

How To Tackle **Tough Questions** from Secondary School Students in **Sex and Relationships Education**

A practical guide to help teachers manage difficult questions in the classroom with confidence.



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INTRODUCTION



Sex and relationships education has always posed a unique set of challenges, which teachers approach with skill and sensitivity. However, teaching this important subject has become increasingly complex for secondary schools in recent years.

Today's students are bringing more unpredictable and nuanced questions into the classroom, often prompted by what they have seen online. While their questions might come from a place of genuine curiosity, they can leave even the most experienced teacher feeling unprepared. For non-specialists covering lessons at short notice, tough questions in RSHE can be a minefield.

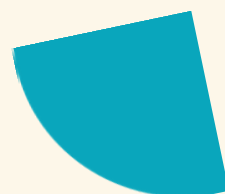
Although statutory guidance has been in place for several years, teachers are having to deal with new situations all the time. There's nothing like being put on the spot in the classroom by an off-the-wall question about something a student has seen on TikTok.

Then there are those cases where a question rings alarm bells or causes safeguarding concerns. Take the example of a student who has shared an intimate photo and fallen victim to sextortion, but doesn't know where to turn for help.

Teachers are often fielding questions of a personal nature too, and having to find the balance between keeping a professional distance while encouraging students to explore the issues themselves.

At a time when students are bombarded with information from many quarters, what they really need is support from their trusted teachers. Which is why many teachers welcome advice on how to answer the tough questions appropriately, honestly and sensitively.

This guide explores the challenges teachers face in RSHE discussions and provides practical scenario-based techniques from teachers on handling difficult questions with clarity and confidence.



WHY ARE STUDENTS ASKING TOUGHER QUESTIONS?



The main challenge my teachers face in RSHE is managing sensitive or unexpected questions, while maintaining professional boundaries and creating a safe environment where students feel comfortable.

Angharad Ryder-Owen,
Deputy Headteacher, Norbury High School for Girls



It is natural for young people to be curious about sex and relationships, and schools play a vital role in providing support in a safe, balanced and understanding environment. However, many teachers are finding that students' questions are becoming harder to tackle, particularly in the three following areas:

Questions that are not age-appropriate

If a young person is unable to find answers about sex and relationships from the people around them, they often turn to social media with their questions. The algorithms on social media platforms very quickly lead young people to content that may not be age-appropriate.

Similarly, children are increasingly exposed to online pornography, even when not actively seeking it out. According to research from the [Children's Commissioner](#), more than a quarter (27%) of children have seen pornography by the age of 11. This content can depict extreme sexual violence, providing a distorted and dangerous view of what a relationship should look like.

Personal questions to the teacher

Children are growing up in a very different world to the one in which we grew up. While there is more open discussion about sex and relationships which is a positive development, this can mean teachers are asked more personal questions about their own lifestyle, choices and experiences.

Another reason for personal questions is that students are often navigating their way through unreliable information online. Students may seek out the views of teachers on the content they are seeing, such as a new trend on social media or the opinions of an influencer.



A question you don't know how to answer ?

Sometimes teachers genuinely don't know how to answer a student's question. Students may ask what would happen in a particular scenario, and the teacher would prefer some time to think about the answer, or decide where to direct the student for more information.

There can also be misunderstandings and missed nuances in questions students ask due to the slang, coded language and emojis young people use. Language is evolving faster than ever, and teachers are finding that despite their best efforts, it can be difficult to keep up.

HOW TO TACKLE TOUGH QUESTIONS IN SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS TEACHING

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There is a massive difference between the questions you get from students who are already having sex and need your advice on staying safe, and students who are not even ready to hold someone's hand.

Charlotte Anderson
Head of Citizenship, Religious Studies,
Sociology & PSHRE,
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Teachers with extensive experience have developed their own tried and tested approaches to tackling tough questions in RSHE. Difficult questions are much harder for teachers who are not specialists in the area, don't have the depth of experience or have not had the necessary training.

One of the key challenges for any teacher is that not all young people are at the same stage in terms of sex and relationships. There's a fine balance between proactively supporting students who are sexually active, while meeting the needs of students who are a long way from being interested in intimate relationships.

Now that some students are encountering sexual content much earlier than they used to, due to



online influences, the questions which arise in RSHE lessons are even more complex and varied.

