

Handling complex issues safely in the PSHE education classroom

Discussing and teaching about complex or sensitive issues safely is central to best practice in all PSHE teaching, as every topic in PSHE education has the potential to be sensitive for pupils. PSHE teachers should therefore approach all 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 and should plan their language use, resources and activities accordingly. Furthermore, there are also immediate controversial issues rising from the news which may capture pupils' attention or cause them concern. Although we do not advocate knee jerk reactions, in certain circumstances children and young people will naturally want to discuss high profile events and will look to adults in school to support them, to provide reassurance and to talk through these issues.

It is vital that in each case, pupils are able to have such discussions and engage in learning activities in a safe climate of trust, cooperation and support. PSHE education therefore 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.

Whatever the subject matter, whether you feel it is a sensitive issue or not, following the guidance below 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.

Establishing a safe learning environment

A safe learning environment helps pupils to share feelings, explore values and attitudes, express opinions and consider those of others, without attracting negative feedback. As well as encouraging more open discussion, it also helps to ensure that teachers are not anxious about unexpected disclosures or comments and that pupils are not put on the spot, upset or traumatised.

It is good practice for teachers to:

- work with pupils to establish ground rules about how they will behave towards each other in discussion
- provide opportunities for pupils to discuss issues in small groups as well as sharing views with the whole class
- make boxes available in which pupils can place anonymous questions or concerns
- provide access to balanced information and differing views to help pupils clarify their own opinions (whilst making clear that behaviours such



as racism, homophobia, bi-phobia, transphobia, discrimination and bullying are never acceptable in any form)

- be cautious about expressing their own views, bearing in mind that they are in an influential position and must work within the school's values, policies and the law
- be sensitive to the needs and experiences of individuals, as some pupils may have direct experience of some of the issues
- always work within the school's policies on safeguarding and confidentiality (and ensure that pupils understand school policies on disclosure of confidential information and following up concerns in a more appropriate setting outside lessons)
- link PSHE education into the whole-school approach to supporting pupil wellbeing
- make pupils aware of reliable sources of support both inside and outside the school

Ground rules

Ground rules help to minimise inappropriate and unintended disclosures and comments of a negative nature made towards other pupils; whether intentional or not. They are also paramount to effectively managing discussions that might elicit strong opinions from pupils. To be effective, pupils and teachers need to develop ground rules together and then test them in discussion and group activities, amending them as necessary. Examples of ground rules include:

- **Openness:** We will be open and honest, but 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 feel safe discussing issues and 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.
- **Non-judgmental approach:** It is 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 on answering a question or participating in an 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 the other person's point of view respectfully and expect to be listened to ourselves.
- **Using 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.
- **Asking 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 deliberately try to embarrass someone.
- **Seeking 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.

Starting points

Even young children will have some existing knowledge, skills, understanding, beliefs and misconceptions relating to many aspects of PSHE education. They will have been exposed to parental, family, peer, school, media and community views on different issues and they will be aware of a range of related attitudes and values. Finding out pupils' starting points is crucial to ensuring that learning about the issue is pitched appropriately, particularly to tackle any misconceptions held among the group. These can be explored by using baseline assessment activities such as:

- individual, small group or whole class mind-mapping
- 'graffiti' sheets

- 'draw and write' *
- using photographs or pictures as a stimulus for a brain-storm
- a 'round', where each pupil in turn contributes something they know about a topic.
- quizzes
- attitude continuums
- storyboards to illustrate current strategies for managing a given situation

** In 'draw and write' pupils are asked to respond spontaneously to an open ended question by drawing a picture about a particular issue or situation and then writing notes explaining the drawing. For example, ask children to draw healthy person and write around the outside all the things that keep them healthy.*

Distancing techniques

Using distancing techniques such as stories, scenarios, clips from TV programmes or case studies can provide fictional characters and storylines that stimulate discussion whilst 'de-personalising' discussions. This allows pupils to engage more objectively with the lesson content. The following or similar questions can be used to support distanced discussion:

- What is happening to them?
- Why might this be happening?
- How are they feeling? What are they thinking?
- What do other people think of them?
- Who could help them?
- What would you tell them to do if they asked for help?
- What could you say or do to persuade them to act differently?

Handling tricky questions

It is important to encourage pupils to ask questions but this requires the teacher to feel confident to handle the questions raised. The following guidelines will help you manage this aspect of PSHE teaching safely:

- Have an 'Ask it basket' / anonymous question box available before, during and after all lessons, so pupils can ask questions anonymously at any time. If you are concerned about a question, ask anyone whose question has not been answered to come and see you privately)
- Be conscious of the message you give the rest of the group when responding to a question. You may be certain that a question has been put to you to attempt to embarrass you or put you on the spot but a dismissive answer could dissuade others from asking genuine questions

When faced with a tricky question....

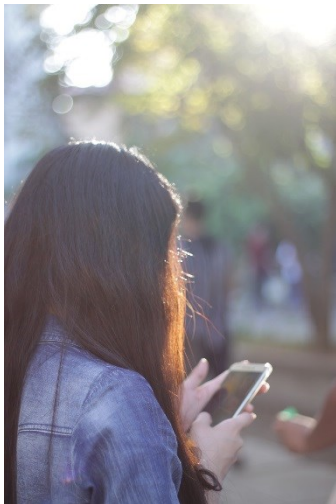
- Thank them for the question and check you have understood what they are asking and what *they* think the answer is
- Give a factual, age-appropriate answer when you can
- Buy time if necessary: explain you do not know the answer/are not sure how best to answer and that you will find out more and respond later. Be prepared with a response such as 'That's a really interesting question and it deserves a good answer – let me have a think about it (for a minute) / (and get back to you later). Consider whether you need to consult senior colleagues. What is the school policy? Is there a potential safeguarding issue?

Signposting support

Ensure that, included in the lesson, is information about different sources of help for young people—both within and beyond the school. Provide opportunities for pupils to develop the skills 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.

- The PSHE Association has developed guidance specifically focusing on responding to pupils' concerns about a recent terrorist attack, which can be accessed here: [A generic framework for discussing a terrorist attack](#) and [Discussing a terrorist attack with children in the primary phases](#)
- NSPCC's website www.nspcc.org.uk includes up to date information and sources of support. The NSPCC runs Childline www.childline.org.uk (0800 1111), as well as 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 Rise Above www.riseabove.org.uk and Thinkuknow www.thinkuknow.co.uk

Online considerations



As children and young people become more digitally aware, they are likely to turn to online media—particularly social media, to explore a range of issues.

PSHE education's approach to teaching about these issues must therefore focus on equipping young people with the skills to critically evaluate the information they are presented with online. For example, checking a range of sources about a breaking news event and developing other critical thinking skills for identifying 'fake news' and increasing their awareness of the ways that social media sites filter and tailor specific information to match individuals' pre-existing beliefs and attitudes (this is sometimes known as a 'filter bubble' or 'echo chamber'). Moreover, young people need support to avoid getting drawn into unhealthy/risky conversations or relationships online. This may involve developing strategies to recognise and respond to online bullying, hate speech, extremist views or radicalisation in different online contexts. For example, how to safely challenge inaccurate or offensive views, how to remove themselves from conversations that make them uncomfortable, and how to report abuse.