

# Submission on the Relationship and Sexuality Education Curriculum 2025

## Hohou Te Rongo Kahukura

May 2025

**Q1-10: For years [x-x] the content included in the draft RSE framework is appropriate for [x-x] year old students.**

- ➔ 'Strongly disagree'
- ➔ See later comments

**Q11: There is no content in the draft RSE framework that should be removed.**

- ➔ Strongly disagree

**Q12 (free write): What specific content should be removed.**

All young people in Aotearoa New Zealand deserve best-practice, evidence-based Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) that is mana-enhancing, affirming, and fit for purpose in today's world. RSE should promote inclusion and well-being, and address risk factors for family, partner and sexual violence.

According to Te Puna Aonui (Briefing to Incoming Minister, November 2023), family violence and sexual violence cost an estimated \$7 billion per year and \$6.9 billion per year respectively. In Aotearoa New Zealand, these forms of violence are gendered, formed through and continue colonisation, and reflect and reinscribe power imbalances and marginalisation around gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity and disabilities.

School-based RSE should help young people to identify inappropriate behaviour in relationships; build their skills and capacity to have healthy relationships and reduce perpetration of partner and sexual violence. As well as learning knowledge, attitudes and skills to develop respectful, healthy relationships, RSE should also support the development of positive peer group social norms, as young people are most likely to seek help from one another around mental health and experiences of harm. The bystander approach or teaching young people to safely intervene in situations which may lead to harm, or where social attitudes which promote violence, discrimination or exclusion are being expressed, is effective in developing these positive peer group norms.

Therefore, we welcome a compulsory framework being developed in response to the damning Education Review Office (ERO) report ‘Let’s Talk About It’ – but we want it to fit Aotearoa New Zealand in 2025 and beyond. ERO reported that 82% of students didn’t learn and would like to have learned about consent. We wholeheartedly agree there have been inconsistencies in the delivery and content of RSE, including in response to the needs of Takatāpui and Rainbow young people. We suspect inconsistent RSE contributes to our horrifying rates of family, partner and sexual violence. In addition, RSE has not kept up with challenges facing young people in today’s world in terms of forming identity, peer pressure, social media, online abuse and access to pornography, bullying, mental health, and partner and sexual violence.

NZ curriculum aims to inculcate the values of Curiosity, Diversity, Equity, and Respect. School based RSE will contribute to development of these values. In addition, school based RSE will contribute to the development of the key competencies of managing self and relating to others.

We offer these suggestions to improve the draft framework in terms of evidence-base, impact and opportunity to promote respect, inclusion and social cohesion as well as reduce our rates of family, partner and sexual violence.

## Structural changes

### **Need to focus on student outcomes**

It is striking that the framework does not focus on outcomes for students, using instead the language of ‘teach students to know that’. We recommend a shift to outcomes to contribute to targeted development of key competencies such as managing self and relating to others. We recommend outcomes focus on knowledge, attitudes, and skills for every area covered. It is imperative that RSE offers knowledge, impacts on attitudes, and develops and extends strengths-based skills.

For example, Age 5-6, Relationships domain, the first bullet point shifts to:

Learners will be able to:

- describe different kinds of families (two-parent, single-parent, extended family/whānau, non-traditional with two mums or two dads etc) KNOWLEDGE
- value different kinds of families ATTITUDE
- demonstrate ways to show respect for different kinds of families SKILL

And so on. This format will significantly strengthen the existing framework to centre RSE on the needs of students.

### **Need for positive, strengths-based approach to sex and relationships**

While addressing risks, it’s also important that the new framework acknowledges the pleasure and connection that humans feel in relationships – from friendships to

romantic relationships – which contribute to positive mental health and social and emotional wellbeing. Healthy relationships, respect, cultural differences and gender and sexuality diversity are all aspects that should be framed positively, yet there is a distinct lack of content reflecting the positive aspects of sex and intimacy in the draft framework. The very limited mentions of online content are also very harms-based, rather than taking a student-centric and strengths-based approach that equips young people to be ethical online citizens who treat others respectfully online, consider their own digital footprint and understand the social, psychological and legal implications of sharing sensitive images on themselves and others.