However, there are some techniques that teachers are finding helpful when confronted with tough questions in the classroom. The following sections look at typical scenarios which may arise during discussion sessions in RSHE lessons, and how teachers are dealing with them.



How to tackle age-inappropriate questions

The Government's updated [Relationships, Sex and Health Education](#) guidance for English secondary schools has a stronger focus on confronting challenging topics. While teachers may have access to information on teaching difficult subjects such as female genital mutilation (FGM), rape or strangulation in sex, it can be hard to prepare for the questions that follow.

Scenario 1

During a lesson for 13-year-olds on contraception and safe relationships, a student put up their hand and asked: "I saw a video online where someone was talking about choking during sex. Is that normal?"

The question immediately caused laughter and awkwardness around the room. A few students started making jokes, while others looked uncomfortable.

The teacher was conscious that some students in the class may not have heard terms like this before, while others clearly had.

Here are some ways teachers suggest handling a scenario like this.

Pause and validate the question

It's far better to take some time to think rather than rushing in too quickly with an answer. Take a pause, possibly some deep breaths to regulate your nervous system, and calm the class down if necessary.

Acknowledge the question without expressing shock or judgement. Praise the student for being inquisitive in a responsible and mature way and tell them that you will find out the information for them. This generates trust and encourages a safe space to ask questions.

If possible, give the student a brief, factual and age-appropriate answer to the question, and draw on research or medical facts for your answer.



We avoid saying that students shouldn't be asking questions like that at their age. Instead, we recommend teachers stay calm and composed, acknowledge the question, answer with a factual response and link the discussion back to the learning intention.

Angharad Ryder-Owen, Deputy Headteacher, Norbury High School for Girls



Follow up individually

A question like this is difficult in a class where there is a wide chasm between students who are sexually active or engaging with sexual content online, and those who have very little knowledge and experience.

Offer to answer specific questions on a one-to-one basis at an agreed time – after the lesson or during break. Show the student that their question is important, and you are taking the time to discuss it with them.

Encourage students who appear uncomfortable or worried to come to you individually with their questions too.

Invite students to save up their questions for the end of the lesson and write them down. This gives you thinking time about how to answer, while respecting the student's curiosity to learn.



Identify safeguarding issues

In the scenario mentioned at the start of this section, it's a good idea to log the incident with the safeguarding team so that they are aware of the type of content children in the school are seeing online.

Ensure that teachers understand the safeguarding process around other questions which might arise in RSHE lessons, and check the policy on managing questions around topics such as sexting, controlling behaviour and abusive relationships.

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There's a line between what you need to safeguard and what is just a child's curiosity about something they've seen on TikTok. However, it is important to make the safeguarding team aware because you can guarantee if one child has seen it, others have too.

Charlotte Anderson,
Head of Citizenship, Religious Studies, Sociology and PSHRE,
Co-op Academy, North Manchester

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2 How to tackle personal questions

Many of the topics covered in RSHE are deeply personal, and students may seek additional clarification by asking the teacher for their own views and perspectives. Teachers need effective ways to keep the discussion inclusive while deflecting questions which are overly personal.



Scenario 2

During a lesson for 13-year-olds on abortion and reproductive rights, a student asked the teacher directly: “Miss, do you personally agree with abortion?” The room immediately became quiet and several students turned to look at the teacher, waiting for a personal opinion.

Here are some approaches teachers can take to avoid answering personal questions:

**Maintain professional boundaries**

Clear boundaries are essential from the outset. If students know that you will not answer personal questions about yourself and other staff, they will stop asking.

Turn the discussion around to the way people’s opinions can be influenced by religion, culture, family background and personal experience, but keep the focus on respectful discussion and accurate information.



I would say: ‘We are not talking about what I think. But if you want to find out more about abortion or contraception, you can talk in more detail to the nurse at the Brook Sexual Health facility – or the equivalent resource in your area.’

Charlotte Anderson,
Head of Citizenship, Religious
Studies, Sociology and PSHRE,
Co-op Academy, North Manchester





Keep the discussion inclusive

Remaining objective is absolutely key. Teachers can do this by keeping discussions factual and avoiding judgmental language.

Establish ground rules at the start of the lesson based on the school's diversity, inclusion and equality policies.

Explain that in this lesson nobody should feel pressurised into answering a personal question.



