

**Draft specification
for Junior Cycle SPHE**NCCA consultation

# Draft specification for Junior Cycle SPHE - NCCA consultation

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The NCCA is currently updating the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum and as part of that work an updated junior cycle SPHE short course is now available for consultation. A key part of the consultation is feedback from individuals and groups who are interested in this area of young people’s education.

The consultation will remain open until Friday, October 14th 2022.

You can send us your feedback by using this template and sending it to
**SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie**

Before completing the template please read the draft junior cycle SPHE short course at this link:

[**https://ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/consultations/.**](https://ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/consultations/.)

Extracts from this are provided below.

**Date Protection Statement**

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Any data from this will be further anonymized and aggregated and only made available after the final report is completed. Where a respondent selects ‘yes’ to the question *Are you willing to be listed as a contributor to the consultation*, respondents are consenting to having their name / organisation’s name published with the list of written submission on [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)

# SPHE Short Course - Feedback

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| --- | --- |
| **Name:** Shirley Scott | **Email address:** **drccpolicy@rcc.ie** |
| **Are you contributing views as:** | Yes/No |
| **An organisation**  | **Yes**/No  |
| **Are you willing to be listed as a contributor to the consultation on the NCCA website?** | **Yes**/No  |
| **Name of organisation**  | Dublin Rape Crisis Centre |

## Questions to consider:

Question 1.
The aim of the updated short course is ***'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'***

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

In principle the aim captures the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle. The ethos of the course is well-placed and attempts to address the needs of students in leading fulfilling and healthy lives. As the course rationale outlines, relationship and sexuality education (RSE) is an integral part of and connects with aspects of SPHE**.[[1]](#footnote-1)** The aim of the course should also attest to the curriculum being accurate, inclusive, evidence-based and reflecting the rights of the child.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in a General Comment recommended that States adopt: ‘…*age-appropriate, comprehensive and inclusive sexual and reproductive health education, based on scientific evidence and human rights standards and developed with adolescents’.*[[2]](#footnote-2) Research carried out by Plan International found that 1 in 3 of those surveyed encountered misinformation on LGBTI+ identities in school.[[3]](#footnote-3) The significance of sexuality education is in a number of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [[4]](#footnote-4) including:

*SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing: To ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages, including the following sub-goal: By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes.*

*SDG 4: Quality Education: To ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning, and includes a sub-goal pertaining to teacher professional learning and development: By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states.*

*SDG 5: Gender Equality and Empowerment: To ensure all forms of discrimination and violence against girls and women are eliminated and includes a sub-goal: By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.*

A stated aim of the RSE strand of the curriculum should be based not just on biological physical facts around sex but one that also provides an opportunity to put forward the positive aspects of intimate relationships which are based on equality and mutual respect. Student participation in the RSE strand should empower them to take responsibility for their own decision-making and behaviours and how their choices can affect and impact on others.

The last comprehensive prevalence study: Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland (SAVI) Report found that one in four adults experience sexual violence in their lifetime.[[5]](#footnote-5) With this in mind, RSE needs to aim concretely and specifically to prevent future generations from having similar negative experiences. Thus, an understanding of sexual abuse and violence, explaining what it is, how to recognise it and what to do about it, including how to access support, should be integrated into the curriculum.

The importance of an inclusive approach to RSE which respects diversity and enables students to feel accepted, understood and included through what they are taught and what they learn is also essential. Ultimately, the RSE strand of the curriculum should cover sexual health and risks, as well as teaching students about consent and understanding boundaries, what a healthy relationship looks like and how to stay safe in the real world and online, will ensure they have a good knowledge base on which to make informed decisions. In addition to providing an appropriate educational and emotional foundation, it is key to preventing sexual abuse and harm in their futures.

