

Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in secondary schools



School resources

Relationships and sexuality education in secondary school is extremely important. RSE promotes students social and emotional skills, builds the foundation of safe, equal and pleasurable relationships, and develops awareness of broader social, cultural and environmental contexts that influence wellbeing. RSE involves learning about relationships as well as about bodies, gender, and sexualities. RSE is different from what many people remember as 'sex education', which focuses on the physical /biological dimension of sex. RSE is shaped by a holistic model of health, which includes physical, mental/emotional, spiritual and social dimensions of human sexuality. The following review will help teachers to:

- understand what constitutes quality RSE in the secondary school environment
- reflect on what the research and young people are telling us needs to change in RSE
- ensure their school is taking a whole-school approach to promoting wellbeing through RSE
- consult with their community
- design and implement a classroom programme
- identity the key progressions of learning through secondary school
- answer any difficult questions and ensure safe and professional practice in the classroom.

This review includes links to [Relationships and Sexuality Education – A guide for teachers, leaders, and boards of trustees: Years 9–13](#), published by the New Zealand Ministry of Education in 2020, and [key resources](#) that support a whole-school approach to RSE.

What constitutes quality RSE?

Sex education and RSE are different. RSE is framed within a holistic model of wellbeing, which includes physical, social, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects. The term 'sex education' relates more to the physical aspects of sexual and reproductive knowledge, whereas RSE is much broader. Learning in RSE provides the opportunity for young people to learn about themselves and develop the knowledge and skills to navigate safe, equal and pleasurable relationships. RSE provides a critical lens for learning about the social and cultural factors that shape how we understand gender, sexuality and relationships.

An extensive literature review into 30 years of data on the effectiveness of sexuality education¹ found that RSE increases knowledge about the body's changing needs, decreases shame and anxiety about sexuality, improves communication skills, expands understanding of gender identity and social norms. Furthermore, RSE develops young people's media literacy skills, promotes inclusion and healthy relationships, and improves sexual abuse disclosure rates. Key findings relevant for secondary school teachers are that RSE needs to:

- start in primary school and continue throughout secondary school
- be based on a holistic and broad definition of sexual health
- be framed in a positive, affirming and inclusive approach to human sexuality
- be responsive to its learners
- recognise young people as crucial to the planning process.

In many schools, RSE stops at Year 10. However, Years 11-13 are a critical time for young people to discuss, critique, and challenge heteronormative assumptions and gender stereotypes that negatively impact safe and equal relationships.

Quality RSE in Years 9 and 10 starts with finding out what students have learned at primary level, identifying gaps in knowledge and skills, and establishing their learning needs. For example, secondary schools often assume primary school RSE programmes include learning about puberty. However, research by ERO has shown that many programmes are based on the physical dimension of puberty². Although the physical changes of puberty are important, young people want more knowledge and skills to navigate relationships that are being shaped by a digital world.

What young people are telling us

Young people are growing up in a changing world where families are more diverse, information is available at a touch of a button, and social media is part of life. Young people are also challenging gender norms and stereotypes and their impact on wellbeing. To ensure that young people have the knowledge and skills to respond to these societal changes and challenges, RSE needs to draw on the voice of students and be effectively planned by trained teachers³.

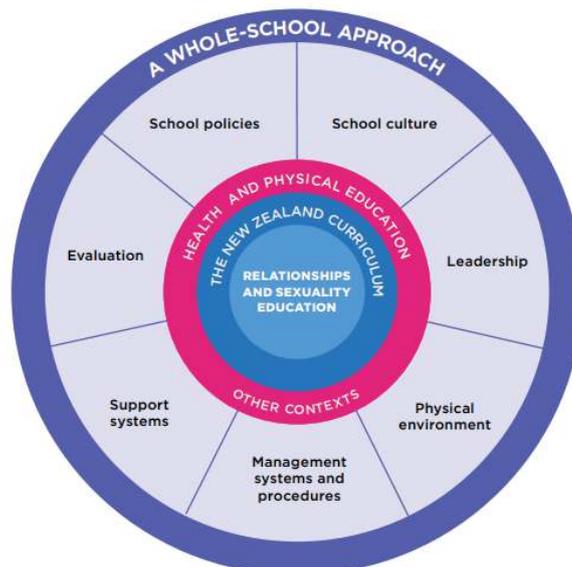
Recent research from the New Zealand Classification Office highlights that young people seldom have quality conversations about sexuality, especially porn, with adults⁴. This research highlights that even though discussions about sexuality may be difficult, adults must start conversations that allow young people to explore the complexity of relationships and sexuality. Here, one young person talks about the importance of education around viewing online porn:

I think education around it and why it could be damaging or dangerous and other reasons why it might not be ... cos there are also positives ... there's positives and negatives to everything⁵.

