

Handling sensitive or controversial issues

Recent media coverage of child abuse raises yet again the importance of keeping children and young people safe by developing their relevant knowledge, skills and confidence through PSHE education.

Children and young people will want to discuss such high profile events as well as other sensitive issues. It's vital that they do so in a climate of trust, cooperation and support.

A safe learning environment helps students 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 make sure that teachers are not anxious about unexpected disclosures or comments.

It is good practice for teachers to:

- work with pupils to establish ground rules about how they will behave towards each other in discussion
- offer some opportunities for pupils to discuss issues confidentially in small groups as well as sharing views with the class
- place boxes in which pupils can place anonymous questions or concerns to avoid having to voice them in front of the class
- provide access to balanced information and differing views to help pupils clarify their own opinions and views (whilst making clear that behaviours such as racism, discrimination and bullying are never acceptable in any form)
- decide how far they are prepared to express their own views, bearing in mind that they are in an influential position and must work within the school's values
- be sensitive to the needs and experiences of individuals – 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 welfare
- make pupils aware of 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. Such ground rules support broader class rules and the school's behaviour policy.

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:

- not asking personal questions
- respecting what people say
- listening to others
- having the right to 'pass' if you do not wish to comment.

Starting points

Even young children may 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. These can be explored and used as a starting point for discussion about specific issues raised by using starter activities such as:

- group or class brainstorming
- 'graffitti' sheets
- 'draw and write' *
- using photographs or pictures
- pupil to pupil interviews
- a 'round', where each pupil in turn contributes something they know about a topic.

* 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 a stranger and describe what they have drawn.

Distancing techniques

Using distancing techniques such as stories, TV programmes/characters, role play, scenarios based on real situations can provide fictional characters and storylines that stimulate discussion whilst they 'de-personalise' discussions.

The following or similar questions can be used to support discussion when using fiction, role play scenarios etc.:

- What is he/she like?
- What is happening to them?
- How are they feeling?
- What are they thinking?
- What do other people think of him/her?
- Is what is happening right or wrong?
- Who could help him/her?
- What would I tell them to do if they asked for help?
- What could you say to persuade (the character) to act differently?

Include in the programme information about sources of help both within the school and outside and help children develop the skills to seek advice and articulate their concerns.

Useful links:

- The accompanying PSHE Association web article '[PSHE education and children's safety](#)' discusses the importance of a comprehensive, progressive and supportive programme of PSHE education that gradually teaches children the skills and strategies they need to stay safe and an understanding of when to employ them.
- NSPCC's website www.nspcc.org.uk includes up to date information and sources of support. The NSPCC runs Childline (0800 1111) and an advice line for adults worried about children (0800 800 5000).
- The website <http://thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk> targets teenagers and helps them to explore what constitutes abuse and how to obtain support
- The campaign 'Schools Safe 4 Girls': http://www.pshe-association.org.uk/news_detail.aspx?ID=1313 provides links to sources of support and advice provided by the End Violence Against Women Coalition.