



Let's talk about it:

Review of relationships
and sexuality education





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Acknowledgements

We acknowledge and thank all the students, parents and whānau, school leaders, teachers, board members, and others who shared their experiences, views and insights through interviews, group discussions and surveys. We thank you openly and whole heartedly for giving your time, so that others may benefit from your stories.

We give thanks to the thousands of students, parents and whānau, teachers, leaders, and board members who responded to our surveys. We also thank the 20 schools that accommodated our research team on visits, organising time in their school day for us to talk to students, teachers, and leaders. We know your time is precious.

We thank the many experts and practitioners who have shared their understanding and experiences of relationships and sexuality education with us. We particularly acknowledge the diverse membership of our Expert Advisory Group who shared their knowledge and wisdom to help guide our evaluation and make sense of the findings.



Executive summary

Relationship and sexuality education (RSE) is required to be taught in all state and state-integrated schools. RSE is important to children and young people's physical and mental health, and their safety. However, there are differing views on what, when, and how much should be taught in schools, with a particular focus on sensitive RSE topics.

The Education Review Office (ERO) reviewed RSE to identify options for improving RSE through developing an understanding of how it is currently taught and how well it meets the needs of students, expectations of parents, and capabilities of schools. This summary sets out what we did, how we did this, and the key findings and recommendations.

What is RSE?

Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is a collection of health and relationship-related learning. It can include topics on bodies, reproduction, sexualities, bullying and online safety. RSE is required to be taught in all state and state-integrated schools. This requirement is similar to other countries, except Aotearoa New Zealand is less prescriptive about content, has a stronger requirement for consultation, and offers less guidance and support for teachers.

Schools design their own RSE programmes based on the New Zealand Curriculum and the optional RSE guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education. As part of the 'Health and Physical Education' Learning Area, school boards are required to consult with their communities at least once every two years on how to deliver RSE. Consultation exposes schools to differing views on what RSE topics are appropriate to learn in school, and when, and even whether RSE should be taught at all.

Why does RSE matter?

Most developed countries teach some form of RSE to support development, health, and safety of children and young people. RSE helps students learn about healthy relationships (within families, friendships, and romantic relationships), prevents bullying, and promotes inclusion – both in the classroom and more widely in society. RSE also helps students to navigate a changing world – where online safety, misinformation, and harmful attitudes are increasingly prevalent. We continue to have a range of worrying statistics in Aotearoa New Zealand that directly relate to relationships and sexuality, indicating the importance of RSE for all our futures.

What we did

ERO was commissioned to undertake a review to identify options for improving RSE through developing an understanding of how RSE is currently taught and how well it meets the needs of students, expectations of parents, and capabilities of schools. We used a mixed methods approach to deliver breadth and depth, drawing on a range of data and analysis, including:

- a review of Aotearoa New Zealand and international literature
- a review of national and international guidance and policy documents
- over 12,500 survey responses from a representative sample of 429 schools
- site visits in 20 English-medium schools – across regions and school characteristics, including size, equity index, rural, and urban
- interviews with over 350 participants – made up of teachers, school leaders, students, parents and whānau, board members, education providers, and other expert informants.

Key findings

From our evidence, we have identified 21 key findings across five areas.

Area 1: Is teaching RSE in schools supported?

We looked at whether students and parents and whānau support RSE being taught in schools.

Finding 1: There is wide support from students and parents and whānau for RSE being taught in schools.

Finding 2: Pacific parents, parents of primary aged students, and parents of faith are less supportive.

Area 2: What is being taught in RSE?

Finding 3: What students learn about depends on where they go to school.

Finding 4: What students are taught changes as they grow up.


Finding 5: Sensitive topics are taught later. Different sexual identities, gender identity, and human reproduction are mostly taught in secondary school.

Finding 6: What is taught in RSE is changing over time, as society changes.

Area 3: Does RSE meet students' needs?

We looked at how well RSE is meeting the needs of students, and how this differs across different groups.

Finding 7: Most students agree that they are taught the right amount of most RSE topics and at the right age, though some topics aren't being delivered at the right time to meet students' needs.



Finding 8: Boys are more likely to want to learn all topics later than girls, reflecting that boys may go through puberty later.

Finding 9: Students' views are split about when and how much they learn about human reproduction, different sexual identities, gender identity, and romantic relationships.

Finding 10: Students' faith and sexuality impacts how well RSE meets their needs.

Finding 11: Recent school leavers report that there were significant gaps in their RSE learning.

Area 4: Does RSE meet the expectations of parents and whānau?

We looked at how well RSE is meeting the needs of parents and whānau, and how this differs across different groups.

Finding 12: A third of parents and whānau want to change what or how RSE is taught, and over one in 10 do not want it taught in schools.

Finding 13: For most RSE topics, parents and whānau broadly agree their child is learning the right **amount**, but primary school parents more often want sensitive topics taught **later**.

Finding 14: Many parents and whānau want their children to learn more about consent, relationships, and health, and learn earlier about friendships, safety and managing emotions.

Finding 15: Parent and whānau views are split on teaching about gender identity, different sexual identities, and gender stereotypes.

Finding 16: Parents' gender, faith, and their children's identities impacts how well RSE meets their expectations.

Area 5: Is teaching RSE manageable for schools?

We looked at how school leaders, teachers, and boards are finding the current settings and requirements for RSE teaching.

Finding 17: Not all schools are meeting the current consultation requirement.

Finding 18: Schools face significant challenges in consulting on what to teach in RSE particularly rural schools and schools with a high Māori roll.

Finding 19: Schools most commonly deliver RSE as modules, but nearly a quarter deliver RSE on an ad-hoc basis.

Finding 20: Most, but not all teachers have the capability they need to teach RSE, and many find it stressful, particularly in primary.

Finding 21: Most schools find the Curriculum and RSE guidelines useful.

Areas for action

Based on these 21 key findings, ERO has identified three areas that require action to improve relationships and sexuality education and support the impact that it needs to have. These are set out below.

Area 1: Extend teaching and learning of RSE into senior secondary school.

Our findings show that RSE is a key area of learning for children and young people, particularly at a time of increased risks through social media and harmful online content. There is widespread support from parents and whānau and students for RSE to be taught in schools. However, students aren't always getting the content they need at the right time for when they need it.

Recommendation 1: RSE continues to be compulsory from Years 1 to 10.

Recommendation 2: The Government consider how to extend RSE teaching and learning into Years 11 to 13 (including whether it should be compulsory) and schools look at how they can prioritise it.


Area 2: Increase consistency of what is taught.

The findings show that RSE is not being consistently taught across schools due to the flexibility of our Curriculum, combined with the autonomy given to individual schools and teachers in delivering RSE. ERO has also found that not all teachers are well prepared to teach RSE, particularly in primary schools where RSE is often taught by the classroom teacher.

Recommendation 3: The Ministry of Education review the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) curriculum (within the Health and Physical Education learning area) to ensure clarity on what should be taught and when, spanning from Years 0 to 13. This review should clarify the knowledge, skills, and understanding students are expected to develop.

Recommendation 4: The Ministry of Education provide evidence based resources and supports for school leaders and teachers, including curriculum and teaching guidance.

Recommendation 5: Teachers, especially those in primary schools, receive the professional development necessary to effectively teach RSE. This support should include training during their initial teacher education, as well as ongoing professional development.



Area 3: Look at the consultation requirement on boards.

ERO has found that the requirement for school boards to consult at least once every two years on what they will teach in RSE is creating significant challenges for schools. Parents and whānau often have conflicting views on what should be taught, the extent of that teaching, and the appropriate timing – and school staff can be subject to abuse and intimidation. Some schools respond by scaling back RSE teaching, which results in students missing out on learning opportunities.

Recommendation 6: Consider replacing the requirement on school boards to **consult** the school community on RSE (as part of the Health and Physical Education curriculum) with a requirement to **inform** parents and whānau about *what* they plan to teach and *how* they plan to teach it, before they teach it. Schools should continue to take steps to understand students' needs. Schools should also ensure that parents and whānau know that they can withdraw their children from any element of RSE that they are uncomfortable with.

Recommendation 7: Retain the ability for parents and whānau to withdraw their children from RSE lessons and provide clear information about how to do this.

Conclusion

Relationships and sexuality education is critical to the learning, development, and wellbeing of Aotearoa New Zealand's young people. This is more important than ever, considering increased access to harmful online content and social media, global divisiveness on key topics of gender and sexuality, and our own country's worrying climate of bullying, sexual harm, and relationship – and sexuality-related violence. Students need clear and consistent skills and knowledge.

ERO's evaluation has found that although there are challenges, there are ways through them. The areas for action we have identified have the potential to make significant improvements that serve our children and young people, their parents and whānau, and our valued school leaders and teachers.



About this report

Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is a core part of Aotearoa New Zealand's Health Curriculum. RSE supports students to learn about their own identity and development, and how to interact positively and respectfully with others.

The Education Review Office wanted to understand what is and isn't working in RSE, and why. This report describes what RSE is being taught in our schools, the views of students and parents and whānau around RSE, and the experiences of schools in teaching RSE. We use these findings to identify potential areas for improvement.

The Education Review Office (ERO) is responsible for reviewing and reporting on the performance of early learning services, kura, and schools. As part of this role, ERO looks at how the education system supports schools to provide quality education for students. In this report, we look at how schools are teaching relationships and sexuality education (RSE), including what challenges they face, how well supported they are, what works well, and what helps.

What is this report about?

This evaluation identifies options for improving RSE, how the current settings impact how RSE is currently taught, and how well it meets the needs of students, expectations of parents and whānau, and capability of schools. Our research answers seven key questions.

- 1) What is RSE and what is required of schools?
- 2) Why is RSE important and is teaching it in schools supported?
- 3) What are students taught in RSE?
- 4) Does RSE meet students' needs?
- 5) Does RSE meet the expectations of parents and whānau?
- 6) Is teaching RSE manageable for schools?
- 7) What improvements could be made?

How did we find out about RSE?

ERO has taken a mixed-methods approach to assess what is and isn't working in RSE, and why. We focused our investigation on experiences of students, teachers, leaders, school boards, and parents and whānau across Aotearoa New Zealand in English-medium state and state-integrated primary, intermediate, and secondary schools.

The findings in this report draw on multiple sources of information, set out below.