Young people know that sex is exciting – it’s all around them, in every media they consume. Pretending otherwise, or focusing only on risk and danger, pushes young people to seek out information from other sources, and misses an opportunity to build critical thinking and agency. Without adequate, inclusive RSE, porn and online material becomes a default teacher for many young people, especially those without access to other forms of learning (including Takatāpui and Rainbow children and young people who cannot see themselves in existing RSE materials).

### **Need for whole-school approach that addresses power and injustice**

The new framework needs to clearly articulate how it will ensure consistent and comprehensive RSE education across all schools, while still highlighting the importance of a whole-school approach. Well-taught RSE is undermined, for example, in schools where students are bullied because of who they are; where racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, biphobic or transphobic attitudes and practices impact students, or where disclosures of harm do not lead to safe outcomes.

The draft framework does not adequately address bullying and harassment. Bullying is more likely to be aimed towards young people who are trans and non-binary, sexuality diverse, disabled, and/or Māori, Pacific or ethnic. Takatāpui and Rainbow students and female students are more likely to be sexually harassed. RSE must name and challenge power and injustice – but it also needs to take place in a whole-school environment that reinforces and supports respect and inclusion.

### **Need for support for teachers, including in receiving disclosures**

The new framework must address the fact that Aotearoa has extremely high rates of family and sexual violence, and that many children and young people may want to ask for help after recognising their experiences as abusive. High quality RSE will help prevent violence and must also respond safely and confidentially to disclosures of harm. There is the need, as identified in ‘Let’s Talk About It’, to ensure teachers have adequate support and professional development to safely teach these topics in New Zealand’s diverse classroom settings, to New Zealand’s diverse population.

## Need for support for parents and caregivers

It is essential that RSE is communicated with parents and ideal that this communication would involve not just telling parents what is included in the guidelines but actually running short courses for parents in which they can learn some of the skills based content, especially around consent. This would be useful at all ages so that parents are reinforcing learnings within the home, and would likely dispel misinformation in communities that can lead to resistance to RSE materials.

## Need for additional domains

There is significant content missing in existing three domains of the draft framework, as discussed below, particularly in relation to the social and emotional aspects of relationships. Some missing content can be woven into the existing domains, but the addition of two domains would significantly strengthen the framework. We suggest **Identity, gender and sexuality** (more accurate information and chance to explore gender, sexuality and cultural belongings) and **Supporting each other** (covering bystanding or safe intervening in bullying or harmful situations; supporting friends who are being bullied/experiencing violence; red flags in relationships and online contexts). This would allow **Safety and Consent** to be more strengths-focused and explore consent in context, including in online contexts; **My Bodies** to cover sex diversity, puberty, cultural understandings of embodiment and STIs including HIV; and **Relationships** to focus on developing positive relationship skills and healthy relationships with friends and romantic partners.

**Q13: There is no additional content that should be added to the draft RSE framework.**

➔ Strongly disagree

**Q14 (free write): What additional content should be included, and at what age.**

## Content changes

### Significant content missing in structure of draft framework

The draft framework offers just three domains which do not adequately cover all the relevant components of effective relationships and sexuality education in Aotearoa New Zealand. As well as erasing Māori, Pacific and other ethnic communities, and Takātapui and Rainbow students, there is content missing in the existing three domains that is crucial to equipping students with the knowledge, attitudes and skills to negotiate healthy friendships and romantic relationships, and be able to recognise violence and abuse and seek help for themselves and their friends.

In contrast, in 2018, UNESCO published *“International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence-informed approach”* which identified 8 domains relevant to best-practice:

1. Relationships
2. Values, Rights, Culture and Sexuality
3. Understanding Gender
4. Violence and Staying Safe
5. Skills for Health and Well-being
6. The Human Body and Development
7. Sexuality and Sexual Behaviour
8. Sexual and Reproductive Health

A broader set of domains could help incorporate content that is missing from the existing framework and allow material that will better meet the needs of Māori, Pacific and ethnic students, and Takatāpui and Rainbow students. We suggest adding domains which focus on missing content discussed below.