Refer to legal and health guidance

A good way to divert personal questions is to focus on the facts, for example the medical aspects of abortion or the legal position around biological sex.

Try employing distancing techniques to depersonalise sensitive topics. For instance, say 'research suggests...' or 'there is medical evidence that...' and use case studies or fictional scenarios as a basis for discussion.

It is important not to shame students, for example, those who may have experienced abortions. To avoid this happening, it's a good idea to introduce some behaviour guidelines at the start of a lesson on a sensitive topic, where students agree to respect each other's privacy. This helps the whole class maintain appropriate boundaries.

Have some facts and figures up your sleeve to share if the discussion becomes too personal or students start to judge each other's views.



I would direct students to the legal aspects of a tricky topic to avoid personal questions. However, you need to be wary of hammering home the legal position too much because students might be afraid of coming to you for advice. For example if a student has sent intimate pictures, they might not want to admit to it because it's illegal.

Charlotte Anderson,
Head of Citizenship, Religious Studies, Sociology and PSHRE,
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»»» Change the direction of the lesson

To move away from personal questions, teachers can shift the focus back to different aspects of the topic.

Introduce a new pair or group activity which takes the spotlight off the teacher as an individual and allows students to explore their own ideas and listen to the views of others.

Switch away from personal questions by asking students to create posters, cards or mind maps to illustrate all the possible opinions and perspectives people might have on a topic.

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We have activities which encourage students to discuss issues with each other, such as think, pair, share. We get students to talk through with a partner, and feed back what their partner said. It's an effective way to encourage students to share their views.

**Angharad Ryder-Owen,
Deputy Headteacher,
Norbury High School for Girls**

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3 How to tackle questions you can't answer



It can be stressful to be faced with a question you can't answer, with a classroom of expectant faces waiting for your response. The important thing to remember is that teachers don't need to know the answer immediately. Far better to explain that you need a bit of time to look into it further so you can give them an informed answer.

Scenario 3

In a lesson for 14-year-olds on online safety and image sharing, a student asked: "What would happen legally if someone sent an intimate photo when they were under 18, but both people agreed to it?" The teacher was unsure of the exact legal position and worried about giving inaccurate information in front of the class.

Here are some techniques for dealing with questions you can't answer:

Follow the question up later

Teachers do not need to know the answer to every question immediately. In fact, students might respect the fact that you value their question enough to need extra thinking time. If students can't get answers from their teacher they might head back to TikTok or other unreliable sources for more information.

Don't shut the question down, instead try reserving it by saying: 'let me take that away and come back to you about that' Keep a list of reserved questions and get back to students at a later date with a response.

If appropriate, tell students it is a topic we will be covering later in the curriculum and remind them that TikTok is not the place to look for answers.

One way to approach this is to explain that you can't discuss the question now. Then set aside some time to check your sources and prepare a suitable answer, and perhaps run it past a colleague. If you can prepare a slide to share on the question in the next lesson, students will know you take their questions seriously.

**Angharad Ryder-Owen,
Deputy Headteacher,
Norbury High School for Girls**



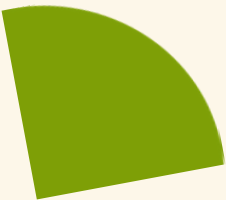


Signpost sources for information

Support structures inside schools are important in helping teachers manage questions they find difficult to answer.

It is a good idea to check whether staff training includes answering difficult questions, and to give cover and non-specialist staff advance warning of lesson content and possible questions.

Encourage less experienced teachers to approach their RSHE lead, safeguarding teams and SLT to see if the school has any recommended approaches for questions on specific sex and relationships topics.



Our head of RSHE prepares the form tutors by sharing weekly updates on which topics are coming up and suggests they look through the resources and documents and get back to her in advance of the lesson with any questions.

**Angharad Ryder-Owen, Deputy Headteacher,
Norbury High School for Girls**



Provide question boxes

It can sometimes be useful to buy more time by asking students to submit their questions in writing. This way, students can ask questions privately and be sure the teacher has had time to think about the answer.

Try asking students to write their question on a whiteboard and hold it up for the teacher to see and answer later. Invite students to ask questions on an anonymous basis if they prefer.

To avoid singling out students, suggest that everyone in the class puts a note in an anonymous question box, even if some people leave theirs blank.