Over 12,000 survey responses from:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → 6,470 students → 506 recent school leavers → 700 school leaders → 759 teachers → 344 board chairs/presiding members → 3,809 parents and whānau
Interviews and focus groups with over 300 participants:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → 156 students → 42 school leaders → 55 teachers → 19 board members → 38 parents and whānau → A range of stakeholders
Site visits to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → 20 English-medium schools
Data from:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → An in-depth review of national and international literature → In-depth reviews of national and international guidance and policy documents

To help us understand what is happening with RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand, we worked with an Expert Advisory Group which included academics, educators, practitioners, and sector and RSE experts.

Who did we talk to?

In all of ERO's evaluations, we seek views from a wide range of people. For this study, in addition to speaking with students, parents and whānau, teachers, leaders, and school boards, we invited a wide range of stakeholders to speak with us. We heard from parent groups, external providers of RSE, agencies related to youth mental health, sexual health, and health more broadly, professional teacher associations, cultural and faith-based groups, non-government organisations (NGOs), and advocacy groups.

We ensured that we visited a wide range of schools, including co-educational, girls' and boys' schools, rural and urban schools, primary, intermediate, secondary, and area schools, state and state-integrated (including faith-based) schools and schools with high Māori and high Pacific rolls. We visited schools across the country.

Our survey response rates, set out in the table above, are larger than normal – a very high response rate for students and parents and whānau. We also used a range of methods, including link-tracking and representative survey panels, to ensure survey data integrity – see Appendix 3 for more. These high response rates, alongside our qualitative methods, supported the development of robust findings.

How did we hear from rainbow communities?

In our student survey, for students in Year 9 and above, we provided opportunities for students to identify as part of rainbow / takatāpui / LGBTQIA+ communities and additionally to identify as a boy, girl, another gender, or prefer not to say. We also acknowledge that some students from rainbow communities^a may not always feel ready, comfortable, or safe to identify that way.

We talked to students from rainbow communities within our site visit fieldwork, and met with focus groups of parents of students from rainbow communities and teachers who are from rainbow communities themselves.

The proportion of students who identified as 'another gender' (gender diverse^b) within our survey is representative of the wider population, but is unfortunately still too small to statistically compare to others. We have drawn findings about gender diverse students' views on RSE from our qualitative data where possible.

Report structure

This report is divided into seven chapters.

- **Chapter 1** sets out the **context** of what RSE is and how it works.
- **Chapter 2** describes whether there is **support for RSE being taught**.
- **Chapter 3** describes **what students are being taught in RSE**.
- **Chapter 4** describes whether RSE is **meeting students' needs**.
- **Chapter 5** looks at whether it is **meeting the expectations of parents and whānau**.
- **Chapter 6** describes whether RSE is **manageable for schools**.
- **Chapter 7** shares our **key findings** and **areas for action**.

We appreciate the work of all those who supported this research, particularly the students, parents and whānau, teachers, school leaders, board chairs and presiding members, and experts who shared with us. Their experiences and insights are at the heart of what we have learnt.



^a In this report, we use the term 'rainbow communities', aligning with guidance from the Public Service Commission. This is a broad umbrella term that covers a diversity of sexual orientations as well as gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, ace identities, and more).

^b In this report we use the umbrella term 'gender diverse' to describe a range of gender identities, including non-binary, transgender, and culturally specific identities such as tangata ira tane and whakawahine (Māori), fa'afafine (Samoa) and fakaleiti (Tonga).



Chapter 1: What is relationships and sexuality education?

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is taught in most developed countries, to support children and young people to have healthy relationships, to feel good about who they are, and to develop the skills and knowledge they need to promote their own health and safety, and that of others. This important learning links to some key issues for our country.

RSE is woven into the Health and Physical Education learning area of Aotearoa New Zealand's curriculum. In this chapter, we look at what RSE teaching and learning is, why it matters, what our schools are expected to do, and how similar countries to ours handle this part of their schooling.

To understand how well RSE is working in our schools, it is important to know how RSE works here, as well as how it's different from other countries.

This section sets out:

- 1) what RSE is
- 2) why RSE matters
- 3) what schools are required to do
- 4) how RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand compares to what other countries do.

What we found: An overview

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) covers a wide range of topics.

Broadly, RSE teaching and learning includes things like friendships, personal safety, managing feelings, bodies, health, diverse identities, wellbeing, and how to act in positive and respectful ways with others.

RSE is part of the health and physical education learning area in the New Zealand Curriculum.

Schools develop their RSE programmes using the New Zealand Curriculum and, if they choose, the RSE guidelines. The curriculum is compulsory but the guidelines are not. However, in the curriculum there is no specific, compulsory RSE content.

RSE helps address key issues for young people.

RSE learning relates to key issues faced by young people in Aotearoa New Zealand, such as bullying, sexual violence, sexual health, and crime.

Schools are required to consult with their communities on how they will deliver RSE.

School boards are required to consult with their school community at least once every two years on how the school will implement the health education component of the curriculum, which includes RSE. Parents and whānau can withdraw their children from RSE lessons if they choose.

Aotearoa New Zealand has a similar requirement to teach RSE as other countries but a less prescriptive curriculum, stronger requirements for consultation, and less guidance and support for teachers.

Australia, England, and Canada all have a more prescriptive RSE curriculum, and Australia and England have more detailed guidance. Only England has a requirement to consult the community, and requirements are more flexible.

1) What is RSE?

Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is a collection of health and relationship-related learning. Most developed countries teach RSE in their schools. In RSE, students learn from their teachers or visiting experts about things like friendships, relationships, bodies, health, and safety, and develop knowledge and skills about acting in positive and respectful ways with others.

RSE is part of the 'Health and Physical Education' learning area within our New Zealand Curriculum.^c Health and physical education learning is compulsory in Years 1-10 (approximate ages 5-14). This learning area includes RSE-related topics, but there isn't a specific, discrete RSE section of the curriculum that schools have to cover.

Within the health and physical education learning area, there are four 'strands of learning':

- personal health and physical development
- relationships with other people
- healthy communities and environments
- movement concepts and motor skills.

^c RSE also occurs in Māori-medium education through Te Marautanga o Aotearoa, specifically within the Hauora wāhanga ako (wāhanga ako are similar to learning areas). This evaluation does not include Kaupapa Māori schools (though it does include schools with high-Māori rolls, and schools with rūmaki Māori bilingual units).

RSE in the New Zealand Curriculum

RSE is woven throughout the 'Health and Physical Education' learning area of the curriculum. Learning in Health and Physical Education is structured around *four underlying concepts*, and *four strands of content*, across *seven key areas of learning*. These are set out in the table below, with the most strongly RSE-related content in bold.

Underlying concepts	Strands	Key areas of learning
Hauora	Personal health and physical development	Mental health
Attitudes and values	Movement concepts and motor skills	Sexuality education
The socio-ecological perspective	Relationships with other people	Food and nutrition
Health promotion	Healthy communities and environments	Body care and physical safety
		Physical activity
		Sport studies
		Outdoor education

Under the key areas of learning, there are a large number *achievement objectives* that describe what students should be able to do or know as they move through year levels, to do with health and physical education more broadly. These are set out in Appendix 1. Some of these achievement objectives include aspects of RSE. As is the case across the whole curriculum, achievement objectives become more complex as students move through year levels.

There is not a specific, discrete RSE topic or unit that schools have to cover. Individual schools decide on the specifics of what RSE content will be taught.

The full health and physical education learning area of the New Zealand Curriculum can be found here: [The New Zealand Curriculum – Health and physical education](#)

“In health and physical education, the focus is on the well-being of the students themselves, of other people, and of society through learning in health-related and movement contexts.”

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION LEARNING AREA, NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM (2007)¹



The *Relationships and Sexuality Education: A guide for teachers, leaders and boards of trustees*^d resources ('RSE guidelines') are produced by the Ministry of Education. These have more detail than the curriculum about what RSE content to cover at different year levels, and how to teach it. Using the RSE guidelines is optional for schools.

The guidelines "focus strongly on consensual, healthy, and respectful relationships as being essential to student wellbeing."² They set out 54 *key learning statements*, organised into *three groups* (which link to the three strands of learning in the curriculum, outlined above).

→ Ko Au — All about me:

- Knowledge, understandings, and skills relating to physical and sexual health and development: emotional, mental, social, spiritual, and environmental.

→ Ko Aku Hoa — Friendships and relationships with others:

- Understandings and skills to enhance relationships, for example, in relation to friendships, intimate relationships, love, families, and parenting.

→ Ko Tōku Ao — Me and the world:

- Critical inquiry, reflection, and social-action skills related to issues of equity, gender, body image, risk, and safety.

The key learning statements are set out in Appendix 2. The full guidelines documents can be found here: [Relationships and sexuality education guide](#)

There is some professional learning and development (PLD) for teachers available to support their RSE teaching. There is very limited training as part of initial teacher training, which varies depending on the initial training provider.

What do different 'year levels' mean?

Throughout this report we refer to school year levels, for example, 'Year 10'. The table below shows the approximate ages of students by the school year they are in. These have replaced the old 'standard' and 'form' structures (e.g. Year 6 is the old 'Standard four', and Year 13 is the old 'seventh form').

School year levels	Student ages
Year 0-4	Age 5-8
Year 5-6	Age 8-10
Year 7-8	Age 10-12
Year 9-10	Age 12-15
Year 11-13	Age 15-18

^d Since 2001, there has been sexuality education guidance in place in Aotearoa New Zealand, supplementary to the curriculum. This guidance has been updated, in 2015 and 2020.

There is flexibility and variation between individual schools and the year levels they serve. For simplicity in this report, we talk about 'primary' schools and students for our findings related to approx. Years 0-8, and 'secondary' schools and students for findings related to Years 9-13. The most common school makeup types are below.

Type of school	School year levels
Contributing primary school	Year 0-6
Full primary school	Year 0-8
Area school	Year 0-13
Intermediate school	Year 7-8
Middle / junior high school	Year 7-10
Secondary school	Year 9-13

2) Why does RSE matter?

Most developed countries teach some form of RSE to support children's and young people's development, health, and safety. RSE focuses on a range of key issues including preventing bullying, promoting healthy relationships and sexual health, and promoting inclusion and reducing discrimination – in the classroom and more widely in society. RSE also plays a key role in helping students to navigate a changing world – where online safety, misinformation, and harmful attitudes are increasingly prevalent.

