



# Dublin Rape Crisis Centre

## Submission to

# Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

*25 October 2019*

At the request of the Minister for Education and Skills, a major review of RSE in primary and post-primary schools was undertaken from June 2018 to March 2019. The review examined the experience of teaching and learning in RSE including; the curriculum, the approach to learning, the supports needed, and ways to improve the experience of RSE for students. Engagement in the review was considerable and signals the level of interest and concern people share in relation to this aspect of education. We are now engaging in consultation to ensure the findings and draft advice is reflective of the needs of students, schools, and parents.

In responding to the findings and draft advice on the future directions of RSE it is recommended that you read the draft report or the summary of the draft report both of which are available here <https://www.ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/consultations/review-of-relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse>.

**Please provide some brief background information on your organisation (if applicable).**

The **Dublin Rape Crisis Centre** (DRCC) is a non-governmental organisation which aims to prevent the harm and heal the trauma of rape and sexual abuse in Ireland.

Since 2008, DRCC has a well-established BodyRight programme <https://www.drcc.ie/get-informed/education-and-training/bodyright/>. It is a 4-day training programme which is delivered to equip teachers, guidance counsellors, Youth Reach workers and others working in schools, alternative education settings, clubs and other social settings for young people to raise awareness about sexual violence, to assist in its prevention and to develop healthy relationships programmes. In response to the emerging needs of young people, recent years have seen the addition to the programme of modules addressing sexting, advertising, popular culture, pornography and the meaning of consent.

We provide other training to many agencies and individuals who encounter the impact of sexual violence on those with whom they work. Our services include running the

National 24-hour confidential Helpline as well as accompaniment services for those attending at Garda stations or for court proceedings. We offer counselling and therapy services to adults and young people over 16 years' old who have experienced rape, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse. We provide analysis and research on issues of sexual violence for policy and advocacy purposes. We carry out public awareness campaigns to prevent sexual violence.

**The approach**

Across all stakeholders, there was strong agreement that RSE needs to be more than information about biological aspects of growing up and sexual activity. It needs a holistic approach that balances discussion about the risks and dangers associated with relationships and sexual activity with discussion about the positive, healthy and enjoyable aspects of relationships. A holistic approach can be understood as teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of relationships and sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realise their health, wellbeing and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own wellbeing and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.

**To what extent do you broadly agree/disagree with the proposed direction on the approach to RSE that has emerged from the review? Please tick your response in the box below.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
✓			

**What are the aspects of the proposed approach that you agree/disagree with?**

DRCC agree with the proposed holistic approach that balances and connects both the relational as well as the sexual dimensions of RSE across a range of perspectives - cognitive, emotional, physical and social in addition to covering a broad range of topics. Children and young people have the right to lead healthy lives and the education curriculum has a part to play by providing them with comprehensive sexual health education that gives them the tools they need to make decisions that can impact their health and well-being for the rest of their lives. We are also in agreement with the proposed approaches that:

- RSE should be based not just on biological 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;
- The importance of an inclusive approach to RSE which respects diversity and enables children and young people to feel accepted, understood and included through what they are taught and what they learn;
- All of which can be provided in an age and developmentally appropriate manner which establishes a foundation on which more complex knowledge can be built up over time.

A holistic approach should also encompass issues related to consent and sexual violence set in the context of healthy relationships with the self and others. Our opinion is grounded in the expertise and experience we have gained through devising and delivering the DRCC's BodyRight sexual violence prevention programme over the past 11 years. It is designed to be delivered after and integrated with a programme focusing on healthy relationships. As a leading provider of such training, DRCC is available to share our expertise, experience and resources with the Department of Education & Skills to develop undergraduate, post graduate and CPD training for school staff.

**What else is important when considering the approach for teaching SPHE/RSE in schools?**

- A phased approach to the introduction of topics that heretofore have not been included in the curriculum;
- This review process illustrated the value of engaging with young people so ongoing meaningful youth participation should prevail;
- Include all parents in the process: those who are supportive of the changes to the curriculum and those who hold a view that home is the more appropriate place for their child to learn about these topics or simply do not want it discussed. We find that this can often be because of fear or misunderstanding about what is involved which adequate communication can allay;
- Support for teachers and/or principals around speaking with parents whose cultural and religious beliefs may not support the RSE programme being provided in school;

- Comprehensive training and ongoing support for teachers delivering these topics: including resources and professional qualifications.

### The curriculum

The Review highlighted the need to create a single integrated curriculum that sets out the learning for SPHE/RSE as one subject and incrementally provides continuity of experience from early childhood to post-primary. In the immediate term the NCCA will develop interim guidelines to support the current curriculum on how it can be approached in a more holistic way and provide clarity on how topics can be taught in an inclusive manner to incorporate current themes identified by the review.

