

Subject:**RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION (RSE)****Circular Number:**

2001/15

Date of Issue:

24 August 2001

Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided schools (primary, preparatory, secondary, grammar, special);
- Education and Library Boards;
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; and
- Teachers' Unions.

Summary of Contents:

This Circular provides guidance to schools on the provision of Relationships and Sexuality Education. It should be read in conjunction with guidance material published by CCEA.

Enquiries:

Any enquiries about the contents of this Circular should be addressed to:

Department of Education
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Governor Awareness:

Essential

Status of Contents:

Curricular Guidance for schools

Related Documents:

CCEA Guidance Material

Superseded Documents:

Circular 1987/45

Expiry Date:

Not applicable

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INTRODUCTION

1. This Circular forms part of a resource pack which is being distributed to all schools. It updates previous guidance in relation to the teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). In addition to the Circular the pack includes comprehensive teacher guidance material produced by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

A LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR RSE

2. The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 requires all grant-aided schools to offer a curriculum which:

- a. promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development of pupils at the school and thereby of society; and
- b. prepares such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

3. RSE is included on a statutory basis within the Northern Ireland Curriculum through the science programme of study and the health education cross-curricular theme. Health Education is taught mainly through the medium of science, with important contributions coming from physical education, English, home economics, personal and social education and religious education. Guidance on the content of a personal and social education programme for schools is contained in a CCEA publication which was issued to schools in August 1999. Many schools have found it helpful to explain to parents, before a programme of RSE is instigated, how they intend to approach this sensitive subject and what aspects will be covered in the course of the programme. Schools should therefore take account of any parental concerns expressed to them. They should, as far as possible, make alternative arrangements for any pupil whose parent wishes him/her to be excused from particular, or all, sex education classes.

4. The legal age of consent for girls is 17.

WHY RSE IS REQUIRED IN THE CURRICULUM

5. The age at which sexual intercourse first takes place has been decreasing over the past few decades. Some people believe that sex education lessons are responsible for early sexual activity. Research, however, has indicated that those young people for whom the school classroom is the main source of information about sexual matters are no more likely to have had intercourse before the age of 16 than those citing other main sources, ie, parents, boyfriends or girlfriends, friends.

6. A strategy for HIV and AIDS issued by the then Department of Health and Social Services in 1993 recognised the need for increased efforts in public education, alongside education programmes in schools.

7. A survey of the health behaviour of school children in Northern Ireland undertaken in 1994 found that among fifth form pupils almost half the boys reported that they had not been given classes explaining menstruation or sexually transmitted diseases (apart from AIDS) and almost 1 in 4 said they had never had a class on puberty. Almost 1 in 8 girls reported that they had not been given classes explaining menstruation or puberty. For girls and boys, personal relationships were less likely to be discussed in class than pregnancy and contraception.

8. The Regional Strategy for Health and Social Well-being 1997-2002 identified 2 targets in relation to sexual health:

- A comprehensive health promotion programme for schools in relation to sexual and reproductive health, which emphasises the importance of personal relationships, self-esteem and decision making skills, will have been developed and implemented.
- By 2002 there should be a further fall in unplanned births to mothers aged under 20, with the effect that the overall number of births to teenage mothers is reduced by 10%.

MINISTERIAL GROUP ON PUBLIC HEALTH

9. The first priority area for action identified by the Ministerial Group on Public Health was children's and young people's health. Departments were asked to draw up action plans with the intention of developing an integrated, comprehensive strategy for improving the health of children and young people. The production of guidance on relationships and sexuality education is an integral and important aspect of Department of Education's Health Action Plan.

A MORAL FRAMEWORK FOR RSE

10. Education is concerned with the personal, social, emotional and vocational preparation and moral development of young people as well as with their academic attainment. The Department recognises that RSE is an issue which will place distinct demands on schools and teachers. It is, however, an important part of children's preparation for adult life. It must not be value-free and it should lead to the acquisition of understanding and attitudes which prepare pupils to view their relationships in a responsible and healthy manner. A school's RSE programme should aim to present facts in an objective, balanced and sensitive manner, set within a clear framework of values and an awareness of the Northern Ireland legislation on sexual behaviour. Pupils should be encouraged to appreciate the value of a stable family life, marriage and the responsibilities of parenthood. As they mature, pupils should come to understand the importance of self-restraint, dignity, respect for themselves and others, including those of a different sexual orientation, and acceptance of responsibility. Each school's moral framework, within which their RSE policy will be developed, should be clear to parents and teachers.