RSE helps students learn about healthy relationships.

The types of relationships that young people learn about in RSE include families, friendships, and romantic relationships. The evidence shows that good quality RSE increases student knowledge, critical thinking, and positive attitudes around relationships, identity, and sexual health, and reproduction.³ This includes understanding concepts like consent, boundaries, and respectful interactions from an early age. This helps them to recognise harmful relationships, and to form more positive, respectful, and healthy relationships.⁴ RSE also includes a focus on managing feelings, including anger.

RSE helps students to navigate harmful online content.

At a time where young people are increasingly exposed to harmful online content⁵ (including pornography, misinformation, and hate speech), RSE plays an important role in teaching students to critically identify, analyse, and reject misinformation and harmful attitudes (including misogyny and homophobia).⁶

Young people, particularly young males, are increasingly susceptible to harmful online content.⁷ Interestingly, the state of Victoria, Australia, has refocused an RSE initiative in schools to counter the influence of misogynistic radicalisation.⁸ Their updated programme is designed to help students identify and address hate speech and negative online content, with an added emphasis on teaching about consent, pornography, and gender-based bullying.⁹

Increased social division

Research shows that there are increasingly split views across countries globally, as well as in Aotearoa New Zealand, which include RSE-related issues like gender identities, racial and cultural (including religious) identities, and sexuality.¹⁰

This global context is relevant to this study, where we look at how Aotearoa New Zealand's young people, their parents and whānau, and their school communities view sensitive topics.

RSE learning relates to key health and safety issues for our country's young people.

In Aotearoa New Zealand we continue to have a range of worrying health and safety issues that directly relate to relationships and sexuality. This indicates that not all young people have the knowledge and skills they need to be healthy and safe, and to support others to be healthy and safe too. Concerning issues are set out below.

Family and sexual violence

- Aotearoa New Zealand has very high rates of family and sexual violence, and this is increasing.¹¹ The number of family harm calls to police increased from 119,000 in 2016 to 174,000 in 2022.¹²
- Offences of domestic abuse or violence are mostly by men against women, with 24 percent of New Zealand women have experienced these offences during their lifetime.¹³
- One in three women (35 percent) in Aotearoa New Zealand have been victims of sexual violence over their lives¹⁴ and women are three times as likely as men to have experienced sexual assault during the last 12 months.¹⁵
- People from rainbow communities are six times more likely to experience sexual assault than others.¹⁶
- Almost one in five young people (18 percent) in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools report ever having had unwanted sexual experiences, sexual violence, or abuse. This is higher for girls (26 percent) and young people from rainbow communities (over 34 percent).¹⁷

Bullying

- Aotearoa New Zealand has the second-highest rate of reported school bullying in the OECD.¹⁸
- A disproportionately high proportion of students who report bullying are from rainbow communities.¹⁹

Racism

- ERO's 2023 research around diversity in schools found deeply concerning levels of racism and racist bullying. More than half (54 percent) of students reported seeing someone being mean to others because of their ethnic identity and/or culture in the last month. One in five (20 percent) have been bullied because of their ethnic identity and/or culture.²⁰

Pornography

- Two-thirds (67 percent) of our country's 14-17-year-olds have seen pornography. By age 17, three-quarters (75 percent) have seen pornography.²¹ It is established that this can impact on students' perceptions of healthy sexual behaviours, such as communicating and respecting consent.²²

Sexual health

- Less than half of students who are currently sexually active report using condoms to prevent sexually transmitted infections, and only just over half report that they always use contraception to prevent pregnancy.²³

What ERO has found in the past about RSE

ERO regularly reviews different aspects of the curriculum. The last time we looked at RSE was 2018, and before then in 2007.

In 2007 we found that **schools were not meeting the needs of all students**, particularly Māori or Pacific students, international students, students with strong cultural or religious beliefs, students with additional learning needs, and students who were from rainbow communities.

ERO's 2007 report can be found here: [The Teaching of Sexuality Education in Years 7 to 13 \(2007\) | Education Review Office](#)

In 2018 we found that **the provision and overall curriculum remained inconsistent**. Most schools were meeting minimum standards, but many had significant gaps in curriculum coverage. In the majority of schools, the most commonly covered topics of the more specific *sexuality* part of RSE were anatomy, physiology, and pubertal change. The two least often covered topics in secondary school were sexual violence and pornography, which were covered in less than half of the secondary schools ERO visited.

In 2018 we also identified that key challenges for teachers were a lack of access to professional learning and development on RSE teaching, as well as subject and pedagogical knowledge to teach RSE. In some cases, there was also a general discomfort about teaching the subject.

In response to ERO's 2018 report, the Ministry of Education released the updated 'Relationships and Sexuality Education: A guide for teachers, leaders and boards of trustees' in 2020. There is a guide for Years 1-8 and a guide for Years 9-13. These are the 'RSE Guidelines' that we refer to in this report.

ERO's 2018 report can be found here: [Promoting wellbeing through sexuality education | Education Review Office](#)

3) What are schools required to do?

Schools are required to consult with their communities on how they will deliver the health curriculum, including RSE.

Health education is the only part of the curriculum that schools are required to consult their community about. The Education and Training Act 2020 requires consultation at least once every two years, about how the school will implement the health education component of the curriculum (which includes RSE).

Schools are required to allow parents and whānau to withdraw their children from RSE lessons.

The Education and Training Act 2020 also states that parents may request, by writing to the principal or person responsible for teaching and learning, that their child is released from teaching and learning about specified aspects of [relationships and] sexuality education. The school must ensure that the student is supervised during this time.

Schools develop their own RSE teaching and learning programme, which they can do in a range of ways.

Each school in Aotearoa New Zealand currently develops their own 'localised curriculum' (the teaching and learning programmes to be delivered by the school), using the New Zealand Curriculum document. The Ministry of Education also provides guidelines for schools, which they can use in their development of their RSE programme if they choose, and inform their consultation process.

The New Zealand Curriculum allows for a highly flexible approach to teaching, including RSE, and is intended to allow schools to be responsive to school communities' views. This flexibility, combined with RSE guidelines that are not compulsory, can also create significant issues for schools in teaching this sensitive area of the curriculum. This is something we explore in more depth in Chapter 6 of this report.

4) How RSE in Aotearoa New Zealand compares to what other countries do

To help us understand how well RSE teaching and learning is going in Aotearoa New Zealand, we looked at RSE in Australia (New South Wales, Victoria), Canada (Ontario), and England. Some form of RSE is taught in most developed countries, though there are variations in how it is framed – for example as 'sexuality education' or 'puberty education'.

Aotearoa New Zealand has a similar requirement to teach RSE as other countries but a less prescriptive curriculum, stronger requirements for consultation, and less guidance and support for teachers.

→ RSE is compulsory in Australia (New South Wales, Victoria), Canada (Ontario), and England. Parents have the right to withdraw in all these countries, although England has more restrictions on this.

- Only England has a requirement to consult the community, and requirements are more flexible.
- Australia, England, and Canada all have a more prescriptive RSE curriculum, and Australia and England have more detailed guidance.

Australia (New South Wales and Victoria)

RSE is compulsory from foundation (new entrance) through to Year 10 in Australia, and to year 12 in the state of Victoria. The curriculum is highly prescriptive, based on the Australian national curriculum, which details achievement standards, content, and exemplars. Schools are not required to consult their communities but may seek feedback voluntarily. Parents can withdraw their children from RSE. Schools receive clear guidance on implementing the curriculum, including external PLD for teachers.²⁴

Canada (Ontario)

Ontario mandates RSE from grades 1 to 8, with a prescriptive Human Development and Sexual Health curriculum.²⁵ School boards are not required to consult their community, but they must provide parents with information about what their child is being taught. Parents have the right to withdraw their child from some aspects of RSE. Guidance is somewhat limited, with resources mainly based on the curriculum itself, while some districts like Toronto provide additional materials.²⁶

England

Relationships and Health education is compulsory for all primary and secondary school students, with Sex Education recommended (not compulsory) at the primary level. Statutory guidance sets minimum standards. Schools must consult parents in developing and reviewing their RSE policy but are not mandated to do so comprehensively. Parents may only withdraw their child from the sex education part of RSE, and only up until three terms before their child turns 16.²⁷ Clear guidance is available for schools, covering curriculum planning and working with external agencies. A range of PLD resources are available for teachers.²⁸

Conclusion

RSE is part of the health and physical education learning area of the New Zealand Curriculum. This learning is compulsory from Years 1-10, though parents and whānau can choose to withdraw their child from these lessons. Schools are required to consult their community at least once every two years about their health curriculum (which includes RSE). There are detailed guidelines about RSE available, but not compulsory, for schools.

Aotearoa New Zealand has a similar requirement to teach RSE as other countries but a less prescriptive curriculum, stronger requirements for consultation, and less guidance and support for teachers.

In the next chapter, we examine the extent to which parents and whānau and students support RSE. The chapter also looks at what increases the likelihood of people supporting RSE being taught, or wanting change.



Chapter 2: Is teaching RSE in schools supported?

RSE is important to children and young people's physical and mental health, and their safety. However, given the sensitive nature of the content, there are differing views on whether it should be taught, what should be taught, and how it should be taught.

In this chapter, we set out what we found out about how supportive parents and whānau and students are of RSE being taught in schools.

RSE covers a broad range of topics, including some more sensitive or divisive topics, like bodies and sexuality. There are differing views on what's appropriate to learn in the school context, including whether it should be taught at all. To understand the different perspectives of students and parents and whānau, we looked at:

- our surveys of parents and whānau and students
- our interviews with parents and whānau and students
- our interviews with key experts
- our visits to schools
- local and international research.

This chapter sets out the views of students and parents and whānau on whether RSE should be taught. It covers:

- 1) students' views on RSE being taught in schools
- 2) parent and whānau views on RSE being taught in schools.

What we found: An overview

Students support RSE being taught, particularly girls.

Over nine in 10 (91 percent) students support RSE being taught in schools. Girls are more likely than boys to support it being taught, with 95 percent of girls supporting it, and 88 percent of boys supporting it. Nearly all students (97 percent) from rainbow communities (which includes girls, boys, and gender diverse students) support RSE.

Most parents support RSE being taught. Primary parents and whānau are less supportive.