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I have an Ask-it Basket. It's a little basket at the front of the room where students can pop a question on a post it note. And then I can answer those questions or say that I'll come back to the next lesson with an answer for you.

**Charlotte Anderson, Head of Citizenship,
Religious Studies, Sociology and PSHRE,
Co-op Academy, North Manchester**

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Brainstorm question types

It's not possible to anticipate every type of question that students are likely to ask. However, you can prepare to an extent by talking through previous scenarios with colleagues to see what questions they have encountered in their lessons.

Take each of the topics on the curriculum for the next month or term and ask the teachers taking RSHE lessons whether they are aware of any particular questions they have encountered previously on the topics.

It's also a good idea to explore whether any topic has generated an unusual amount of exposure on social media.



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We have a department booklet which we all go through and discuss the questions students are likely to ask. For instance, in lessons on contraception, someone always asks: 'Will the condom fit me?' Then we prepare possible answers we can adapt to different types of question and write these down in the booklet.

**Charlotte Anderson,
Head of Citizenship, Religious Studies,
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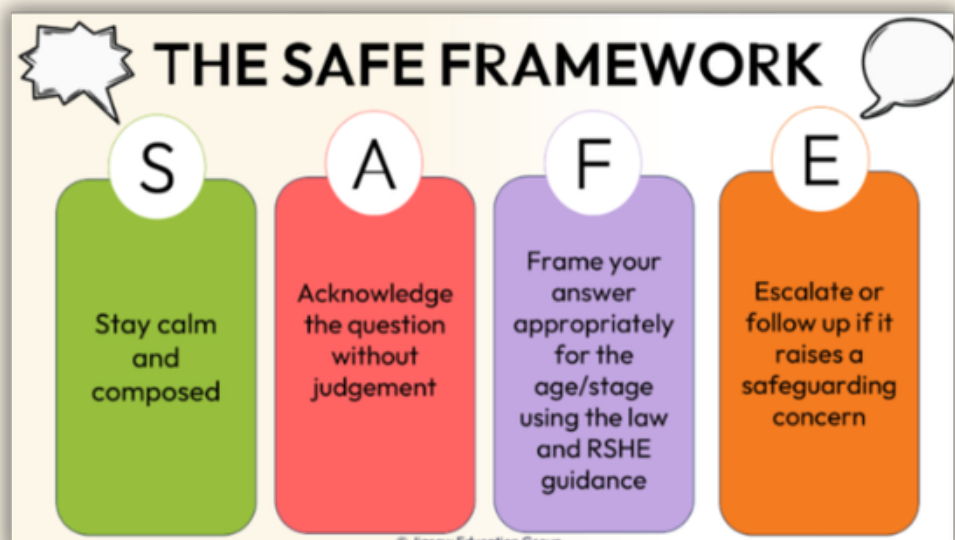
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A FRAMEWORK TO HELP TEACHERS PREPARE FOR TOUGH QUESTIONS

You have to expect the unexpected when it comes to students' questions about sex and relationships. In some ways, those unpredictable questions are part of the joy of teaching – seeing young people's curiosity in action and supporting them to build healthy relationships.

Jigsaw Education has created the **SAFE Framework** which teachers can use to prepare for tough questions of all types.



Here are some examples of how to prepare for tough questions using the SAFE Framework.

Stay calm and composed



If you remain calm, it not only discourages students from asking awkward questions to get a reaction, it also reassures students who may be concerned or anxious about the lesson content. A calm environment makes it easier for everyone to explore difficult topics without anxiety or embarrassment.

For instance, some questions students ask in RSHE lessons can be amusing, and allowing students to laugh if appropriate, can help to make everyone feel more comfortable and relaxed.

Set boundaries early in the lesson so the laughter doesn't spill over into poor behaviour and prevent students from learning. Explain why the subject matter is serious and keep responses factual and objective.

