

Handling complex issues safely in the PSHE education classroom



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Establish a safe learning environment

PSHE lessons support pupils to discuss and learn about complex issues in a safe climate of trust, cooperation and respect. PSHE education has a key role to play in developing their knowledge, skills and confidence in approaching complex issues and in recognising that attitudes towards these are likely to be influenced by their own values, worldview and interpretation of messages from the media.

It's important to link PSHE education to the whole-school approach to supporting pupil wellbeing. We must work within the school's policies on safeguarding and confidentiality — and ensure that pupils understand school policies on disclosures of confidential information, following up concerns in a more appropriate setting outside lessons. PSHE education should provide access to balanced information and differing views, but be cautious about expressing your own views, bearing in mind that teachers are in an influential position and must work within the school's values, policies and the law.

For some issues discussed in PSHE lessons, pupils may have very closely held values or personal experiences that affect how they feel about the topic, and we may not always be able to predict what these are. Whatever the subject matter, whether you feel it is a sensitive issue or not, following this guidance will ensure a safe learning and teaching environment for your pupils and for you — allowing you to address any elements of PSHE education with confidence.

“When teaching sensitive topics, teachers can use approaches such as **distancing techniques**, setting **ground rules** with the class to help manage sensitive discussion, and using **question boxes** to allow pupils to raise issues anonymously.”

The DfE Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education statutory guidance (2025).

Agree ground rules

Ground rules establish how pupils will behave towards each other in discussion, exploring the values and opinions of others in a respectful way. They are paramount to effectively managing discussions that might elicit strong opinions from pupils. They also help to minimise inappropriate and unintended disclosures and comments of a negative nature made towards others.

To be most effective, negotiate them with your pupils to create a shared sense of ownership, whilst ensuring safe discussion principles are covered, then test and amend them as necessary.

Examples of ground rules include:

Openness

We will be open and honest but will not discuss directly our own or others' personal/ private lives. We will discuss examples but will not use names or descriptions which could identify anyone.

Keep the conversation in the room

We know that our teacher will not repeat what is said in the classroom unless they are concerned we are at risk, in which case they will follow the school's safeguarding policy. The 2025 RSHE guidance states, in relation to this area, "It is... important that children **understand how confidentiality will be handled** in a lesson and what might happen if they choose to make a report, about themselves or a peer."

Non-judgmental approach

It's okay for us to disagree with another person's point of view but we will not judge, make fun of, or put anybody down. We will 'challenge the opinion, not the person'.

Right to pass

Taking part is important. However, we have the right to pass a question, or to choose an alternative activity, and we will not put anyone 'on the spot'.

Make no assumptions

We will not make assumptions about people's values, attitudes, behaviours, identity, life experiences or feelings. We will listen to other points of view respectfully and expect to be listened to ourselves.

Use appropriate language

We will use correct terms rather than slang terms, as they can be offensive. If we are not sure what the correct term is, we will ask our teacher.

Ask questions

We are encouraged to ask questions, and they are valued by our teacher. However, we do not ask personal questions, or anything intended to embarrass someone.

Seek help and advice

If we need further help or advice, we know how and where to seek it — both in school and in the community. We will encourage friends to seek help if we think they need it.

The framing and language of ground rules can be different for younger pupils, especially in key stage 1. We have a [lesson plan to develop ground rules](#) with key stage 1 and 2 classes to support you in doing this.

Consider vulnerabilities

Approach lessons with the assumption that at least one pupil could have direct experience of the topic being discussed or find it sensitive for another reason.

Where there are known vulnerabilities, consider some of the following strategies:

- **Discuss the content of the lesson with specific pupils in advance**, providing the option of an exit pass for some, or all, of the lesson.
- **Liaise with pastoral colleagues and parents/carers about topics in advance.**
- **Plan language use, resources and activities with vulnerabilities in mind**, ensuring lessons don't shock, shame or scare pupils.

“Content and examples should relate to the local context and **avoid using fear as an educational tool**. Children should be taught that carrying weapons is uncommon, and should not be scared into the perception that many young people are carrying knives (which can lead to the misconception that they need to carry a knife too).”

“Teachers should **avoid language which stigmatises boys** or suggests that boys or men are always perpetrators or that girls or women are always victims.”

2025 RSHE guidance

It's also helpful to provide opportunities for pupils to discuss issues in small groups as well as sharing views with the whole class. In certain circumstances children and young people will want to discuss high profile events and will look to adults in school to support them, provide reassurance and to talk through the issues.

In these situations, it's important to take care that lessons:

- **Avoid knee-jerk reactions** that frame particular incidents, year groups or pupils as being the 'problem'.
- **Avoid victim-blaming language.**
- **Don't inadvertently inspire, glamourise or instruct in harmful behaviours.**

"Teachers should take care to **avoid language which romanticises** eating disorders and avoid discussing instructions, methods or ideas of restriction, bingeing or purging."

"They should take particular care **not to discuss instructions or methods** of self-harm or suicide and avoid using emotive language, videos or images as there is a risk this could signpost pupils towards dangerous ideas and online content of which they may not previously have been aware."

2025 RSHE guidance

Start where your pupils are

Assumptions about what pupils already know, believe, and can do in relation to PSHE topics can't be made based solely on age or year group. Pupils will have been exposed to parental, family, peer, school, media, online and community views on different issues and they will be aware of a range of related attitudes and values.