Most parents and whānau (87 percent) support RSE being taught in schools. Primary school parents and whānau are slightly less supportive (82 percent) than intermediate (89 percent) and secondary school (89 percent) parents and whānau. Six percent of parents and whānau withdraw their children from RSE lessons.

Parents and whānau of all ethnicities support RSE, but Pacific parents are less supportive.

Nine out of 10 New Zealand European (89 percent) and Asian parents (89 percent) support RSE being taught, compared to 84 percent of Māori whānau and 82 percent of Middle Eastern/Latin American/African (MELAA) parents. Nearly three in 10 (29 percent) Pacific parents do *not* support RSE being taught in schools.

Parents and whānau who practice a faith are over two times more likely to not support RSE being taught.

Over one in five parents who practice a faith (22 percent) do not support RSE being taught, compared to 9 percent of parents who do not practice a faith.

Parents and whānau who know what is being taught are happier with RSE.

Parents and whānau who report they know nothing about what is being taught were 68 percent^e less likely to be happy with what is being taught than parents and whānau who know most of what is being taught.

1) Do students support RSE being taught?

Students support RSE being taught, particularly girls.

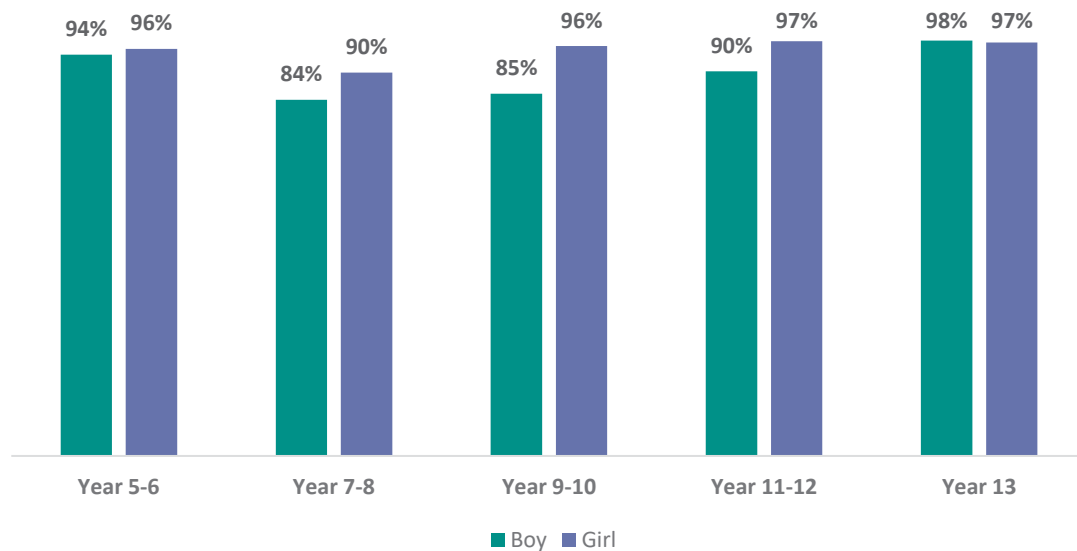
We asked students whether they support RSE being taught in schools. There was a high level of support for teaching RSE, with over nine in 10 students (91 percent) supporting RSE being taught in schools. Year 13 students were the most likely to support RSE being taught, with 97 percent of Year 13 students supporting RSE.

Girls and boys^f support RSE being taught, but girls are more likely to support it (95 percent compared to 88 percent across all year levels). This is most apparent at Year 9-10, with 96 percent of girls thinking it should be taught, compared to 85 percent of boys.

^e $P < 0.001$ – from logistic regression modelling.

^f While our proportion of gender diverse student responses are representative of the population, these numbers are too low to statistically compare to boys and girls.

Figure 1: *Student views on whether RSE should be taught in schools by gender and age*



ERO found that students place importance on RSE because they want to learn about their bodies and emotions, relationships, and other people who are different to them. Students place particular importance on the topics around puberty and consent because some families don't talk about these topics at home, or young people are embarrassed talking with their parents and whānau about them. The international evidence supports the finding that children and young people want puberty education to be delivered in schools.²⁹

“Sometimes parents don't know as much as what the school would be teaching you. So if you do get it from your parents, they might not have had a proper education or can't answer all of the questions you have.”

YEAR 10 STUDENT AT A SECONDARY GIRLS' SCHOOL

“I feel we should learn RSE at school because it's a safe environment.”

YEAR 8 PACIFIC STUDENT

“If you weren't as close with your parents, it might not be a conversation you have and you might learn it at school. I feel like lots of people would rely on the school to give them that information.”

YEAR 10 STUDENT

“You get the incidental comments [from parents] of, ‘I’m glad you’re teaching this, so we don’t have to.’”

HEALTH TEACHER AT A SECONDARY GIRLS’ SCHOOL

ERO found that girls tend to be more supportive about RSE than boys. This matches what is found internationally.³⁰ Some topics, such as contraception and unplanned pregnancies, can have greater impacts on girls than boys, and girls can be generally more open to discussing their thoughts, feelings, and worries. Boys think some topics are less relevant for them and are more easily embarrassed. What boys and girls prefer is set out in more detail in Chapter 4.

Students from rainbow communities are very supportive of RSE. Ninety-seven percent of students from rainbow communities support RSE being taught in schools.

Figure 2: *Students from rainbow communities views on whether RSE should be taught in schools*



ERO found that students from rainbow communities are supportive of RSE at school as it helps them understand their experiences, teaches them to take better care of themselves, and can support inclusivity at school. We heard that in cases where students from rainbow communities don’t have useful RSE, they can feel lost and confused, or ignored. They also tend to look for information online, meaning they face higher risk of misinformation and cyberbullying in the online space.

“I think that this sort of education is immensely important to teach young people and teenagers about their bodies, their relationships, and more, especially consent... [and] queer identities... If this stuff isn’t talked about, so many people could end up feeling alone, insecure, and get stuck in dangerous situations.”

STUDENT FROM RAINBOW COMMUNITIES

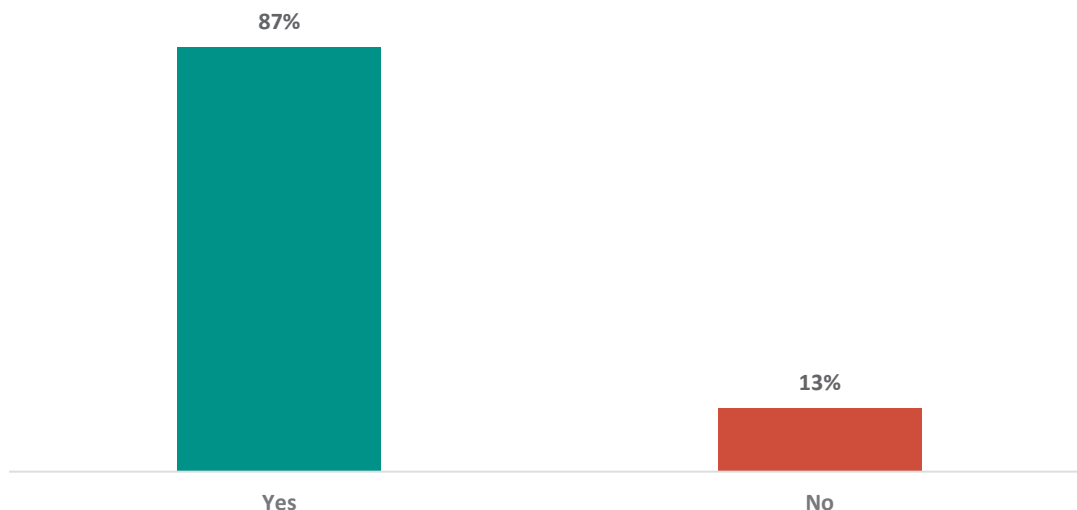
ERO found that just under one in 10 (9 percent) of the overall student population don't support RSE being taught at school. These students prefer to learn about topics from their parents and whānau. This is often due to their cultural and religious beliefs, which may involve specific views about how topics are taught and who should teach them. Views of different student groups are set out in more detail in Chapter 4.

2) Do parents and whānau support RSE being taught?

Most parents and whānau support RSE being taught.

We also asked parents and whānau whether they support RSE being taught at school. Most parents and whānau (87 percent) support it being taught, but 13 percent don't.

Figure 3: *Parent and whānau views on whether RSE should be taught in schools*



ERO consistently found that parents and whānau value RSE, both for their child and wider society, and trust their schools to teach it. For example, parents and whānau told us that RSE can help reverse negative social trends, like the high levels of family and sexual violence that currently exist in Aotearoa New Zealand, by 'normalising' discussions about these issues. Not all families have the knowledge and capability to have these discussions at home. Also, parents and whānau think that students are more likely to be open in their discussions at school, and issues are less likely to become a source of shame.

“There are still prude attitudes in NZ school sex education. This is counterproductive. Sexual topics should be openly discussed. Not normalising sexual education bears risks, particularly around STIs, manipulation, violence and family planning.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU OF YEAR 13 STUDENT



Parents and whānau who want their school to increase RSE coverage see it as a way of helping their child understand the changes happening to their bodies and emotions. Parents and whānau also value RSE as a way of keeping their children safe. For example, they want consent to be covered more and earlier so their children know about normal and healthy interactions and relationships. We cover this further in Chapter 5.

Similarly to students, we found that parents and whānau who don't want RSE to be taught in schools want their child to learn about RSE-related topics at home. Parents and whānau who practise a faith additionally refer to the role of their church or faith-based community in teaching RSE to their child, especially some of the more sensitive topics. This finding is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Parents and whānau are more likely to be happy with RSE when they know what is being taught.

We asked parents and whānau how much they know about what is being taught, and how happy they are they are with what their child is being taught in RSE. We found that the more parents and whānau know about what their child is being taught in RSE, the more likely they are to be happy with what is being taught.

Parents and whānau who report they know nothing about what is being taught were 68 percent^g less likely to be happy with what is being taught than parents and whānau who know most of what is being taught.

Parents and whānau who only know some of what is being taught are 57 percent^h less likely to be happy than if they know most of what is taught.

This finding also emerged from our interviews with parents and whānau, who were generally more likely to be happy with what is covered in RSE when the school has provided lots of information, and the school has been responsive to what parents and whānau told them they want.