The role and profile of SPHE must be elevated within the overall school curriculum, even if it is competing for time and space with examinable subjects because the consequences of not doing so are too serious for students in their emotional development, as well as in their futures. Barriers such as poor timetabling practices, lack of available teacher time and materials impact the quality of education.[[6]](#footnote-6) SPHE needsto be part of a school-wide approach to addressing students’ growth in relation to their sense of self-worth, emotional well-being, and healthy and respectful relationships. For full engagement and comprehension, the curriculum should not only theoretically exist within the allocated time for teaching, but should be implemented holistically within the education system as a whole.

It is essential that the updated course also includes clear and concise implementation strategies for the educational objectives. Specifically, the course contains a plethora of content which directs educators on what to teach, but does not offer support or guidance on how to teach such topics. This is of particular importance as many objectives require critical discussion and debate. Without clear strategies on how to manage this learning environment, students and educators alike could miss opportunities for comprehension and further development.

Educators must be professionally prepared and supported with the resources and confidence to teach their students this new curriculum which is both important and complex work. Initial teacher education and continuing professional development is critical to building confidence and competence in the implementation of RSE in schools.[[7]](#footnote-7) If educators are to realise the full potential of the updated SPHE curriculum, then the conditions needed to support them in effectively providing it, need to be put in place. The importance of educators who are adequately prepared, comfortable and confident in teaching SPHE and RSE particularly and can facilitate shared dialogue and participatory learning are crucial ‘*to provide comprehensive, age-appropriate, inclusive and effective sexuality education to child and young people in our 21st century classrooms’*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The spiral approach adopted to engaging with each strand of SPHE will support students’ comprehension, as well as retention of information. The course needs to take into consideration learning abilities and/or difficulties faced by particular student cohorts when implementing the strategy. It must also be as accessible as possible to ensure optimal levels of understanding.

Question 2.
The course is structured around four strands and three cross­cutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide ***clarity*** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be ***relevant*** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15-year old’s today.

The multi-strand, spiral approach applied to SPHE is likely to have a positive impact on students’ understanding of the learning outcomes. The opportunity for content to be revisited at different stages provides opportunities to consolidate and build on previous learnings and allows for issues and topics to be explored further.

Overall, the learning outcomes of the four curriculum strands are relevant to the lives, interests, and needs of today’s 12 to 15-year olds. They do provide some clarity about expectations.

 However, there are some of learning outcomes that require further exploration and development to ensure optimal comprehension which we will elaborate on further. The learning outcomes in relation to Strand 3 in particular provides opportunity to reflect, discuss and build on the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs they have acquired about healthy relationships. There is more clarity required in the areas of unequal power within a relationship and the behaviours that make relationships unequal and unhealthy.

In our own work in this area, BodyRight, we have identified that it is very important to include a component on the nature of sexual violence on the curriculum as part of education on healthy positive sexual expression. [[9]](#footnote-9) Leading sociologist in gender and sexuality studies, Michael Flood, suggests that sex education programmes include the structural and cultural factors that contribute to sexual violence[[10]](#footnote-10). To expand on the learning outcome there is a need to incorporate a trauma informed approach for greater emphasis on the effects of trauma for educators and students alike. Such an approach could contribute to the educators’ own knowledge and understanding of trauma and its impact on student development[[11]](#footnote-11).

Outlined below are the learning outcomes that we focused on in particular:

**Strand 1. Understanding Myself and others**

In Learning Outcome 1.1, the exploration of the physical, social and emotional changes that happen during adolescence are highlighted. Although this is taught earlier in primary school it does provide the opportunity to review the changes that occur during adolescence and puberty and remind students that everyone is different and develops at their own pace. Within this learning outcome there could even be scope to include the science behind adolescent brain development and how taking part in stimulating or potentially addictive habits can affect the way the brain develops.[[12]](#footnote-12) [[13]](#footnote-13)

The purpose of this learning outcome should also be to ensure that students fully understand how the male and female reproductive systems work and the correct names and description of the different parts of the reproductive and sexual organs.

