

# St. Mary's Diocesan School

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## St Mary's Diocesan School

### Relationship and Sexuality Education Policy Statement

*Enacted after consultation with staff, parents representatives, Principal and Board of Management. In this document all references to gender are taken to be inclusive and the term "parent" is taken to include "guardian". For the purposes of this document SPHE is taken to refer to Social Personal and Health Education, RSE is taken to refer to Relationships and Sexuality Education. JC refers to Junior Cycle, SC refers to senior Cycle.*

#### A. School

St Mary's is an all-boys, voluntary secondary school under the patronage of the Diocese of Meath with an enrolment circa. 900 pupils.

#### B. Our School Philosophy

**Mission Statement:** *St Mary's Diocesan School is a Catholic Secondary School committed to the development of the whole person, offering equal opportunities to all to achieve their full potential in a familial Catholic environment. The school aspires to an education based on high ideals and a broad curriculum which will allow our students to confidently play their role in society.*

1. In keeping with its holistic ethos, our school encourages its pupils to consider and assess different viewpoints in relation to issues of morality. Exploring and respecting the needs and values of minority groups and individuals within our school enriches the whole life of our school community.
2. The school gives its pupils the opportunity to explore the humanities, sciences, arts, business studies and technical subjects. In addition, it provides religious, moral and physical education in order to meet its objectives of supporting students in achieving their full academic potential and preparing them for participation in civic society and working life.
3. A Code of Behaviour has been published in consultation with parents, staff and pupils and the following excerpts illustrate how the ethos of the school operates on a daily basis:
  - i. Committed to the development of the whole person offering equal opportunities to all to achieve their full potential in a familial Christian environment
  - ii. To foster in each student a feeling of self-worth and a sense of respect and consideration for others. Respect for others and our pastoral care structure are at the centre of the basis of our Code of Behaviour.

#### C.

##### Objectives of this policy:

The policy will ensure clarity and consensus on how SPHE and RSE is taught in St. Mary's Diocesan School.

It will articulate the relationship of RSE to SPHE.

It will articulate the rationale of the RSE programme.

It will clarify the rights, roles, and responsibilities of all within the school community in relation to the RSE programme with reference to school staff, students, parents/guardians, and the Board of Management/patron.

It will ensure that teachers, parents/guardians, and students understand how the teaching of RSE is linked to the school ethos.

It will provide information on the practicalities of delivering the programme.

### **Aims of the SPHE/RSE Programme:**

The SPHE programme aims to enhance students' understanding of themselves and foster a positive sense of self-worth. It aims to equip students with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary for leading enriching and healthy lives. The programme is designed to empower students to establish, foster, and sustain respectful and loving relationships with themselves and others. Additionally, it seeks to strengthen their ability to make a constructive contribution to society. See Appendix 4 for more details about JC and SC SPHE programmes.

### **Rationale and Purpose of SPHE/RSE Policy:**

SPHE offers a vital framework for students to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and values essential for their overall wellbeing, encompassing physical, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects. It emphasises principles like respect, equality, inclusivity, and empathy, setting a foundation for young individuals to navigate their development positively.

Adolescence marks a critical period of identity formation and self-discovery, prompting the need for guidance in making informed decisions, developing a strong sense of self, and handling life's challenges effectively. SPHE aids in fostering these capabilities, equipping students with the skills to manage their lives with confidence.

The programme emphasises the cultivation of crucial life skills such as self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills. These competencies are key in adapting to the complexities of a rapidly changing world and achieving positive outcomes in various life situations. Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), a significant component of SPHE, plays a critical role during this phase by encouraging young people to explore and understand their identities and values in relationships, facilitated by open discussions in a safe, educational environment. Having the opportunity to think about and discuss relationships, sexuality and healthy sexual expression within a safe classroom setting and with a skilled teacher is vitally important.

SPHE utilises interactive and reflective teaching methods to create a supportive space for students to enhance self and social awareness, promoting personal growth and wellbeing. It aligns with junior cycle education's focus on wellbeing indicators - Active, Responsible, Connected, Resilient, Respected, and Aware - making it a central element of a school's Wellbeing programme. By advocating for an inclusive approach that respects diversity and human rights, SPHE contributes significantly to forming a compassionate, equitable society, recognising the richness brought by diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

### **D. What the School Currently Provides**

Arrangement regarding the teaching of the programme and the deployment of staff will be made by the Principal. RSE will be provided from 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> Year. No element of the curriculum will be omitted whilst respecting the ethos of the school.

### **E. Management and Organisation of Relationships and Sexuality Education in Our School**

1. **Advice** - The school's function is to provide a general education about sexual education about sexual matters and not offer individual advice, information or counselling on aspects of sexual behaviour and contraception – however, sources of information and advice will be identified as appropriate. Teachers may provide pupils with information about where and from whom they can receive confidential sexual advice and treatment, e.g. their doctor or other suitable agency. Advice offered should not be directive and should be appropriate to the age of the pupil.

