

Outstanding sex and relationships education in a Catholic context: The John Henry Newman Catholic School

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Brief description

This example shows how sex and relationships education is delivered comprehensively and effectively in a Catholic context as part of the PSHE programme. Teachers deal extremely well with sensitive and controversial issues ensuring that students feel secure and able to express their opinions and reach their own judgements.

Overview – the school’s message

‘As a Catholic community we believe that sex and relationships education (SRE) is integral to the lifelong learning process and the belief that we have been uniquely created in the image and likeness of God. As such, all people have special value and worth. It is firmly rooted in the school’s personal, social, health and economic education programme, through religious education (RE) and as part of the statutory National Curriculum for science.

The school supports the parents and carers as the primary educators in SRE and responds to the needs of the students to enable them to make responsible and well-informed decisions as young people. Every member of staff who delivers SRE, either as a form tutor delivering the PSHE education programme, or as a subject teacher, understands that they are part of a holistic and integrated programme across the curriculum.

Jane Goring, Deputy Headteacher

The good practice in detail

Relationships with parents and carers and support of the governing body

The school is rightly proud of its outstanding PSHE education. Relationships with parents and carers are central to effective learning. The school works with parents and carers from the start of transition from primary to secondary school to build valued relationships of trust and respect. It is by establishing such relationships that SRE can be taught openly and effectively. Parents and carers are welcomed into the school regularly, at annual parent and carer support evenings, subject information evenings and specific transition meetings, all of which foster and build these relationships. The school regularly communicates with parents and carers, informing them of relevant pastoral issues and offering various means of support and guidance. As a consequence of this the school can deliver SRE confident in the knowledge that they are working alongside and with the support of parents and carers.

‘The lessons give everyone a good understanding of the range of sexualities and how to treat everyone with respect.’

SRE is valued highly by the governing body which ensures that the formal SRE policy is reviewed annually and, when necessary, updated. PSHE education is a whole-school development priority and the staff responsible for planning and delivering SRE are able to have confident and open discourse and discussion with the governors to address pertinent and relevant issues within the subject. This commitment by governors signals the importance of good provision for SRE to the whole school community.

Support for staff and quality assurance

Extensive and thorough induction helps staff to feel confident, supported and prepared to deliver SRE. From the initial staff selection process, where there is an explicit pastoral focus, to the newly qualified and recently qualified teacher programmes, continuous support is available to help staff become effective form tutors.

‘We learn about real life situations and we are helped to develop our own moral framework for our well-being.’

This support enables tutors to build trusting relationships with students so that they can explore SRE issues in a safe, welcoming and accepting environment. These trusting relationships continue to be fostered by the pastoral teams within the school. The learning coordinators take responsibility for the delivery of the programme and quality assure the SRE that is being delivered by form tutors. This provides

opportunities for feedback from learning coordinators to the PSHE education coordinator at pastoral leaders’ meetings, as well as from tutors sharing good practice at the regular tutor team meetings.

External agencies and resources

In addition to regular meetings for new and recently qualified staff, further support is offered to all teaching and non-teaching staff who deliver the more sensitive and/or challenging aspects of the SRE programme. For example, the PSHE education coordinator runs an after-school workshop on the dangers of ‘sexting’ (the sending of sexually explicit texts) to Key

Stage 4 tutors prior to delivering a session on this topic during anti-bullying week. The materials for the session itself were based on resources from the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, and this is an example of how the school is resourceful in using the expertise of outside agencies. A range of external agencies and groups delivers key aspects of the SRE programme. These include local police officers from the Hertfordshire Constabulary who provide alcohol awareness sessions, and [Ten Ten Theatre](#) which allows pupils the opportunity to explore relationships issues through drama. Tutors are expected - and support staff encouraged - to attend presentations wherever possible and the opportunity for [follow-up](#) is incorporated into the PSHE education programme.

Comprehensive support is provided by a dedicated PSHE education coordinator. The school invests in training and supports local networking initiatives between local schools and within the county. This provides the coordinator with opportunities to meet with other specialists and share good practice. The Hertfordshire PSHE network meeting was hosted by the school in summer 2012, at which the county's anti-bullying adviser spoke, specifically focusing on the issue of homophobic and transgender bullying.

Subject specialists

The relationships fostered within the school engender an atmosphere of trust to develop between staff and students to the extent that specialist staff can deliver specific content within the SRE programme. For example, the PSHE education 'Body Changes and Puberty' session in Year 7 is delivered to boys and girls separately by members of the science department. This results in students receiving the same information yet feeling safe and secure enough to ask questions of the staff involved in the lesson. Experienced science teachers, including members of the senior leadership team, also deliver a talk on sexually transmitted infections to Year 9 students. This demonstrates how subject specialisms are used within PSHE education, to deliver the best possible SRE.

‘Everyone has such confidence in the school and the teachers – you can ask anyone for help and you don’t feel judged.’

Complementary and well-coordinated programmes of study

SRE runs through the PSHE education, RE and National Curriculum for science programmes. The school ensures that, where possible, the SRE content in each of these programmes complements one another. For example, in the spring term Year 7 explore emotional changes in PSHE while in science they study changes occurring in puberty. In Year 9 pupils spend a day on retreat at Buckden Towers reflecting on the value of marriage and the family, run by the RE department, while in science they study conception, and in PSHE education they explore relationship issues supported by Ten Ten Theatre.

SRE is set within a broader context of building self-esteem, building relationships and taking responsibility for one's actions. The programme focuses on meaningful discussion about feelings, relationships and values as well as the physical aspects of reproduction. It supports Catholic teaching on the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and for bringing up

‘We can always write down any questions and the teacher will answer them next lesson – but as we get older and more confident we just ask whatever we like - knowing that it will be taken seriously’

children. All pupils study 'Religion and Life' based on a study of Roman Catholic Christianity at GCSE, in which issues such as abortion and contraception are approached fully and with confidence, reflecting Catholic teaching.

Pupils with disabilities and/or special educational needs and learning support

The SRE programme is inclusive of all pupils and students regardless of ability. Learning support assistants provide additional support to students within pastoral and PSHE sessions, working alongside form tutors to deliver SRE content.

The learning support department offers support outside of these lessons through the Social Skills programme. Students from Years 7 to 11, on the inclusion register, are placed in small groups; each group has a mix of different needs and is grouped according to personality.

‘We learn about the possible outcomes of the choices we may make – to help us make the choices that are right for us.’

Within these sessions students are encouraged to identify their own areas of difficulty and the group discusses these challenges in a solutions circle. Discussions are noted and any disclosures are passed on to the designated person where necessary. At the end of each session students pick the discussion topic for the next session. Should students require more focused support a member of the Learning Support

department will arrange a one-to-one session. Some students in Years 8 and 9 also follow a Life Skills programme, in which they cover topics such as hygiene, relationships and body changes.

The school's background

The John Henry Newman Catholic School is a mixed Catholic comprehensive school in Stevenage, Hertfordshire. It is a designated Arts College. It draws students from a very wide catchment area including Bedfordshire and North London. The roll is approximately 1,600 including 500 in the sixth form. The majority of students are Catholic. Currently 13% of students are listed as having a special educational need and/or disability.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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