



Guidelines on Relationships and Sexuality Education

Republic of Ireland



IRISH CATHOLIC
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE
EÓBHÓDAIL GÁSPRÓ CAITLÍCEACH ÉIREANN



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The *Primary School Curriculum* was published by the Department of Education and Science in 1999 and one of the six areas of learning in the curriculum is *Social, Personal and Health Education* (SPHE). An integral part of the SPHE curriculum is the provision of *Relationships and Sexuality Education* (RSE). This current publication, which updates *Relationships and Sexuality Education in Catholic Schools* (1997), outlines the context within which RSE takes place in a Catholic primary school.

The Religious Education (RE) programme in the Catholic primary school seeks to help the children to grow and develop into healthy, mature adults, capable of realising their full potential as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. One aspect of that growth is the development of the children's capacity to relate to others and to have a personal appreciation of their own sexuality. This is not seen as a separate element within the RE programme but is integrated throughout. This booklet includes material which outlines clearly where the RE programme in a Catholic primary school deals explicitly with the topics outlined in the Department of Education's guidelines for RSE. The topics covered in the RE programme, both in the time devoted and in many respects in the material covered, are what is suggested in the RSE curriculum.

The ethos of a Catholic school is entirely concerned with fostering the development of relationships – the love of God and the love of every human being. These are the greatest commandments, 'On these two commandments hang the whole law, and the Prophets too' (Mt 22:40). In *Vision '08: A Vision for Catholic Education in Ireland*, the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference summarised Catholic education as follows:

- ❖ Catholic education is inspired by Jesus Christ. It is person-centred, seeking to develop the full potential of each person.
- ❖ Catholic education proposes a sacramental view of reality, helping pupils to see God 'in the light of the Gospel and of human experience' (*Gaudium et Spes*, par. 46).
- ❖ Catholic education takes place in open, happy, stimulating and mutually respectful communities.

- ❖ Catholic education values intellectual and practical reason, promoting dialogue and understanding between faith, tradition, culture and heritage.
- ❖ Catholic education values tolerance and inclusiveness. Catholic schools welcome pupils of other traditions, faiths and none, seeing diversity as offering opportunities for deeper understanding among people holding diverse convictions.
- ❖ Catholic education seeks to enable pupils to act with integrity and justice, in pursuit of the common good in an imperfect world, and to act as stewards of creation.

Executive Summary

The vision, the values, the human and Christian virtues, the revealed truths and the lived tradition which go to make up the Christian understanding of life cannot be taught without reference to sexuality and procreation, and to the responsible, respectful and loving use of these gifts of God.

It is the responsibility of the Board of Management to initiate the process of developing an RSE policy for the school. In practice, a policy committee, consisting of representatives of parents, teachers and the Board of Management undertakes this task. Catholic primary schools are strongly advised to have an RSE policy prior to delivering an RSE programme. The policy should give guidance to teachers on how to approach moral and ethical issues relevant to RSE while taking the ethos of the school and the RE programme into account.

Everyone who is involved in the task of Relationships and Sexuality Education in a Catholic school should be guided by a number of basic principles.



1 The school should seek to communicate the Christian vision of human life and human relationships. This constitutes an education for love or as the Irish Bishops' Pastoral, *Love is for Life*, states ... 'It would be better to speak of "education for love", since the whole aim of a Christian and healthy sexuality is to put love, in its full and genuine meaning, into sexual relationships. Properly imparted, this knowledge

can greatly help young people towards a mature and balanced and Christian understanding of sex.¹ This would include such fundamental ideas as the following:²

- ❖ The human body is sacred – the visible image of God.
- ❖ The human body shows us that we are mortal and limited – dependent on God who gives and sustains our life.
- ❖ Through our bodily nature we relate to other people in a physical world which we share. From this it follows that we are called to respect one another and to recognise in one another, ‘bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh’ (Gn 2:23).
- ❖ Since it is sexual, the human body expresses the call of men and women to reciprocal love which is a mutual gift of self: ‘In a society that tends more and more to relativise and trivialise the very experience of love and sexuality, exalting its fleeting aspects and obscuring its fundamental values, it is more urgent than ever to proclaim and bear witness that *the truth* of conjugal love and sexuality exist where there is a full and total gift of persons, with the characteristics of *unity* and *fidelity*.’³
- ❖ Love and fruitfulness include and call for one another. In particular, married love – the only context which ‘aims at a deeply personal unity, a unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul’⁴ – is essentially oriented both to the loving unity of the couple and to cooperation with God in bringing new human life into the world. The values of love and life are seen most fully in the context of marriage and the family.⁵

¹ *Love is for Life*, Section 53.