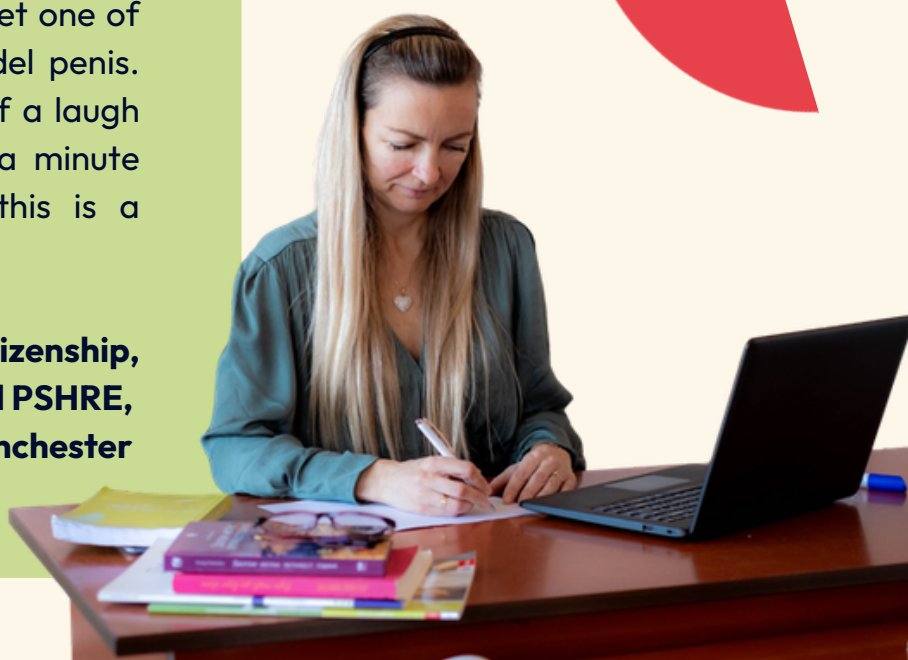


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Students find it funny when you get one of them to roll a condom on a model penis. You can say we'll all have a bit of a laugh while we put this on, but after a minute we're going to stop, because this is a serious subject.

**Charlotte Anderson, Head of Citizenship,
Religious Studies, Sociology and PSHRE,
Co-op Academy, North Manchester**

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Acknowledge the question without judgement



It can be hard not to show how shocked you are by some students' questions. But the risk is that if a student senses they have shocked you, they might enjoy the reaction and try to do it again. Alternatively, they may be worried or feel shame or guilt that something they have seen or done is not appropriate.

It's important to find ways to remain objective, and to have some set phrases to call upon to avoid appearing judgmental.



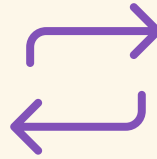
It's not helpful to the student if you show that their question has shocked you. It's better to say something like: 'That's an important question, and I want to make sure I give you the correct information. I'm going to check the legal guidance after the lesson and come back to you next week with a proper answer.'

**Angharad Ryder-Owen,
Deputy Headteacher,
Norbury High School for Girls**



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rame your answer appropriately



Teachers can follow RSHE guidance to ensure they answer questions appropriately for the age and stage of their students.

There will be students in many classes who find the subject of sex and relationships daunting and this will be reflected in their questions. Some students might not know what they want to ask. In these cases, teachers can emphasise that RSHE lessons may not seem relevant to them now, but they are essential in preparing them for their future relationships.

Try to show students that there are sources of information they can tap into when they are ready, and that these sources are more reliable and trustworthy than social media.

One way to guide students towards asking appropriate questions is to set some ground rules at the start of every RSHE lesson.

These could include:

- We have the right to pass
- We respect each other's privacy
- We use positive language and no put-downs
- We listen to each other
- We respect each other's right to their opinion



We talk quite a lot about how you don't have to be interested in sex yet. I'm just preparing you for when you are. This is where you can go if you need to.

Charlotte Anderson,
Head of Citizenship, Religious Studies,
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Escalate or follow up a safeguarding concern



Some questions might raise a safeguarding concern. These could include age-inappropriate questions, 'asking for a friend' type questions, or real situations students are involved in, such as signs of an unhealthy or controlling relationship.

Provide a calm, non-stigmatising explanation to the question, which encourages the student to seek support. For example, if a student asks: 'Why do people self-harm?' a good response could be: 'Some people self-harm because they're struggling to cope. If you or someone you know feels this way, it's really important to talk to someone you trust.'



If something arises in a lesson that seems concerning, our teachers follow up the conversation with the student afterwards. The next step would be to take it up with the safeguarding lead. The main thing is to keep the approach calm and be professionally curious throughout.

