



Creating a Safe Learning Environment

Practice Guide

Introduction

Education about relationships and sex is by its very nature more personal than many other aspects of a school curriculum, and so it's vital to establish an environment for learning in which pupils and staff feel safe, and can model respectful relations. This short guide focuses on developing a working agreement.

Many schools already use the idea of a working agreement, particularly in form groups which meet daily and work together throughout the week. If there is no 'live' working agreement for the relevant group of pupils it is worth spending time reminding the group you are working with of their own working agreement or developing one if one does not exist. A good working agreement is a live document that is referred to again and developed if necessary. A sample activity that can be used is provided below.

This practice guide supports the implementation of principle 4 from our [statement of commitment](#).

We are committed to Relationships and Sex Education, which:

DEVELOPING A WORKING AGREEMENT

The development of a working agreement is an established aspect of good practice in RSE. The agreement, and process of developing it will:

- Ensure that both staff and pupils understand what is expected of them
- Help reduce anxiety
- Increase participation from pupils across the group
- Establish boundaries about the types of information that can be shared and the types of questions that can be asked
- Make it possible to discuss topics that might feel controversial
- Promote and model respectful behaviour within the group
- Address prejudice, for example sexist or homophobic language
- Provide a means of sanctioning behaviour which is not in line with the agreement.



ACTIVITY

MATERIALS: FLIPCHART AND MARKER PENS

INSTRUCTIONS:

Explain to the group that you will need to create an agreement about how you work together. Ask the pupils why they think it is necessary to agree on how members of the group behave.

Reasons could include:

- So that everyone in the group feels confident to share their views
- So that everyone in the group understands boundaries about sharing personal information
- So that everyone in the group feels they are respected

Invite the pupils to list their suggested 'rules' and note them down on a sheet of flipchart paper. Check if the group is in agreement about everything on the list. Can anything be discarded or merged? Once the list is complete you could ask the pupils to sign their name at the bottom of the list to demonstrate their commitment to the rules. Keep a copy and have it available in future sessions or lessons.

Example:

- Respect the opinions of others – and respect ourselves too!
- Express yourself with freedom
- Don't scream or shout
- No ideas or questions are silly
- Take it in turns to talk
- Have confidence in your views
- Consider the words you use – respect others*
- No personal questions
- Be careful with what you share – i.e. don't use names, use phrases like 'I know someone who...' if you want to talk about something that might be confidential

*You may want to encourage pupils to include an explicit reference to the unacceptability of homophobic or sexist language in the learning agreement.

Differentiation: For learners needing more support prepare some example rules for them to choose from and rank. Use single words such as 'listen', 'speak out', 'ask'.

BOUNDARIES AND QUESTIONS

It is essential that no-one is to ask or be expected to answer a personal question, including teachers and all staff involved. There may be some personal information that staff are comfortable sharing, but there should be no obligation to do so. This aspect can be covered by 'no personal questions' in the learning agreement.

The use of an 'anonymous' question box allows pupils to ask questions they might otherwise not ask. This also enables staff to sift out any obviously joke questions and to seek further information for questions that they are unsure how to answer.

SIGNPOSTING

Linked to the working agreement, pupils need to know what they should do if they do not feel safe during the lesson. This could happen if the content is distressing because of personal experiences of the pupil. Is there a safe space that a pupil can go to if needed? Do pupils know what topics are coming up in advance? Is there a means for pupils to evaluate their RSE and to comment on how safe they felt?

From the outset pupils should be made aware of sources of confidential one-to-one advice for example from the school nurse or local young people's services. This information needs to be repeated and visible.

DISTANCING TECHNIQUES

With the learning agreement in place, there are many other techniques that can be used to create safe learning opportunities. Teaching activities should aim to use a range of distancing techniques. Examples include role play, drama, puppets, masks, stories, case-studies, games and scenarios. These techniques enable pupils to explore new and perhaps challenging ideas and potentially personal issues without having to talk about personal experience. This helps to prevent disclosure in a classroom setting.

LEARNING SUPPORT

You may well have learning support staff working with pupils who need extra help. Make sure that you brief them in advance about the lessons including the learning agreement and try to ensure that they are happy with their role which may well involve explaining terminology.