11. RSE should be taught in a sensitive manner which is in harmony with the ethos of the school and in conformity with the moral and religious principles held by parents and school management authorities. Teaching should take place, therefore, within a caring moral context, stressing the importance of stable, loving personal relationships, parental responsibilities and family life.

12. Through the study of health education, children should learn about changes which will occur in their bodies as they grow older. In primary schools they should be prepared for the physical and emotional changes at puberty. As they progress through their school career they will become more aware of their own sexuality and they will require information and guidance in coming to terms with physical and emotional changes and how these affect their feelings towards, and relationships with, other people. Most parents see the need for their children to have knowledge of, and information about, sexual matters. Some undertake this responsibility in the home; some prefer to share it with the school and other appropriate agencies; others, however, are unable or reluctant to advise their children adequately. As a result, children's knowledge of sexual matters can be acquired in a distorted manner from their peers or other sources. In a society in which sexual conduct is presented openly in the media, young people need both the guidance of sympathetic and well-informed adults and the

opportunity to learn about, discuss and reflect upon sexual development in a secure and understanding environment such as that provided by the family and the school.

THE SCHOOL'S RSE POLICY

13. The Department considers that every school should have a policy setting out how the school will address relationships and sexuality education within each pupil's curriculum. This policy should show clear linkages with the school's pastoral care policy, and should set out the aims of the teaching programme, describing the topics which will be included, their sequencing and depth of treatment and the teaching methods and materials to be employed. The policy should be the subject of consultation with parents, and should be endorsed by the school's Board of Governors. All teachers, whether or not they are centrally involved in teaching the programme, should be aware of its details and their implications. The implementation of such a programme demands a high degree of co-ordination, co-operation and monitoring and it is recommended that schools should designate a senior member of staff to act as co-ordinator. He/she would be responsible to the school principal for oversight of the programme.

PUPIL NEEDS

14. In translating the aims of the school policy into classroom practice the school should ensure that teaching is at all times appropriate to the maturity and level of understanding of the pupils concerned. As maturity is not always determined by chronological age, teachers have to be alert to the personal and emotional circumstances of the individual pupil. Teachers will have to be aware of, and take into account, the variety of existing pupil knowledge, the different attitudes and beliefs and the pupils' capacity to understand the issues. This will be particularly important in relation to children with special educational needs, where physical development may outstrip emotional maturity. Pupils should also have opportunities to provide feedback about the content of the programme of relationships and sexuality education in the school so that it can be responsive to their needs.

DELIVERING THE RSE PROGRAMME

15. Any co-ordinated, structured and systematic RSE programme will, especially in post-primary schools, involve more than one teacher. For example, the moral and social framework could be established in religious education classes and other aspects of the programme dealt with in subjects such as English, home economics, biology or physical education. Elements of the programme may also be taught through a programme in personal and social education or a specifically designed short course or module. Irrespective of how the programme is taught, it should take account of the individual pupil's emotional, intellectual and physical development and should deal comprehensively with the ethical, social and biological implications of the subject. The programme should be consistent with and complemented by the school's arrangements for health and pastoral care and guidance which should give pupils opportunities to explore further matters of individual concern.

16. Schools may wish to involve outside speakers and qualified professionals, eg clergy, doctors, nurses, health visitors, health education officers, social workers or marriage guidance counsellors, as part of their teaching programme. It is, however, essential that the programme is organised by the school and that the school should be satisfied that contributions from informed outsiders are an integral part of the whole programme and in harmony with its aims. Appropriate steps should be taken by the school to ensure that all visiting speakers are vetted (note Section 3 of the guidance material).