“The school has very open communication. They sent home a notice advising what topics were being covered... His form teacher also texted all parents advising that she was available for phone calls if parents wanted to discuss further – which is great!”

PARENT/WHĀNAU OF YEAR 8 STUDENT

Primary school parents and whānau are less supportive.

We analysed whether there is support from parents and whānau for RSE being taught by different school types. Primary school parents and whānau are slightly less supportive (82 percent) than intermediate (89 percent) and secondary school parents and whānau (89 percent).

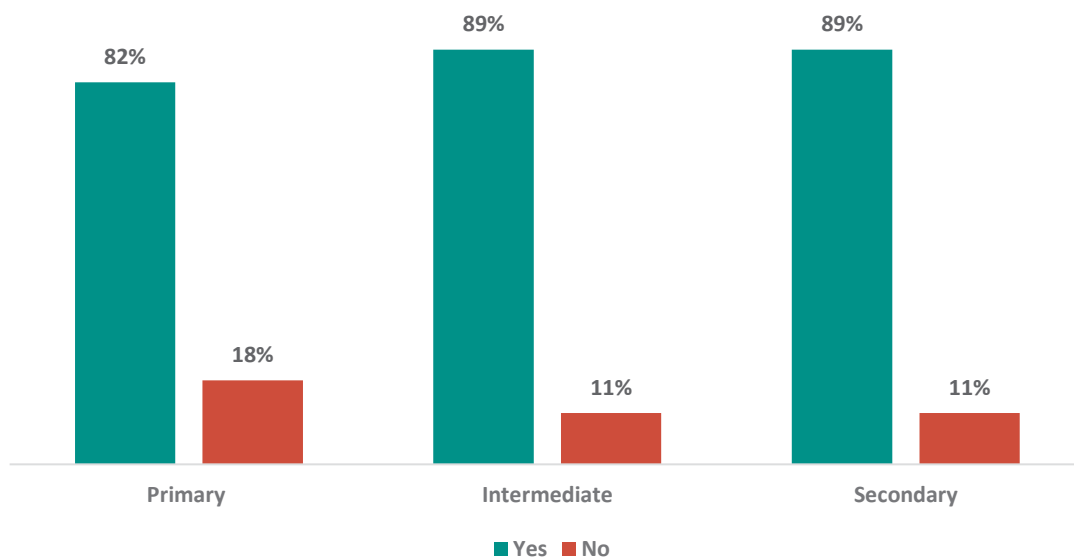
^g P<0.001 – from logistic regression modelling.

^h P<0.001 – from logistic regression modelling.

Just under one in five parents and whānau of primary aged students (18 percent) do not think RSE should be taught, compared with just over one in 10 intermediate (11 percent) and secondary (11 percent) parents.

We also considered whether other factors, such as whether a school is state or state-integrated make a difference, however there was no significant difference.

Figure 4: *Parent and whānau views on whether RSE should be taught in schools*



We found that primary school parents and whānau are more likely than secondary school parents and whānau to be concerned about RSE content not being age appropriate. 'How' RSE is delivered also matters to primary school parents and whānau across topics.

For example, primary school parents and whānau are generally supportive about consent being covered in RSE as long as the content is age appropriate. This can mean a focus on appropriate and inappropriate touching, rather than consent within intimate relationships. Primary school parents and whānau are less supportive of topics on genders and sexualities being taught in primary school. They talked about children maturing at different rates and being concerned that topics like these could be confusing for younger children.

In addition to concerns about *content* of RSE lessons, primary school parents and whānau are interested in *how* RSE is delivered. We consistently heard they want RSE delivered to students in smaller groups (rather than a whole class), and they want there to be opportunities for students to talk openly in the sessions, and to have a named person they can talk to about the topics covered. We heard that separating boys and girls for RSE was important to some parents and whānau.

It is also a strong theme in our research that primary school parents and whānau want to play a role in teaching their children RSE topics, which is why they want more information and resources to be sent home. They especially want a more prominent role in teaching their children about sex. However, many of the parents and whānau that we spoke to had limited knowledge of what was being taught for RSE due to lack of information.

Some parents and whānau are aware that RSE can be delivered by external providers, such as the Life Education Trust. Their programme covers key topics such as online safety, identity, friendship and relationship, respect and resilience, puberty, etc. Parents and whānau told us they prefer external providers to deliver some content if this means it will be taught by experts.

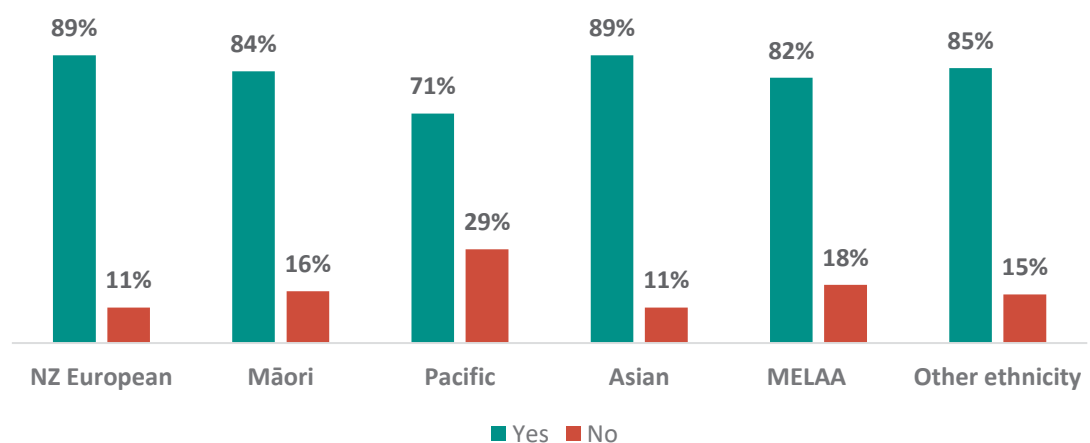
Parents and whānau of all ethnicities support RSE, but Pacific parents are less supportive.

There is variation by ethnicity in the level of support from parents and whānau for RSE being taught in schools.

New Zealand European (89 percent) and Asian (89 percent) parents are the most supportive of RSE being taught. Eighty-four percent of Māori whānau support RSE being taught, and 82 percent of Middle Eastern/ Latin American/ African (MELAA) parents support it.

Pacific parents are 29 percent less likely to support RSE being taught in schools as it is now than parents and whānau of other ethnicities,ⁱ with 71 percent supporting RSE being taught.

Figure 5: *Parent and whānau views on whether RSE should be taught in schools by ethnicity*



ⁱ $P < 0.06$ from logistic regression modelling.

Some of the concern from Pacific parents about RSE content can be explained by their faith. Data from the New Zealand Census indicates that Pacific peoples are often religious.³¹ Just over two-thirds (68 percent) of Pacific parents in our survey indicated that they have a faith. Concerns raised about RSE by parents and whānau of faith are set out later in this chapter.

Other concerns raised by Pacific parents relate to their cultures. A strong theme emerging from our interviews is that bodies and sexual topics are often 'not discussed' in Pacific cultures. This is why even a small amount of RSE content being taught at school can be considered 'too much.'

“We [in Pacific communities] may want RSE to be taught by parents at home – but then, it’s not actually taught. We don’t talk about our private parts.”

PACIFIC SCHOOL COUNSELLOR



For Pacific parents who do support some RSE being taught at school, they highlight the importance of teaching it in a culturally appropriate way.

We heard from Pacific parents that consideration of 'va' (relatedness/ relationship) is important for RSE. Sexuality and reproduction are 'tapu' (special or sacred) topics and discussing these topics between classmates of opposite sexes is breaking the vā. Some Pacific parents indicated that they would prefer RSE be taught to boys and girls separately.^j Some Pacific parents additionally want RSE to be taught by people of the same culture because there is a need to develop trust when teaching tapu topics.

“RSE needs to be considered within the cultural context. In our Tongan culture, we don’t like to have a lot of those conversations around sexuality. If you were to bring it up within this school, I think we need female to be with female and male with male and have that separated. The teacher needs to be someone of Pacific background as well.”

PACIFIC PARENT/WHĀNAU



“There needs to be the right people behind those messages, to get the message across [to Pacific families].”

PACIFIC SCHOOL COUNSELLOR



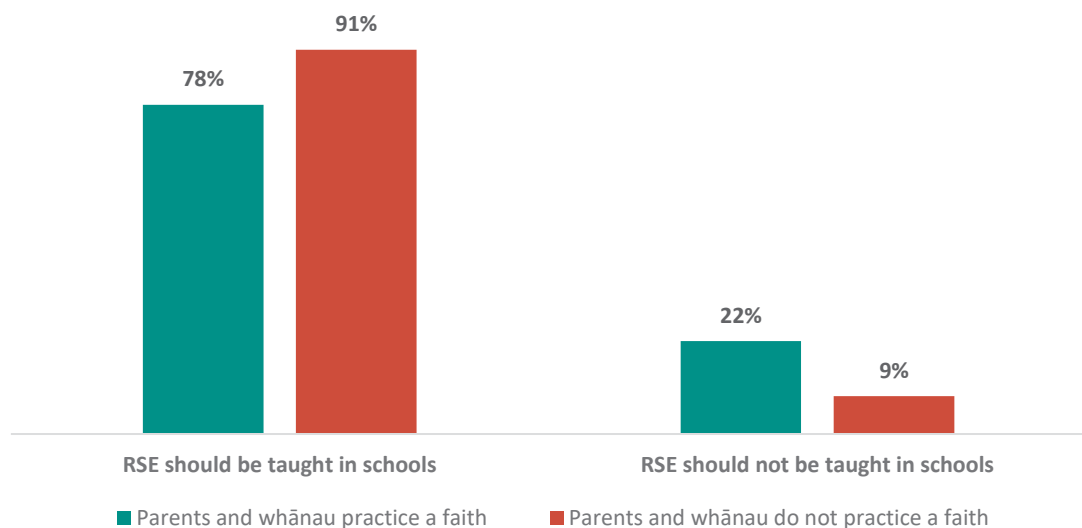
^j Pacific communities and cultures include a range of diverse genders, as well as boys and girls, such as faka'afine or fa'afatama (Samoa), fakaleiti (Tonga), or Akava'ine (the Cook Islands). Views and experiences relating to these other genders were not specifically mentioned by the Pacific parents that ERO spoke to who shared that children of different genders should be separated for RSE.

