

Teaching relationships and sexuality education

How can teachers prepare themselves to teach relationships and sexuality education?

When delivered appropriately, comprehensive relationships and sexuality education (RSE) equips students with a vital suite of knowledge and skills with which to navigate their developing sense of self and others. However, teaching RSE can be an uncomfortable and sometimes confronting experience for teachers. Keep the following in mind when you are preparing to teach RSE.

1. Understand that all children have a right to comprehensive RSE

The United Nations has identified RSE as a fundamental branch of education which is necessary to address a wide range of health and societal issues. Your responsibility as a teacher is to provide children with reliable, age-appropriate education about navigating their sexuality and relationships.

2. Become familiar with curriculum requirements for RSE

Young people are bombarded with confusing and conflicting information about relationships and sexuality from a very early age. The state and Australian curriculums have been designed to provide age-appropriate education for students in Foundation to Year 10.

Few curriculum areas can seem as subjective as RSE but there is specific and age-appropriate content that you can use as a frame of reference for teaching. The more familiar you become with this content, the more confident you will be to make judgements about what is appropriate and inappropriate for individual learning journeys.

Be aware that relationships and sexuality education is a developing and constantly growing field. It is beneficial to stay well-informed about health and wellbeing research, to ensure you are providing students with the best possible education.

3. Be aware of your own biases, values and attitudes

All humans have individual biases, values and attitudes, and teachers are no exception. Biases are natural, and not inherently bad, but can become problematic when they influence your teaching practice or the way you interact with students and curriculum material. Take time to consider the potentially problematic biases, values and attitudes you bring to RSE. Acknowledging that you have biases that may be disruptive to your teaching is the first step toward overcoming them.

Biases can look like:

- believing masturbation is bad
- believing sex is only for making babies and
- thinking that sex should only be between a man and a woman.

4. Familiarise yourself with your school's policy for mandatory reporting of disclosures of sexual assault

Learning concepts like public and private, and about inappropriate touching, can lead to child survivors discovering that they have been victims of sexual assault. Students may also find that they have a newfound vocabulary to describe experiences that they were previously unable to. It is imperative for teachers to be prepared for disclosures of sexual assault before one occurs, in order to respond appropriately at the time.

All schools should have a policy in place in the event that a child discloses abuse. Before teaching RSE, familiarise yourself with this policy. Remember to maintain a calm and caring attitude toward the student during a disclosure. Avoid displaying shock or judgement, and under no circumstances dismiss or refute a child's disclosure. Your role as a confidant is to listen, reassure and report. The experience may be challenging, but the child's welfare must come before your discomfort.

Australian law is very specific about when teachers are required to report disclosures of child abuse and neglect. For an overview of the requirements in your state, refer to the Child Family Community Australia Resource sheet: [Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect](#).

How can teachers prepare students for relationships and sexuality education?

School can sometimes be the first time students are exposed to relationships and sexuality education, but all students, even those who are more familiar with the topics, require a safe and comfortable environment in which to express ideas and ask questions. To this end, RSE benefits from establishing firm and student-driven behaviour agreements. The following are some important concepts to include in these agreements.

1. Confidentiality

Both students and teachers have a right to confidentiality. Let students know that it is important not to ask personal questions, or to share stories about other people. This can be used as an opportunity to reinforce the concept of privacy and trust.

2. Support and respect

RSE can trigger a wide range of emotional responses. Students should understand that for the safety of the class, it is important to be respectful and supportive of all members. Take the time to create a safe environment, which encourages respect for diversity.

In practice, this can include things like:

- not laughing at someone's question
- the right to pass (to not answer/ engage in activities)
- using correct terminology
- respecting people's pronouns

- having a zero tolerance policy for racist, sexist or homophobic language or attitudes
- practicing empathy

3. The right to speak and be heard, and the right to pass

The right to speak and be heard and the right to pass are elements of creating a safe learning environment. These rights acknowledge that all students have the right to speak about their beliefs, values and opinions without judgement, and with respectful listening. With the right to pass, students are not obliged to answer questions, offer opinions or participate in an activity.

The right to speak and be heard comes with the responsibility to respect dissenting views. Exceptions to this right are when beliefs, values or opinions violate the humanity of another person (homophobic, sexist or racist attitudes). Your role as teacher and mediator is to gently challenge harmful attitudes, while reminding students of the need for a supportive and respectful learning environment.

4. Trigger warnings

Provide students with 'trigger warnings'. These are warnings that some topics may bring up unhappy memories or distressing feelings. It is important that students know they can remove themselves from discussions or the class if they need to. If your school has a counsellor, it can be helpful to inform them before you cover potentially sensitive topics with your students'.