### **Erasure of Te Ao Māori**

For example, there is a strong cultural bias to the draft framework in favour of western or British-influenced ideas and concepts. There are no references to Te Ao Māori, or to critical concepts and understandings within Te Ao Māori, including in relation to Takatāpui identities and sex, sexuality and gender diversity. The previous guidelines clearly articulated Te Ao Māori perspectives, including through the use of wellbeing model Te Whare Tapa Whā.

The Ministry of Education holds ample evidence that education which does not reflect Te Ao Māori produces poorer educational outcomes for Māori students. There is also a lost opportunity to discuss relationships at a conceptual level. Have relationships between Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti been respectful? Has consent been present? For all students, this is a loss of the opportunity to consider mātauranga Māori and concepts such as Te Whare Tapa Whā; the chance to understand connection and wellbeing through a relational, collective lens.

In our view, the draft framework currently fails to meet state obligations in relation to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

### **Cultural diversity**

Pacific, Asian and other ethnic communities in Aotearoa are also absent from the draft framework. Given one in four people living in Aotearoa were born overseas, and that ethnic diversity continues to expand, this is a serious oversight. Exploring cultural diversity gives all students the chance to recognise that social norms are fluid – including in relation to ideas about gender and sexuality. Many cultural groups in Aotearoa do not conform to the rigid binaries of sex, sexuality and gender brought here through colonisation.

For example, as [Pacific group Le Va](#) say: “Pasifika families have long included Mahu, Vakasalewalewa, Palopa, Fa’afafine, Akava’ine, Fakaleiti or Leiti and Fakafifine.”

Exploration of cultural diversity is a significant opportunity to demonstrate respect in action across cultures, and contribute to undermining harmful ideas that contribute to family, partner and sexual violence, such as treating women and feminine people as less valuable than men and masculine people, or treating Takatāpui and Rainbow people as less valuable than heterosexual, cisgender people – precisely because such ideas are socially constructed and differ across cultures.

### **Gender, gender stereotypes and gender diversity**

In 2014 in response to Roastbusters, ACC developed the Mates & Dates healthy relationships programme for secondary schools. It included the domain of ‘Identity, gender and sexuality’. The UNESCO 2018 framework includes ‘Understanding Gender’ as a domain. In contrast, the draft RSE framework currently makes only occasional reference to gender. This is a gaping and dangerous gap.

Partner and sexual violence continue to be heavily gendered in Aotearoa New Zealand. The RSE framework **must** include content that will allow young people to explore the ways in which masculinity and femininity shape experiences of identity and relationships. Encouraging students to explore gender and challenge ideas that there is just one way to be a man (in particular) is critical to violence and suicide prevention and requires the chance to explore and dismantle gender stereotypes, cultural beliefs, social norms, and harmful ‘influencers’ such as Andrew Tate in the digital world. Failing to address gender stereotypes also stops an opportunity to address the values which underpin homophobic, biphobia and transphobic bullying.

Adding a specific domain focused on gender will also allow the acknowledgment of gender diversity, including transgender, non-binary and indigenous perspectives and identities such as Takatāpui, fa’afafine, fakaleiti, akava’ine, and vakasalewalewa.

The draft RSE framework currently erases gender diversity entirely. This is not evidence-based. Government research in 2012 discovered 3.7% of secondary school students identified as transgender or not sure yet about their gender (The Health and Well-Being of Transgender High School Students: Results from the New Zealand Adolescent Health Survey (2013), Clark, T.C., Lucassen, M.F.G., Bullen, P., Denny, S.J., Fleming, T.M., Robinson, E.M., Rossen, F.V. & the Adolescent Health Research Group).

Therefore, it is difficult to understand this erasure in Aotearoa in 2025. Failing to acknowledge the vibrant reality of gender diversity will not make transgender, non-binary, Takatāpui, fa’afafine, fakaleiti, akava’ine, and vakasalewalewa students stop being who they are – they will just have to hide.

This erasure will make going to school more difficult. It will make these students more likely to be bullied by other students. It will impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

And it will fail to equip students who are not transgender with knowledge, attitudes and skills which will promote respect, inclusion and social cohesion.

Gender diversity should be integrated into all year levels. The dangerous erasure of gender diversity is accompanied by a lack of clarity about sex diversity and sexuality diversity.

