

Strand 2 | Relationships and Sexuality

Learning Outcome 2.3:	Students should be able to discuss the need for consent and the importance of care, respect, empathy, trust and mutual pleasure within a sexual relationship.
Pre-learning:	Revisiting earlier discussion about characteristics of healthy relationships (including boundaries), and the influence of gender norms and pornography on sex scripts will be helpful.

What is the important learning?

This learning outcome aims to foster a positive approach to relationships and sexuality education, whereby sex is not seen as a risk to be managed but a positive aspect of human life and a potential source of mutual pleasure, connection and wellbeing. The aim is to prepare young people to approach sexual relationships with compassion and awareness of their needs, feelings and boundaries and those of others.

In Junior Cycle SPHE students will have learned about the importance of consent as an aspect of all healthy relationships and why sexual consent matters, not only from a legal perspective but also from the perspective of building mutually respectful and caring relationships.

In senior cycle, it is important to build students' understanding of sexual consent and extend the conversation so that young people understand what characterises healthy and positive sexual relationships from a holistic perspective. Sexual consent that is ongoing, voluntary, and freely-given, is the legal minimum for sexual activity. However, students should understand that healthy sexual relationships entail much more than consent; they also involve mutual respect and pleasure, trust, communication, and care for one another. By ensuring that the other person is equally enthusiastic about and welcoming of the sexual activity, students will not only avoid legal concerns, but avoid any unintended feelings of unease or violation experienced by themselves or the other participant.

While acknowledging that experiences of human sexual pleasure are diverse, it is important to highlight that pleasure should never be obtained by violating another person's dignity, human rights, or well-being.

A person may legally consent but still feel pressured, disrespected, or harmed. Many harmful experiences – both physical and emotional – occur where legal consent might exist, but the sexual activity is not fully welcome or mutual. Raising awareness about the importance of emotional and physical safety, empathy and respect helps students recognise when a situation may be violating and harmful, even if it is not illegal. Key message – if there is any uncertainty stop!

Educating young people about consent has made great strides in Ireland in recent times ...However, this progress is being undermined by the fact that boys' sexual expectations of girls are being moulded by pornography, while at the same time girls' have been groomed by pornography to submit to acts that they do not want and do not enjoy... Acquiescing to unwanted, unpleasurable sexual acts cannot be equated with meaningful sexual consent.

(SERP Report, Executive Summary, 2024, p20–21)

Consent: Consent in a sexual setting is defined in Irish law as follows: a person consents to a sexual act if he or she freely and voluntarily agrees to engage in that act. The age of consent to engage in sexual intercourse in Ireland is 17 years old.

Possible questions to explore through this learning outcome

- Why do people have sex? What are people looking for in sexual intimacy?
- Has the purpose of sex changed over time? What/who has influenced this?
- Beyond pleasure, what else matters?
- How can an understanding of the physical and emotional aspects of sex support more positive and pleasurable experiences of sexual intimacy? How can it support healthy relationships?
- Is there a danger of sex becoming less pleasurable, less equal, and even painful for some, due to the sexual scripts that pornography is teaching? (refer to lessons in RSE 3 and RSE 5 on pornography and its impact)
- What are the barriers to open, healthy communication and sexual activity and how can we build the confidence and skills to communicate what we want in an intimate relationship?
- Is there a difference between the legal minimum standard and what we might want to strive towards in our sexual relationships?
- In what circumstances might people feel that they consented to sexual activity, and still feel uneasy or violated afterwards?

Approaches to consider when teaching this learning outcome

- Encourage reflection on the relational and emotional dimensions of sexual intimacy. Pleasure involves not only physical sensation; it also needs trust, connection, and emotional and physical safety.
- Raise awareness of how individuals can experience sensory stimuli differently and therefore there isn't a one size fits all approach to sexual intimacy.
- Plan the learning and classroom discussion so that it is inclusive of diverse identities and experiences, including students who identify as LGBTQ+.
- To avoid personalising the discussion, talk about what 'people generally' hope for in an intimate relationship – what things matter to most people when it comes to sexual relationships? How might a person's values come into play? Highlight values that are non-negotiable – respect, care, equality.
- A focus on rights and responsibility is helpful as this reminds us that every person has a right to be treated with equal respect and dignity.
- Encourage an understanding of sexual consent that includes but goes beyond a narrow legal lens.
- Avoid fear-based and negative messages about sex and try to shift towards messages of empowerment that help young people become more confident in expressing what they want in an intimate relationship. Foster empathy so that young people also care to find out what their partner wants.
- Discuss communication skills (both verbal and non-verbal) that can support them in expressing needs and boundaries.
- The legal age to consent to sexual activity is 17 years and research shows that the large majority of young people wait until they are at least 17 years of age to have sex. Some senior cycle students will be sexually active and in facilitating classroom discussion, it is important that these students are not exposed. Equally, students who express a desire to delay, or have little interest in intimate relationships. should not feel judged.
- Acknowledge that while most people feel sexual attraction and will become sexually active during their lives, some people identify as Asexual (experience no sexual attraction) and some choose not to be sexually active.

Possible follow-on learning outcome:

LO 3.5: Students will be able to demonstrate the confidence and skills need to be their own person and be able to advocate for themselves and others, even if it means standing out from the crowd.

Go to the SPHE Toolkit for [classroom resources linked to LO 2.3](#)