It is important to note that traditional biomedical approaches that stem from a 'youth at risk' model can close down discussions around RSE and promote guilt and shame in young people⁶. Young people have called for better relationships and sexuality education, and many schools are rising to this challenge.

The importance of taking a whole-school approach

Quality RSE is based on a whole-school approach to relationships and sexuality. The following diagram can be used to support leaders to discuss the strengths of the school and areas for development in RSE⁷.



An example of a whole-school approach to wellbeing is promoting inclusion and diversity. This approach would include:

- Exploring how classroom programmes (in health and across the curriculum) reflect learning about gender diversity. For example, movies that discuss gender identities could be used in English programmes and Health education
- Aligning school policies, practices and the physical environment to support inclusion and foster openness. For example, this might include creating non-gendered school uniform options.
- Identifying support systems and management systems that address bullying related to gender identity, such as creating student-led alliance groups that promote inclusion
- Celebrating difference through recognising diverse families, identities, and cultures, such as celebrating Pride Week.

Three [videos](#) from the Ministry of Education provide short practical examples of strong leadership and a whole-school approach to RSE. These videos highlight how a whole school approach to RSE promotes inclusive environments and the development of healthy relationships between school members. Starting with a review of the whole-school approach around RSE supports teachers to develop and implement RSE in the classroom that is supported by school-wide policies and practices.

Consulting with the community about RSE within the Health curriculum

It is important for schools to reflect on the importance of community consultation to ascertain the needs of their community. Consultation involves more than informing the school community on what will be taught - it should be a transparent and shared process. In New Zealand, it is a requirement that school boards consult the school community at least once every two years and adopt a statement on the delivery of the health curriculum, although the board may choose how to consult with the community. The purpose of the consultation is to enact a shared process to create a localised curriculum that meets the needs of students. Effective community consultation involves board members and school leaders working together to consult with the community on how the school plans to deliver sexuality education as part of the health curriculum. It is essential that students and their families are able to have meaningful input into the content and delivery of the sexuality education programme⁸.

There are many strategies that schools have used to consult with communities. These include:

- Combining consultations with community cultural events
- Facilitating consultations in a range of settings such as the marae or local church
- Consulting with students first and sharing this information with families
- Utilising senior students to survey students and facilitate consultations
- Including students, and their previous work, in the consultation process.

Many schools carry out online surveys with their communities, but these surveys often do not have a high return rate and leave little room for collaboration. Māori and Pasifika families prefer to participate through a shared process where relationships are at the heart of the discussion. For more information and great ideas on consultation, see Tūturu's [Community Consultation: Health Education resource](#), and the Ministry of Education's [video](#) on consultation and teacher [resource page](#).

Planning an RSE programme of learning

A whole-school approach to RSE that is deliberately planned and based on progressions across the curriculum levels reflects good practice. The Ministry of Education's [one-page](#) learning programme review and planning considerations provide a helpful starting place for schools to discuss a localised curriculum. Here are some key starting points:

1. Read the Ministry of Education's [RSE guide](#) for Years 9-13 (or relevant local guidance for your school).
2. Discuss how your current programme meets the needs of students as they move through secondary school.
3. Discuss with staff how responsive your RSE programme is about the changing needs of society (digital technology, changing family structures, gender diversity and inclusion, access to online sexual material, early puberty)⁹.
4. Discuss the components of a whole-school approach to RSE and identify strengths and areas for development.
5. Discuss a range of culturally appropriate ways to effectively consult with the school community about health education and RSE.