17. The CCEA guidance material suggests approaches and provides examples which will be of use to schools in producing an overall programme of RSE. Schools should ensure that their teaching, however, is consistent with the ethos of the school. The responsibility of both sexes in sexual matters should be stressed. The teaching should put primary emphasis upon what is positive and good in relationships between the sexes, and should also include treatment of those matters about which people have diverse and deeply held views, for example, methods of family planning, including contraception. Teachers should not avoid discussion of sensitive issues such as contraception, abortion, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, homosexuality and pornography. Discussion of such issues in the media and elsewhere is so common that many pupils will already be aware of them.

18. Young people and their parents should expect that the teaching and guidance which pupils receive on such matters will help them to appreciate the value of the prevailing moral standards of society. They should be helped to understand the skills involved in creating and sustaining loving, stable relationships and the personal and social benefits they bring. They should understand the moral, psychological and health risks to themselves and other people of sexual promiscuity and be aware of those aspects of the law which relate to sexual matters. These issues should be presented either as part of the programme or in response to specific questions raised by pupils, in a broad and balanced way, free from sensationalism and personal bias and sensitively pitched to the level of pupils' needs, experience and capacity to understand. Moreover, schools should not ignore consideration of sexual practices which are at variance with or run counter to the prevailing moral standards; nor can they afford to ignore the possibility that some of their pupils may already have experienced homosexual feelings, and teachers should be sensitive to this in the teaching of the subject.

19. The teaching of sex education in the classroom is primarily a matter for the professional judgement of the principal and staff. A wide range of teaching resources is available to help teachers plan their programmes in the classroom. It is important, however, that teachers should satisfy themselves that any materials which they propose to use are completely compatible with the policies and ethos of their school. In the choice of materials, schools may wish to seek advice from the appropriate advisers of the Education and Library Boards, the health education officers of the Health and Social Services Boards, school health doctors and nurses, the education officers of the various Protestant churches, the Diocesan religious education advisers, or other informed and responsible sources including voluntary organisations concerned with specific health-related issues.

INVOLVING PARENTS

20. It is important that parents should be involved in, and fully informed about, the school's programme on RSE and its approaches to particularly sensitive issues. The teaching offered by the school should always reinforce and strengthen positive family relationships and the role of parents, and the counselling and advice available to individual pupils should complement and support the proper exercise of parental rights and responsibilities. Schools should take account of parents' views on the content of their RSE programme and, in order that parents should know and understand the context in which certain teaching/learning materials are used, schools may find it helpful to give parents opportunities to examine them, to discuss their use with staff, and to discuss them with their children at home.

CONFIDENTIALITY

21. A teacher approached by a pupil for counselling on sexual matters should, where appropriate, encourage the pupil to seek advice from his or her parents and/or from qualified professionals. Where the circumstances lead the teacher to believe that the pupil has embarked on, or is

contemplating, conduct which is likely to place him or her in moral or physical danger, or in breach of the law, the teacher has a duty to inform the pupil of the risks involved. The pupil should be made aware that the teacher can offer no guarantee of confidentiality. Whether the teacher should take the matter further, by informing the designated teacher for child protection or the Principal, and where the Principal should consider involving the pupil's parents, the specialist support services, or the designated child protection officer of the Education and Library Board or CCMS, will depend on the particular circumstances involved and on the professional judgement of the staff concerned.

22. It should be stressed that if, at any time, a teacher becomes aware that a child may have been the victim of sexual abuse, the teacher should follow the detailed guidance on child protection, "Pastoral Care in Schools: Child Protection", which was issued under cover of Circular 1999/10. No undertakings of confidentiality should be given to the child in these circumstances.

23 Any enquiries about the guidance material should be addressed to Mrs Lorna Doherty, CCEA, Clarendon Dock, 29 Clarendon Road, BELFAST BT1 3BG, telephone number: 028 9026 1200.

24. Enquiries about the circular should be addressed to Mrs Patricia Thomson, Curriculum and Assessment Branch, at the Department of Education, (for address see front page), telephone number: 028 9127 9496.

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