



NCCA An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curraíom agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Information Note for Media:

Updated Junior Cycle
SPHE curriculum

May 2023

Contents

CONTENTS	2
CONTEXT:.....	1
WHY CHANGE?	1
WHY JUNIOR CYCLE SPHE MATTERS?.....	2
WHAT'S DIFFERENT IN THE UPDATED JUNIOR CYCLE SPHE CURRICULUM?	2
KEY FEATURES OF THE UPDATED CURRICULUM	2
THE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PROCESS – HOW DOES IT WORK AND WHO HAS A SAY?	3
IS THE SAME SPHE CURRICULUM TAUGHT ACROSS ALL SCHOOLS?.....	4
HOW CAN WE ENSURE THAT THE LEARNING IS AGE-APPROPRIATE?	4
AT WHAT STAGE ARE BROADER SPHE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENTS?	5
RELEVANT LINKS	6
APPENDIX: AN OVERVIEW OF THE LEARNING IN JUNIOR CYCLE SPHE.....	7
The four stands of Junior Cycle SPHE	8

Context:

NCCA carried out an extensive review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in 2018 and 2019 and a key recommendation arising from that review was the need for an up-dated SPHE curriculum spanning both primary and post-primary education. The publication of the updated Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum marks the first part of this work.

Why change?

The main drivers for change in the SPHE curriculum can be summarised as:

- growing evidence of the challenges that young people face as they navigate growing up today, coupled with evidence of the important role that school-based health education programmes can play in supporting young people’s social, emotional and physical wellbeing.
- extensive feedback gathered through consultations in recent years during which students, teachers and school leaders shared their experience of SPHE in schools. These consultation reports are published on www.ncca.ie and clearly highlight the direction of change needed to provide more effective Social, Personal and Health Education for all children and young people. Of particular relevance are – [The Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality in Primary and Post Primary schools](#) (2019); the [Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE](#) (2021); and the [Consultation report on the background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE](#) (2022).
- national policy clearly supports the development of an updated SPHE curriculum that is inclusive, age-appropriate and stage-appropriate across primary and post-primary schools.¹

¹ Programme for Government, 2020; and Zero Tolerance, the Third National Strategy for Domestic and Gender Based Violence, 2022.

Why Junior Cycle SPHE matters?

Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) provides a safe classroom setting where students can discuss and learn about important aspects of their lives. Within this space, students can grow in awareness of self and others, and develop the understanding and skills they need to maintain healthy lives, make healthy choices and build caring and respectful relationships.

SPHE is a key pillar of the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Programme in all post-primary schools as it helps students identify actions they can take to protect and promote their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. SPHE fosters all 6 indicators of Wellbeing – enabling students to become more active, aware, connected, respected, responsible and resilient.

What's different in the updated Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum?

An integrated approach – The [Review of RSE](#) highlighted the need to create an integrated curriculum that sets out the learning in SPHE in a coherent and comprehensive manner from primary to post-primary school. In line with best international practice, an integrated approach means that Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is taught in an integrated manner throughout the year, and incorporated into SPHE rather than being approached through a stand-alone series of lessons.

Updated content – The topics included in the updated curriculum are informed by extensive research and consultations and will ensure that young people have opportunities to engage in learning that is relevant to their needs and is age- and stage-appropriate. Sample topics: communication and listening skills, self-esteem, self-image and self-identity, gender stereotypes, factors affecting young people when making healthy choices, addictive substances and behaviours, engaging safely and responsibly online, healthy and unhealthy relationships, consent as an aspect of all respectful relationships, sexual orientation and gender identity, how to manage one's emotions and cope with the day-to-day stresses of teenage life, how to recognise and respond to abusive and bullying behaviour and how to find appropriate and trust-worthy information, supports and services related to health/wellbeing.

Time allocation – The course has been designed for 100 hours of classroom learning to be taught across the three years of junior cycle.

Key features of the updated curriculum

Student-centred – The Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum is research-based and firmly rooted in the lives and needs of young people growing up in Ireland today, with the focus on supporting them as they navigate the opportunities and challenges of adolescence.

Inclusivity – The updated curriculum supports teachers in adopting an approach that is inclusive in accordance with principles of equality, human rights and responsibilities, *one that is inclusive of*

all genders, sexualities, ethnicities, religious beliefs, social classes and abilities/disabilities (Curriculum Rationale, page 2). This ensures that students can see themselves, their families and their communities reflected across the learning, and they can learn to value and respect diversity as an aspect of human life and human sexuality.

