

# Relationships and Sexuality (RSE)\* Review

## Respondents details

|                                     |                                |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
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| <b>Position (if applicable)</b>     | CEO                            |
| <b>Organisation (if applicable)</b> | Dublin Rape Crisis Centre      |
| <b>Date</b>                         | December 20 <sup>th</sup> 2018 |
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Is this response a personal view or made on behalf of an organisation?

Personal  Organisation

Is this submission related to primary, post-primary or both?

Primary  Post-primary  Both

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Yes  No

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**Please provide some brief background information on your organisation (if applicable)**

The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (DRCC) is a non-governmental organisation which aims to prevent the harm and heal the trauma of rape and sexual abuse in Ireland. We have provided crisis counselling and long-term therapy services to adult women and men who have experienced rape, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse and have provided our expertise and experience for policy and advocacy purposes for almost 40 years. Our services include a national 24-hour helpline, one-to-one counselling and support and accompaniment services for those reporting to An Garda Síochána or attending court. We make policy interventions and carry out public awareness campaigns to prevent sexual violence. Our training programmes include *BodyRight* developed by the DRCC, aimed at teachers, Youthreach staff, youth workers and those working with young people in alternative education settings, to raise awareness about sexual violence among young people and to assist in its prevention. We also deliver training to many agencies and individuals who encounter the impact of sexual violence on those with whom they work. We work directly with students in universities and through school talks.

**What are you or your organisation's experiences of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)?**

In our work in Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, we see the often life-long consequences of the trauma and harm caused by sexual violence of all kinds. We also know from our experience that much of this harm is caused by people's lack of knowledge and capacity to cope with their society. This is particularly true for children and young people of every gender.

In 2007, we received funding from the Department of Justice to allow us develop and deliver a pilot Sexual Violence Awareness and Prevention Programme. The ideas and contributions from the young people who took part in the focus groups influenced the design, content and methodology of the programme. Further funding from Cosc, the National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence enabled us to develop the *BodyRight* programme further.

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The *BodyRight* programme is not intended as a standalone programme but should be integrated into an already existing social, personal, health, relationships and sexuality programme. The aims of the *BodyRight* programme include:

- To increase awareness of the importance of respecting other people and their integrity including physical integrity;
- To develop an understanding of what is meant by sexual violence, sexual harassment and sexualised bullying;
- To provide information on the law on sexual violence in Ireland;
- To consider the meaning of consent to a sexual act, and the importance of all sexual activity being consensual;
- To increase awareness of the impact and consequences of sexual violence;
- To introduce young people to mindful self awareness as a tool to understand and manage their own experience;
- To increase the ability of young people to protect themselves and to avoid harming others by developing their awareness and capacity to resource themselves;
- To change attitudes that lead to sexual violence and compound its impact through increased self awareness and self reflection;
- To raise awareness among young people of the potential harm of some of the behaviours of themselves or their peers, and their ability to question and challenge these.

DRCC provides a 4-day training for school and youth work staff to equip them to facilitate the programme with young people. We have trained in excess of 550 facilitators to date.

The DRCC also contributed to the process whereby the Manuela Riedo Foundation with the collaboration of 16 Rape Crisis Centres developed the Manuela Programme for use in transition year in schools. The DRCC is one of four RCC's hosting a project worker who will pilot the programme over the next two years in collaboration with Túsla.

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**The Minister of Education has requested that the following areas be specifically considered;**

- **Consent what it means and its importance**
- **Developments in contraception**
- **Healthy, positive sexual expression and relationships**
- **Safe use of the internet**
- **Social media and its effects on relationships and self-esteem**
- **LGBTQ+ matters**

**What are the challenges and opportunities when considering these areas in the review of Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE)?**

Consent Opportunities:

- Education about consent is essential for building healthy and respectful relationships and shouldn't be limited to just consenting to sexual activity;
- It's vital that children and young people know about their rights and that nothing should happen to them without their consent;
- Children and young people have a right to learn about bodily autonomy, their rights, and how to respect the rights of others;
- Younger children can learn about trust, respect and communication and then these ideas could be tied into a greater understanding and awareness of sexual consent as young people progress through the education system;
- But where it does relate to sexual activity it is important for young people to know and understand that even if they consent to a sexual act, they are absolutely free to change your mind before the activity or at any time before it ends.

Consent Challenges:

- How much consideration is given to the cultural and/or faith dimension of the setting in which the programme is being delivered;
- Parental and Board of Management support and co-operation;
- Appropriate timetabling of RSE within the curriculum;
- Buy-in and engagement from teachers;
- Adequate initial and ongoing training for teachers;
- The availability of up-to-date, accessible, age appropriate resources.