**2. Sensitive Questions** - It may not be appropriate to deal with some questions in class. When deciding their response, the teacher should consider the age and readiness of the students, the RSE programme content and policy and the ethos of the school. It is best practice that teachers will use fictional case studies when discussing scenarios, to avoid students oversharing sensitive information in a busy classroom environment. If a teacher (as a mandated person) becomes concerned about any matter that has been raised, he/she should report the matter to the DLP (Designated Liaison Person) in accordance with the school's Child Protection Procedures.

**3. Confidentiality** – In accordance with the school's Child Protection Procedures it is school policy that in circumstances where a pupil is considered at risk of any type of abuse or in breach of the law, the teacher must report the matter to the DLP. Teachers must not promise absolute confidentiality and should remind pupils that this is the case.

**4. Withdrawing Pupils from RSE** – This policy is available on the school website and a hard copy is available on request. RSE is a mandatory element of the SPHE programme, and schools are obligated to offer RSE lessons at both Junior and Senior Cycle. However, The Education Act 1998, Section 30 (2) (e) states that a student is not required to attend instruction in any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parents. Should a parent/guardian wish to withdraw their child from RSE, there is a window of time to do so. They must inform the Principal in writing during that time period. They will receive correspondence from the school with the time period details each year. Parents do not need to provide reasons for withdrawal but we respectfully invite them to do so. Once a parent has made a request to withdraw from the RSE programme, that request will be complied with in the following years unless revoked by the parent. **See Appendix 1.** Please note RSE topics may come up in any subject or discussion. If you withdraw your son from RSE, he will only be removed from lessons where RSE is the specific, main topic of the lesson only.

**5. Visiting Speakers** – Circular 43/18 states: *Use of programmes and/or external facilitators can play a role in supplementing, complementing and supporting a planned comprehensive approach to wellbeing promotion.* Furthermore, it continues: *External facilitators always work under the guidance and supervision of the relevant classroom teacher who remains in the classroom with the students at all times and retains a central role in the delivery of the subject matter. Absence of the teacher may undermine the integrity of the curriculum, and the credibility and professionalism of the teacher. It may also compromise the safety of the students.*

It is therefore to be borne in mind that external facilitators/speakers are useful in the delivery of RSE but are to be used to supplement the work of the classroom teacher. The classroom teacher should bear in mind the school's ethos, the age of pupils, the relevance of the material to be presented and the school's Child Protection Procedures when deciding to invite and make use of an external facilitator/speaker.

#### **6. Pornography**

In the SPHE classroom, topics such as sexting and pornography are addressed with the aim of providing students with essential knowledge and skills to navigate the digital world safely and responsibly. By discussing these topics, students are equipped with the tools to recognise harmful behaviours, set boundaries, and make informed decisions regarding their online activities. Discussing these topics empower them with the knowledge needed to protect their emotional and mental wellbeing.

**Important Note: Under no circumstances will pornographic or explicit images be shared in the SPHE classroom.**

### **7. Supporting Students with AEN (Additional Education Needs)**

Students with intellectual disabilities usually progress through the stages of sexual development at the same age as other children but may lack the cognitive or emotional maturity to understand the physiological and psychosocial changes that they are experiencing. Children and young people with an intellectual disability may also lack the understanding or awareness of behaviours that may put them at risk of sexual exploitation.

SPHE/RSE teachers may tailor the classroom content by utilising the AEN-specific resources and support. This approach enhances young people's understanding and learning, ensuring they grasp the material while also safeguarding their safety and wellbeing.

### **F. Provision for Ongoing Support, Development and Review**

1. All teachers involved in this work do not necessarily have to be 'experts' on the issues concerned. However, they do require sensitivity to the needs of the group, and ability to deal with questions openly and honestly and a preparedness to refer to more expert advice if necessary. The skills acquired in general teaching apply also to SPHE. Some teachers will have expert training in the specific areas of health, relationships and sexuality education and will be encouraged to lead training of other teachers.
2. The school will facilitate teachers to obtain expert training where possible in this field bearing in mind the overall needs of the school.
3. Resources and teaching material will be purchased where they have been identified as useful by staff and approved by the Principal.
4. Monitoring, Evaluating and Reviewing the RSE Programme will be undertaken as part of the school's Wellbeing Programme.

### **Links to other policies:**

This policy works in partnership with other school policies such as our Attendance policy, Code of Behaviour policy, Bí Cinealta policy, Child Protection Procedures, Acceptable Use Policy of Digital Devices. This list is not exhaustive. These can all be found on our school website.

