

## Strand | Emotional and relational education

Strand Unit: Relationships	
<b>Stage</b>	Stage 4 (5th and 6th Class). This learning is intended for children typically aged 11-13.
<b>Relevant Key Competencies:</b>	W - Being well AL - Being an active learner CL - Being a communicator and using language
<b>Pre-learning:</b>	Before addressing this Learning Outcome, children need to have engaged with related Learning Outcomes, such as learning about the physical, social and emotional changes that happen during puberty, factors and influences that shape young people's self-identity and the diversity of family types.

### Learning Outcomes

Through appropriately playful and engaging learning experiences, children should be able to:

<b>Stage 4</b>	begin to understand sexual orientation as describing attraction to someone of a different gender, the same gender, or more than one gender.
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#### Relevant definitions from the *Wellbeing specification*:

**Sexual orientation** - A person's emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to others. This can include, but is not limited to, attraction to a different gender (heterosexual); the same gender (gay or lesbian); more than one gender (bisexual). Some people do not experience sexual attraction or may have low levels of sexual attraction, which is termed asexuality. Sexual orientation develops and evolves over time. Sexual orientation is distinct from gender identity (page 56).

## The focus of learning:

This Learning Outcome is intended to support children in beginning to understand the concept of sexual orientation in an age and developmentally appropriate, respectful and inclusive way. This includes learning that people may love or be attracted to someone of a different gender, the same gender or more than one gender. It does not involve teaching about sexual behaviour or sexual acts. Instead, the focus is on recognising and valuing the diverse ways in which people experience love and attraction.

The aim is to nurture a sense of belonging and emotional safety, ensuring that all children feel respected and accepted. This includes children who may already identify as LGBTQ+ or those who have LGBTQ+ family members. The emphasis is on fostering empathy, understanding and respect for difference—without any expectation that children disclose or define their own identities.

When preparing to teach this Learning Outcome, it is important to keep in mind that children develop at different rates. Some may begin to experience feelings of attraction, while others may not—and both are entirely normal. Teachers should also be aware that the legal age of sexual consent in Ireland is 17. It is important to be clear with children that while feelings of attraction are natural, no one under the age of 17 can legally consent to any form of sexual activity.

As children approach adolescence, it is not unusual for them to question aspects of their identity, including their sexual orientation. This can be a crucial and vulnerable time. This questioning is a natural part of development and allowing children and young people the time and space to explore their identity without pressure is important. This Learning Outcome encourages open conversations that help children begin to understand the broad range of ways people can experience sexual orientation. All young people benefit from environments that affirm and support them as they develop their unique identities. Teachers play a powerful role by modelling empathy, respect and inclusion—helping every child feel seen, safe and valued.

In SPHE, teachers are most supportive when they adopt a sensitive, non-judgemental and open approach — one that acknowledges life's diversity and complexity, and helps create a classroom culture where empathy, understanding and respect for human diversity can flourish.

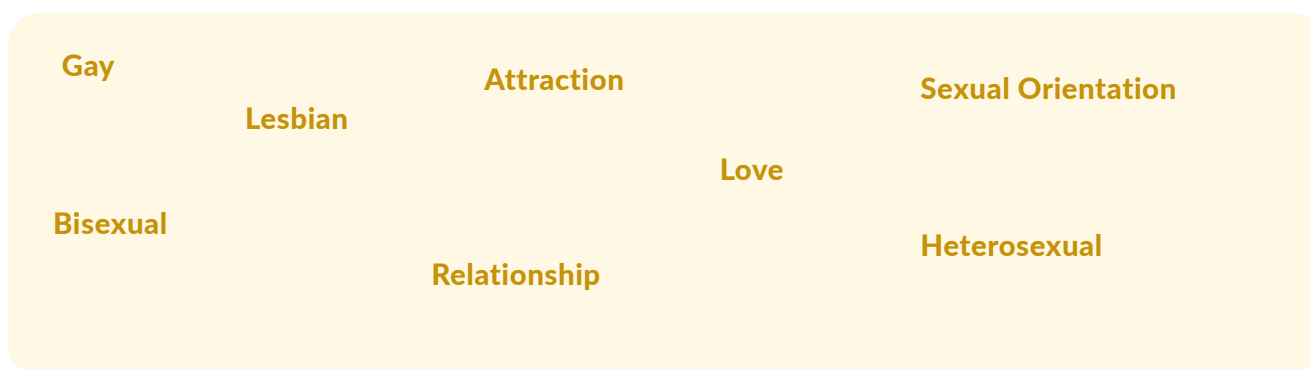
## Approaches to consider:

- The *Wellbeing* classroom should be a space that openly and actively respects the uniqueness of each child, including their sexual orientation.
- Maintain an open mind that reflects awareness that matters related to sexual orientation are complex and that each child's identity is unique and valued.
- Use age-appropriate stories that reflect people's diverse ways of identifying, experiencing and expressing their sexuality.
- Remember that it is not good practice to ask a child to share personal experiences. For example, even if you are aware that a child comes from a same-sex family or has an LGBTQ+ sibling, it is important to respect their privacy. Children should be given the space to share their experiences in their own time and in their own way—if and when they feel comfortable and it is appropriate to do so.

