

Relationships and sexuality education – what is it, really?

A required area of learning in the *New Zealand Curriculum* since 1999.

Relationships and sexuality education has been a required area of learning in *The New Zealand Curriculum* from Years 1 to 10¹ for over twenty years. Relationships and sexuality education is taught in schools around the world. There is clear evidence that relationships and sexuality education is essential learning for all young people.^{2,3} It provides students with the knowledge and skills they need to develop healthy relationships and make informed choices that support their mental and physical health and wellbeing. Research shows that when young people have quality relationships and sexuality education, they are more likely to delay having sex, and use condoms and contraception when they choose to have sex.⁴ More recently, relationships and sexuality education has been linked to a broader range of positive social and health outcomes, including promoting healthy relationships and preventing sexual and intimate partner violence.^{5,6,7}

A partnership with parents and whānau

Relationships and sexuality education is a partnership with parents and whānau. Parents and whānau play an essential role sharing information and values around relationships and sexuality with their children. Children and young people are exposed to a broad range of information and perspectives about relationships and sexuality through mainstream media, social media, and friends. School is another place where children and young people learn about these issues. Teachers are supported to teach this area of the curriculum through professional development based on evidence of best practice. Parents are encouraged to talk to their children about what they learn in school, just as they talk to their children about what they see and hear through social media, mainstream media, and friends.

Under the Education and Training Act 2020,⁸ schools must consult with their community at least every two years about how to implement the health education curriculum, including relationships and sexuality education. Parents can withdraw their child from all or part of relationships and sexuality education.

Age-appropriate

Relationships and sexuality education is a progression of learning. In the early years, the focus is on things like friendships, being kind to others, belonging, being inclusive and respectful of differences. It is

¹ <https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum/Health-and-physical-education/Learning-area-structure>

² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)(2018) Why comprehensive sexuality education is important. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/why-comprehensive-sexuality-education-important>

³ Ministry of Education (2020) Relationships and Sexuality Education Years 1–8: A guide for teachers, leaders, and boards of trustees. <https://hpe.tki.org.nz/assets/healthpe/pdfs/RSE+Guide+y1-8.pdf>

⁴ UNESCO (2018) Revised edition: International technical guidance on sexuality education. An evidence-informed approach. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>

⁵ Santelli JS, Grilo SA, Choo T-H, Diaz G, Walsh K, Wall M, et al. (2018) *Does sex education before college protect students from sexual assault in college?* PLoS ONE 13(11): e0205951. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0205951>

⁶ Thursdays in Black (2017) In our own words: student experiences of sexual violence prior to and during tertiary education. Retrieved from: <https://library.nzfvc.org.nz/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=5557>

⁷ Glodfarb ES and Lieberman LD (2021) Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Vol 68 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.036>

⁸ Education and Training Act 2020 <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2020/0038/latest/LMS170676.html>

also about how to take care of your body, including strategies to keep safe and ensuring children can identify safe adults and know the right words to use if they need help.

In the middle and older years, relationships and sexuality education includes information about things like menstruation and puberty, contraception, condoms, and consent in the context of intimate relationships, keeping safe online and media literacy, including how to deal with sexually explicit material. This education is important for kids to be healthy and safe. It also teaches young people what to do if harm occurs, and where they can seek support. While many kids learn about these issues at home, others do not, so it is important they learn at school from trusted adults. Almost all young people will see information about sex and bodies somewhere online. Evidence shows that talking about sex, condoms and contraception does not encourage young people to have sex but supports young people to delay sexuality activity.⁹

Inclusive of different identities and perspectives

Relationships and sexuality education teaches young people that in society, people hold a range of identities and perspectives, including identities related to gender, ethnicity, language, and religion. It incorporates mātauranga Māori and other cultural perspectives. Relationships and sexuality education supports young people to think about the diverse world around them, and how to be respectful of differences. We all want young people to feel that they belong and to be accepting of others. This is important learning for young people throughout their lives – in their intimate relationships, but also in friendships, among whānau and workplace relationships. Schools have a responsibility to ensure all young people feel safe and included at school, including young people who are gender diverse. Conversations about gender diversity are happening online, and in the media. Evidence-based learning about these issues in school, alongside conversations with parents at home, helps young people make sense of what they are encountering online.

Young people want all the issues covered

Young people want to learn about a broad range of issues related to sexuality and relationships. We've heard this through our surveys and research confirms it. Here's what they've said¹⁰:

"[Relationships and sexuality education] taught us about different sexualities and genders, sexually transmitted diseases, reproduction, different contraceptives and healthy relationships. Was incredibly useful and I still use that information now."

"I wish it had been a lot more important. It all felt so secretive and there wasn't very much of it. I always felt like we were doing something wrong by learning about it, and always had to act like it was dumb or embarrassing or not cool, because I didn't want to come across as wanting to know more."

For more information about relationships and sexuality education in Aotearoa New Zealand, visit

<https://parents.education.govt.nz/primary-school/learning-at-school/sexuality-education/#My-rights>

⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023) What Works In Schools: Sexual Health Education.

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/whatworks/what-works-sexual-health-education.htm>

¹⁰ Family Planning (2019) Young People's Experiences of Sexuality Education

https://www.familyplanning.org.nz/media/303990/youth-survey-summary-report_march2019_final.pdf