

Relationships and sexuality education – FAQs

Why should schools teach about relationships and sexuality education issues when parents and whānau should be doing it?

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 and messages are often reinforced at home and school. However, even in the best relationships, some kids don't want to discuss these issues with their parents, and some parents don't feel comfortable talking to their children, especially about new or tricky topics. Teachers are trained to teach this area of the curriculum. School also provides a safe environment for young people to have conversations with their peers about these issues. 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. 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.

Does relationships and sexuality education teach young children about sex?

Relationships and sexuality education covers different information at different ages, and learning topics are age appropriate. There are Ministry of Education guidelines, resources, and professional development to support teachers to know what to teach at what age and stage. In the early years, the focus of relationships and sexuality education is on things like friendships, being kind to others, belonging, being inclusive and respectful of differences. It is also about how to take care of your body, including strategies to keep safe. It is not until later years that young people start learning more complex and sensitive issues related to sexuality and sex.

Does relationships and sexuality education indoctrinate young people with gender ideology?

No. Teachers do not try to influence young people's gender identity. 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. Relationships and sexuality education supports young people to think about the diverse world around them, and how to be respectful of differences. This includes accepting gender diverse people and people who identify with the rainbow community. It also includes accepting people from different cultures and religions.

We all want young people to feel that they belong and to be accepting of others. Schools have a responsibility to respond to the needs of all students, including those who are gender diverse. Gender identity is just one aspect of someone's identity that is covered under relationships and sexuality education. It is relevant to the world that young people live in, and these issues are no different to conversations taking place out of school, including online.

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

Why should children be exposed to things like sex, contraception, gender and sexuality at school when they should be learning about maths and reading?

Academic learning is essential, but we know that young people need to be healthy and well to learn and thrive. That is why Health and Physical Education is a part of the *New Zealand Curriculum*. Mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing are essential to child and youth development, and the skills that are learned through relationships and sexuality education have lifelong impacts. For example, 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.² 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.^{3,4,5}

Is relationships and sexuality education just part of a progressive agenda?

No. Relationships and sexuality education has been included in the *New Zealand Curriculum* for over twenty years. Unfortunately, there are some polarised views about relationships and sexuality education overseas. In Aotearoa New Zealand, it is not a controversial topic. Surveys have shown that New Zealanders support relationships and sexuality education in schools.⁶ Some topics covered by relationships and sexuality education receive more attention if these issues become more of a focus of media and society. For example, pornography, consent, and gender have all received a lot of media attention at different times during the past 10 years, so people are more interested in how these topics are covered in school.

What about the rights of parents?

Under the Education and Training Act 2020,⁷ 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 relationships and sexuality education.

What about the rights of young people?

Young people are clear that they want to talk about a broad range of issues related to sexuality and relationships. All surveys, reviews and research confirm this.⁸ Relationships and sexuality education must be responsive to the needs of young people and promote the rights of young people to have the information they need to be healthy and well and to make informed choices. While parents and the wider school community should provide input into the health education programme taught at each school, the rights and needs of young people should be prioritised.

² UNESCO (2018) Revised edition: International technical guidance on sexuality education. An evidence-informed approach. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>

³ 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>

⁴ 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>

⁵ Makleff, S., Garduño, J., Zavala, R.I. et al. Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Among Young People—a Qualitative Study Examining the Role of Comprehensive Sexuality Education. *Sex Res Soc Policy* 17, 314–325 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-019-00389-x>

⁶ Family Planning (2020) Parent Survey <https://www.familyplanning.org.nz/media/304279/parent-and-caregiver-survey-summary-report-january-2020.pdf>

⁷ Education and Training Act 2020 <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2020/0038/latest/LMS170676.html>

⁸ Family Planning (2019) Young People's Experiences of Sexuality Education https://www.familyplanning.org.nz/media/303990/youth-survey-summary-report_march2019_final.pdf