

Creating the conditions for positive classroom discussions

Introduction

This material aims to support teachers in creating the conditions for positive classroom discussions. The sections are as follows:

- Preparation for teaching
- Teaching and learning
- How can I support parents?¹
- Further reading.

The SPHE curriculum emphasises the importance of a positive classroom climate and atmosphere, where children feel respected, valued, and cared for (NCCA, 1999, p. 36). Positive classroom discussions can help to understand and clarify children's emergent thinking and are likely to foster an open and engaging environment, in which children feel comfortable exploring topics related to SPHE/RSE. Often opportunities arise for children to consider their views and opinions in relation to those of others, in an age-appropriate and sensitive manner. Establishing and maintaining a respectful, safe, and trusting environment is key to supporting these interactions as well as integrating supportive strategies and approaches into your teaching practices for SPHE/RSE.

Preparation for teaching

Anticipate discussions: It is helpful to consider what children might say during discussions before teaching a particular topic, especially if the topic is sensitive or new to the children in your class. Anticipating differing opinions and viewpoints in advance can support your ability to respond appropriately and effectively, and to consider the type of language that might arise and be needed for children to participate in the discussion.

Prepare to be flexible: Being flexible allows you to be ready to use unplanned teaching opportunities that arise during the teaching day. Children often raise issues of a topical nature which they have overheard being discussed, so it is helpful to consider the skills, questions, and knowledge you might need to respond to questions and issues that arise unexpectedly in class.

Consider other perspectives: While preparing for teaching SPHE/RSE, you can think about other perspectives on the issues or topics: these might depend on your context and the variety of backgrounds and experiences of your class.

Elicit prior knowledge and learning: Assessing the children's prior knowledge and learning can be a useful first step when teaching sensitive topics. Surveys, KWL charts and quizzes can provide you with information about what the children know and understand, and what they are less sure about. This knowledge can help you understand the starting points for learning and to make decisions about learning experiences that will meet the needs of the children in your class.

Prepare high-quality questioning: Preparing well-thought-out questions in advance of particular topics can stimulate discussion, challenge assumptions, promote critical thinking and prompt reflection. As well as this planned teaching and learning around a small number of open questions, you can elicit the children's own questions and use these to help plan lessons.

¹ Parents refers to mothers, fathers and those with parental responsibility in different parenting relationships. This may include foster parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, legal guardians, and carers.

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Teacher Snapshot



Listening systems are a great way of capturing child voice and they work from the very early years to the senior classes. Finding a variety of opportunities to support children to ask questions, share ideas or concerns and connect with the teacher is important. I have found that having a system in place outside of the everyday discussions that happen in class is a great way to continually encourage the children to talk and connect with me. I have found some children are reluctant to ask questions openly or find it easier to use a system to indicate they would like to say something to me. A variety of age-appropriate methodologies can be used—such as a Question Box or a What's on Your Mind Box for pupils. I have found it important to use these approaches throughout the year but they take on particular importance during RSE. Question boxes are a good way to manage questions, whereby children can place questions in a 'box' and I can take these questions and be more thoughtful and considerate in my response to them.

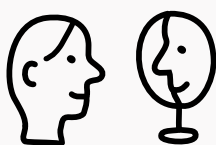
Supporting active listening: Ensuring that children feel listened to and affirmed in their right to express their views creates the conditions for positive classroom discussions. Paraphrasing can be a way to encourage listening, by asking children to re-state the perspective of others. You can show balance by representing different perspectives accurately, avoiding generalisations, such as *all children are...* and judgement statements, for example, *children should...*

Model behaviours: The children in your class can learn a great deal from your behaviour, such as your body language and responses. You can reflect upon and model the behaviours you want to develop in your class, such as presenting an openness and curiosity to the topics being discussed. You can also model your non-verbal communication, including your tone of voice, facial expression and other non-verbal aspects that may impact on children's understanding and willingness to contribute. This gives a useful scaffold for children on how to interact with their classmates during discussions.