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#### Contraception Opportunities:

- Decisions that young people make can impact their health and well-being for the rest of their lives;
- They have the right to lead healthy lives and the education curriculum has a part to play in preparing young people by providing them with comprehensive sexual health education that gives them the tools they need to make these decisions;
- It is not enough to include discussions about abstinence and/or contraception to help them avoid unintended pregnancy or disease, they also need to be provided with fact based, age-appropriate information which allows them take personal responsibility for their health and wellbeing.

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#### Healthy, Positive Sexual Expression and Relationships Opportunities:

- A well thought out, age appropriate relationship and sexuality education programme should provide young people with an opportunity to explore and develop positive beliefs and values around sex and reproductive health;
- Any relationship and sexuality education should be based not just on biological facts around sex but one that also provides an opportunity to put forward the positive aspects of intimate relationships which are based on equality and mutual respect;
- Young people's participation in a relationship and sexuality education programme should empower them to take responsibility for their own decision-making and behaviours and how their choices can affect and impact on others;

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- The last comprehensive prevalence study: the Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland (SAVI) Report found that one in four adults experience sexual violence in their lifetime<sup>1</sup>. In light of this knowledge the RSE programme needs to aim concretely and specifically to prevent future generations from having similar negative experiences. Thus, an understanding of sexual abuse and violence, explaining what it is, how to recognise it and what to do about it, including how to access support, should be integrated into the programme;
- Ultimately, a relationship and sexuality education programme that covers sexual health and risks, as well as teaching children and young people about consent and understanding boundaries, what a healthy relationship looks like and how to stay safe in the real world and online, will ensure they have a good foundation of knowledge on which to make informed decisions.

#### Healthy, Positive Sexual Expression and Relationships Opportunities:

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- Appropriate timetabling of RSE within the curriculum;
- Buy-in and engagement from teachers;
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- The availability of up-to-date, accessible, age appropriate resources.

#### Safe use of the internet Opportunities and Challenges:

- New digital technologies and widespread internet access has shaped the ways in which young people learn about many things including sex, and can pose new and different risks for them;

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<sup>1</sup> The SAVI Report (2002) *Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland* Hannah McGee, Rebecca Garavan, Mairéad de Barra, Joanne Byrne and Ronán Conroy. <http://www.drcc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/savi.pdf>

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- The role that education plays in online safety can complement the role that parents play in informing and protecting children and young people and vice versa,
- One of the benefits to including education which guides the safe and responsible use of the internet is that it both highlights the benefits that can be derived from the internet but it also prepares children and young people for the potential risks and threats;
  - Children and young people can get enormous benefit from the internet in terms of browsing information, sometimes for study, other times to socialise and playing games;
  - But all too quickly and easily those environments can become unsafe when they are misused by others so it is really important that children and young people are aware of this so that they can keep themselves safe online.

#### Social Media and its Effects on Relationships and Self-esteem Opportunities and Challenges:

- Widespread internet access has transformed the way children and young people communicate with each other on smart phones in particular;
- One of the challenges is that the online contacts of many young people tend to expand rapidly and often without much filtering. But again the opportunity of including social media is that it presents the opportunity to raise awareness and understanding about the use of the privacy and security settings on the sites they use;
- Another way in which children and young people communicate is by sexting: the sending of sexual photos, messages, videos. While sharing such images might appear harmless to some young people, sexting can have serious social and legal consequences and the importance of knowing about those consequences cannot be underestimated;
- Raising awareness and understanding is key to not only influencing young people's attitudes and values to prevent potentially harmful behaviour but it can also diminish the likelihood of their well-being and self-esteem being undermined.

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In addition to the main BodyRight programme the DRCC also developed an additional sexting module, piloted by a number of our BodyRight facilitators. Their feedback has shown that the module works really well in raising the issue with young people and allowing them to consider the impact of how, once a picture has been sent they cannot be sure where it may end up. Worrying feedback that arose was how children as young as 11 and 12 years of age are sexting which highlights the need for those in our primary schools to know why and how important it is, to stay safe online. The module has also been used to raise awareness among parents and school staff.

Psychologically and emotionally, sexting can take its toll on children and young people. Once the image has been shared, things can quickly spiral out of control -

- the young person may no longer know who their picture might have been forwarded to;
- the not knowing, the not being in control of the situation can leave them feeling completely overwhelmed;
- this in turn can have a detrimental effect on their health and well-being leading to feelings of anxiety, depression, self-harm and in the worst cases – suicide;
- it also increases the risk of victimisation where they can be harassed, intimidated even blackmailed for sending such material - often referred to as ‘sextortion’ or webcam blackmailing. The more accurate terminology being referred to as online sexual coercion and extortion of children<sup>2</sup>.