Focus on developing skills – There is a strong focus on developing young people’s social and emotional skills, specifically self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness and relationship skills.

Positive approach – The course promotes a positive approach that looks not just at the dangers associated with certain behaviours or choices but affirms young people’s capacity to think critically, to question social norms and to reflect so that they can make thoughtful and healthy choices and become more aware of how these choices impact on themselves and others.

Clarity of learning – The updated curriculum provides much greater clarity to teachers on what needs to be taught through the three years of junior cycle SPHE. Topics are now clearly named within the Learning Outcomes, setting out the essential learning that all students will engage with while allowing for flexibility at school level to respond to the specific needs of students.

The curriculum development process – how does it work and who has a say?

Like all curriculum and assessment work carried out by the NCCA, the redevelopment of the Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum has been informed by extensive research, by work with schools and the education partners, and has been the focus of extensive public consultation, including that on the draft curriculum. The approach to curriculum development adopted by the NCCA is explained below.

Research – The curriculum development work is informed by extensive national and international research, and by commitments set out in international conventions to which Ireland is a signatory, and commitments set out in Government of Ireland policies and strategies.

Work with schools and networks – Schools provide important feedback to NCCA on ideas and approaches under consideration as well as providing feedback on draft curricula.

Consultation – is a key aspect of the curriculum development process and multiple modes of consultation are used to allow everyone who wishes to contribute to do so. The NCCA analyses and reports on all feedback received through consultation and gives careful and deep consideration to the findings and their implications for the curriculum/programme in question. Arising from such consultation, changes are made to curriculum specifications as they are finalised as advice for the Minister. Examples of such changes can include amending, adding or removing learning outcomes; improving strand titles; revising the nature and/or weight of assessment components; and reviewing and updating terminology in order to provide greater clarity. Changes

made to draft curricula are reflective of the serious consideration that NCCA gives to consultation feedback.

In keeping with NCCA's curriculum and assessment processes, changes were made to the final Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum specification in response to the key findings set out in the published [Report on the consultation on the draft SPHE junior cycle curriculum](#)

During the development of an updated curriculum, consultations are publicised via www.ncca.ie and NCCA social media channels (Twitter @NCCAie, Instagram @NCCA_irl and Facebook @NCCA).

Deliberations by the members of Council, its three Boards and Development Groups provide a further important source of expertise and advice, with the final decisions about the advice being made by the Council. In carrying out their deliberations, the members of these representative structures draw on research, consultation findings and work with schools and other settings.

The membership of Council, Boards and Development Groups is published on the NCCA website at [Council 2022-2026 | NCCA](#) and [Boards and Development Groups | NCCA](#). In addition, notes of current relevant Development Group meetings are published at [Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education \(... \(ncca.ie\)](#) and [Wellbeing | NCCA](#).

Is the same SPHE curriculum taught across all schools?

There is a national curriculum for all subjects, including SPHE, that is taught across all primary and post-primary schools irrespective of the particular school ethos. While the SPHE curriculum sets out the topics to be taught in schools, teachers have freedom to choose the classroom resources they will use when teaching the course. In making such choices, they are aware of the need to teach topics in a way that is sensitive to the age and stage of development of their students and which meets their needs.

How can we ensure that the learning is age-appropriate?

In developing the curriculum, significant work goes into ensuring that learning is age-appropriate. Decisions about what to include in the curriculum are based on national and international research and best practice, as well as extensive consultations with parents/guardians, teachers and children/young people themselves.

Within the classroom, the teacher has flexibility to judge how and when topics should be taught, so that learning takes place in a way that is meeting the needs and stage of development of their students while also reflecting the school context.

At what stage are broader SPHE curriculum developments?

The work in redeveloping the SPHE curriculum began with junior cycle. The updated Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum will be available for first year students entering post-primary education in September 2023.

Work on Primary and Senior Cycle SPHE commenced in late 2022. A draft senior cycle curriculum for SPHE will be available for public consultation in late 2023. At primary, work on SPHE is part of the wider redevelopment of the full primary curriculum. Learning and teaching related to SPHE will be part of the curriculum area of Wellbeing. A draft Wellbeing specification for primary schools will be available for public consultation in 2024.