**Appendix 1.**

*Steps to request withdrawal from RSE by a parent:*

*All parents are given a window of opportunity to withdraw their child from RSE. This is detailed in the letter in Appendix 2, which is sent out via VSmal.*

*Parent to contact the Principal within the window via email [office@stmarysds.ie](mailto:office@stmarysds.ie)*

*Principal will arrange a time to discuss same.*

*The teacher of the child is notified via email and will inform the child when RSE specific lessons are beginning so that the child can be withdrawn from those classes.*

**This policy was ratified by the Board of Management on the**

## Appendix 2.

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I am writing to you to inform you that as part of our SPHE curriculum at junior and senior cycle your son will be provided with specific lessons focusing on relationship and sexuality education (RSE). These lessons will be taught throughout the school year.

These lessons are being taught in SPHE class at junior cycle and during non exam time at senior cycle to complement the relationship and sexuality education that takes place in the home.

The general aim of SPHE in our school is to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual, including the aesthetic, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, social, religious and spiritual development.

General information about Relationships and Sexuality education across Primary and Post Primary Schools [Information on relationships and sexuality education final.pdf](#)

Information for Parents (SPHE) [jc-sphe-information-for-parents-en \(1\).pdf](#)

RSE is set firmly within a moral, spiritual and social framework. A positive attitude to sexuality will be expressed in a responsible and respectful manner. RSE will be taught with reference to the school's RSE policy, available on our website and will be consistent with the core values and ethos of the school.

In order to ensure that young people are receiving comprehensive RSE education, we would highlight the importance of openly discussing topics with your child in advance of these lessons.

If you have any concerns about your son engaging in these lessons, please contact the Principal by XXX via [office@stmarysds.ie](mailto:office@stmarysds.ie) If you want your child withdrawn from RSE class, a discussion must be arranged in advance with the Principal to the commencement of the lessons. **Please note: If you withdraw your son from RSE, that remains the case for the years ahead unless you revoke that decision and inform the school.**

Kind Regards,

Appendix 3.

**Resources:**

**Some of the following resources may be used in lessons:**

<https://www.curriculumonline.ie/junior-cycle/short-courses/sphe/sphe-2023/sphe-toolkit/resources-for-teaching-and-learning-in-sphe/>

<https://www.curriculumonline.ie/senior-cycle/sphe/sphe-toolkit-deafe0b9379b1ba416af2bfdacf51549/>

<https://www.curriculumonline.ie/senior-cycle/sphe/sphe-toolkit/resources-for-learning-and-teaching-sphe-2024/>

**Teachers may also choose to use an agreed textbook. A hard copy and digital will be provided in this case to the students.**

## **Appendix 4: Junior and Senior Cycle Specifications:**

### **Learning Outcomes explored in the Junior Cycle SPHE Specification 2023**

#### **Strand 1:**

- 1.1 explore the physical, social and emotional changes that happen during adolescence
- 1.2 reflect on their personal strengths and values and how they bring these into relationships
- 1.3 explore the range of influences and life experiences that can impact on self-image and self-esteem and identify ways to nurture a positive sense of self-worth
- 1.4 recognise the factors and influences that shape young people's self-identity, such as family, peers, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnic background, dis/abilities, religious beliefs/worldviews
- 1.5 reflect on gender equity and how gender stereotypes impact on expectations, behaviour and relationships
- 1.6 discuss experiences/situations of bias, inequality or exclusion<sup>3</sup> and devise ways to actively create more inclusive environments
- 1.7 communicate in a respectful and effective manner and listen openly and sensitively to the views/feelings of others
- 1.8 reflect on the meaning and importance of empathy and discuss ways that it can be expressed
- 1.9 demonstrate self-management skills, including setting personal goals, delaying gratification, and self-regulation of thoughts, emotions and impulses.

#### **Strand 2:**

- 2.1 consider the multifaceted nature of health and wellbeing, and evaluate what being healthy might look like for different adolescents, including how food, physical activity, sleep/rest and hygiene contribute to health and wellbeing
- 2.2 investigate how unhealthy products such as nicotine, vapes, alcohol, and unhealthy food and drinks are marketed and advertised
- 2.3 discuss societal, cultural and economic influences affecting young people when it comes to making healthy choices about smoking, alcohol and other addictive substances and behaviours, and how harmful influences can be overcome in real-life situations
- 2.4 demonstrate skills and strategies to help make informed choices that support health and wellbeing and apply them in real-life situations that may be stressful and/or involve difficult peer situations
- 2.5 discuss the physical, social, emotional and legal consequences of using addictive substances - immediate and long-term
- 2.6 consider scenarios where, for example, alcohol, nicotine, drugs, food and electronic devices might be used to cope with unpleasant feelings or stress, and discuss possible healthy ways of coping

2.7 assess the benefits and difficulties associated with their online world and discuss strategies for dealing with a range of scenarios that might arise

2.8 discuss how to share personal information, images, opinions and emotions in a safe, responsible and respectful manner online and in person

2.9 explore why young people share sexual imagery online and examine the risks and consequences of doing this 2.10 demonstrate how to access and appraise appropriate and trustworthy information, supports and services about health and wellbeing.

