

A curriculum for life

# The new Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Code – what it is and what it's not!

Posted on [December 3, 2021](#)

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The forthcoming Curriculum for Wales has been well received for the way it will help our young people survive and thrive in a rapidly changing world. RSE will play an important part in delivering on the Curriculum's aspirations. The draft mandatory RSE Code was laid in the Senedd on 23 November in preparation for members' approval. It has been designed to outline core learning at developmentally-appropriate phases, introducing the learning sensitively, providing detail for schools and settings on what should be taught and when.

In this piece we want to help practitioner colleagues understand how the draft RSE Code was developed, the considerations and consultations along the way, and briefly how it should be used. In doing this we hope to provide the tools to dismantle any myth or misconception that might be faced in school or at the school gate. We also want to share the many positives that this forward-looking draft Code will bring.



I can recognise and explain that my opinion and the opinions of others have value

Ability to act with kindness, empathy and compassion in interactions with others

### Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) Statutory Guidance and Code



## Humanities

Experiencing inclusive behaviours, language and role modelling that show respect for others, whatever their gender.



So to begin at the beginning...

The draft RSE Code has been developed by educational practitioners, in consultation with experts and interested parties who represent the rights of children, families, and community groups. As a working group, we took an evidence-informed approach to developing the draft Code and supporting statutory guidance. We debated on a whole range of issues relating to RSE, health and wellbeing, rights and diversity, to name just a few! There were many rich and engaging discussions around the purpose of RSE and the role it needs to play in safeguarding, educating and empowering children to develop safe and healthy relationships, and make a positive contribution to society.

Whatever discussions there were, and whatever tangents we veered off on, invariably we would return to these three vital questions for RSE:

- In what way can Relationships and Sexuality Education best support our learners to engage with their social world in a healthy, positive, and proactive

way?

- How can the RSE Code provide the mandatory learning needed for practitioners to develop a positive and protective curriculum; which sits within an emotionally-safe and supportive whole-school approach?
- How can schools and families be supported to work together to ensure that learners get the best possible experience of RSE?

Proposals for the draft Code and statutory guidance were consulted on extensively and were subject to public consultation during the Summer term 2021. The draft Code does not promote, or actively encourage, any particular life-style choice, religious or values-based views, or specific activities; but aims to ensure that schools create safe and supportive learning environments’.

As well as being a cross-cutting element, drawing on different areas of learning and experience (Areas) and subject disciplines, RSE is part of the wider Area for Health and Wellbeing. To assist with the understanding of how each Area can contribute to RSE, further information is being added to the Curriculum for Wales online guidance. For example, life-cycles and reproduction will continue to be taught through the science and technology Area, which along with other disciplines, draws upon the discipline of biology.

To this end, practitioners’ approaches to RSE will encompass a variety of methods. They will draw out RSE strands when considering other Areas. For example, the humanities description of learning *‘I can recognise and explain that my opinions and the opinions of others have value’* supports many aspects of RSE such as, *‘ability to act with kindness, empathy and compassion in interactions with others’*; and *‘experiencing inclusive behaviours, language and role modelling that show respect for others, whatever their gender’*.

Practitioners will also create opportunities for RSE to be taught discretely. As soon as children enter the social world they will be encountering and interacting with complex and often contradictory messages. It’s important that all children are provided with opportunities to explore these ideas in a safe and supportive environment. Therefore, another way of presenting the strands of learning that make up the draft RSE Code, is to ensure that they are covered from within the context of the Health and Wellbeing Area. This will ensure the positive and protective nature of RSE is realised through the lens of emotional wellbeing and healthy relationships.

| <b>Phase 1</b>  | <b>Phase 2</b>    | <b>Phase 3</b>     |
|---|-------------------|--------------------|
| Practitioners should consider learners’ developmental appropriateness for learning in each phase: |                   |                    |
| <b>From age 3</b>   | <b>From age 7</b> | <b>From age 11</b> |

The RSE Code requires schools to design an RSE curriculum around broad interlinking learning strands. These are:

Relationships and identity

Sexual health and wellbeing

Empowerment, safety and respect

The strands are presented as three phases. Ages are attached to each phase as a general guide (from age 3, 7 and 11). However, it is recognised that all children develop at different rates and practitioners are strongly encouraged to take account of everything they know about a learner's cognitive, social and emotional development when introducing RSE strands. One of the central ideas relating to these phases, is that they are never taught in isolation. For example, for the strand of learning linked to help and support, – phase 2 is to *'be able to identify trustworthy sources of information and be able to raise issues and questions with trusted adults'*. The phase which precedes this is *'recognise trusted adults who can help...'* Therefore, we wouldn't stop teaching about who are the reliable adults we can turn to for help from phase 1, just because we have moved on to the content in phase 2. Similarly, the learning from both these phases would continue when we get to phase 3, *'recognise and be able to use a range of support services to access information...'*

Another very important thing to know about these phases relates to 'developmentally appropriate' content. The learning set out in each phase indicates broadly when practitioners should start to consider whether learning in a phase is developmentally appropriate for their learners. The principles of progression across the Health and Wellbeing Area underpin progression throughout RSE, and phases are designed in such a way as to help practitioners to identify appropriate prerequisites for learning about RSE. For example, in preparation for adulthood, young people will be provided with opportunities to learn about *'safe and pleasurable relationships and recognise the role consensual activity plays within relationships'*. For the younger learner, or a learner in early stages of cognitive, physical, emotional or social development, the learning that takes place is around *'...an awareness of the different feelings one can have, recognising other people's feelings and how these may differ to your own'*.

Whereas learners in phase 3 of the draft RSE Code will learn about sexual health, young children and learners in early stages of development will learn about personal hygiene and how we keep ourselves clean.

During the early phase of development, an effective focus on prerequisite skills is essential to enabling the learner to successfully respond to situations in a meaningful way. Before learners can successfully engage with learning around meaningful relationships they will need to have developed the knowledge that other people have thoughts and feelings that differ from their own, and the skills to socially interact in a

positive way. During this stage, the emphasis is on how enabling adults can create emotionally-safe environments that support learners' early self-expression and behaviour regulation.

Therefore, schools will develop an RSE curriculum that truly reflects the experiences that our children and young people are having in the world around them. This means that RSE will be designed in response to learners' developing skills, knowledge, capacities and needs; as well as ensuring that they encounter RSE topics in a way that is appropriate for their chronological age.

Learner voice is essential to this approach and schools will need to develop their RSE in a way that takes account of the views and needs of learners and their families. Authentic learner voice is about more than just canvassing views but involves schools taking a holistic approach to ensuring that the needs of all learners are met. This is why the draft RSE statutory guidance includes advice for schools to ensure clear lines of communication with parents; including the sharing of examples of resources they plan to use to support the different developmental phases.

The new draft RSE Code means that schools will be empowered to create their curriculum and whole-school approaches that are tailor-made for their pupils; ensuring that all learners can engage in RSE in ways that are appropriate, relevant and meaningful for them.

*Post contributed by the RSE Working Group*