



Circular 0022/2010

To Chairpersons of Boards of Management and Principals  
of all Primary schools

## **Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Best Practice Guidelines for Primary Schools**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Department of Education and Science wishes to advise management authorities of the necessity to adhere to the following best practice guidelines to support the implementation of Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) at primary level. SPHE is a mandatory curricular subject in all primary schools.

National and international research has consistently shown that the classroom teacher is the best placed professional to work sensitively and consistently with pupils and that s/he can have a powerful impact on influencing pupils' attitudes, values and behaviour in all aspects of health education in the school setting.

### **RESPONSIBILITY OF SCHOOLS**

*The Education Act (1998)* states that :

*A recognised school shall promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school.*

School management, principals and teachers have a duty to provide the best quality and most appropriate social, personal and health education for their pupils. They also have a duty to protect pupils in their care at all times from any potentially harmful, inappropriate or misguided resources, interventions or programmes.

### **SPHE: BEST PRACTICE APPROACHES**

The following approaches represent best practice in the implementation of SPHE:

- A whole-school approach to the consistent implementation of SPHE is essential.
- The classroom teacher is responsible for the implementation of the SPHE curriculum.
- The teaching of SPHE is founded on an ongoing relationship between pupil and teacher based on trust, understanding, mutual respect and consistency of implementation.
- The SPHE curriculum is developmental and aims to foster the growth of pupils' social and personal skills in a holistic way.
- SPHE must include a substantial skills development element in addition to fostering health promoting values and attitudes using age appropriate information.
- Active learning is the principal teaching and learning approach recommended for the implementation of SPHE.
- Individual themes such as Relationships and Sexuality, Substance Misuse Prevention, Bereavement, Racism and Child Abuse Prevention should not be treated in isolation but rather in the context of the overall SPHE curriculum.

## **VISITORS TO PRIMARY SCHOOLS: GUIDELINES**

If schools wish to enhance or supplement the SPHE curriculum by inviting visitors to the classroom precise criteria must apply:

- External facilitators/tutors who contribute to the SPHE programme must be approved in advance by the principal and board of management (BOM). Visitors must work under the guidance and supervision of the classroom teacher, who must remain in the classroom with the pupils at all times and retain the central role in the delivery of the subject matter in SPHE lessons. Interventions without the direct involvement of the teacher are not appropriate. Visitors must never replace the class teacher. To do so would undermine the integrity of the curriculum, the credibility and professionalism of the teacher and school, and could compromise the safety and welfare of the pupils.
- Outside facilitators who contribute to the SPHE/RSE programme can play a valuable role in supplementing, complementing and supporting a planned, comprehensive and established SPHE programme.
- Any supplementary interventions must be age and stage appropriate, and should include evidence-based content and methodology and clear educational outcomes.
- All materials proposed for use must be approved in advance by the principal and BOM, be age and stage appropriate for pupils and be in line with the ethos of the school, and the principles of the SPHE curriculum. There is a need also to take account of all relevant school policies and procedures, including the school's child protection policy, RSE policy and substance misuse policy. The *SPHE Teacher Guidelines* (page 103) outline sample criteria for choosing appropriate resources.
- Interventions and external inputs should be evaluated by the school principal, teachers, and pupils (as appropriate) in terms of the content, approach, methodology and proposed learning outcomes.
- It is strongly recommended that parents are consulted and made aware of any visitor or agency proposing to engage with pupils in classrooms and schools.
- The school's SPHE coordinator may also help in the process of whole-school planning and coordination to support the effective implementation of SPHE/RSE.

### **PLEASE NOTE**

Research findings indicate that the following teaching approaches have limited effect and are counterproductive to the effective implementation of SPHE. In light of this, schools are advised to avoid the following approaches:

#### ***Scare tactics***

Information that induces fear, and exaggerates negative consequences, is inappropriate and counterproductive.

#### ***Sensationalist interventions***

Interventions that glamorise or portray risky behaviour in an exciting way are inappropriate and can encourage inappropriate risk taking.

#### ***Testimonials***

Stories focused on previous dangerous lifestyles can encourage the behaviour they were designed to prevent by creating heroes/heroines of individuals who give testimony.

#### ***Information only interventions***

Programmes which are based on information alone are very limited in the learning outcomes they can achieve and can in fact be counter productive in influencing values, attitudes and behaviour.

***Information that is not age appropriate***

Giving information to pupils about behaviours they are unlikely to engage in can be counterproductive in influencing values, attitudes and behaviour.

***Once off/short term interventions***

Short-term interventions, whether planned or in reaction to a crisis, are ineffective.

***Normalising young people's risky behaviour***

Giving the impression to young people, directly or indirectly, that all their peers will engage/are engaging in risky behaviours could put pressure on them to do things they would not otherwise do.

***Didactic approach***

Didactic approaches which are solely directive in nature are ineffective in the successful implementation of SPHE.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

Teachers who require information, advice, guidance, and support in assisting them to implement any aspect of the SPHE curriculum should contact the relevant support service to meet their professional development needs.

Information, advice, guidance, and support is also available from Local Health Service Executive (HSE) Education Officers (Addiction Services) and Health Promotion personnel.

Alan Wall

Principal Officer  
Teacher Education Section

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