Support and encourage children's engagement: You can adopt strategies that can gently encourage all the children to take part in discussion. Providing 'wait time' gives the children a chance to think before responding. You can slow down the pace of discussions of sensitive topics to help children feel more comfortable in engaging. Children may respond in a more open and curious manner to discussions that they had been involved in suggesting, so consulting with your class regularly on discussions in SPHE/RSE can help engagement. While the SPHE/RSE lesson is a safe space where children can discuss matters of importance in their lives, you can acknowledge that some children may wish to participate by simply listening and observing, and that participation in discussions is on a voluntary basis.

Depersonalise the discussion: Depersonalising a discussion can create the conditions for children to approach a topic in a more open manner. You can do this by using the third person, for example, *What do you think someone your age might think or say about....?* or *What are the reasons why children might feel under pressure to?* If a child voices an opinion or attitude that is judgemental or unhealthy, you can broaden the discussion and ask if this is a prevalent attitude in society. This makes the discussion more general without focusing on the child who voiced the opinion.

Teacher Reflection



- What preparation do you do for SPHE/RSE, and how do you feel it supports positive discussions?
- Thinking about your current practice, what aspect of preparation do you find most challenging? What steps could you take to support your preparation in this area?

Teaching and learning

A focus on the curriculum: You can share the focus of learning with the children when you begin lessons, which helps maintain the boundaries during discussions.

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Deferring or following up on discussions: Sometimes you may need to defer or follow up on discussions. This can be because you are out of time, the discussion at hand requires reflection by the children, or you need to source further information to support the discussion. In this case, you can let the children know when the discussion will be picked back up. Deferring and following up on discussions can be reassuring for some children who may benefit from another chance to share their thoughts after time reflecting.

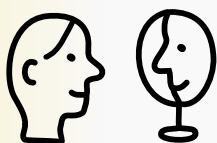
Establish a means of closure: You can establish a sense of closure by reflecting on learning or simply using a social closure, while remaining sensitive to any feelings that have surfaced during the discussion. You can remind the children that you are available to talk, in case something has come up during a discussion that a child wants to bring to your attention.

Child Snapshot



I like when my teacher is understanding, friendly and open especially when we are talking about awkward topics. My teacher knows me best and they know what they are talking about and I feel comfortable asking them questions. I like when we have time to discuss our feelings on topics.

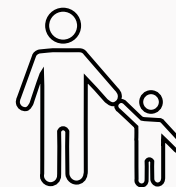
Teacher Reflection



- Consider the type of approaches you take when facilitating discussions in your classroom. What, in your experience, creates a positive, open, and non-judgemental classroom environment?
- Thinking about the approaches above, how might these support positive discussions in your classroom?

What's Next?

How can I support parents?



Home learning: You could provide written or reflective activities that encourage children to share some of their thoughts/feelings about discussions they have had in class with parents.

Communications: You might consider ongoing communication formats with parents such as class meetings or parent/teacher meetings. Sharing the approach you take for discussions and providing material for parents can support them working with their child on the topics that are being taught in school through SPHE/RSE.

Resources to share with parents/guardians: The online SPHE/RSE toolkit provides resources to share with parents at each class level. [Resources to teach SPHE/RSE](#)

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Further reading

SPHE/RSE online toolkit: The following support materials complement the strategies and approaches set out in this support material. [Fostering relationships, expectations and boundaries](#)

Primary Language Toolkit: NCCA has developed a toolkit of support materials with an emphasis on supporting and facilitating positive classroom discussion.

- [Socio-Dramatic Play to Support Oral Language and Early Literacy](#)
- [Critical Thinking and Book Talk](#)
- [Suggested Picture Books](#)
- [Talk Time](#)

Talk and discussion: The Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST) have developed resources that provide supports in how to implement talk and discussion in your classroom

[Discussion | PDST](#)

50 picture books to change the world: This resource suggests picture books that allow a discussion of friendship, conflict, struggle, norms, points of view, difference, and injustice in a distanced way, thus allowing sensitive issues to be discussed without direct disclosures about the children's own lives.

[50 Picture books to change the world](#)

References

NCCA. (1999). [Social Personal and Health Education Teacher Guidelines](#). Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.