Parents and whānau who do not practice a faith are two times more likely to not support RSE being taught in schools.

We asked parents and whānau about their faith, and whether that impacts their support for RSE being taught. Parents and whānau who practice a faith are less likely to support RSE being taught.^k

While most parents and whānau who practice a faith do support RSE being taught (78 percent), over one in five parents and whānau who practice a faith (22 percent) do not support RSE being taught, compared to 9 percent of parents and whānau who do not practice a faith.

Figure 6: *Parent and whānau views on whether RSE should be taught in schools – by whether the parents and whānau practice a faith*



Of parents and whānau with faith who want no teaching on certain RSE topics, such as sex, sexuality, or gender identity at school, we found a key reason is that they are concerned that the learning won't align with their religious beliefs, especially in relation to gender identities which don't align with some religions' views on two genders (boys and girls only). We heard that teaching gender diversity and gender identity can be particularly challenging for schools to land for some parents and whānau of faith – while others value teaching about diverse gender identities in ways that align with faith-based RSE resources.^l For topics related to sex and sexuality, we heard parents and whānau with faith tend to prefer to teach the content at home. The views of different parent and whānau groups are set out in more detail in Chapter 5.

^k $p < 0.01$ from logistic regression modelling.

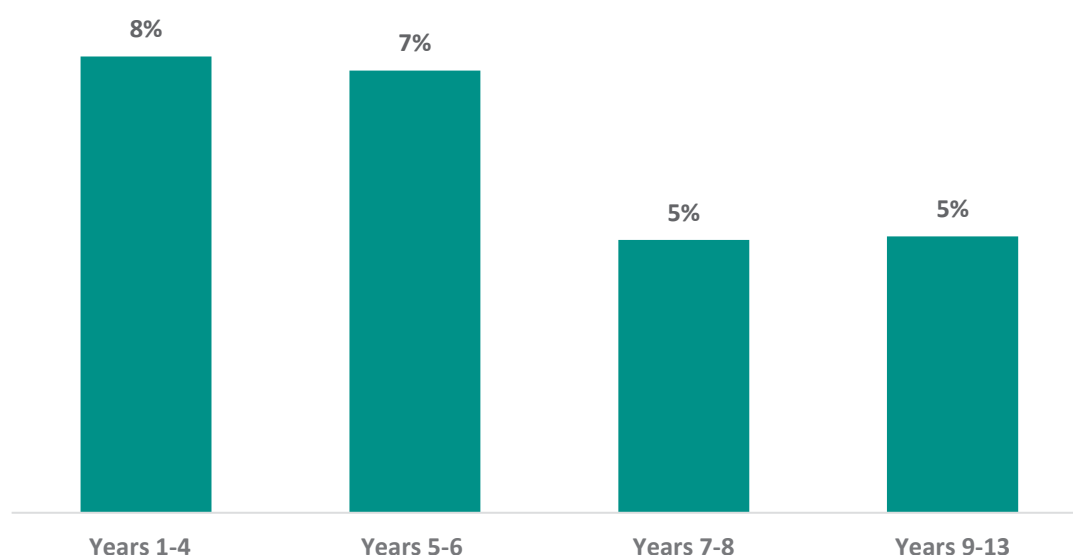
^l For example, *Wonderfully made in God's image: A revised framing document for human sexuality education in Aotearoa Catholic schools* (2021).

Some parents and whānau withdraw their children from RSE.

Another way of understanding the support for RSE is looking at how many parents and whānau withdraw their children from RSE. Overall, 6 percent of parents and whānau withdraw their children from RSE. This is slightly higher in primary school, with 8 percent of parents and whānau of Year 0-4 children, and 7 percent of parents and whānau of Year 5-6 children withdrawing students. At intermediate and secondary age, 5 percent of parents and whānau withdraw their students from RSE.

The most common reasons that parents and whānau give for withdrawing their students are not wanting their child learning about this *at school* (31 percent), learning this *at their age* (31 percent), or they do not want their child to learn about it *at all* (11 percent).

Figure 7: *Parents and whānau report that they withdraw their children from RSE, by school year.*



We consistently heard that withdrawing children from RSE is an easy process for parents and whānau, involving just emailing the schools about their wish to withdraw. However, some parents and whānau aren't aware there is a process for withdrawing their child from RSE. Schools told us that withdrawals are uncommon and often they are only partial, which means children are only withdrawn from certain RSE topics.

We heard that key reasons for parents and whānau withdrawing their child from RSE include religious and cultural beliefs, and concerns about topics being offered 'too early.' We heard from schools that Muslim parents are more likely to withdraw their children, believing that RSE is a topic to be taught at home rather than at school. Primary school parents and whānau are more likely to withdraw their children from RSE, because they think it is 'too early' for their children to learn about topics like genders or sexualities, which they believe may confuse them.

We also heard that parents and whānau are more likely to withdraw their children from RSE when they feel they don't have enough information about RSE content, so are choosing not to 'risk it' and instead withdrawing their child.

“Without proper information being disseminated to parents, how are we able to make an informed choice? Based on this lack of information we are inclined to withdraw our child from these classes.”

PARENT/WHANAU OF YEAR 3 STUDENT



We found that responding to the particular concerns of parents and whānau can avoid withdrawals. For example, we heard that parents who were initially concerned about RSE and emailed the school with questions sometimes changed their minds about withdrawing their children following the school's response.

Alternatively, we heard from parents and whānau who do trust the school to teach age appropriate content and that have had positive experiences of the school RSE programme.

Conclusion

Overall, there is wide support from students and parents for RSE being taught in school. Students are supportive of RSE being taught, especially girls.

Pacific parents, parents of primary aged students, and parents of faith are less supportive. Some parents withdraw their children from RSE because of concerns about what is, or might be, covered in RSE lessons.

In the next chapters we look more at what is being taught in schools, and how well it meets the needs of students and teachers.



Chapter 3: What is being taught in RSE?

The current settings for RSE teaching and learning in Aotearoa New Zealand offer a lot of flexibility in what is taught for RSE, and how. ERO identified 13 topic areas that are typically included in RSE programmes, and asked schools about whether and when they taught these topics. We found there is a lot of variation in the RSE teaching and learning that is happening at different schools.

In this chapter, we set out what we found out about what is being covered in RSE lessons, and where we found differences between year groups and school types.

RSE learning is a key part of our national health curriculum for all students. However, in Aotearoa New Zealand the content and delivery of RSE is comparatively flexible. We wanted to find out about what is actually being taught and learnt in schools. To understand this, we looked at:

- the New Zealand Curriculum
- the RSE guidelines
- our surveys of teachers
- our interviews with teachers, leaders, students, parents and whānau, and boards.

This section sets out:

- 1) what is covered in RSE
- 2) what is taught at different ages.

What we found: An overview

Schools can make their own choices about what they cover in RSE.

There is a lot of flexibility for schools around exactly which RSE content is taught, and how it is taught. Schools can develop their own programmes, rely on external providers, or both. No specific health and physical education content is compulsory to be covered – meaning no specific RSE content is compulsory.

ERO identified 13 topic areas that are typically included in RSE programmes.

RSE teaching includes coverage of a wide range of topics, which relate broadly to personal safety, managing feelings, bodies, health, diverse identities, wellbeing, and relationships with other people. There are 13 particular areas that are included in typical RSE programmes.

What students are taught changes as they grow up.

In Years 0-4 (ages 5-8), almost all students learn about feelings and emotions, friendships and bullying, and personal safety. As they progress through Years 5-8 (ages 8-12), they begin to learn about getting help with their health and changes to their body.

At Years 9-10 (ages 12-14), around eight in 10 students learn about consent, romantic relationships, sexual identities, human reproduction, and gender identity.

Students do not have to learn RSE in Years 11-13 (ages 14-18), but over seven in 10 continue to learn about personal safety, including online safety, friendships and bullying, identity, managing feelings and emotions, and celebrating differences.

Sensitive topics are taught later – different sexual identities, gender identity, and human reproduction are mostly taught in secondary school.

Less than one in five teachers of ages 8-10 report teaching these topics, compared to three-quarters of teachers of age 12-14 students.

Recent school leavers are less likely than senior secondary students to report having learned about gender identity, gender stereotypes, and celebrating difference.

What is taught in RSE is changing over time, as society changes. Only around one third of recent school leavers report they learnt about gender identity, gender stereotypes, and celebrating differences, compared to over two-thirds of current Year 11-13 students who report they learn about these topics.

What students learn about can depend on where they go to school. Students in girls' schools are more likely to learn about consent, different sexual identities, and gender identity than students at co-ed schools.

Eight in 10 students at girls' schools learn about consent (81 percent), compared to less than six in 10 students at co-ed schools (58 percent).

In the following sections we look at each of these findings in more detail.

1) What does the curriculum cover?

Schools can make their own choices about what they cover in RSE.

As discussed in Chapter 1, there are two Ministry of Education documents that guide RSE teaching and learning in Aotearoa New Zealand schools.

- The New Zealand Curriculum (2007) includes achievement objectives that describe what students should be able to do or know as they move through year levels, to do with health and physical education more broadly. These include RSE-related topics but there isn't a specific RSE section of the curriculum. Teachers and leaders use the New Zealand Curriculum to develop their school's health and physical education programme – including what RSE content they'll cover.
- The RSE guidelines (2020) have more detail and specificity about what to cover when teaching RSE, across different topics and different age groups. The guidelines are an optional resource available for schools to help them develop their programme.

There is a lot of flexibility for schools around exactly which RSE content is taught, and how it is taught. Schools can develop their own programmes, rely on external providers, or both.

Legally, schools must develop their school curriculum so that it:³²

- is consistent with the principles of the New Zealand Curriculum
- models, encourages, and explores the values in the New Zealand Curriculum
- supports students to develop the key competencies in the New Zealand Curriculum.

Schools can select the achievement objectives from each learning area that meet the identified interests and learning needs of their students. They must provide programmes of learning that cover the learning areas of the New Zealand Curriculum, including health and physical education, to students in Years 1-10. No specific health and physical education content is compulsory to be covered – meaning no specific RSE content is compulsory.

RSE teaching typically includes coverage of personal safety, managing feelings, bodies, health, diverse identities, wellbeing, and relationships with other people.

