



October 2018

Relationship and Sexuality Education Programme: Consultation Response

The Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC) is an all-island grassroots movement for choice and change. We organise the annual March for Choice to demand free, safe and legal abortion access for all who need or want it. ARC was a founding member of the “Together For Yes” campaign which secured a resounding Yes vote in the recent referendum to repeal the 8th Amendment. We aim to ensure that the health and dignity of all reproductive rights-holders in Ireland are protected in line with international best practice and human rights standards.

ARC support relationship and sexuality education which is inclusive, evidence-based and autonomy-focused. All young people should receive the same standard of education, regardless of their school’s ethos or their teachers’ beliefs or preferences.

Context

In the past year we have seen Ireland grow up in terms of acknowledging and respecting sexual and reproductive rights. The global “Me Too” movement and the campaign to Repeal the 8th Amendment led to many adults having their first real conversations about topics such as sexual assault, consent, abortion and bodily autonomy. The fact that these conversations were novel exposed the reality that most Irish people did not learn how to talk about these concepts during adolescence. There is still a long way to go to ensure everyone’s education includes the relevant information needed to live safe and healthy sexual lives.

Many elements of the Relationship and Sexuality Education programme (RSE) taught in schools around Ireland were developed over twenty years ago. There is widespread evidence that RSE is failing to consistently give all young people the knowledge and understanding they need in the areas of sex and relationships. We therefore welcome this National Council for Curriculum and Assessment review process. As an advocacy organisation primarily concerned with the expression of reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, we feel strongly that adolescents need to be well-educated about their bodies and their sexual and reproductive rights.

We support relationship and sexuality education which is inclusive, evidence-based and autonomy-focused. All young people should receive the same standard of education, regardless of their school’s ethos or their teachers’ beliefs or preferences.

Current practice

We know that such education is not currently provided in Ireland. Repeated studies carried out by Ireland's Crisis Pregnancy Agency and the Departments of Health and Children and Youth Affairs reveal that adolescents and young people report failure on the part of teachers delivering RSE to discuss the practice of safe sex and broader social and emotional aspects of well-being and sexuality. Young people interviewed in these studies also demonstrated a lack of knowledge concerning sexually transmitted infections, contraception and how to negotiate healthy relationships.¹²³ This may well be due to the fact that under the current Education Act, schools are free to deliver RSE according to their own values, which are often conservative and religious. In many cases, schools in Ireland rely on abstinence-based curricula or omit certain topics altogether.

Research has consistently found that sex education based on 'abstinence only' premises is ineffective and harmful to young people.⁴ Abstinence-only programmes have been shown to have no effect on the age young people first engage in sexual intercourse or their number of sexual partners, among other behaviours. In reality, many young people who intend to be abstinent do not remain so and are likely to engage in sexual activities without the necessary knowledge on contraception, consent, or sexual health in general.

The lack of a national monitoring and evaluation framework for RSE remains one of the chief barriers to accurately assessing equality of access and addressing how the curriculum could be improved to ensure it serves the needs of all children and young people. Equally important, there does not appear to be a working mechanism to hold schools accountable for instituting an all-school RSE policy and delivering the RSE programme despite the fact that the Department of Education recognized the provision of sexuality education as a rights obligation under the terms of Article 11.2 of the European Social Charter in a circular issued to post-primary schools.⁵

Recommendations

In order to deliver high-quality RSE across Ireland, we believe that the education system should focus on principles of inclusion, consent, bodily autonomy, and evidence-based practice. Our specific recommendations are outlined in more detail below.

¹ Hyde, A. & Howlett, E. (2004) *Understanding Teenage Sexuality in Ireland*. Dublin: Crisis Pregnancy Agency.

² Mayock, P. & Byrne, T. (2004) *A Study of Sexual Health Issues, Attitudes and Behaviours: the Views of Early School Leavers*. Dublin: Crisis Pregnancy Agency.

³ Mayock, P., Kitching, K., & Morgan, M. (2007) Relationships and sexuality education in post-primary schools: Challenges to full implementation. Dublin: Crisis Pregnancy Agency/Department of Education.