### **Sex diversity**

The draft RSE framework introduces the term 'intersex' in Year 10, in the My Body domain. There is no other discussion of diverse sex characteristics, despite around 2% of young people in Aotearoa being born intersex/with diverse sex characteristics.

In the UNESCO framework, sex diversity is considered in two domains: Values, Rights, Culture and Sexuality and The Human Body and Development.

Within the My Body domain, differences between bodies, including naming genitals, is introduced in Year 1. This is critical information for child sexual abuse prevention – it means children can accurately describe where a predator is touching them.

The draft framework in Year 1 suggests that 'while their body may be similar to their friends, it may also be different'. This offers an excellent opportunity to begin exploring body diversity and differences in sex characteristics with simple explanations that can be built upon in subsequent years. As with gender diversity, sex diversity should be evidence-based and seek to reduce misinformation that leads to bullying and other forms of violence. In addition, just like other children, intersex children should be able to accurately describe where a predator is touching them to prevent child sexual abuse.

Sex, like gender and sexuality, is not binary, so including medically accurate definitions of male, female and intersex is important health information. Many intersex children and young people grow up feeling shame about who they are, which can be substantially reduced by introducing more accurate information about sex diversity. For other intersex children, puberty may involve changes to their bodies they, and their family, are not expecting. There are opportunities to include more accurate information across these topics.

Sex diversity refers to natural variations in bodies, including internal and external reproductive organs, secondary sex characteristics, chromosomes, and hormones.

### **Sexuality diversity**

Sexuality diversity is not mentioned in the draft RSE framework until Year 8. This will be too late for many sexuality diverse young people and also risks othering students who come from families with Takatāpui and Rainbow parents or family members. Sexuality diversity should be integrated into all year levels.



For example, in Year 1, there is an opportunity, when exploring diverse family structures, to ensure there is visibility of sexuality diversity, by offering examples of Rainbow parents.

In addition to being introduced too late, sexuality has been reduced to only four categories: heterosexual, homosexual (gay and lesbian), bisexual and asexual. This does not reflect indigenous identities like Takatāpui, or the vibrant diversity of identities within Rainbow communities in 2025. In addition to the four named identities, common diverse sexualities include pansexual, queer, aromantic and demisexual, and more! The existing definitions erase intersex and trans and non-binary people, and do not reflect the ways Takatāpui and Rainbow communities define ourselves.

‘Opposite sex’, used to define heterosexual people, does not make sense because sex is not binary. ‘Both sexes’, used to define bisexual people, does not make sense because sex is not binary. Bisexual people define themselves as being attracted to people with the same gender, and people with different genders, from themselves. The word ‘both’ erases sex and gender diversity entirely.

Poor information about sexuality diversity will contribute to poor outcomes for sexuality diverse students, and students from Rainbow families. In addition, many sexuality diverse and gender diverse students have romantic relationships with students who are not part of Takatāpui and Rainbow communities. These relationships are less likely to be healthy when some identities are not valued as highly, or even visible in RSE.

The erasure of sex diversity and gender diversity also creates an erasure of sexuality diversity in the draft framework. Students who are sex, gender and sexuality diverse deserve to be able to see themselves in RSE.

### **Significant gaps around the digital sexual landscape**

The Classifications Office estimates that young people first see porn at around age 12, with some children seeing it much earlier, sometimes exposed through pop-ups and viruses. The digital sexual landscape is a fundamental part of young people lives, and it changes rapidly, largely out of sight of parents and older people. The online world is where young people explore, connect, and engage sexually, and digital sexual experiences are now interwoven into their everyday lives through social media, porn, online communities, sexting, dating apps, and AI-generated sexual platforms. In fact, for many young people, especially those without access to other forms of learning, porn and online sexual media are now primary learning tools around sex, bodies and consent.

It is in the digital landscape that MSD’s Love Better has so successfully engaged young people. There will continue to be opportunities like Love Better, but there are also considerable challenges and risks, particularly with the increasing normalisation and eroticization of violence across online sexual content. To combat problematic online



content, other countries are now developing RSE curricula which embeds ethical digital sexual citizenship and critical thinking as early as primary school. This can strengthen young people's critical thinking, build online sexual resilience and agency, and reduce harm. Without a comprehensive focus on this area, this draft RSE framework risks being irrelevant in today's digital world. By not addressing the online world and framing it as only dangerous, young people are left to navigate their digital sexual world and experiences without the support and guidance they need.