In Learning Outcome 1.4, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression as core parts of the human identity are explored. Students live and study in a diverse gender society so it is important this learning outcome acknowledges and helps create a dialogue that respects and celebrates difference in gender identities andsexual orientation and expression**.**

Giving students the opportunity to discuss gender identity and sexual orientation provides an important context for discussion about treating each other with dignity and respect regardless of differences in gender, sexual orientation and gender expression. Ultimately the learning here is around students building an understanding about the diverse society they live in.

In Learning Outcome 1.5, reflection on gender equity and how gender stereotypes impact on expectations, behaviour and relationships is highlighted. Gender stereotypes are harmful because they limit a person’s ability to make significant life choices and pursue their professional goals. This learning outcome should provide the students with a gender literacy that will allow them not just to reflect upon but to navigate the many cultural stereotypes that exist in relation to gender. It is important that students are given the opportunity to recognise and consider the impact gender bias can have on their own lives and how it could prevent them from reaching their full potential if they don’t combat them. Allowing students to recognise and describe how media can create, influence and perpetuate gender stereotypes will strengthen their critical thinking skills when exposed to structural or cultural gender inequity or stereotypes.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In Learning Outcome 1.6, the focus of the student discussion centres on creating a more inclusive society. The Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality (2021)[[15]](#footnote-15) recommended that all school curriculum review should promote gender equality and diversity.

Students need to understand equality and they need to know their own rights to understand how they should be treated and in turn how they should treat others. They also need to understand how discrimination on the basis of race/ethnicity, including Traveller ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation impacts everyone–not just the targets of the discrimination. When people are discriminated against, opportunities to learn from them are missed. Challenging notions of power dynamics in society, identifying how holding power relates to experiences of privilege or discrimination will be an important tenet of this learning outcome.

In Learning Outcome 1.7, the focus is on communicating in a respectful and effective manner, including the capacity to understand the perspectives of, and empathise with others. Included within the focus of this outcome could be an objective on assertive communication which is both an important social and communication skill. Students could develop their skills in this area to allow them to effectively communicate their position in a clear way while at the same time respecting the rights and wishes of others.

**Strand 2. Making healthy choices**

In Learning Outcome 2.1, students evaluate what being healthy might look like for an adolescent, including how food, physical activity, sleep/rest and hygiene contribute to health and wellbeing. This should also include behaviours and motivations that contribute to health and wellbeing. In a world of social media, young people face increasing pressure to live up to unrealistic images and ideologies. This can result in young people getting conflicting messages about what is and isn’t healthy which in turn can impact their physical and mental health. Everyone should learn how to maintain a healthy lifestyle and the benefits of this learning outcome can have positive impacts for maintaining good habits into adult life.

In Learning Outcome 2.7, it is suggested that students assess the benefits and difficulties associated with their online world. This however, is an extremely limited scope and, we submit, insufficient to build their necessary understanding. UNICEF’s Children in a Digital World states that “*More attention should be given to the content and activities of children’s digital experiences – what they are doing online and why – rather than strictly to how much time they spend in front of screens*.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

The learning outcome for students should be one that supports them to analyse the influence of the online world and how it can positively and negatively shape their behaviours, attitudes and values.

In Learning Outcome 2.9 which relates to the sharing of sexual imagery online, it is important that a proactive approach to helping students understand, assess, manageand avoid risks associated with online activity are explored. If students are not given the tools and the language to deal with these issues, they will not be able to navigate them appropriately and may be harmed or cause harm. Ultimately, they need to be resourced to develop skills to allow them safely manage their online interactions with others. We would submit that learning outcome 2.9 would be better placed within Strand 3.

