

Teaching sensitive issues

Learning from real-life experiences is central to personal and social development. Through the delivery of broad, balanced relevant programmes of PSE, opportunities for learners to consider sensitive issues will arise inevitably. Through exploration of such issues, learners develop interpersonal skills such as

- listening attentively in different situations and responding appropriately
- considering others' views to inform opinions and making informed decisions and choices
- expressing opinions and justifying a personal standpoint
- taking part in debates and voting on issues
- identifying and assessing bias and reliability, e.g. evaluating messages from the media
- developing strategies for resolving conflict.

Potentially sensitive issues

Although any PSE topic can prove sensitive to particular individuals, issues that are likely to be contentious are those that deal with moral and ethical values and beliefs, that arouse strong feelings and that have a personal, social or political impact. They are usually complex issues on which people often hold strong views and embedded attitudes based on different experiences, interests and values. Such issues might include:

- bullying
- cultural values
- politics
- personal lifestyle choices
- relationships, including issues such as sexual health, sexual exploitation and forced marriage
- sexuality
- conflict, including issues such as domestic violence
- family lifestyle and values
- health and well-being, e.g. obesity, anorexia, self-harm
- legal matters, e.g. antisocial behaviour orders
- financial issues, such as debt, poverty
- unemployment
- bereavement
- ... and many more.

Delivery of sensitive issues

Well planned, high quality PSE sessions help learners to access balanced factual information from a range of sources, and enable them to become more aware of alternative viewpoints.



In delivering sensitive issues in PSE and PSE-related activities, such as SEAL, teachers need to:

- establish a respectful learning environment in which learners can express a point of view that may differ from those held by their peers
- ensure that learners have access to balanced information and to differing views to enable them to clarify their own opinions; this may include contributions made by visitors
- decide how far they are prepared to express their own views, bearing in mind that they must work within the agreed framework of the school's mission statement/values
- avoid reinforcing stereotypes or creating tension between learners
- take due care of the needs of individual learners when tackling personal, social or cultural identity issues; for example, when working on the concept of loss and change in relationships where a pupil has recently experienced bereavement
- judge when to allow learners to discuss issues confidentially in groups and when to support by listening into those group discussions.

Ensuring confidentiality

Learners may make personal disclosures during PSE sessions, either in class or to individual teachers. For example, they may disclose that they, their friends or relatives are using illegal drugs. Schools must have a confidentiality policy which outlines clearly for teachers their legal and professional roles and responsibilities. Specific guidance about confidentiality in respect of sex and relationship education can be found in the circulars section under publications on the Welsh Government website:

[Sex and Relationships Education in schools guidance \(external link\)](http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/curriculuminwales/arevisedcurriculumforwales/sexeducation/)
<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/curriculuminwales/arevisedcurriculumforwales/sexeducation/>

Teachers should make it explicit that there is no pressure on learners to disclose personal experiences in PSE lessons and must ensure that pupils know that teachers cannot offer unconditional confidentiality. Equally, if a learner wishes to discuss an important personal concern, teachers should make sure that pupils are aware of confidential sources of support, both within and beyond school. This would include encouraging learners to talk to their parents/carers.

Teachers with responsibility for delivering PSE need to feel confident in:

- handling sensitive issues that may arise



- dealing sensitively with, and following up appropriately, individual or group disclosures made in a classroom setting
- working within school confidentiality guidelines
- knowing what to do in the case of a potential safeguarding issue.

Specific guidance about safeguarding children in education can be found in the circulars section under publications on the Welsh Government website:

[Safeguarding Children in Education: The role of local authorities and governing bodies under the Education Act 2002 guidance \(external link\)](http://new.wales.gov.uk/publications/circular/2008/safeguardingchildren/)

<http://new.wales.gov.uk/publications/circular/2008/safeguardingchildren/>

The need for balance

There is an absolute need to ensure balance when discussing sensitive issues in PSE. This could mean that every individual PSE lesson offers balanced coverage of an issue or it could mean that balance is provided over a whole topic. Equally balance could mean that it is the teacher's responsibility to give an opposing view more prominence if media coverage or the overall class perspective is somewhat one-sided or narrow.

The need for balance should not prevent a clear stand against discrimination. Common values and legal frameworks require that there are views and behaviours that should not be tolerated: for example, racism, bullying, including homophobic bullying, violence and cruelty are never acceptable and should be challenged.

Teachers can avoid bias in PSE by:

- involving learners in establishing ground rules for PSE sessions to create a classroom climate in which issues can be discussed openly
- opening up opportunities for all learners to contribute their views to group or class discussions
- helping learners to distinguish opinions and value judgements from facts
- trying not to highlight particular facts or evidence in a way that gives it a greater importance than other equally relevant information
- giving equal importance to conflicting views and opinions
- actively encouraging learners to challenge and offer alternative interpretations of information
- challenging a consensus of opinion that emerges too easily.

