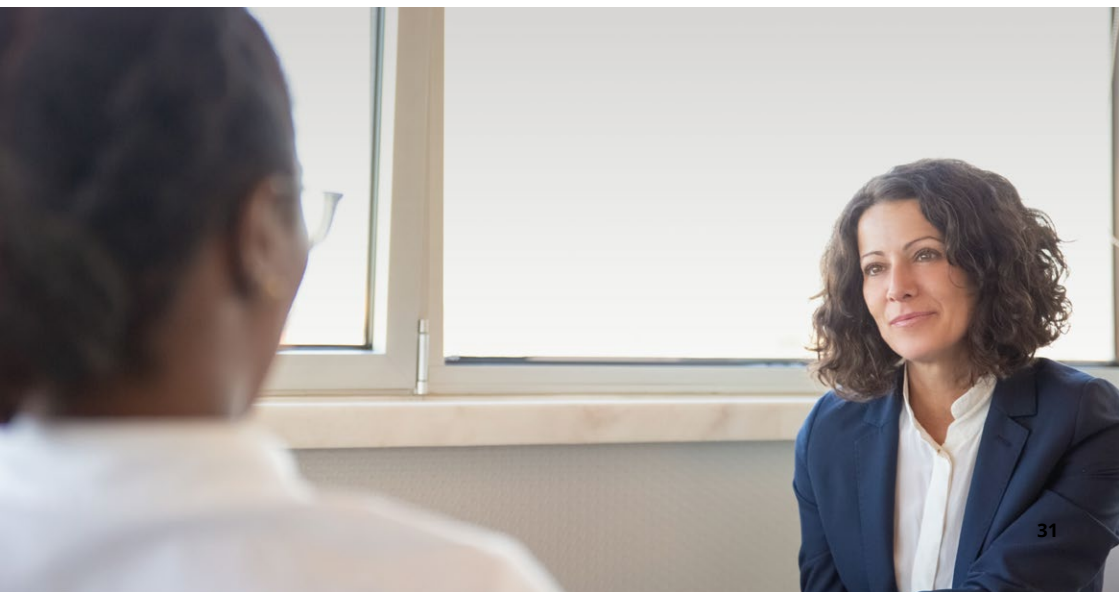
Be specific about your concerns. For example, if your child has been distressed about something that has been taught in a lesson, be precise about the date, time and details of what happened.

### **Be measured**

Be measured in how you express yourself. This will help you avoid coming across as confrontational or rude. It is also helpful if you are able to offer constructive suggestions about how the school can address your concerns.

### **Keep a written record**

If you do have to pursue your concerns more formally and this involves meetings with members of staff, email them afterwards. Thank them for their time and for what they have agreed to, including a list. That creates a written record of agreements and makes it easier to hold the school to their promises.





## ***Withdraw your child***

The law allows you to remove your child from any teaching. Section (30)(2)(e) of the 1998 Education Act states that the Education Minister:

Education  
Act 1998

*“shall not require any student to attend instruction in any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parent of the student or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years, the student”.*

As well as providing a backstop protection against your child receiving harmful education, the willingness of parents to withdraw their children is a deterrent against controversial teaching methods. You can withdraw your child at any point. But it is best exercised as a last resort when other means of engaging with the school have failed. Schools want to avoid children being withdrawn from teaching. If they know an approach to teaching RSE is likely to lead multiple parents to exercise this right, they may reconsider.

There have been reports of schools requiring parents to supervise their children when withdrawn from a lesson. This is obviously very difficult for many parents, particularly where both are in full-time employment. Schools need to be careful not to impose unreasonable conditions which undermine this law by making it impractical for parents to take advantage of it.



## ***Make a formal complaint***

On rare occasions, you may need to pursue a formal complaint. This creates a written record that the school's approach is causing problems and should enable you to get specific responses to your concerns. Sometimes officials defend themselves against the accusation that teaching is causing widespread concern among parents by pointing out that no complaints have been received. Multiple formal complaints from different parents show there is a problem that the school needs to resolve.

The law requires schools to have a complaints procedure, and it is good practice for schools to publish it on their website. If it isn't there, you can ask the school for a copy. Take careful note of any deadlines.

### ***i* Tips**

- Focus on a small number of key points and make sure what you write is accurate.
- Back it up with evidence wherever possible.
- Be clear about what you would like the school to do to resolve the situation.
- Focus on the needs of your child.
- It can be helpful to support what you are saying by quoting from the law, as set out in this booklet. But remember, teachers are not lawyers and the decisions on your complaint will be made by the school or its board of management, not a court. You don't need to write a technical legal argument.



## **Get involved**

Before resorting to quoting the law, it is helpful for parents to build a positive relationship with the school wherever possible. This may be by simply expressing thanks to teachers, volunteering where there are opportunities, or taking on a more formal role. But whether you take on such a role or not, schools should always welcome parental engagement with their children's education.

### *Parents' Association*

The school principal and the board are required by law to have regard to any advice from the Parents' Association on any aspect of the school's work, including the teaching of RSE and SPHE. This does not mean they have to do everything the association says, but they must give it serious consideration. It could be difficult for them to go against its advice without a good reason.

If a Parents' Association doesn't exist, you can set one up. The law requires the school board to give reasonable assistance for this, and to the association itself once it is established.

### *School board*

Most schools have Boards of Management appointed by the school's patron, commonly a religious body. The Board is accountable to the patron for upholding "the characteristic spirit of the school" (see 'Religious Foundations of Schools') and any school deed or charter, as well as ensuring the school is complying with the law. The Board is not involved in the day-to-day running of the school but has a significant role to play in its overall approach, including in the formation of school policies, such as on RSE and SPHE.

Usually, boards will include two parents, elected by other parents. If you are able to stand for election to the board, you can have a significant impact.



## **Other actions**

### *Respond to public consultations*

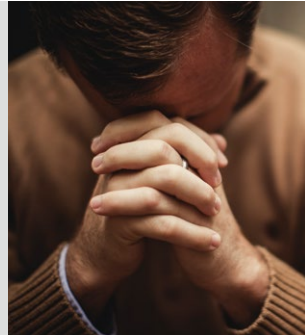
Proposed changes to the curriculum are open to public consultation. Well-written responses do make a difference, and the more people who respond, the greater the impact they can have.

### *Engage with politicians*

If you have concerns, it is worth raising them with your TDs.

### ***“But first...pray”***

Prayer is our most powerful and effective weapon. Pray for our teachers, board members, pupils and those in government and the NCCA, that schools will promote what is good, and not lead children astray. What is right to pray for is also right to work for, and we trust this booklet will help you take action.



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# Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)

A guide for Christian parents

**Parents may be worried about upcoming changes to Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). This booklet explains why.**

Some of these changes risk promoting 'anything goes' sexual ethics and the idea that a person's 'true gender' is independent of biological reality.

But there are lots of good educational and legal reasons why schools must not interpret the new curriculum in this way, and parents have a vital role in helping ensure schools make good decisions.



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