² Cf. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educational Guidance in Human Love* (1983), 22.

³ Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2005), 223

⁴ John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), 1643.

⁵ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (337) – ‘God who is love and who created man and woman for love has called them to love. By creating man and woman he called them to an intimate communion of life and of love in marriage: “So that they are no longer two, but one flesh” (Mt 19:6). God said to them in blessing “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gn 1:28).’



- ❖ In Christian marriage, sexual union reflects the great mystery of the union of Christ and the Church. It becomes ‘an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves us’.⁶
- ❖ ‘Sexuality touches the sources of human life. It concerns the family, the basic cell of the human community and the foundation of a stable society. Sex is not just a personal and private matter. It has a social and community aspect too.’⁷
- ❖ The presence of sin in ourselves and in the world makes these truths less easy to discern.

Any attempt to communicate ‘the facts of life’ as mere facts without reference to the religious and moral dimensions of human sexuality and without reference to the pupil’s need to grow in maturity would be a distortion. Scientific facts are not the whole truth about human sexuality and reproduction. To allow children to become aware of the mere facts without being helped to see them in their rich human meaning would be to deprive them of the truth.

Quite apart from information about ‘the facts of life’, children should be taught from the beginning to recognise, at their own level,

⁶ Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News* (2010), 56.

⁷ *Love is for Life*, No. 7.

that sexuality is a gift of God. They should learn to appreciate that being a girl or being a boy is something for which they should be thankful to God. They should learn that human beings are created male and female in the image of God; sexual difference and complementarity are part of the variety of God's gifts.



2 The school must recognise that, in this area above all, its role is subsidiary to that of the parents.

The 1996 Vatican document, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, stresses the primacy of the role of the parents in the education of their children: ‘... any educative activity, related to education for love and carried out by persons outside the family, must be subject to the parents’ acceptance of it and must be seen not as a substitute but as a support for their work.’⁸

This is acknowledged in the opening words of the Department of Education’s booklet, *Relationships and Sexuality Education, Going Forward Together, An Introduction to Relationships and Sexuality Education for Parents* (1997): ‘As a parent, you are the first teacher of your child. You hand on values and attitudes to each new generation of children. Your child’s school aims to work together with you in this important job.’

To put this principle into practice a number of principles need to be clearly stated:

- ❖ Because RSE is an integral part of both the RE curriculum in a Catholic primary school and of the SPHE curriculum, schools are not required to ask parents to sign a permission slip to allow their child to attend lessons on the sensitive issues in RSE. However, the Primary Professional Development Service states in their Resource Pack for Relationships and Sexuality Education in Primary Schools that ‘where parents wish to take their child out of the lessons on the sensitive issues, a school can ask them to put this in writing. A school is advised to consult with parents on how to manage the opting out process in the best interests of the child.’⁹

⁸ *Educational Guidance in Human Love*, 30.

⁹ http://ppds.ie/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=290.

- ❖ Many parents/guardians need encouragement and help in introducing sensitive topics to their sons and daughters at home. The school can play an important role in providing that help and encouragement through ‘including parents fully in policy development, making new parents aware of the RSE policy, organising information evenings, sending home the home/school links pages at the end of each RSE lesson, making copies of the parent information booklet, RSE Going Forward Together, available to parents, or informing parents that they can look at copies of the RSE resource materials in the school.’¹⁰ Copies of this publication might also be made available to parents.
- ❖ The presumption should be that the child is not hearing the names of sexual organs and information about human reproduction for the first time in the school. Prior discussion with the parents should aim at reaching a consensus about when the school may reasonably presume that such information will have been communicated to the child at home. Parents who are properly fulfilling their responsibility with regard to the sexual education of their child should not find that the school has anticipated material which they had planned to communicate at a later date.
- ❖ Some parents may decide that they would prefer to delegate, in whole or in part, the responsibility for dealing with these issues to their child’s teachers. They should nevertheless inform themselves about what is being taught in school in order that they can cooperate with what the teachers are doing.
- ❖ In assessing the emotional and intellectual maturity of the pupils it must be borne in mind that very considerable differences exist even within the same class. Nothing should be dealt with in class unless the teacher is satisfied that every child in the class is ready for it. This raises particular difficulties in a school where teachers are teaching more than one class. In a two-teacher school, for instance, topics should not be raised with sixth class pupils while there are third class pupils in the same room for whom the lesson would not be suitable.
- ❖ The kind of maturity which a child requires in order to discuss intimate matters in the context of a loving relationship with his or

¹⁰ <http://ppds.ie>.



her parents is one thing. A different and much higher level of maturity may be required before a child is ready for the discussion of such matters in the more public context of a classroom.