Schools have flexibility around the sorts of content taught in RSE. There is no 'correct' or mandated set of topics to cover or outcomes that must be achieved (so long as schools meet the three legal requirements above). To find out what topics are being taught in RSE and how it's going, ERO drew on the New Zealand Curriculum's achievement objectives and the RSE guidelines' key learning statements to develop a list of 13 RSE topic areas that schools could be teaching in RSE. These are set out in the table below.

RSE topic area	Content
Changes to their body	This topic could include talking about body parts for young primary students, up to pubertal changes for older primary students, including how pubertal change relates to social norms around gender and sexual identity. Senior secondary students could cover changes to the body over their lifespan and how these relate to health and wellbeing.
Human reproduction	This topic could include basic concepts about broader reproduction, for example the life cycles of animals and insects, for young primary students, through to varying approaches to conception for older students, including how approaches to conception relate to social norms, choice, and wellbeing.

RSE topic area	Content
Health and contraception	This topic could include teaching about getting help when you're sick for young primary school students, up to information about contraception and sexual health for older secondary school students.
Friendships and bullying	This topic could include how to be a good friend and expressing your feelings in the junior years of primary school, up to how to deal with relationship challenges in later years of primary. This could also cover aspects of relationships online.
Romantic relationships including intimate relationships	Guidance for this topic starts at Year 7 and could include teaching about consent, assertive communication, and dealing with pressure. At secondary school this could cover how values affect ideas and behaviours around intimacy, considering risks, and safe sexual practices.
Managing feelings and emotions	This topic could include expressing your own feelings and needs for young primary students, up to using strategies to address relationship challenges for older primary students.
Consent	This topic could include teaching about how to give and receive consent in a range of contexts (e.g., at the doctor, in the playground, or online) for primary students, making informed choices for older primary students, up to skills for dealing with pressure and coercion for secondary students.
Personal safety including online safety	This topic could include teaching about who to ask for help and skills for staying safe in a range of contexts, including online, for primary students. For older primary students, this could cover strategies and resources to support health and wellbeing, and using information to make safe choices.
Your identity	This topic could include describing different aspects that make up personal identity (e.g., ethnicity, gender, language, religion, whakapapa) for younger primary students, and how these can relate to their wellbeing. As students get older, they could learn in more depth about how aspects of their identity, and how they are represented in society, affect their wellbeing.

RSE topic area	Content
Celebrating differences	This topic could include celebrating that different people have different backgrounds in the junior years of primary, identifying instances of discrimination for older primary students, up to promoting inclusive practices and policies in a range of contexts in secondary school.
Gender stereotypes	This topic could include teaching about gender stereotypes for younger primary students, and critiquing media representations of gender and their effects on wellbeing for older primary students. For secondary students, this might include critical reflection on how gender stereotypes and attitudes affect wellbeing, including in school activities.
Different sexual identities	This topic could include talking about how people don't all have the same ways of thinking about gender, families, or romantic relationships, from about Year 3. For older primary students and younger secondary students, teaching could be about how puberty relates to social norms around sexuality. Secondary students might learn about how sexual identity relates to cultural, generational, and personal values, and how it can shift over time and in different contexts.
Gender identity	This topic could include talking about our own genders in primary school, and about social norms related to genders for older primary students. For older primary students and younger secondary students, teaching could be about how puberty relates to social norms around gender. Secondary students might be taught about cultural, generational, and personal values related to gender identity, and how identity can shift over time and in different contexts.

The findings in the following sections are based on what students, teachers, leaders, and parents and whānau told us about these 13 possible RSE topics. To make our surveys, interviews, and focus groups age appropriate, not all year levels of students were asked about all topics, and the wording of some topics was changed for younger children (see our technical report for our survey and interview questions: <https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/technical-report-review-of-relationships-and-sexuality-education>).

2) What is taught at different ages?

While the content taught in RSE varies, there are typical stages during school when certain RSE topics are typically taught.

What students are taught changes as they grow up.

In Years 0 – 4 students are taught <i>most</i> about:	Managing feelings and emotions, friendships and bullying, and personal safety including online safety – almost all students learn about these subjects.
In Years 5 – 6 students are taught <i>most</i> about:	Getting help with their health, and changes to their body – seven in 10 students learn about these subjects – as well as building on learning from earlier years.
In Years 7 – 8 students are taught <i>most</i> about:	Changes to their body – eight in 10 students learn about these subjects – as well as building on learning from earlier years.
In Years 9 – 10 students are taught <i>most</i> about:	Consent, health and contraception, romantic relationships including intimate relationships, different sexual identities, human reproduction, and gender identity – around eight in 10 students are taught these subjects – as well as building on learning from earlier years.

Students don't all continue RSE-related learning into Years 11-13 (ages 15-18), but many do. Over seven in 10 Year 11-13 students continue to learn about personal safety, including online safety, friendships and bullying, your identity, managing feelings and emotions, and celebrating differences.

Table 1: Teachers report which RSE topics they are teaching, by year level

Topic	Year 0-4	Year 5-6	Year 7-8	Year 9-10	Year 11-13
Changes to their body	28%	70%	81%	80%	33%
Human reproduction	NA	18%	39%	82%	48%
Health and contraception	54%	73%	28%	89%	58%
Friendships and bullying	98%	98%	96%	96%	82%
Romantic relationships including intimate relationships	NA	NA	39%	86%	61%
Managing feelings and emotions	99%	98%	93%	94%	73%
Consent	60%	46%	57%	93%	73%
Personal safety including online safety	96%	95%	97%	92%	85%
Your identity	86%	79%	86%	93%	76%
Celebrating differences	82%	86%	74%	80%	73%
Gender stereotypes	21%	42%	63%	82%	67%
Different sexual identities	8%	15%	38%	85%	67%
Gender identity	6%	15%	38%	77%	64%

We also compared teachers' and students' views on what was being taught, how much, and when. Mostly, we found that teachers report more being taught than students remember learning. This makes sense, as students are less likely to remember every aspect of their learning comparative to teachers, who have to plan and deliver the content. Teachers have more of a role in knowing what is covered. On sensitive (and potentially more interesting and memorable) topics such as gender identity and different sexual identities, however, students report learning more.

Schools told us they develop their RSE content using the New Zealand Curriculum to help them. Schools also use the RSE guidelines. The RSE guidelines include learning statements and guidance that are designed to support schools to cover some of the more sensitive topics, such as human reproduction, gender identities, and different sexual identities, as students get older. In several schools, we heard the content such as health and contraception are covered only briefly in the earlier years of secondary school and are revisited in later years as they become more relevant.

We also heard from schools that deciding which content to teach depends on the local context and needs of their community. For example, a rural school explained that their RSE curriculum is more focused on puberty for students in Years 7 and 8 than an urban school would be because the teachers think their students are relatively naïve about this topic.

At another school, there is greater coverage of consent and pornography for their students, because the school knows their students are exposed to explicit content through social media.

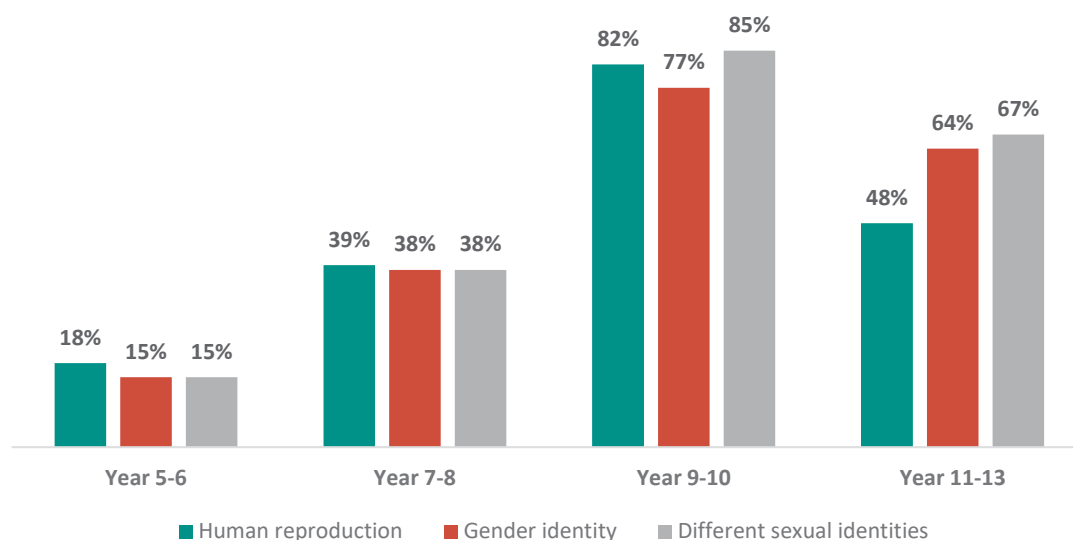
“When we first introduced Navigating the Journey [RSE programme from Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa], we didn't talk about pornography at all. It was completely off the table. But we had to bring it back in after we had had repeated incidents. There is a college next door to us and college kids were showing our intermediate kids pornography on the bus on the way home. We have to respond. We have to give our students the skills. And so, teaching about pornography was brought back into the program with really clear messaging around it.”

INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL TEACHER

Sensitive topics are taught later. In Years 5 – 6, human reproduction, gender identity, and different sexual identities are rarely taught, but by secondary school at least three-quarters of teachers report teaching these topics.

Teachers report that in Years 5–6, less than one in five students are learning about human reproduction (18 percent), gender identity (15 percent), and different sexual identities (15 percent). In Years 7–8, this rises to two in five learning human reproduction (39 percent), gender identity (38 percent), and different sexual identities (38 percent), and in Years 9–10 at least three quarters are learning about human reproduction (82 percent), gender identity (77 percent), and different sexual identities (85 percent).

Figure 8: *Teachers report human reproduction, gender identity, and different sexual identities are taught at each level*



While the RSE guidelines indicate that some sensitive topics, such as sex, sexuality, and gender, could be covered in age appropriate ways at a reasonably young age, schools sometimes choose to leave them until later based on the outcome of their consultation with parents and whānau. Chapter 5 provides more detail on why primary school parents and whānau want sensitive topics to be taught later, and Chapter 6 looks at schools' experiences with consultation.