From researching the sexting module, we are aware of some excellent resources that are available including Webwise<sup>3</sup>, and Say No! (Ireland) - A campaign against online sexual coercion and extortion of children<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas-and-trends/crime-areas/child-sexual-exploitation/online-sexual-coercion-and-extortion-of-children>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.webwise.ie/lockers/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6o2Ygv-zpk>

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Sex creates curiosity, which leads to exploration. Many young people are learning about sex through the medium of pornography, which can really compromise their ability to manage intimate sexual relationships. Notwithstanding their ability to effectively use online technologies, children and young people still need protection from content that can harm their development. Viewing pornographic material can skew their view of acceptable behaviour at a crucial time of development-

- being exposed to pornography can impact on a young person's development of their own sexuality and sexual identity;
- the person being viewed is portrayed only as a sexual object;
- in the mind of the young person that object can sexually arouse them;
- it can also lead to unrealistic expectations and compromise the young person's understanding of consent because pornography doesn't give a clear message about the necessity of consent, the result of which is that they end up confused and/or misinformed about the importance of this issue;
- Young people need to be educated to be critical and informed consumers of online content including gendered and sexualised advertising and media and pornography.

Bringing us right back to the significance of providing age-appropriate sex and relationship education in schools, dealing with issues including online pornography and sexting so that young people have the information they need to keep themselves safer online. Pornography is a poor and potentially harmful sex educator.

LGBTQ+ matters Opportunities:

- One of the key messages from the youth consultation process of the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy<sup>5</sup> was the importance of LGBTI+ inclusive education.
- Every young person needs to feel accepted, understood and included and providing all young people with inclusive relationship and sexuality education is a key way to do it;

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<sup>5</sup> LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020 LGBTI+ young people: visible, valued and included. Department of Children and Youth Affairs

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- When a young person sees themselves reflected in what they are learning, it isn't just providing or equipping them with the information they need to make safe and informed decision, it also helps them feel that they belong.

#### LGBTQ+ matters Challenges

- How much consideration is given to the cultural and/or faith dimension of the setting in which the programme is being delivered;
- Parental and Board of Management support and co-operation;
- Appropriate timetabling of RSE within the curriculum;
- Buy-in and engagement from teachers;
- Adequate initial and ongoing training for teachers;
- The availability of up-to-date, accessible, age appropriate resources.

#### **What supports need to be considered with regards to these challenges and opportunities in the review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)?**

- A whole of school approach to the development of a school policy on relationship and sexuality education that involves the Board of Management, parents, student councils and other key stakeholders is essential;
- Ensure that the policy reflects the needs of the diverse groups of children and young people within the school e.g. young people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, disabled, travellers, from ethnic minorities, etc.
- In tandem with school policies, all staff should have sufficient training to allow them recognise the importance of the RSE programme and empower them act to appropriately in whatever situation presents;
- The role and profile of relationship and sexuality education must be elevated within the curriculum, even if it is competing for time and space with examinable subjects because the consequences of not doing so are too serious;

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- Teachers are one of the key constituents influencing quality implementation of RSE programmes;<sup>6</sup> so they need to have the appropriate training and time to provide that education;
- In order to train educators who can deliver comprehensive relationship and sexuality education in schools, in youth groups, and in many other and varied settings, sufficient resources must be made available;
- It is also important that the materials are kept up-to date and accessible to optimise the children and young people’s learning;
- Monitor the implementation of the RSE programme on an ongoing basis and evaluate the actual programme at agreed intervals.

**If you have any comments or observations, please respond here:**

The brief outline above of our *Bodyright* programme outlines work that we do with second level students in schools, youth work and alternative education settings. We also believe that children at primary level need to learn how to build the concepts of respect and consent into their young thinking and vocabulary. It is important to start such conversations at an early age, to build consistently on the information provided so that children and young people grow up understanding everyone’s right to bodily autonomy – including their own. Providing basic information at a young age establishes the foundation on which more complex knowledge can be built up over time.

Most children spend a significant portion of their developing years in a school or other educational setting. It is essential that a child’s right to develop to their fullest potential, in accordance with Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>7</sup>, is enshrined at the heart of and underpins all school programmes including the RSE programme.

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<sup>6</sup> WHO 2017 *Training matters: A framework for core competencies of sexuality educators*.

<sup>7</sup> Article 29 States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to: (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

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School-based sex education should be viewed as education that has a lifelong impact: providing children and young people with the knowledge, understanding and skills to develop positive attitudes towards sexuality; to take care of their sexual health; and to enhance their interpersonal relationships, now and into the future.

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