



# RSE Best Practice Case Studies in Catholic Schools



The Catholic sector is blessed to have many examples of best practice approaches to RSE. Catholic schools are some of the most diverse ethnically, socially and religiously in England and Wales. Often, families from many varied backgrounds choose to send their children to Catholic schools because of the unique and compassionate ethos that lies at the centre of school life. A Catholic ethos embraces everyone regardless of their background with the aim to educate the whole person. It also holds the role of parents as primary educators of their children at its core. As is the case with every subject, this ethos is firmly at the heart of RSE lessons at Catholic schools. This document contains three case study examples of schools that have used their Catholic ethos to enable them to produce best practice RSE curriculums. They have demonstrated the value of embracing the diversity of their pupils and their families in order to tailor their approach to RSE in a way that works best for their particular school community. They have also consulted parents and other members of the local community to ensure that the RSE curriculum is age-appropriate and related to the experiences and lives of young people today. By embracing diversity, involving parents and understanding the importance of educating the whole person, Catholic schools have shown their success in this field. We hope that you find these case studies useful.

## Relationship and Sex Education at St Benedict's Catholic School, Cumbria

St Benedict's is a larger than average-sized high school serving Whitehaven and the surrounding area. The student intake is predominantly Catholic; students from other faiths are also welcomed.

When it comes to Relationship and Sex Education (RSE), St Benedict's School in Cumbria takes a whole school approach to the subject, with lessons being covered in the RE, Science and PE curriculums. Everything they do within the school is set in the context of helping parents and the Church to form young people and as such they make a point of bringing everyone along with them.

Over the past two years they have developed an innovative approach to teaching RSE by involving, pupils, teachers, parents, and key members of the local community, asking them what they thought should be included in the curriculum. This was done through a series of consultation evenings.

Their first question was understanding what the school and the pupils needed from the curriculum. Working with all the different departments and Directors of Learning, they drafted a model journey a student would take through our RSE curriculum. They discussed this journey with both students and staff and made any necessary changes before deciding which of the teaching departments best covered these curriculum areas.

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In addition, they arranged a meeting with the local police force to highlight and discuss any significant issues in the school's local area and how these could be incorporated into their lessons. Through this process they discovered that 'sexting' is a particular issue for Cumbria so, in conjunction with the local police force and ICT/Computing, the school created resources for form tutors to address this issue.

Central to their approach with RSE is developing positive relationships that encourage enquiry and questioning. Hence, they created a key question for each of the weeks that would develop a deeper knowledge and understanding of the topics covered and focus as a key assessment piece for the week so that they could effectively track and monitor students.

What's more, to keep their curriculum constantly relevant they run regular student surveys to ensure that the schemes of work are fully meeting their pupil's needs. Furthermore, each year they hold a parents/guardians and governors evening to evaluate and discuss any new steps.

The school's strong Catholic ethos is no barrier to effective RSE, if anything it is the Catholic belief in the formation of the whole person which strengthens their commitment to teaching the subject to a high standard. This ethos is fostered through the development of virtues which in turn become good habits of the mind and heart, and develop within each person through the Gospel values that are given to all by Jesus.

As such, the school sees the teaching of effective RSE as an intrinsic part of supporting pupils on their journey of faith. Pupils are encouraged to ask challenging questions to which teachers give honest and genuine answers based upon a Catholic understanding that all relationships should be supportive and healthy. By using Jesus as the archetype, St Benedict's shows pupils what it means to live in a healthy and happy relationship with others. This culture underpins their Catholic approach that positive relationships are at the heart of all that is good within the community.

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## Relationship and Sex Education at English Martyrs Catholic Primary School, Reading

English Martyrs in Reading is an ethnically diverse, larger than average Catholic Primary school with above average number of pupils whose first language is not English.

In the summer of 2012 the governors of English Martyrs had concerns about the suitability of their Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) content; specifically, that they did not teach about the act of sexual intercourse to pupils in Year 6, when it appeared that many of the pupils had some knowledge of it already. Hence, in order to teach about it correctly, and within the context of the Church's teachings on sexuality, the school developed a series of lessons which addressed this.

The RSE lessons are always taught over one week (one lesson per day) and in the format of a presentation. No formal written work is set, but children are encouraged to ask questions and discuss what they are learning. The sessions typically take place towards the end of the summer term, so that pupils are emotionally and intellectually as mature as possible. Parents are informed of the content of the lessons during an information session for them, about two weeks before the lessons are taught. They are shown the same slides and very often, many report that they have learned something new about the Theology of the Body.