### **Strand 3:**

3.1 reflect on the values, behaviours and skills that help to make, sustain and end relationships respectfully with friends, family and romantic/intimate relationships

3.2 examine benefits and difficulties experienced by young people in a range of relationships - friendships, family relationships, and romantic/intimate relationships

3.3 identify signs of healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships

3.4 appreciate the importance of setting healthy boundaries in relationships and consider how to show respect for the boundaries of others

3.5 consider the importance of taking care of their reproductive health

3.6 appreciate the breadth of what constitutes human sexuality, and how sexual orientation and gender identity are experienced and expressed in diverse ways

3.7 explore the pressures to become sexually intimate and discuss ways to show respect for people's choices

3.8 appreciate the importance of seeking, giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships, from the perspective of building caring relationships and from a legal perspective

3.9 explain the importance of safer sexual activity with reference to methods of contraception and protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

3.10 discuss the influence of popular culture and the online world, in particular, the influence of pornography, on young people's understanding, expectations and social norms in relation to sexual expression

3.11 demonstrate how to access and appraise appropriate and trustworthy advice, support and services related to relationships and sexual health.

### **Strand 4:**

4.1 discuss the fluid nature of emotional wellbeing and ways to nurture and protect it 4.2 recognise and acknowledge their emotions and recognise the links between thoughts, feelings and behaviour

4.3 consider the impact of stress and draw upon a variety of techniques to help self-regulate emotions and cope with the day-to-day stresses of life

4.4 discuss ways to support themselves and others in challenging times and where/how/when to seek support, if needed

4.5 explore how emotional wellbeing can be affected by factors within our control, such as sleep, diet, exercise, substance use and online exposure, and factors beyond our control

4.6 recognise different kinds of abusive and bullying behaviour that can occur in interactions online and in person

4.7 explain why noticing and responding to different kinds of abusive or bullying behaviour that can occur in person and online is important and discuss appropriate responses including, why, how, where and when to report

4.8 identify actions young people can take, without putting themselves at risk, in situations where they are aware of incidents of abusive behaviour or bullying happening and explore the barriers to standing up

4.9 demonstrate how to access and appraise appropriate and trustworthy information and services aimed at supporting young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health.

## **Learning Outcomes explored in the Senior Cycle SPHE Specification 2024**

### **Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

1.1 explore the determinants of good health.

1.2 investigate ways a person can influence their holistic health, including physical activity, food, sleep, social connections, positive self-image and connecting with nature, and discuss how these are related.

1.3 examine social norms, attitudes and beliefs related to alcohol, tobacco/vaping and substance use.

1.4 explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, community, peers, school, social media, digital technology, alcohol and mood-altering drugs, and one's self-image and identity.

1.5 recognise helpful and unhelpful thinking patterns, including negative self-talk, and how these can affect emotions and behaviour.

1.6 describe and draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health.

1.7 recognise the signs and symptoms of low mood, stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed.

1.8 discuss ways of responding to low mood, stress and anxiety.

1.9 explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed.

1.10 discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

## **Strand 2: RSE**

2.1 demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating effectively, navigating difficult conversations, preventing and managing conflict and dealing with break-ups.

2.2 reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity, and those of others, can influence the dynamics of families, friendships and romantic relationships.

2.3 discuss the need for consent and the importance of care, respect, empathy, trust and mutual pleasure within a sexual relationship.

2.4 examine how both positive and harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online, and in society and discuss strategies for challenging and changing harmful attitudes and narratives.

2.5 identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control.

2.6 explore the root causes and consequences of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV), and outline the supports and services available, and protections under the law.

2.7 investigate the possible influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations and what supports are available for those impacted by pornography.

2.8 discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape, and what to do and how to seek support if they or someone they know has experienced any of these.

2.9 understand the components of sexual health including fertility across the life-cycle, reproductive choices, sexual functioning, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health information and services.

## **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

3.1 consider strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health.

3.2 demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life.

3.3 explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times and where to find support.

3.4 summarise accurately their rights, responsibilities and protections before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, consent, alcohol and drug use, their work-place rights and right to access services.

3.5 demonstrate the confidence and skills needed to be their own person and be able to advocate for themselves and others, even if it means standing out from the crowd

3.6 recognise when people are experiencing discrimination and demonstrate the skills needed to express solidarity in a range of situation.