## Possible questions to explore:

- What does “being attracted to someone” mean? How do people show they are attracted to or like someone?
- What are different ways people form loving relationships?
- What does “sexual orientation” mean in simple terms?
- Can you think of stories, movies or real-life examples where people love someone of the same gender, a different gender or more than one gender?
- How can we show kindness and respect to people who may be different from us?
- Why is it important not to make assumptions about who someone might like or love?

## Key vocabulary for teaching this Learning Outcome:



## How can you explain sexual orientation in a child-friendly way?

- *Some people are attracted to someone of a different gender. That's called heterosexual.*
- *Some people are attracted to someone of the same gender. That's called gay or lesbian.*
- *Some people are attracted to more than one gender. That's called bisexual.*
- *In our world, there are many kinds of loving relationships. What matters most is how people treat each other—with kindness, respect and care.*

Children may ask personal, sensitive or unexpected questions during discussions about relationships and sexual orientation. It's important to create an environment where curiosity is welcomed, while also recognising that not all questions need to be answered in the moment. You might respond with:

- *That's a great question. It's a bit beyond what we're learning right now, but you'll learn about that when you are older. Let's keep our focus on what we're learning today.*
- *That's an important question. I'd like to think about the best way to answer it, and I'll come back to it later.*
- *That's a personal question. It's okay to be curious, but it's also important to respect people's privacy.*
- *That's something you could explore more at home with a parent or guardian.*

Consider having a 'question box' in the classroom, allowing children to submit anonymous questions. This gives you time to reflect on how best to respond, ensuring your answers are age-appropriate and suitable for the learning context. Remember, you are not expected to have all the answers. Responding with honesty, care and professionalism models respectful communication and shows children that it's okay to ask questions, even when answers aren't immediate or simple.

## Connections across strands and strand units

The Learning Outcomes in the *Wellbeing* specification have been designed to connect and integrate with each other. While discrete lessons are valuable, this learning should be revisited and built upon over time. When teaching about sexual orientation, it is important to consider how this learning connects with learning in other strand units. Below are some examples of connections that can be made:

- **Human development (page 27):** Children develop a growing understanding of the physical, social and emotional changes that happen during puberty, including feelings of attraction. They learn that individual variation is to be expected.
- **Sense of belonging (page 29):** Children are supported to recognise the important role each person plays in creating a sense of belonging within their class, school and community. They learn to appreciate the diversity present within their communities and explore individual and collective strategies to contribute to positive and inclusive learning environments.
- **Family (page 29):** Children understand that families are structured in diverse ways, such as mother- and father-headed families, co-parenting families, one-parent families, same-sex parent families, adoptive families, blended families, extended families, foster families and stepfamilies.
- **Rights and fairness (page 30):** Children learn to appreciate the importance of rights, equity, equality and justice for a fair and inclusive society. They discuss the grounds under which discrimination is prohibited in Ireland, including sexual orientation. They also examine the potential impacts of stereotypes, which can include stereotypes related to sexual orientation.

## Progression of learning

Early Childhood	Stages 1-3	Stage 4	Junior Cycle
Through <i>Aistear</i> , babies, toddlers and young children are enabled to share personal experiences about their own families, backgrounds and culture(s), and come to know, understand and celebrate the diversity of family structures.	In the early stages of primary school, children explore their individuality and recognise the diversity of families and relationships in their communities. They learn to show empathy and respect for others and to understand the importance of fairness, inclusion and equality. As they grow, they begin to learn about the physical and emotional changes of puberty.	At this stage, children build on their earlier learning by developing an understanding that <i>sexual orientation</i> relates to emotional or romantic attraction—whether to someone of the same gender, a different gender, or more than one gender. They learn that people can experience and express love and attraction in different ways, and they are encouraged to value and respect this diversity.	In <i>Junior Cycle SPHE</i> , young people build on this foundation by exploring the broader concept of <i>human sexuality</i> , including its emotional, social and cultural dimensions. The relevant Learning Outcome states:  “ <i>Students should be able to appreciate the breadth of what constitutes human sexuality, and how sexual orientation and gender identity are experienced and expressed in diverse ways.</i> ”

## Top Tip!

Teaching about sexual orientation is most effective when it builds on a classroom culture rooted in kindness, inclusion and mutual respect. A positive learning environment—where curiosity is welcomed and every child feels seen, valued and safe—is foundational. As a teacher, you play a key role in modelling inclusive language and attitudes that reflect and celebrate the diversity of children’s identities and families. While most learning about sexual orientation will happen through planned learning, don’t overlook the valuable opportunities that may also arise through teachable moments in everyday classroom interactions.

## References

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Department of Education (2023). *Social, Personal & Health Education (SPHE): Short Course Specification for Junior Cycle*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Government of Ireland (2024). *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: Government Publications.

Government of Ireland (2025). *Wellbeing Specification for Primary and Special Schools*. Dublin: Government Publications