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The sessions cover everything from the physical and emotional changes that take place in puberty to what marriage is, why it is important, what makes a successful marriage. The pupils learn about marriage vows and what these entail as well as how physical affection is a natural and important part of marriage. In the lesson regarding Church teaching, pupils are taught that the 'act of marriage' reflects the love of the Trinity, as well as Christ's relationship with His Bride, the Church. A lot of what is taught is quite challenging for most of the pupils to fully comprehend, however, it is the overall intention that they appreciate something of the sacredness of sexual intercourse within marriage.

When it comes to learning about the physical act of sex, the focus is primarily scientific in nature, in that the basic biology of sexual intercourse is taught. However, pupils are constantly reminded that Catholics believe that sexual intercourse should take place within marriage. Pupils are also taught that at the moment of conception, Catholics consider that spouses 'work with' God to create a new person.

The school also dedicated a session to the role of the media. Pupils are introduced to the media, what it is and how it can reflect sexuality and body image in a way that is contrary to the teachings of the Church. Children are encouraged to question what they see in the media and recognise when images are morally wrong. In this session pupils learn that in reality most people in our society do not live in accordance - or even agree - with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

In the several years that the school has taught these lessons, they have only ever received positive feedback. Parents are pleased that the school is taking a comprehensive approach to RSE and that it is clearly in accordance with the teachings of the Church. Children have said that they find the lessons very interesting and are keen to ask questions, discuss their learning and find out as much as they can. Due to the mixed familial circumstances of our pupils, their RSE programme acknowledges that many families are not formed in the same way as the teachings the Church describes. However it is stressed that all are loved by God and no matter what the home life of a pupil is like, they are all precious in the eyes of the Lord.

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## Relationship and Sex Education at Notre Dame RC School, Plymouth

Notre Dame RC School in Plymouth is a comprehensive school for girls. It is part of a worldwide network of schools founded by the Sisters of Notre Dame.

Often, people are surprised when they are told that Notre Dame, a Catholic school founded by nuns, has been named by Ofsted as a best practice example of excellent relationship and sex education. But for the staff at Notre Dame it's no surprise at all. They have been teaching and perfecting their RSE lessons for more than three decades, and actively involve their students in the deliverance and development of their RSE curriculum.

The sisters who founded the course more than 30 years ago were forward thinking in their approach to teaching PSHE, whilst at the same time maintaining the Catholic ethos of the school. This sentiment continues to influence the school's approach to this day.

The founding sisters recognised that the most important element of successful RSE is to deal with reality which is still key to how the school teaches RSE today. Now more than ever, information about relationships is more easily accessible. And it's not just what's available on the internet, but also the changing nature of family structures that is making students more aware of relationships at a much younger age.

However, what makes the curriculum at Notre Dame particularly successful, and indeed it is what Ofsted credited them for, was the way they involved students in the programme. Under the umbrella theme of 'Respect' (respecting one's body, what makes a respectful relationship etc.) the school, along with a trusted LA lead, trained a group of Year 13s to give a lesson to Year 10s about healthy relationships.

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This proved extremely successful as the younger girls felt more at ease talking and asking questions about issues such as contraception with their peers than with their teachers. Having said that, there was always a member of the school staff present in the room to support the Year 13s if needed. The success of student-led learning has also resulted in the Year 10s wanting similar training to be able to run a lesson for Year 8s and 9s on healthy friendships. This is something which the school is extremely proud of.

A challenge for the school to face has been the thorny 'age appropriate' issue. More specifically, at what stage should certain sensitive subjects be approached? They have found in this respect that it is important not to have a PSHE/RSE curriculum which is set in stone, but one which is fluid, listens to students and caters for their needs.

Integral to Catholic education is the view that parents are the primary educators, so teachers at Notre Dame are prepared to supplement what students may have been taught at home. However, importantly, the school also ensures that RSE is taught in partnership with but separately from the Religious Education curriculum.

Just because Notre Dame is a Catholic school doesn't mean that they stifle or hide their students from the real world. They recognise that to do so would be a failure in their duty of care. A key focus for the staff is that Catholic education is about the formation of the whole child which includes preparing them for what is in the real world and keeping them safe. It also involves catering for the unique needs of individual pupils and working within the boundaries of a flexible curriculum. The key therefore for successful RSE at Notre Dame is to be flexible.

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