

Strand 3 | Relationships and Sexuality

<p>Learning Outcome 3.6:</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Pre-learning:</p>	<p>Before addressing Learning Outcome 3.6, students need to have engaged with related learning outcomes, such as learning about the physical, social and emotional changes that happen during adolescence (1.1), factors and influences that shape young people's self-identity, such as (family, peers, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnic background, dis/abilities, religious beliefs/world-views (1.4) and gender equity and gender stereotypes (1.5)</p>

What is the important learning?

It is a normal part of adolescence to question different aspects of one's identity. '*Figuring out the kind of person you are becoming is the major developmental task of adolescence*'. (Gaffney, M. 2021. *Your One Wild and Precious Life*, p53). As part of this figuring out, it is not uncommon for young people to question aspects of their identity which may include their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Experts advise that the adults in their lives need to acknowledge that this questioning is normal and allow the young person the time and space to work it through.

The purpose of Learning Outcome 3.6 is to open up conversations with young people about the breadth of ways that people can experience and express human sexuality. Human sexuality is broad and holistic and includes our gender identity, our sexual orientation, our relationship with ourselves and our relationships with others. Sexuality is part of who we are as humans, whether we are sexually active or not. Sexual activity is just one way that people can express their sexuality. (See [the Sexuality Wheel](#))

In SPHE, teachers are most supportive when they adopt a non-judgmental, sensitive and open approach that acknowledges the diversity and complexity of life and seeks to create a classroom environment in which empathy and understanding can grow.

As part of these discussions, it is important to acknowledge that sexual orientation and gender identity are two distinct aspects of our personhood (see definitions It's inappropriate to assume, label or categorise a person, including their sexual orientation or gender identity. As per guidance, [Being LGBT in school](#), teachers and students are advised to respect the language and terms that young people use to identify themselves as this is one way of creating an inclusive environment and supporting students who identify as LGBTQ+.

The most common age for young people to identify themselves as LGBTQ+ is 12, and the most common age for young people to tell someone they are LGBTQ+ is 16. This is a crucial time for LGBTQ+ young people. Experts assert that all young people need to be given the opportunity and space to develop their unique identities in environments of support and affirmation. Teachers can play a powerful role in this regard by acknowledging the diversity and complexity of life and modelling understanding and empathy.

In the context of discussing gender identity it is important to acknowledge that while most people's gender identity matches their sex registered at birth, this is not the case for everyone. It's important to let teenagers know that there are different ways of experiencing and expressing our gender. Furthermore, it's normal and healthy to question gender norms and stereotypes and many young people may not wish to conform to the way society expects them to look or behave. For the vast majority of young people, gender non-conformity and gender questioning does not mean that the person will go on to identify as transgender. It is also important to keep in mind that, as with other aspects of identity, one's gender identity can change over time.

Relevant definitions

Sexuality – the components of a person that include their biological sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual expression, sexual fantasies, attitudes and values related to sex. Aspects of sexuality can change as we go through different ages and relationships.

Gender identity – a person's felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex registered at birth, such as cisgender, transgender, non-binary.

Sexual orientation – each person's capacity for emotional and sexual attraction to, and intimate sexual relations with, individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender. Some people do not feel sexual attraction or may have very low levels of sexual attraction, and this is termed asexuality.

Approaches to consider:

- The SPHE classroom should be a space that openly and actively respects the uniqueness of each young person, including their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression preferences.
- Maintain an open mind that reflects awareness that matters related to sexual identity are complex and that each student's identity is unique and valued.
- The use of stories and testimonies reflecting young people's diverse ways of identifying, experiencing and expressing their sexuality and gender is recommended. However, remember that asking a young person to talk about their personal experiences is not good practice. Respect their stories and allow them to share them in their own time and in their own way, as appropriate.
- The teacher is not expected to engage in classroom discussion on complex medical aspects of sexuality. If questions such as intersex identities or treatments that support a medical transition arise, it is safest to gently acknowledge that these are complex and best discussed with a medical expert.

See [Dealing with sensitive or challenging conversations](#) and [What makes an inclusive SPHE classroom?](#)

Possible questions to explore through this learning outcome:

- In relation to **human sexuality** – What does it mean to say that we are all sexual beings? how is human sexuality expressed? how is our concept of 'sexuality' influenced by family, peers, media, religious beliefs?
- In relation to **sexual orientation** – What is the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation? why is it important to respect different kinds of relationships? do we live in a heteronormative society and what's the impact of this? what steps can we take to create an inclusive environment in the classroom and outside of school?
- In relation to **gender identity** – how do gender expectations and stereotypes influence the way that people express their gender? why is it important to respect the different ways that people can experience and express their gender identity? How do/can people demonstrate this respect?

Possible follow-on learning outcomes:

Discuss experiences/situations of bias, inequality or exclusion and devise ways to actively create more inclusive environments (LO 1.6)

Go to the [2023 SPHE Toolkit for teaching resources linked to LO 3.6](#)