**Strand 3. Relationships and Sexuality**

In Learning Outcome 3.1, it is asked that students explore human sexuality - what it means, how it is expressed, what healthy sexual expression might look like and the difference between sexuality and sexual activity. However, this lacks the inclusion of how media and pornography influence these ideas. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) stated: “*At age 17, nearly a quarter of young men and 20 per cent of young women cited the internet/TV/films/books as their main source of information about sex. Those who were more alienated from their peers were significantly more likely to cite the internet as their main source.”*[[17]](#footnote-17) Given the existing evidence, this objective should be further explored by also asking how sexuality is portrayed healthily or unhealthily in media, culture, and pornography given these elements will be of great influence to the age group.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In Learning Outcome 3.2, students discuss the values, behaviours and skills that help to make, maintain and end relationships respectfully including with friends and romantic/intimate relationships. The addition of how to “*end relationships*” is useful given the 2022 My World Study 2: The National Study of Youth in Ireland found that of the youths surveyed who had experienced a breakup, 40% reported to finding it very distressing and 20% reported to finding it distressing.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Given the impact of breakups on the mental health of children and young people, this objective could further explore ways in which student can share their knowledge to support their peers in communicating, making, maintaining and ending relationships healthily.

In Learning Outcome 3.3, students identify signs of healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships. It is important that this outcome also take account of abusive behaviours such as coercive control and victim-blaming. This objective could be further developed by asking students to explore where their understanding of healthy relationships come from and how that might influence their own relationships.

In Learning Outcome 3.5, students explore the pressures to become sexually intimate and discuss ways to show respect for people’s choices. This objective should be further developed by linking back to the outcomes of making healthy choices around self-esteem, self-worth, and the influence of life experience to ensure the spiral approach on knowledge integration is maintained.

In Learning Outcome 3.7, it is asked that students take time to appreciate the importance of giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships from the perspective of building caring interpersonal relationships and from a legal perspective. Given that consent is central to any sexual relationship and for many purposes defines the difference between a healthy relationship and a harmful one, as well as defining what is and is not lawful, it is extremely important that this be explored in some depth. In research commissioned by Dublin Rape Crisis in 2021[[20]](#footnote-20) 70% of adults surveyed identified that there was a problem with consent in Ireland with young adults, and in particular young males, being the least comfortable or familiar with the topic. Similar research undertaken by the University of Galway’s Active Consent project[[21]](#footnote-21) has shown how much work is needed at third level now, because of the dangerous lack of knowledge of so many third level students. In 2021, the Central Statistics Office reported that more than half of the recorded victims of sexual offences were under the age of 18.[[22]](#footnote-22) A more detailed, expansive focus on consent should be placed within the draft curriculum.

This learning outcome could be expanded into multiple objectives that include, but not limited to the law in Ireland regarding sexual activity under the age of 17, how to communicate boundaries, and case studies on what consent does and does not look life in real-life scenarios, including in the digital space.

In Learning Outcome 3.8, students are provided with an explanation of the importance of safer sexual activity with reference to methods of contraception and protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It is important for all students to learn about contraception so they have the information they'll need to make responsible choices with regards their sexual health. The 2020 ESRI study, previously referenced, confirms why it is so important that young people know about STIs. The study cites data from the HSE Health Protection Surveillance Centre which confirms STI notifications among 15–24-year-olds in Ireland is showing increased incidence.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In Learning Outcome 3.9, students investigate the influence of digital media (in particular, the influence of pornography) on young people’s understanding, expectations and social norms in relation to sexual expression. This is a very important and wide-ranging outcome because of the prevalence of pornography, and how easily accessed it can be by children. Schools can play a significant role in building children’s’ capacity to understand the reality and limitations of pornography. Research suggests that schools are effective sites for the promotion of health and violence prevention.[[24]](#footnote-24) With this in mind**,** addressing student’s use of pornography is inherent to the sex education process. Specifically, the inclusion of porn literacy in this objective is essential. Porn literacy is defined as teaching individuals to thinks about, analyse and evaluate the pornography they choose to consume.[[25]](#footnote-25) The Responsible Sex Education Institute’s framework suggests including a list of common concerns regarding young people and pornography which can be reflected upon, discussed, and debated. [[26]](#footnote-26) The emphasis should be on providingstudents with the tools to understand and be critical of the pornography they encounter or consume.