⁴ Santelli, J.S. et al. (2017) 'Abstinence only until marriage: an updated review of U.S. policies and their impact' *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 61(3).
<https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2017/08/abstinence-only-until-marriage-updated-review-us-policies-and-programs-and-their>

⁵ Department of Education and Skills (2010) 'Relationships and sexuality education', DES circular, 0037/2010 https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0037_2010.pdf

Inclusive education

- All young people, regardless of their gender identity, should receive the same RSE. As adults, we need to understand and empathise with people of all genders and sexual orientations and we need the appropriate education to do so.
- RSE should be LGBT+ inclusive. This is important in order to destigmatise LGBT+ relationships, educate students on LGBT+ rights and support young LGBT+ people who may be struggling with discrimination in their personal lives.
- RSE should include factual information about different types of bodies, including trans and intersex people's bodies and disabled people's bodies. With the absence of representation of diverse body types in mainstream media, young people should be assured that there is no such thing as a "normal body".
- RSE should address different kinds of sex. Understanding that your sex life includes a broad range of acts with or without other people is important both for safeguarding young people and for supporting them.
- In order to deliver comprehensive and inclusive sex education to all, the Education Act must be amended. The Act should no longer allow schools to deliver sexuality education in accordance with a school's ethos and should not oblige the board of management to uphold the ethos of the school's patron (often the church).
- Additionally, the RSE programme should be extended to ensure access to sexuality information and education for marginalized adolescents and youth outside the formal education system. It is crucial that this consultation on RSE take into account the rights of those outside formal education. Failure to systematically provide these young people with comprehensive sexuality education will deepen the social exclusion they experience, and jeopardize their future lives and health.

Education focused on consent and bodily autonomy

- Laws governing the age of consent must not infringe on young people's rights to receive sexuality and reproductive health information and education. Children and young people must learn about their right to make decisions about their own body. This can begin at a young age under the theme of "your body, your choice", where children are taught that they can accept or refuse physical contact, e.g. hugs. This is an example of an age-appropriate method of introducing the importance of consent.
- As children learn more about sex, consent must remain central. Lessons about sexual consent should cover what is consent, what does consent look like (mutual, unreserved, enthusiastic, continuous), situations where someone does not have the capacity to consent, the right to withdraw consent and what to do if consent is violated. Education about what constitutes a healthy or unhealthy relationship and where to go to get support should be included in this subject. Students should be given ample opportunity to reflect on and discuss consent.
- RSE should also include discussions of bodily autonomy. Contraception and abortion should form an important part of these discussions and should always be framed in a rights-based, patient-centred fashion, where the sexually active and/or pregnant person is the decision maker. Educating students on the human rights attached to bodily autonomy and an individual's right to privacy must form part of the curriculum.
- Education about consent should incorporate broader discussions of autonomy, such as skills in decision-making.

- Education on human rights should also pay particular attention to the ways in which the bodily autonomy of vulnerable groups (such as people with disabilities or undocumented migrants) is particularly negatively impacted through restrictions to bodily autonomy.

Evidence-based education

- All education must be based in facts.
- RSE should teach children and young people about safe sex and contraception, including how to access and use contraception. These discussions should also explain that no contraception is 100% reliable and provide realistic information about how and why contraception can and does fail, in order to maximise successful use. RSE should also incorporate realistic and unbiased discussions on sexually transmitted infections and their management. Conditions such as HIV are often the subject of heightened stigma due in large part to a lack of knowledge and information.
- Myth-busting around sexual and reproductive health and gender stereotypes is crucial, particularly in the context of widespread misinformation about relationships and sexuality.
- Comprehensive RSE should provide students with facts about puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, abortion and miscarriage. This should include information on how to recognise and date pregnancy. Students should also receive information on pregnancy and the law, such as under what circumstances abortion is legal and the international context around reproductive rights.
- It is important that any new RSE programme introduced in Ireland is monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis in order to assess its implementation and effectiveness, and make improvements where necessary.

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