**To what extent do you broadly agree/disagree with the need for a single integrated curriculum for SPHE/RSE? Please tick your response in the box below.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
✓			

**Please provide a reason for your level of agreement/disagreement.**

DRCC agree with a single integrated curriculum for SPHE/RSE where there is clarity on the topics which need to be covered at the different stages of a child's learning and development. Alongside that building block basis on which to gradually layer knowledge in an age and stage appropriate manner for children and young people, should be guidelines for teachers as to how the sections of the curriculum interrelate.

This would create a foundation in early childhood education upon which more complex knowledge can be built over time thus making SPHE/RSE communication part of daily life for children/young people. It is also important that the materials are kept up-to date and accessible to optimise their learning.

**What else do you consider important in relation to future curriculum development in SPHE/RSE?**

- Monitoring the implementation of the RSE programme on an ongoing basis, including how the interim guidelines are effecting the transition from the current curriculum to a more holistic approach;
- Interim guidelines are just that, short-term, and so a timeframe for transitioning from interim to the new curriculum should be set and agreed;

- Included in the monitoring of the new curriculum should also include the impact the school's ethos has on the implementation, parental engagement, any discernible differences between the primary and post-primary experiences;
- Internal and external evaluation of the programme at agreed intervals;
- Tailoring the curriculum and taking into consideration alternative content approaches for use with diverse groups;
- DRCC cannot emphasise enough the importance of providing age-appropriate sex and relationship education in schools, dealing with issues including online pornography and sexting so that young people have the information they need to keep themselves safer online and to build positive attitudes to relationships;
- We have identified through BodyRight 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.

### Creating the conditions for effective RSE

The Review makes it clear that teachers need in-depth and sustained training and support in the area of SPHE/RSE. Consequently, access to professional development needs to be enhanced at pre-service and in-service levels. The Review also identified the need to take stock of current teaching and learning resources available in this area.

**To what extent do you broadly agree/disagree with the Review's findings on the necessary conditions for effective SPHE/RSE? Please tick your response in the box below.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
✓			

### Please provide a reason for your level of agreement/disagreement.

Teachers are one of the key constituents influencing the quality implementation of the SPHE/RSE programmes so we strongly agree that they need the appropriate training, supports and time to provide that education. The availability of and access to attend training events is an important aspect of improving and enhancing the quality of teaching. The inclusion of SPHE/RSE as a subject on the curriculum for undergraduate primary education and specialist post-graduate primary and secondary teaching qualifications would, represent a major step in the recognition of this subject. DRCC would also

advocate for the role and profile of SPHE/RSE to be elevated within the curriculum, even if it is competing for time and space with examinable subjects because the consequences of not doing so are too serious.

**What else do you consider important in order to create the conditions for effective SPHE/RSE?**

- A whole of school approach to the development and endorsement of a school policy on SPHE/RSE that involves the Board of Management, parents, student councils and other key stakeholders is essential;
- School leadership is key to the effective application of an SPHE/RSE curriculum in schools;
- DRCC believes that the training of teachers in this area ought to include personal development where the teachers are given the opportunity to challenge their own beliefs and attitudes in subjects relating to SPHE/RSE. Adopting such a methodology promotes best practice in the teacher's approach to the curriculum while being cognisant of their wellbeing. This is the model that DRCC uses to train teachers and youth workers in our BodyRight Programme.

**Other considerations**

The Review concluded that comprehensive oversight and support for SPHE/RSE is required to meet the needs identified in the review process. The Review also found schools cannot do it alone and parents must be encouraged and supported in assuming their responsibility for their child's learning. In addition, it suggests that post-primary schools require further support and guidance in planning for junior cycle wellbeing in order to enhance students' learning in SPHE/RSE.

**To what extent do you broadly agree/disagree that these are important considerations for SPHE/RSE? Please tick your response in the box below.**

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
✓			

**Please provide a reason for your level of agreement/disagreement.**

DRCC agree that engaging parents in the process is key to raising their awareness and understanding of what the programme entails and the value of subject.

**Are there any other considerations that should be highlighted in the advice for SPHE/RSE?**

- Promoting two-way communication between:
  - Parents and the school so that parents are aware of the curriculum content; and
  - Parents and children to encourage the continuation of conversations started in school.
- Resources should be made available to schools to engage parents with this revised curriculum and strengthen links between school and home life which could be done in many ways including through the continuation of class work into project work that can be done at home;
- Given the recent inclusion of wellbeing in the curriculum, it's understandable that that further support and guidance would be required. In our view, planning for wellbeing to enhance student learning in SPHE/RSE sends out a positive message to students, parents and teachers that this area of learning is important too.

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