- ❖ There may be situations in which a teacher judges that some or all of the children are not ready for a classroom treatment of some issues. In such a case the teacher should not be afraid to set boundaries and to refer such issues to the parents.



3 The Catholic school, in the formulation of its policy, should reflect Catholic moral teaching on sexual matters. Even more fundamentally, it needs to be specific in excluding approaches which are inconsistent with the very foundations and formulations of Catholic moral thought.

Moral truth is not arrived at by consensus. It is not the product of feelings or instinct. It is not arrived at simply by weighing up the likely consequences of various lines of action. It is not some arbitrary or legalistic imposition. It is not just a matter of being sincere, so that what is right for one person may be wrong for another. All of these approaches can readily be identified in contemporary debates.

In the first place the Catholic school will think in terms of moral truth. Sexual morality is about the meaning of human love. It is about how human relationships may be true to the full meaning and potential which they have been given by the Creator. The truth cannot be reached by means of feelings or instincts; it requires serious reflection about the meaning of human life and the dignity of the human person.

It is evident that, in dealing with profound human relationships, it is not enough to say that what is true for me may be false for you. Relationships are founded on communication. If what love, fidelity and respect mean to one person is not what they mean to another, any relationship between them will soon founder.

Sexual intimacy 'would be a lie if it were not the sign and fruit of a total personal self-giving ...'¹¹ Sexuality is a language and the meaning of that language is not something that we can invent or change.

By sexual union, a man and woman say to each other: 'I love you. There is nobody else in all the world I love in the way I love you. I love you just for being you. I want you to become even more wonderful than you are. I want to share my life and my world with you. I want you to share your life and your world with me. I want us to build a new life together, a future together, which will be our future ... I will be faithful to you not just now but always. I will never let you down or walk out on you.'¹²

In order to be faithful to the vision and ethos of a Catholic school, it is necessary that the following points should be borne in mind:

- ❖ The teacher will not attempt to build respect for the views of others on the false and fragile base of thinking that it does not much matter what one's view is, so long as it is sincere.
- ❖ Where fundamental disagreements have emerged about the right way to behave in particular situations, the discussion should not be

¹¹ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), 11.

¹² Irish Episcopal Conference, *Love is for Life* (1985), 9.

ended by saying, ‘what is right for one person may be wrong for another, so let’s agree to differ’. What is right and wrong is not a mere matter of opinion.

- ❖ Pupils will be encouraged to look more deeply at an issue than simply to ask whether they feel good about it. What is right and what is wrong does not depend on how one feels. Students will be helped to understand human dignity in the light of Christ and to grasp the implications of that understanding for the way that people should relate to one another.
- ❖ To present morality as if it were just a matter of opinion or of feelings or of causing the least possible discomfort would be to teach an approach to morality which is incompatible with the Catholic moral tradition and which is corrosive of genuine relationships.
- ❖ Moral judgement is a matter of reason. It reflects the kind of beings we are, how we should behave in the light of our own dignity and the equal dignity of every other human being. No matter how one feels about it, no matter what other people tell us, no matter what good consequences may follow, if my action is unreasonable then it is immoral.
- ❖ The Catholic school will be careful to give a positive attitude towards the gift of sexuality by showing its important place in God’s plan for human happiness. In Christian marriage, ‘the physical intimacy of husband and wife becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual communion’. That sexual union is, and is intended by God to be, ‘a source of joy and pleasure’.¹³
- ❖ The Catholic school will teach an appreciation of the sacrament of marriage as a memorial of the great works of God in history. ‘Christian marriage reflects the New Covenant between Christ and the Church, the Bride for whom he gave his life. As a commitment to love and to life, Christian marriage, blessed by God, builds up the ecclesial community and is deserving of its full support. Christian marriage is a true sacrament, signifying and communicating grace, echoing the faithful love of God.’¹⁴

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2360, 2362.

¹⁴ *Share the Good News*, 56.



4 The dignity, privacy and modesty of each individual child must always be respected. Care is necessary in relation to what is taught and when. It is also most important that the methods used should be appropriate. The pupil should never feel pressured to reveal or discuss private matters, nor to take part in forms of role-play or drama about which he or she feels a distaste or embarrassment. This is vital for two reasons:

1. It is not possible to teach the fundamental respect which is at the basis of every genuine relationship by methods which lack respect for one or more of the participants. The methods as well as the content must show the importance of sensitivity to the feelings of others, of courtesy, of self-restraint and of respect for the dignity and the privacy of other people. ‘The principle of “fidelity to God and fidelity to man” leads to an avoidance of any opposition or artificial

separation or presumed neutrality between method and content. It affirms, rather, their necessary correlation and interaction.’¹⁵

2. It would risk being entirely counter-productive by generating negative attitudes and a distaste towards the gift and mystery of sexuality and might damage the pupil’s capacity and willingness to discuss these issues freely and openly.

