

Partnership working to support Special Educational Needs (SEN) children in their relationships education



Factfile

Organisation

Northcott School and Cornerhouse

Activity

Group and 1:1 learning in an SEN context

Age range

Secondary

How widely used

Throughout school

A special school in Hull is working with a local provider to deliver RSE learning that fits with its whole-school emphasis on communication and is tailored to young people's needs.

'Our young people are very vulnerable, so one of the big challenges in relationships work is to explain consent, to try and make them safe, so they aren't taken advantage of' Jane Hewson is a Teaching Assistant at Northcott School in Hull and has run RSE lessons there, working alongside Luke Medcalf from local charity Cornerhouse.

At Northcott School, RSE is mainly taught through PSHE (personal, social, health and economic education), underpinned by the school's emphasis on social communication. This provides a strong

foundation to help pupils understand what a healthy relationship is like. The formal curriculum runs alongside a 'social interaction and communication' curriculum, which includes social skills groups and work with Cornerhouse, through visits to its sexual health centre and other community resources.

For those with social communication difficulties, a key task is to unpack precisely what a healthy relationship looks like, says Jane, 'Especially for children on the autistic spectrum, having relationships at all is often



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quite challenging – knowing what is appropriate and inappropriate. It can also be very hard to navigate the difference between a platonic friendship and a relationship where they fancy the other person, and what to do about it.'

Initially, Jane allowed Luke to shadow her, as he wanted to understand how to deliver RSE to young people with SEN, but quickly it became a collaboration. Luke was also able to update the content in some areas, while Jane knew how to pitch the learning at the young people. 'She's probably the best I've ever seen, to be honest,' says Luke. 'In relationships education, there's no such thing as a silly question, and Jane manages that really, really well. If a kid says something funny, she'll laugh along with them, and that gives them the confidence to ask more serious questions.'

This initial partnership formed the basis for Cornerhouse's approach with other special schools: joint delivery, combining teachers' strong understanding of the young people's individual strengths and needs with Cornerhouse's specialist knowledge of RSE.

RSE class learning is supported by one-to-one work with young people referred to Luke for extra support on understanding relationships. Referrals are often due

to inappropriate sexual behaviour, such as public masturbation or using pornography. 'Young people with SEN get all these hormones at puberty just like anyone else,' he says. 'If they aren't given a framework to understand what's acceptable behaviour and then they behave inappropriately, often they will be blamed, when actually it's a failure of education.'

The 1:1 work is built loosely around five sessions, using specialist resources including video and drawing materials, and lasts around four weeks, depending on the young person's needs. The first two sessions tend to focus on building trust. 'Trust isn't like a switch that you can flip on. As vulnerable young people, if I did come in and they trusted me straight away, that might be an issue too,' says Luke.

For Jane and Luke, the school's approach and specialist provider complement each other well. 'I see Northcott staff model positive relationships themselves, and that's vital,' says Luke. 'They're consistent in their approach – all the staff are welcoming and smiling. This is especially important for boys, as some of the young people we work with have only ever seen males handle things in aggressive ways. We have to model a different way to be, with the patience to build trust.'

Learning points

Young people with special educational needs have a strong need for RSE – not least because of high risk of sexual exploitation, among boys as well as girls.

Effective RSE requires a relational approach and time to build trust, so that young people with SEN feel able to ask questions in front of their peers.

Many sexually inappropriate behaviours among young people with SEN stem from a need for help understanding social rules, reading body language, and other communications relating to consent.