**Angharad Ryder-Owen,
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CONCLUSION



Teachers are facing tougher questions from secondary school students in RSHE lessons, because young people are exposed to sexual content at a much younger age than ever before.

The unpredictable, complex and personal nature of those questions can take teachers by surprise, and while it's not possible to plan for every scenario, there are some effective ways teachers can respond to difficult questions.



When faced with a question which is not appropriate to a student's age, teachers can pause and reflect, agree to answer the question individually later, and redirect the lesson to the learning objectives.

Questions about teachers' personal views and experiences can be diverted by shifting the discussion towards the opinions of different groups in society.

Even the most experienced teacher can't know all the answers straight away, but what they can do is reassure students that they will find out more information for them, and that they are taking their questions seriously.

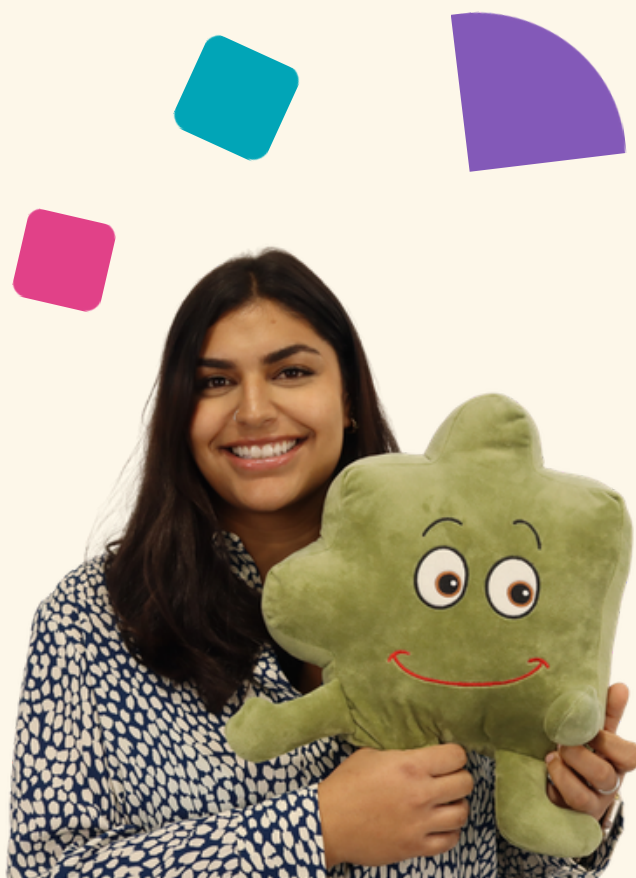
The Jigsaw Education SAFE Framework provides effective strategies for teachers to prepare for tough questions. These include remaining calm, avoiding judgement, answering appropriately and following up safeguarding concerns. This enables teachers to be ready for whatever a student asks in an RSHE lesson.

By sharing ideas with colleagues and valuing students' curiosity, teachers can prepare for the toughest questions, so they can guide young people towards positive relationships now and in the future.

ABOUT JIGSAW

Jigsaw creates high-quality, evidence-informed PSHE and RE programmes for primary and secondary, UK and international schools, helping every learner build the knowledge, confidence, and character to thrive.

- More than lessons - Jigsaw is a complete spiral curriculum that supports a whole-school approach to personal development, ensuring consistency, engagement, and measurable impact.
- Designed to support teachers - Ready-to-teach resources reduce workload and build confidence, especially when addressing complex or sensitive topics such as relationships, online harm, and wellbeing.
- Meaningful personal development - Jigsaw helps schools deliver high-quality PSHE and RE provision that strengthens culture, supports behaviour, and builds resilience and emotional literacy.
- Rooted in best practice - Developed by subject experts and mapped to statutory guidance, Jigsaw combines pedagogy, inclusivity, and compliance.
- Ongoing support - Through CPD, webinars, and our new onboarding platform, teachers receive practical tools and ongoing guidance to deliver PSHE with confidence.



At Jigsaw, everything begins with one simple question:

‘What does this child need to thrive? Today, and in the future?’



If you would like us to show you how we can help you support your students in PSHE, please [book a demo](https://jigsaweducationgroup.com/) or visit us here: <https://jigsaweducationgroup.com/>