As the curriculum work develops, there will be opportunities for engagement with all the key stakeholders, as well as further public consultation before new curriculum specifications for Primary and Senior Cycle SPHE are finalised.

Relevant links

To view the junior cycle updated curriculum go to [SPHE \(curriculumonline.ie\)](https://curriculumonline.ie)

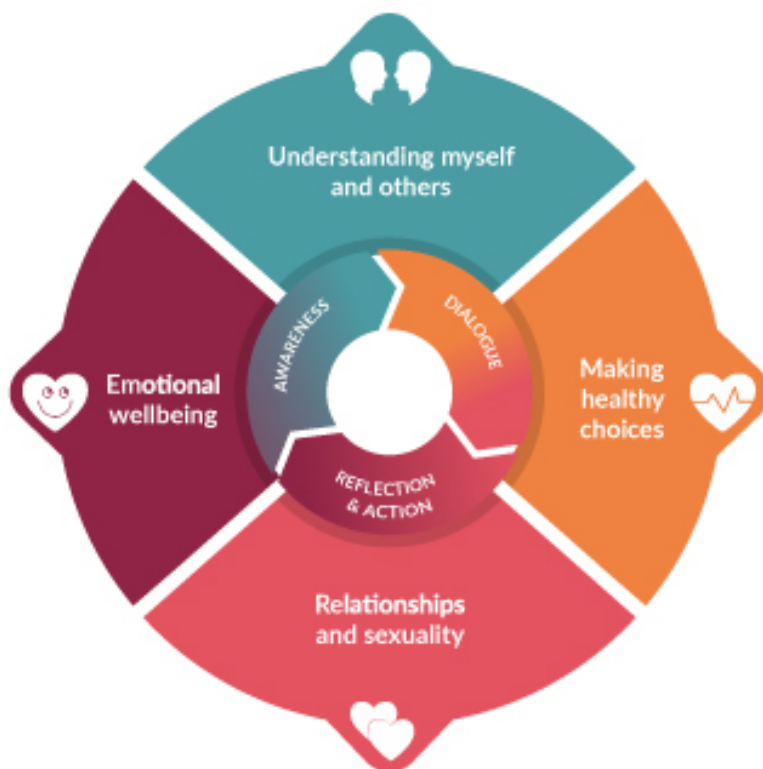
[The Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality in Primary and Post Primary schools \(2019\)](#)

[Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE \(2021\)](#)
[Consultation report on the background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE \(2022\)](#)

[Report on the consultation on the draft SPHE junior cycle curriculum \(2023\)](#)

[Primary Curriculum Framework \(2023\)](#)

Appendix: An overview of the learning in junior cycle SPHE



Learning in the updated course is divided into four strands with each setting out important learning for students. These strands are:

- Understanding myself and others
- Making healthy choices
- Relationships and sexuality
- Emotional wellbeing

Teaching and learning in SPHE focuses on

- * **awareness-building** so that students understand their own thoughts, emotions, values and behaviour and how different factors influence these
- * **respectful dialogue** which gives students opportunities to hear and to discuss a diversity of viewpoints and enlarge their understanding on topics of relevance to their lives
- * **students reflecting** on what they have learned and coming to informed thoughtful decisions about how the learning can help them in their lives now or in the future.

The four stands of Junior Cycle SPHE

Understanding myself and others – This is a foundational strand as it focuses on developing self-awareness and self-esteem and building some of the social and emotional skills needed for healthy relationships. This strand helps students to identify their personal strengths and values. It explores the range of influences that impact on self-esteem, self-image, and self-identity and on their decision-making.

Making healthy choices – This strand is about helping students to consider how they can make healthy choices and the influences at play. They will discuss a range of aspects – food, sleep, alcohol and other addictive substances and behaviours, and of course their online world.

Relationships and sexuality – Here the key focus is on creating and maintaining healthy and respectful relationships. Students will discuss the signs of healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships, how to set boundaries in relationships and show respect for the boundaries of others. They will learn about the importance of consent as an aspect of all healthy relationships and how to take care of their reproductive health. There is also a focus on responsible decision making and examining some of the pressures on young people to become sexually active.

Emotional wellbeing – The focus in this strand is on developing young people's skills, knowledge and coping strategies to help them manage stress, self-regulate their emotions, know how to self-care and where to seek help if needed. The aim is to enable them to cope with the normal emotional ups and downs of teenage life.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curraclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment