

NCIWR submission on the Draft RSE Framework

Draft RSE framework survey statement: There is no content in the draft RSE framework that should be removed.

NCIWR response: Strongly disagree

Draft RSE framework survey question: What specific content should be removed?

NCIWR response: We recommend removing content that approaches the material from an exclusively risk-based lens.

The Draft Framework for RSE takes a risk-based approach to sex and intimacy. This approach, taught in isolation, is out of sync with best practice and has been found to be both ineffective and harmful for young people. The Draft Framework has a distinct lack of information about the positive aspects of sex and intimacy.

Women's Refuge assert that RSE must be reimagined not just as *sex education*, but as a **critical lever for interrupting intimate partner violence pathways** and building **safe, equitable life courses** for all young people. RSE should promote inclusion and well-being, **alongside** addressing risk factors for family, partner and sexual violence.

There is clear evidence of both the prevalence and severity of partner violence, including sexual violence, among young people. It is therefore essential that the RSE Guidelines directly address the realities of this among students and provide clear, gender-informed strategies for prevention, response, and education.

We acknowledge that the material provided for consultation is an overview rather than the full framework, however, a risk-based approach to RSE that only provides information about the possible negative consequences can perpetuate feelings of guilt, shame, and fear around relationships, sex, and sexuality. It may also reinforce victim-blaming narratives and can foster unsafe environments.

An example of this within the Draft Framework is in the Year 5 'Safety and Consent', one of the key learning areas is:

Informed by prior learning, teach students to know that: putting pressure on others to share information and images online is inappropriate and can be illegal; sharing and/or posting images or videos of themselves or others online can be unsafe and once online they will no longer have control over this material.

While it is important to educate around digital abuse, the angle of the approach here can be considered punitive. Information for students about 'what they should not do' needs to be offset with information about what they can do and what support is available across many contexts. Punitive information in isolation is harmful. In contrast, the 2020 RSE Guidelines suggest that key learnings at the same level need to be focussed on understanding concepts such as consent in different contexts, respectful engagement, and participation in creating and upholding inclusive environments. This positive approach to RSE is more in line with best practice – to provide context that supports young people to make safe choices by being informed about risk **while also** being enabled with the skills and knowledge to prevent and respond to problems. All young people in

Aotearoa New Zealand deserve best-practice, evidence-based RSE that is mana-enhancing, and safety promoting.

Draft RSE framework survey statement: There is no additional content that should be added to the draft RSE framework.

NCIWR response: Strongly disagree

Draft RSE framework survey question: What additional content should be included, and at what age.

NCIWR response: Research shows high rates of physical and sexual violence experienced by youth aged 12–18, most often perpetrated by male peers, boyfriends, or acquaintances. However, students are exposed to the conditions which embed, condone, justify, and perpetuate this relational violence much earlier.

Therefore, our recommendations are as follows:

1. Embed a gendered analysis of violence into the RSE Guidelines – Teaching about violence and consent must explicitly acknowledge and address the gendered patterns and drivers of abuse.

Schools are not neutral spaces. Instead, they are gendered environments where cultural norms minimise, ignore, or even enable unhealthy relationships and the violence experienced by students. Harassment and abuse often occur in full view of peers and adults, reinforcing a culture where relational violence is normalised.

2. Age-appropriate, developmentally nuanced education – RSE must begin early and be tailored to developmental stages, recognising that relational violence emerges well before adulthood.

We strongly recommend more specific content be added in the following areas: current digital landscape and coercive control. The online world, broadly, and in relation to sex and relationships, is a fundamental part of young people's lives. It is a landscape that changes rapidly, and the 'current' state tends to be better understood by young people in comparison to their parents, guardians, or other older people in their lives. To combat this, RSE needs to focus on embedding ideas about 'ethical digital citizenship and critical thinking' – this is a module that can expand and develop over age groups. Navigating the topic this way – as opposed to 'online safety', a vague term that speaks again to a risk-centred lens – would equip students with the fundamental understanding of how to approach and conduct themselves online that they can then apply to new and changing contexts as and when they develop. There also needs to be education around critical thinking that specifically addresses pornography – young people need to be provided with a safe environment to learn and explore the ways in which mainstream pornography intersects with gender stereotypes, coercion, violence, and unrealistic expectations about bodies, sex, pleasure, and consent.

The current Draft RSE Guidelines also need to add in more content about coercive control, including power dynamics and epistemic status within relationships. We know that violence, including sexual violence, is most likely to happen in the context of a pre-existing relationship (e.g. partner, ex-partner, friend, colleague, classmate etc.). Framing consent as a standalone concept and failing to unpack the context in which someone can be made to act against their own

interests and desires (coercion) needs to be a central part of any approach to 'Safety and Consent'.

Lastly, and as noted in our comment for the previous question we also recommend changing the framework to have a more positive approach overall. The new framework does not address the pleasure and connection that people feel in relationships of all types. Healthy relationships, diversity (in all its forms), empathy, and respect are all contributors to positive mental health, social cohesion, and wellbeing – these should be the cornerstones of RSE. Further, discussions specifically about sex that only focus on risk and danger serve to push young people to alternative, often inappropriate, sources of information such as pornography or other online dis/misinformation about sex.

3. Move beyond individual responsibility – Rather than focusing on 'risk avoidance' by individuals, RSE should cultivate collective responsibility to challenge harmful norms and intervene as active bystanders.

It has been identified that young people are most likely to initially seek help from their peers after violence. This framework is a critical opportunity to enable young people to overcome the still dominant victim-blaming narratives that are key barriers to support seeking. If young people are taught, from Year 1, the principles of being an active bystander/upstander including skills on safe intervention in age-appropriate scenarios these set a foundation that can shift social norms which support violence. Further, this is also an opportunity to involve students in the creation of pathways at school to loop in safe adults so that the young people who experienced violence and the young people who receive disclosures do not have to carry that alone.

4. Ensure intersectional inclusion – RSE must address the particular needs of Māori, Pasifika, LGBTQIA+, disabled, and other systemically disadvantaged youth.

The removal of diversity throughout this overview is inappropriate and concerning. We strongly recommend adding content about family, cultural, gender, and sexual diversity from the 2020 Guidelines. We also strongly recommend adding back in the considerations for different approaches to be inclusive of diverse learners from the 2020 Guidelines.

The 2020 Guidelines had thoughtful inclusion of family, cultural, gender, and sexual diversity in appropriate ways throughout – these appear to have been stripped from the current Draft RSE Framework. First, the Draft RSE Framework has a strong cultural bias towards western ways of understanding relationships, gender, and sexuality. There is plenty of evidence available that shows us that education that does not reflect te ao Māori results in poorer educational outcomes for Māori learners and that, conversely, education from a te ao Māori lens is suitable for all learners. The previous guidelines (2020) clearly articulated te ao Māori perspectives and provided guidance for teaching content within this perspective as well. The stripping back of this content means that, as is, the new Draft RSE Framework fails to meet state obligations in relation to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Second, there is also little consideration of other ethnic communities – beyond vague allusions to 'cultural differences'. A significant proportion of people living in Aotearoa are from another country, giving scope to recognise and reflect on this would give all students a chance to recognise that social norms and views on gender and sexuality are diverse and that many cultural groups within Aotearoa do not, and have never, conformed to the rigid binaries set out by the western colonial framework for sex, sexuality, and gender.

Third, there is only one mention of sex diversity in the Draft RSE Framework. Sex diversity refers to natural variations in bodies, including internal and external reproductive organs, secondary sex characteristics, chromosomes, and hormones. Intersex is included as a term in the outline for Year 10 but there is no other discussion of diverse sex characteristics. Sex is not binary, so including medically accurate definitions of male, female, and intersex is important health information. It is also important that this information is included before/in tandem with the onset of puberty which can be a time where young intersex children experience bodily changes that they were not expecting.

The last facet of diversity that should be added to the guidelines is around sexuality diversity. This could begin in the lower year groups by talking about diversity within family structures – this would ensure visibility of sexuality diversity by offering examples of rainbow parents and promoting inclusion of young people growing up in rainbow families. In addition, it is concerning that sexuality appears to have been reduced to four categories: homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, and asexual. There are several common sexualities missing from this that young people will be familiar with and identify with. We strongly suggest in-depth consultation with LGBTQIA+ organisations to ensure true representation of the ways Takatāpui and rainbow communities identify to be as inclusive as possible. Further to this, there is the use of language that reinforces binary thinking around sexuality (e.g. “both sexes” used to define attraction for bisexual people) – this implicitly implies that there are only two sexes which is incorrect and exclusionary towards sex and gender diverse individuals.

5. Address institutional complicity – Schools must recognise that inaction, minimisation, or poor handling of violence complaints perpetuates harm. Guidelines must require clear policies, staff training, and monitoring.

We also recommend adding in a clear articulation of how the framework will ensure a whole-of-school approach to RSE. The fundamentals of RSE are easily undermined if, for example, students witness or experience identity-related bullying or if disclosures of harm do not lead to safe outcomes. The core tenets of good RSE (respect and inclusion) cannot be treated as theoretical concepts existing as part of a lesson plan – for RSE to be truly effective for young people, and to work as a primary prevention method for family, partner, and sexual violence, students need to be part of an environment where they are encouraged to, and witness others living these values.

To achieve a whole-of-school approach the framework also needs to set out clear plans to support the professional development of teachers to safely deliver this material within diverse classroom settings that reflect Aotearoa New Zealand’s diverse population. This must include in-depth training on dealing with disclosures which seems to be an overlooked aspect of this framework. Guidelines should also strengthen protections for victims by requiring schools to have victim-centred processes for disclosure, protection, and support, and ensure safety is prioritised over reputational protection.

Draft RSE framework survey statement: Overall, the content covered in the framework will support effective relationships and sexuality education.

NCIWR response: Strongly disagree

Draft RSE framework survey question: Please comment.

NCIWR response: We strongly support the idea of a compulsory framework for RSE being developed in response to the Education Review Office report 'Let's Talk About It' – but what is currently being proposed in this draft framework is not fit for purpose. We agree with that there have been inconsistencies in the delivery and content of RSE throughout Aotearoa New Zealand – but what has been presented for consultation here will only exacerbate this issue. The lack of specificity and approach to RSE presented in this Draft Framework sets back efforts to provide comprehensive, consistent, school-based RSE in ways that will have a profound, perhaps even generational impacts on the progress that has been made in combatting family, partner, and sexual violence in Aotearoa New Zealand.

We recommend an urgent reconsideration of this framework.