Programme development for Years 9 and 10

A minimum of 12-15 hours spent per year on RSE is recommended¹⁰, and the voices of students and their learning needs should guide planning. Below are some guidelines about what effective RSE covers across the secondary school years. These are based on [Relationships and sexuality education: A guide for teachers, leaders and boards of trustees, Years 9-13. See the Relationships and sexuality progressions for sample lessons.](#) For more information and support on senior programmes, see the [NZHEA website](#).

At level four (ages 11-13)

Students learn more about pubertal change and its relation to social norms around gender and sexuality. They develop an understanding of conception and contraception and how this relates to wellbeing. They further develop their skills to manage relationships and explore topics like love, attraction, consent, communication, and social media effects. By the end of Year 8, students should understand how wider contexts link with people's gender and sexual identities, take action to be inclusive, know how to seek help, and critique media representations of gender and relationships.

At level five (ages 13-15)

Students learn about a range of cultural approaches to issues of gender and sexuality and varying perspectives on contraception and reproduction. They will reflect critically on how activities and practices connect with issues of body image and gender norms and develop strategies to promote inclusion. They develop skills for enhancing relationships such as communication, giving and receiving consent, showing respect. As part of developing relationships skills, they develop an understanding of ideas on topics such as love, romance, attraction, and intimacy. Critically reflecting on societal factors that influence sexuality is crucial at this level. Here students learn to analyse representations of sex, sexuality and relationships in terms of their impact on wellbeing. They then explore strategies that allow them to take action to support their own and others wellbeing. These strategies include understanding school and community policies that support inclusion and diversity.

In consultation with the wishes and needs of students and the school community, the above key learning ideas will support schools to develop a comprehensive and responsive learning programme. Key resources that support students in developing a strong identity, being inclusive, having healthier relationships, and learning the skills to critique situations that impact wellbeing are available at the end of this review.

A culturally responsive approach to RSE

RSE needs to be grounded in culturally relevant and evidence-based practices. Working with families, whānau and communities to explore concepts of sexuality is crucial and offers opportunities for new ways of thinking about RSE¹¹.

Answering the tricky questions

Teachers often worry about answering perceived 'tricky' questions in RSE. The following guidelines are adapted from the Ministry of Education [material](#) written for teachers to develop their comfort and confidence in answering questions. You can be asked any question at any time while teaching and for many reasons. Sometimes students may be testing the water with you or seeking attention from peers, but most often, there will be a genuine desire to learn. You need to be prepared for questions on a wide variety of topics, and legally you are entitled to answer any question students ask you. Before you answer, it is important that you have knowledge about these topics.

Here are some guidelines for responding to a range of student questions:

- Keep your expression neutral – don't show any offence, disapproval, or discomfort at the question.
- It is fine to indicate to students that, while sexuality is normal, some people find it uncomfortable and difficult to talk about. You can acknowledge that there are not always easy or straightforward answers and that it is okay to wonder about it and ask questions.
- Answer immediately if the question is simple and you know the answer.
- If you are unsure whether you have understood the question correctly, ask a clarifying question before responding.
- If you don't know the answer or are uncomfortable answering straight away, tell the class that you will check it out and get back to them the next day. Make sure you follow up.
- Be honest but do not answer personal questions that relate to you specifically. Use wording such as 'Some people think/do ... and others ...' or 'What do others think?'
- If the question is too personal, clearly state that you will not answer it.
- If the question is very specific to the student, consider whether the whole class needs to hear the answer. It may be better discussed individually.
- If you feel very uncomfortable about answering a question, you may want to refer the student to someone else or arrange for someone to come in to talk to the class and answer the question.
- If a student's question communicates offensive or discriminatory messages, you will need to deal with this sensitively by making clear to the class at the time the inappropriateness of the question. This might mean leaving alone the details of the question – and its answer – in the moment but coming back to it with a more considered response.

Another way to invite and respond to students' questions is to use a question box. A question box gives you time to consider your response, so this method means you are less likely to be put on the spot. It is

important that you feel confident and comfortable with teaching RSE, including responding to questions, so seek support from your colleagues if needed. If you decide that you will not answer a question from the question box, give students a reason. You could say 'this question asks ... but I am not going to answer it because ...', or 'this question is directed to me personally. I won't be answering from my own experience. But some people believe ... and others feel ...'.