To make sure teaching is developmentally appropriate and builds on prior learning, complete a baseline assessment to identify existing knowledge, understanding, beliefs and misconceptions. Finding out pupils' starting points is crucial to ensuring that learning is pitched appropriately, particularly to tackle any misconceptions held among the group. These can be explored by using baseline assessment activities such as:

- **Mind maps**
- **Graffiti walls**
- **Draw and write***
- **Attitude continuums**
- **Scenarios to respond to with strategies**
- **A post or image to respond to**

**A 'draw and write' is an activity where pupils are asked to respond to open-ended questions or prompts by drawing a picture and then writing notes explaining the drawing. For example, asking pupils to draw healthy person and write all the things they do that keep them healthy.*

Use distancing techniques

Use distancing techniques to help pupils take part in the lesson regardless of personal experiences. Distancing strategies such as using case studies, stories, scenarios and characters help pupils explore an issue objectively without it being personalised, or the lesson becoming a judgement about them and their own behaviour.

Distancing the learning is especially important when exploring complex issues as it avoids embarrassing or re-traumatising pupils with lived experience of the issue. It also reduces the likelihood of a public disclosure of a safeguarding concern. The characters or scenarios used should feel relevant to pupils so you could ask them to...

“Imagine someone about your age who lives near you and goes to a school like ours...”

Handle questions safely

Encourage questions from pupils, including anonymously, so they don't leave the lesson with uncertainty.

To handle questions effectively:

- **Have an 'Ask it basket'/ question box available** before, during and after all lessons, so pupils can ask questions, anonymously or with their name on, at any time.
- **Value the question** and be conscious of the message you give the rest of the group with your reaction - through body language and facial expressions -so other pupils aren't put off asking something.
- **Find out what pupils think the answer is first** to check you have understood what they are asking.
- **Give a factual, age-appropriate answer** when you can.
- **Refer to the ground rules**, such as 'no personal questions'.
- **If you're not sure what the answer is, buy time and consult PSHE lead, SLT and school policies.**

“That's a really interesting question and it deserves a good answer – let me have a think about it and get back to you.”

Signpost support

Always make pupils aware of different sources of support, information and advice that's available, including:

- **Trusted adults at home and at school**
- **Local support services**
- **Reliable age-appropriate helplines**
- **Trusted websites**

“Pupils should also understand **where they can report any concerns and seek help**, including to external services if they do not feel comfortable talking to school staff.”

2025 RSHE guidance

Tell them not just where, but when, why and how they might access support, as well as what will happen next. This can help to demystify the help-seeking process and reduce barriers to getting help.

Provide opportunities for pupils to develop the skills needed to seek advice and articulate their concerns by explaining how to access help and what is likely to happen if they seek support from different services. Be sure to carefully check any sources of support, particularly online, before recommending them to your pupils.

- Childline's website, www.childline.org.uk, has information and advice along with sources of further support, including their helpline (0800 1111). This webpage also has a short, helpful video for children, 'What happens when you contact Childline'¹
- Childline also has an advice line for adults worried about children (0808 800 5000).
- Other organisations that provide online support for children and young people on a range of complex issues include Every Mind Matters www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters and CEOP www.ceopeducation.co.uk.

¹ Scroll down to the 'Watch Videos' section to access this video

Include opportunities to develop digital literacy

As children and young people become more digitally aware, they may go online, particularly to social media, to explore a range of issues, including those that are complex or sensitive.

Our approach to teaching these issues must therefore equip young people with the skills to critically evaluate the information they encounter online. For example:

- **Skills to check a range of sources** about news events, and other critical thinking skills to identify bias or ‘fake news’.
- **Strategies to avoid getting drawn into unhealthy/risky conversations online.** This may involve how to recognise and respond to online bullying, hate speech, extremist views or radicalisation.
- **Understanding of the ways that algorithms and echo chambers on social media sites serve information** to match individuals’ pre-existing beliefs and attitudes.
- **Ways to safely challenge inaccurate or offensive views;** how to remove themselves from conversations that make them uncomfortable; and how to report abuse.

“The curriculum should provide ‘opportunities for pupils to **practise skills** so that they will be confident to use them in real-life situations.”

2025 RSHE guidance

Consider your wellbeing

Some topic areas might be sensitive for you too. Be mindful of these, and how they might affect your own wellbeing and responses in the classroom.

- **Talk with your PSHE lead** about any topics you might find difficult and how you will manage this. You can also check your school’s staff wellbeing policy or other procedures to see if there is additional support available for you.
- **Apply the approaches in this document**, as these help create a safe environment for your pupils and yourself, allowing conversations to be held safely and respectfully.
- **Use safe and effective resources** to help you handle complex issues confidently. PSHE Association lessons (and those with our Quality Mark), have key learning points for your classroom discussions. These help keep the conversation on track and prepare you with expected responses from pupils. [Learn more about what makes our lesson plans different.](#)

Want to know more?

For further information and guidance, take a look at our:

- 'Safe classroom' and 'effective teaching' interactive posters: highlighting best practice principles for planning and teaching PSHE education and establishing a safe learning environment.



- [On-demand training courses](#): training to complete at your own pace (as part of [School Plus membership](#)) on a wide range of topics, including:
 - The Fundamentals of teaching PSHE (primary and secondary versions)
 - Topic specific training on a wide range of themes, including addressing sexual harassment, teaching about puberty confidently, sexual health and contraception, pornography, and effective drug and alcohol education.
- [Live online and face-to-face training](#): including Teaching PSHE confidently and effectively
- Guidance and blogs, regularly updated: including [Misogyny, online influencers and the PSHE curriculum](#).