One must therefore be aware of a number of points:

- ❖ Children come from widely varying home and cultural backgrounds and have had very differing experiences. Teachers are well aware of the delicacy that is needed in dealing sensitively with issues that may be difficult for particular children. This sensitivity is obviously required, especially in dealing with questions about relationships.
- ❖ A dynamic may arise in a group discussion which can place improper pressure on those involved who do not wish to make disclosures: ‘I have told you my worries and questions, why won’t you tell me yours?’
- ❖ A child may easily be disturbed by being asked to participate in a discussion, role-play, or drama which he or she finds embarrassing or which presumes a level of maturity which the child does not yet possess.
- ❖ The materials used should not be such as to cause uneasiness to any of the pupils. It should be remembered that books and pictures which would be perfectly acceptable in the case of a child talking to a parent may be too explicit for classroom use.

In our time, children grow up in a world which no longer communicates respect for fundamental values in the area of sexuality. Nor do they find around them a consistent and positive understanding of human dignity. A feature of modern life can sometimes be the sexualisation of young people at an early age.¹⁶ In this context there is need to be particularly attentive to the popularity of social networks, which offer dialogue and

¹⁵ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (1998), 149.

¹⁶ ‘Also troubling is the encouragement of fashion and self-consciousness about body-image even in young children’ (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, *Cherishing Life*, par. 12)

interactive forms of communication and relationships. Pope Benedict XVI, addressing young people for the twenty-eighth World Youth Day 2013, said they must ‘use these media wisely’. He continued, ‘Be aware of the hidden dangers they contain, especially the risk of addiction, of confusing the real world with the virtual, and of replacing direct and personal encounters and dialogue with internet contacts.’¹⁷ Of special consequence are the following risks to the young in the use of the internet: inappropriate content, cyber bullying and predators.

It is, therefore, necessary to help Catholic young people to a deeper Christian understanding of what it means to be human and of the meaning of human relationships. It is a necessary part of the vocation of their parents to share with them the Good News of human worth and dignity in the light of the Incarnation and of our redemption in Christ.¹⁸ That sharing of the Good News with the rising generation is also part of the calling of every Christian, of the whole community of Christ’s followers.

What we seek to communicate to young people is good news. It is not primarily about fear or warnings about the dangers that await them but about reverence and wonder. We have to try to teach them that sexual intimacy is not something shallow and passing; it is not merely about self-fulfilment; it is about full, faithful, permanent self-giving.

It is no accident that ‘when the family disintegrates through unbearable social pressures, or when its privileged status is diminished, then a move towards unacceptable individualism is inevitable, with increased fragmentation and an accompanying loss of social cohesion. The home is where we learn how to live with others, how to cope with diversity, how to limit our individual desires in the light of other people’s needs. It is where we first learn the healing power of love and acceptance, how to cope with loss and hurt, where we learn the meaning of life and who we are. It is the first school of faith, the “domestic Church”, the “imprint of divine love”, the place where you can go when no-one else will take you in. For all these reasons the family has a very valuable and irreplaceable role in Irish society.’¹⁹

¹⁷ Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for the twenty-eighth World Youth Day 2013, No 4.

¹⁸ *Share the Good News*, 30.

¹⁹ <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/2004/05/03/supporting-marriage-and-the-family/>.



Criteria Applying to Visitors to Primary Schools Involved in RSE

When schools invite visitors into the school to enhance or supplement the SPHE curriculum, precise criteria must apply:²⁰

- ❖ Such external facilitators/tutors must be approved in advance by the principal and the Board of Management.
- ❖ They must work under the guidance and supervision of the classroom teacher.
- ❖ All materials proposed for use must be approved in advance by the principal and the Board of Management, be age and stage appropriate for pupils and be in line with the ethos of the Catholic school, and the principles of the SPHE curriculum. There is need also to take account of all relevant school policies and procedures including the school's child protection policy.
- ❖ It is strongly recommended that parents are consulted and made aware of any visitor and agency proposing to engage with pupils.

²⁰ See Department of Education and Skills Circular 0022/2010, page 2.

RSE and Religious Education

Religious Education in Catholic primary schools seeks to help children to grow and develop into healthy mature adults, capable of realising their full potential as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. One aspect of that growth is the development of the children's ability to relate to others and to have a positive understanding of their own sexuality. Concepts related to RSE in a Christian context are to be found in the Religious Education curriculum for Catholic pre-schools and primary schools. Such concepts are integrated throughout the children's experience of Religious Education in the primary school.

