

An introduction to relationships and sexuality education (RSE)



School resources

Sexuality education is a key area of learning in any school's health curriculum. Research highlights the importance of sexuality education for promoting the wellbeing of students, yet many teachers lack the comfort and confidence to facilitate learning in this area¹. In New Zealand, updated sexuality guidelines for schools were recently released and renamed [Relationships and sexuality education: A guide for teachers, leaders, and board of trustees \(Years 1-8 and Years 9-13\)](#)². This research review provides an overview of RSE and what schools can do to ensure best practice.

What are sexuality education and RSE?

Sexuality education is different to sex education. Sex education focuses on the physical aspects of sexual and reproductive health, whereas sexuality education is underpinned by a holistic approach. In New Zealand, this is defined by the [hauora](#) model. This means that sexuality education takes a broad approach and includes the social, emotional, spiritual, and physical dimensions of human sexuality. Sexuality education takes a positive view of sexual development as a natural part of growing up, and equips students with the knowledge, skills and understandings to promote their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. The World Health Organisation provides a working definition of sexuality that highlights the importance of understanding sexuality education:

a central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors³.

Sexuality education in the school setting starts at Year 1. Sexuality education involves learning about the self, but it sits within the broader area of relationships education. The importance of relationships in sexuality education is reflected in title of the New Zealand Ministry of Education's latest [sexuality guides](#) for schools. Using the term RSE rather than sexuality education emphasises that sex and relationships occur between people, not bodies. This stronger emphasis on relationships supports teachers at [primary](#) and [secondary](#) levels to shift the focus of sexuality education away from the traditional biomedical 'sex ed' approach towards an approach that focuses on learning about identity, relationships, and societal attitudes and values towards gender and sexuality. RSE takes into account the different needs of students and includes:

- Learning about the self, personal growth and development, strengthening personal identity, celebrating diversity and being inclusive.
- Developing the knowledge and skills to support students in interacting with others in positive, respectful ways that maintain and enhance relationships. This includes a range of interpersonal skills and strategies that support inclusion and diversity.
- Exploring societal attitudes and values that shape the way society views gender and sexuality, such as the influence of social media and gender stereotypes.

- Identifying community resources that can support students' own and others' wellbeing, such as friendships, gender identity, and reproductive health.
- Identifying rights, responsibilities, and laws around relationships, sexuality and gender, such as exploring the issue of consent from a young age.
- Taking action to enhance aspects of the environment to promote inclusion and promote positive sexuality, for example - challenging gender binaries to be inclusive of all people.

Access to RSE is a fundamental human right.

What research tells us about RSE and wellbeing

Recent research looking at 30 years of data on sexuality education programmes has found that RSE plays a central role in promoting the wellbeing of all young people⁴. When taught within a [socio-ecological framework](#), RSE has been found to increase knowledge about the body's changing needs, decrease shame and anxiety about sexuality, improve communication skills, expand understandings of gender identity and social norms, develop children's media literacy skills, improve sexual abuse disclosure rates, and promote inclusion and healthy relationships⁵. The research identifies that the greatest benefit to wellbeing occurs when RSE is part of a whole-school approach and starts at the primary school level⁶. The best time to introduce topics such as interpersonal skills, gender identity, equality, and consent is before heteronormative assumptions and values become entrenched in how children understand the world.

However, recent reports by the Education Review Office (ERO) into the state of sexuality education in New Zealand schools continue to highlight that many RSE programmes do not effectively meet students' learning needs⁷. They found inconsistency and gaps in curriculum coverage, and a failure to cater well for disadvantaged groups. More learning about consent, pornography, digital technologies and safe, respectful relationships was needed alongside a holistic focus on topics like puberty.

Young people continue to call for better sexuality education that recognises the changing nature of their world. They want the opportunity to discuss and critique issues related to relationships. This includes discussions around consent, social media, pornography, sexual behaviour, gender norms, sexual and reproductive health, and the societal messages that influence them throughout their lives⁸. They want to know more about having good relationships, love, navigating sexual pleasure, dealing with sexual violence, and changing social and family structures⁹. The foundations of the ability to have these conversations originate in quality primary school RSE.

It is important to note that traditional biomedical approaches that stem from a 'youth at risk' model have been shown to close down discussions around RSE and promote guilt and shame in young people¹⁰. New Zealand research from the Classification Office highlights that young people are less likely to discuss issues or ask for help when they feel judged. One young person from the research stated:

The second adults hear the words sex from a 10 year-old, they shut down and go, 'You don't talk about that'.. they're gonna have questions if you're shutting them down like that. Obviously, you've made it clear that they can't come to you, so where else are they supposed to go?¹¹

A 2018 [survey](#) conducted by Family Planning found that young people want a broader approach to RSE. The report found that young people want in-depth and wide-ranging learning that covers both the practical aspects of sex like contraception, pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and

emotions, consent, communication and safety in relationships. They also want a more open and inclusive approach to RSE which acknowledges the diversity of gender, sexuality and experiences¹².

What does good practice in RSE look like?

Research recognises that RSE with children and young people can be difficult for teachers and adults, and that undertaking it within schools can pose a challenge for the whole school community. However, extensive national and international research highlights that teachers feel more confident and comfortable when schools take a whole-school approach to RSE and plan their programmes in consultation with their communities. Critical to best practice in RSE is foregrounding the lived experiences of students and finding out what they want to learn. A one-size-fits-all model of RSE does not meet the diverse needs of young people or help them unpack the uncertainty and complexity of human relations. In today's world, social media, digital technologies, and diverse ways of expressing gender and sexuality shape how young people interact with the world. The following principles are crucial aspects of good practice in RSE:

- RSE is situated in a whole school approach to student wellbeing and supported by school policies, practices and community consultation.
- RSE starts at Year 1 and is developmentally appropriate (for example, see the key learning at each level of the [2020 RSE guide](#)).
- RSE does not problematise youth sexuality but frames it as part of being human.
- RSE acknowledges that young people are not empty vessels. They want to be more knowledgeable about relationships and explore societal influences on gender and sexuality.
- RSE is shaped by educational outcomes (such as critical thinking) rather than behaviour change models.
- RSE has a minimum of 12-15 hours of dedicated time per year across Years 1-10.

Endnotes

- 1 Education Review Office (2018). Promoting well-being through sexuality education. Wellington, NZ: ERO.
- 2 Ministry of Education (2020). Relationships and sexuality education: A guide for teachers, leaders and boards of trustees. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.
- 3 World Health Organization.
- 4 Goldfarb, E. S., & Lieberman, L. D. (2021). Three decades of research: The case for comprehensive sex education. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68(1), 13-27.
- 5 Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021.
- 6 Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021.
- 7 ERO (2018).
- 8 Classification Office (2020). Growing up with Porn: Insights from young New Zealanders. Wellington, NZ: Classification Office.
- 9 Family Planning (2018). Young people's experiences of sexuality education.

10 Thomas F., & Aggleton P. (2016). School-based sex and relationships education: Current knowledge and emerging themes. In V. Sundaram & H. Sauntson (Eds), *Global Perspectives and Key Debates in Sex and Relationships Education: Addressing Issues of Gender, Sexuality, Plurality and Power*. Palgrave Pivot, London.

11 Classification Office, 2020, p. 39.

12 ERO, 2018, p.6.

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