In relation to the sharing of explicit and private imagery, students should be educated on the legal ramifications of doing so non-consensually through the exploration of legislation such as Coco’s Law.[[27]](#footnote-27)

**Strand 4. Emotional Well-Being**

In Learning Outcome 4.1, students discuss the fluid nature of emotional wellbeing and ways to protect and nurture it. To continue on the discussion, it would also be beneficial to also ask students to explore how this links in with the other 3 Strands to ensure the spiral approach on knowledge integration is maintained.

In Learning Outcome 4.6, students examine different kinds of abusive and bullying behaviour that can occur in online and face to-face interactions. Once more, it would be beneficial to also ask students to explore how this links in with the other 3 Strands to ensure the spiral approach on knowledge integration is maintained.

In Learning Outcome 4.7, students explain why noticing and responding to abusive or bullying behaviour is important and discuss appropriate responses (why, how, where and when to report). Particularly useful in the DRCC’s BodyRightProgramme, is the use of case studies where students can explore and develop responses to these issues which has proven - incredibly useful to students' engagement and comprehension. Given this feedback, we would suggest that this learning outcome include opportunities to allows students to explain how to utilise their knowledge on the topic in real-life situations.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows: *Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.*

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

This assessment as part of learning is valuable, and could be even more beneficial if the Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) linked to more group-based projects on how to challenge negative attitudes and behaviours concerning understanding themselves, making healthy choices, relationships and sexuality, and emotional well-being that students believe effect young people. This gives students the opportunity to apply what they have learned within the curriculum within an action-based framework.

Furthering the sentiment of action-based assessment, the CBA currently lacks students’ assessments of the curriculum as a whole. Without student feedback, there could be topics going unaddressed or underdeveloped that are vital to their comprehension of the curriculum. If the curriculum itself aims to encourage individual autonomy, it would be paradoxical not to allow for students’ voices to be heard in assessment.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

In a general sense, the overall draft SPHE course lacks a clear strategy for implementationas has been mentioned above. Without clarity around practical implementation, these strands and their specific objectives will never come fully to fruition as they were originally intended, particularly in regard to creating an environment in which both students and educators can engage in dialogue on these topics openly and can learn in a way that they are comfortable and do not feel shamed – which is a real threat to the implementation of the course and the learning of the child.

To reach the optimal level of comprehension, a more in-depth exploration of where young people learn and develop their terms of reference about themselves, relationships, and sexual well-being could be useful. If this concept was integrated into each of the four strands, educators would have further insight into where the student’s knowledge point begins and could tailor their approach to delivering the learning outcomes in a way that best engages and challenges students’ beliefs.

Regarding the content of the objectives, there should be a focus on these objectives being an avenue to change. Whilst inherent to all 4 Strands, the objectives within Strand 3 and 4 specifically, could further highlight how to combat negative attitudes and behaviours.

Furthermore, it is highly recommended that there be more than one objective on consent. A fuller understanding of consent, based on open communications, equality and consideration for others will build empathy in young people and contribute to healthier relationships.

### Thank you for taking the time to share your views with us. Please email this document to SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie before Tuesday, October 18th 2022

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8. Ibid Page xiv [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dublin Rape Crisis Centre: BodyRight Programme <https://www.drcc.ie/services/education-training/youth-programmes/> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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12. See slide 27 - <https://www.youth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Pornography-Training-Slides-updated-2021-pdf.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.councilonrecovery.org/how-pornography-affects-the-teenage-brain-an-infographic/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Flood, M. (2022) Engaging Men and Boys in Primary Prevention of Sexual Violence. Available at: <https://xyonline.net/category/article-content/working-boys-and-men> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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27. [The Independent (2020) Law that which bans online harassment will be known as Coco’s Law](https://www.independent.ie/news/law-which-bans-online-harassment-will-be-known-as-cocos-law-39815092.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)