While online safety is mentioned, the draft framework could more explicitly and comprehensively address the risks of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. This includes a need to engage with the common online related sexual harms young people now report experiencing such as harm within video games, grooming, unsolicited nudes, coercion to send nudes, sextortion, harassment, revenge porn and AI deepfakes. There is often shame around porn and online sexual content, particularly for Takatāpui and Rainbow young people who are exploring their identities, which can mean young people are reluctant to ask for help, so process these experiences on their own.

Critical thinking in reference to porn would also allow the opportunity to explore the ways in which mainstream porn intersects with gender stereotypes, coercion, violence, and unrealistic expectations about bodies, pleasure and consent.

### **Gaps in consent, healthy relationships and violence and abuse**

The draft RSE framework introduces a concept of consent which builds year on year. This is welcome, and important, but needs a deeper focus that acknowledges that consent is contextual and nuanced. For example, there is growing concern about the significant rise in the youth trend of rough sex in NZ, evidenced in last year's Rough Sex Symposium hosted by MEDSAC. Yet most young people say they have 'consented' to rough sex when it begins, yet later describe their experiences of rough sex as harmful. To explore consent usefully, RSE must explore power, pressure, fear, silence, and safety – the context within which someone might be able and free to say 'yes' or 'no'. The active seeking of consent through explicit asking must be emphasised, rather than seeing consent as a more passive granting of permission. And gender stereotypes and normative ideas about what counts as sex must be explicitly explored.

The Safety and Consent domain must also explore dynamics of coercive control and encourage young people to reflect on dynamics of healthy and unhealthy relating with friends and romantic partners. Given most sexual harm is perpetrated within relationships, treating consent as a discrete, stand-alone concept completely misses the mark. The draft framework should demonstrate a clear and robust progression of learning about consent in various contexts, including online interactions and intimate relationships, in line with international best practices advocated by UNESCO.

In the current draft framework, Safety and Consent is trying to cover too much ground.

## **Supporting peers and bystanding**

Research identifies that young people are most likely to seek help from their peers after violence. This is an opportunity to develop material that both supports positive peer relating and helps shift social norms which support violence and coercive control. Bystanding material, or supporting young people to safely intervene in situations that could lead to bullying, violence and abuse, should start at Year 1, and build in complexity throughout schooling. There is excellent international and local evidence that bystanding initiatives which help young people clearly identify potential harm; feel safe to intervene; and choose an appropriate intervention shift social norms which support violence.

Combining bystanding and supporting peers into one domain would also allow content about how to support friends who are experiencing harm, as most young people first seek help from their peers. This could include highlighting red flags in relationships and mental health.

## **Puberty**

Information about puberty should take an evidence-based approach and explore puberty – and challenges from puberty – for all young people, including sex and gender diverse young people. Due to significant misinformation, the final RSE framework must provide accurate, evidence based guidance in this area.

Menstruation is not mentioned until Year 6, with detail not provided until Year 7. Endometriosis is not introduced until Year 12. Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa tell us that over 6% of young people will be menstruating by the end of Year 6, and 20% by the end of Year 7. To avoid a potentially terrifying experience for children who have not been taught about menstruation, it should be taught earlier, and endometriosis and other aspects of menstruation should also be integrated, as many young people struggle with pain from their first cycle, and need information so they can seek healthcare.

Similarly, erections and wet dreams are not mentioned until Year 7. To avoid shame and confusion for students experiencing these things at younger ages, they should be mentioned at before Year 7.

## **Sexually transmitted infections**

Comprehensive, accurate information about STIs should be based on activities, rather than identities, to avoid leaving out Takatāpui and Rainbow young people. This includes information about HIV transmission, which is currently entirely erased from the draft framework. This undermines the National HIV Action Plan for Aotearoa New Zealand 2023-2030 on several fronts but especially around the strengthening of knowledge for prevention. In addition, consent explorations need to cover coercion around contraception and STI harm reduction, such as pressure to not use condoms.