For help-seeking and disclosure type questions, ensure you are familiar with your school child protection policy and procedures. [Childmatters](#) offers a number of basic guidelines that should be followed to ensure the safe handling of any disclosure. It is recommended that teachers read and discuss these guidelines at the start of the year. You should also be familiar with school and community support services for young people and recommend these to encourage help-seeking behaviour from students. Key resources to support a whole-school approach to RSE can be found below.

Teacher resources

Excellent resources for a wide range of health contexts	NZHEA (Health Education Association)	https://healtheducation.org.nz/resources/
Guides to health consultation with whānau and the broader community	Tūturu	Health Education Consultation Tūturu Helping NZ schools improve wellbeing (tuturu.org.nz) Resources to help you prepare, consult, and review your statement on how you deliver health education. Use them to develop an approach that will work for your school community. Includes activities that you can use online or in-person to help parents understand how health education builds students' critical thinking skills.
RSE educator guide and videos	TKI	Relationships and sexuality education guidelines – Resource collection
Sexuality education content knowledge	Family Planning NZ	Free short online modules can be sourced here: https://www.familyplanning.org.nz/courses Click on the link and search by Health promotion and education courses. Courses include: Introduction to sexual diversity and gender; Alcohol and sex; Sexuality for young people with a disability.
	Family Planning NZ	Navigating the journey: RSE (for Year 9) A downloadable resource for use with Year 9 and 10 students (there is a small charge for this resource).
Cyber safety involving sexual situations	Netsafe New Zealand	The Netsafe website contains a range of information for supporting young people to be safe online.

Research and resources on online pornography	Teacher education online resource	Ka huri i te korero This online interactive website is designed for teachers across Aotearoa New Zealand to implement kōrero about pornography with RSE classes.
	Classification Office	Research: https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources/research/ Includes reports on young people's views about pornography. Resources: https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources/items/how-to-talk-with-young-people-about-pornography/ Information and short videos for families/whānau and teachers.
	The Light Project	In The Know: Info, help and tips on porn and online sexual stuff Information for young people on porn, nudes and navigating sexual relationships.
Sex, sexuality and gender diversity	InsideOUT	https://www.insideout.org.nz/ Resources for supporting rainbow young people in schools and the community.
	Rainbow youth	https://ry.org.nz/ Providing support, information, resources & advocacy for Aotearoa New Zealand's queer, gender diverse, takatāpui and intersex youth.
	intersex	ITANZ (ianz.org.nz) Information and resources for supporting intersex youth.
	MoE	Inclusive education A guide to supporting LGBTIQ+ students

Endnotes

- 1 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.
- 2 Education Review Office (2018). Promoting wellbeing through sexuality education. Wellington: ERO.
- 3 ERO, 2018.

- 4 Classification Office (2020). Growing up with porn: Insights from young New Zealanders. Wellington: Classification Office.
- 5 Classification Office, 2020.
- 6 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. London: Palgrave Pivot.
- 7 Taken from Relationships and Sexuality Education – A guide for teachers, leaders, and boards of trustees: Years 9–13, p.18.
- 8 ERO, 2018, p. 6.
- 9 See pages 8 and 12 of Relationships and Sexuality Education – A guide for teachers, leaders, and boards of trustees: Years 9–13.
- 10 Education Review Office (2007). The teaching of sexuality education in Years 7 to 13. Wellington: ERO.
- 11 See pages 15-17 and 40-42 of Relationships and Sexuality Education – A guide for teachers, leaders, and boards of trustees: Years 9–13 for ideas of how RSE can support and affirm students Māori and Pacific world views.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY

Tracy Clelland

Tracy Clelland is a lecturer at the University of Canterbury and currently teaches health education, specialising in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). Previous to this role, she was a secondary school HPE teacher. Her research explores the important role of teachers/kaiako and parents/whānau in fostering open communication about sexuality between young people, parents and wider whānau. In 2021 she wrote a resource with the Classification Office for teachers to address pornography within education settings. She also worked with a team of educators to create resources for primary and secondary teachers to implement RSE in schools.