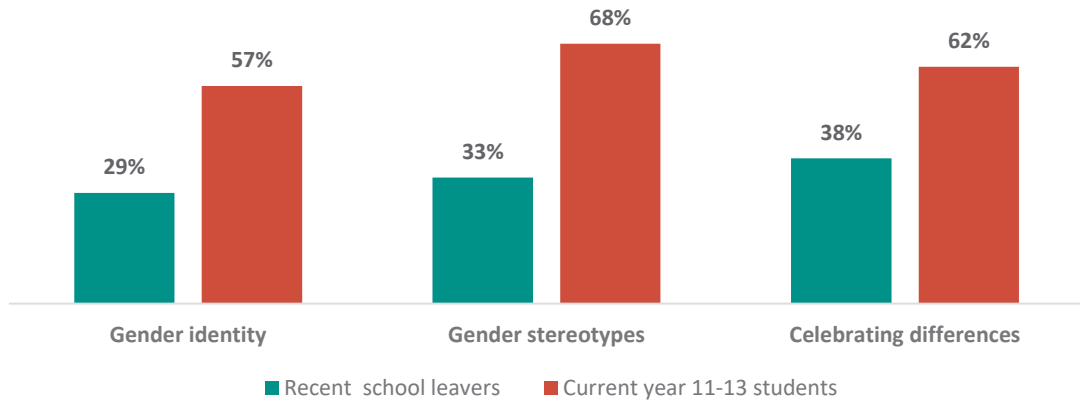
“I think everybody including the parents are pretty comfortable with us teaching about pubertal changes, hygiene, that side of things. An intermediate teacher or a high school teacher will go through human reproduction properly, but I don't know if we do that. I've never taught it at Year 8.”

TEACHER AT A YEAR 1-8 RURAL SCHOOL

Recent school leavers are less likely than senior secondary students to report having learned about gender identity, gender stereotypes, and celebrating difference.

What is taught in RSE is changing over time, as society changes. Only a third of recent school leavers report they learnt about gender identity (29 percent), gender stereotypes (33 percent), and celebrating differences (38 percent), compared to over half of current Year 11-13 students who report they learn about these topics (57 percent of current Year 11-13 students report they learn about gender identity, 58 percent learn about gender stereotypes, and 62 percent learn about celebrating differences). There were no areas which recent school leavers were more likely to have learnt about than current Year 11-13 students.

Figure 9: *Recent school leavers and current Year 11-13 students report learning on key topics.*



3) What is taught at different schools?

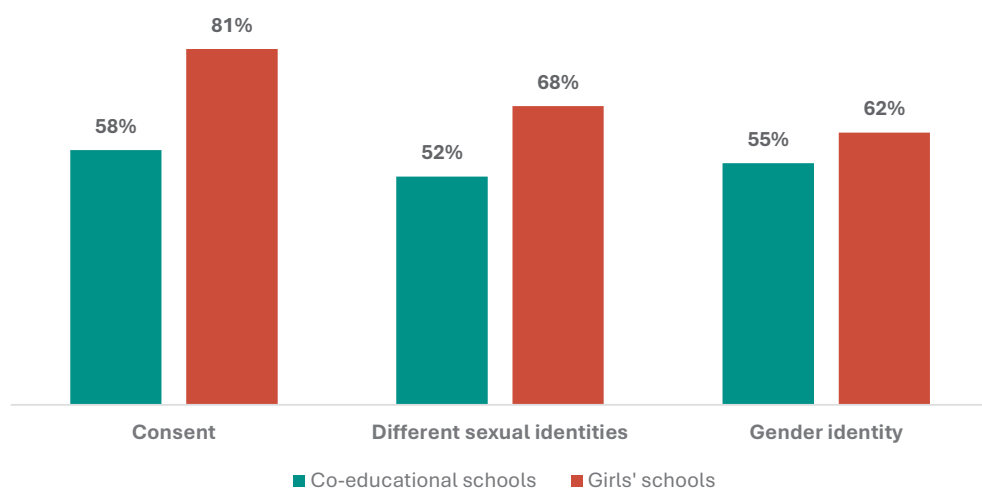
We found that what students learn about depends on where they go to school.

Girls' schools teach more about consent, different sexual identities, safety, and gender identity.

We asked students in boys' schools and girls' schools what they are taught in RSE.

- Eight in 10 students in girls' schools learn about consent (81 percent) compared to less than six in 10 in co-ed schools (58 percent).
- Seven in 10 students in girls' schools learn about different sexual identities (68 percent) compared to half in co-ed schools (52 percent).
- Six in 10 students in girls' schools learn about gender identity (62 percent) compared to half in co-ed schools (55 percent).

Figure 10: *Students reporting what they are taught in RSE, for co-ed and girls' schools*



ERO found that a key driver of girl schools teaching topics more is a response to what their students want. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, girls are more likely than boys to want to learn about topics that impact them, which includes consent and staying safe online. Evidence shows that girls are more at risk than boys of sexual assault. For example, one in four girls (26 percent) and one in nine boys (11 percent) report experiencing sexual abuse before age 15.³³ Also more than one in five girls and one in 11 boys at secondary school report they have been touched in a sexual way or been made to do unwanted sexual things.³⁴

Girls in girls' schools, in particular, tell us they rely on the school to teach them RSE because they aren't comfortable discussing RSE topics with their parents, especially the sensitive topics. Perhaps in response to this, girls' schools often prioritise RSE and they talked about being strategic about when to offer the content to allow time for a trusting relationship to develop first. Most often it is Health teachers that deliver RSE in girls' schools.

“Sometimes my parents don't know as much as what the school would be teaching you. So if you do get it from your parents they might not have had a proper education for that. So then they can't answer all of the questions you have.”

STUDENT AT A SECONDARY GIRLS' SCHOOL

We found that boys' schools often don't prioritise RSE as much. We heard that it gets crowded out by academic subjects. Even within health and physical education, RSE gets de-prioritised, with boys' schools tending to prioritise sports. The international literature supports this finding. There is strong evidence that boys' needs are neglected due to an overemphasis on biology rather than relationships and this, coupled with peer and teacher expectations of masculine behaviour, doesn't help boys to understand themselves, others, or cope with relationships.³⁵

“Sometimes boys go, ‘Why are we doing Health?’ That's the first hurdle that we have to get over – [telling them] that you need to do Health because it's important to you.”

HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER AT A BOYS' SECONDARY SCHOOL

Differences in teaching by school characteristics.

Across this chapter, we have drawn on teachers' survey responses to inform our understandings of what is being taught in schools.

Interestingly, we found that a significant proportion of teachers who responded to our survey opted not to provide the name of the school where they teach. We heard that this is likely to be related to the strong views some community members, and groups, hold about RSE. This limited information means that, while ERO would usually use school information to compare different school characteristics (e.g., by socio-economic community, rurality, high-Māori rolls, or other ethnic makeups of the school roll), our numbers of school-specifying responses were too low to compare differences for what is taught in these different characteristic types of schools.

We were able to draw robust findings about primary and secondary sectors based on the year levels that teachers indicated they teach. However, it should be noted that area schools sit across both primary and secondary year levels, and there are a range of minor year-level differences at different primary, intermediate, and secondary schools. In the case of girls' and co-ed schools, we found striking differences in the reports we received from our student surveys, where we were able to make comparisons based on school information provided. These findings are reported earlier in this chapter.

Conclusion

Schools have a legal requirement to develop their school curriculum in a way that aligns to the principles of the New Zealand Curriculum, however, there is flexibility around the content that is taught in RSE, leading to no consistent approach.

At primary school, students tend to learn more about health, safety, and friendships. As they progress through school, they begin to learn more about sensitive topics. At secondary school, the majority of teaching occurs at Years 9-10 in which students learn about consent, human reproduction, different sexual identities, gender identity, and more. The amount of RSE being taught varies by school type, with girls' schools tending to provide more comprehensive RSE teaching than boys' schools.

In the next chapter, we share students' views on RSE and what they are being taught.



Chapter 4: Does RSE meet students' needs?

RSE teaching that works for students involves making sure that their learning is relevant, timely, and at the right level. We wanted to know what students think about how well RSE meets their needs.

We found that the amount of RSE learning is about right for most students, but they don't agree on all things. Most students want to learn about safety (including online safety), and friendships and bullying earlier. There are also topics like gender identity where students are more split between wanting more and wanting less. Students' faith, gender, and sexuality impact on how they view their RSE learning. Girls are more likely to want more RSE learning, earlier.

In this chapter, we set out how well RSE meets students' needs.

To be effective, RSE learning needs to be relevant, timely, and at the right level. To understand how well RSE is meeting students' needs, we looked at:

- our surveys of students, teachers, school leaders, and recent school leavers
- interviews and focus groups with students, teachers, school leaders, and parents and whānau.

This chapter sets out:

- 1) whether the right amount is being taught at the right time
- 2) whether RSE is meeting all students' needs
- 3) the impact of RSE on school attendance.

What we found: An overview

Most students agree that they are taught the right amount of most RSE topics and at the right age.

Across most topics, seven in 10 students say they are being taught the right amount and around half (41-55 percent) agree that they are learning it at the right time.

Most students want to learn about personal safety and friendships and bullying earlier.

Seven in 10 students want to learn personal safety and friendships and bullying earlier.

Primary students want to learn about human reproduction later.

Six in 10 of Years 5–6 (60 percent) and half of Years 7–8 students (51 percent) want to learn about human reproduction later.

Girls often want to learn more and earlier on key topics.

Over a quarter of girls want to learn **more** about managing feelings and emotions (25 percent) and gender stereotypes (31 percent). Over three-quarters of girls want to learn about friendship and bullying (82 percent) and personal safety including online safety (75 percent) **earlier**.

Boys are more likely to want to learn all topics later than girls, reflecting that boys may go through puberty later.

Boys are more likely to want to learn **all topics** later than girls. The most common topics they want to learn about later are human reproduction (35 percent), different sexual identities (22 percent), and romantic relationships including intimate relationships (22 percent).

Students' views are split about when and how much they learn about human reproduction, different sexual identities, gender identity, and romantic relationships.

Three in 10 students want to learn about human reproduction earlier (28 percent), and three in 10 want to learn it later (28 percent). A third of students want to learn about different sexual identities (33 percent), gender identity (36 percent), and romantic relationships (31 percent) earlier, and nearly one in five want to learn about these subjects later (16–18 percent).

Students' faith and sexuality impacts how well RSE meets their needs.

Students of faith are more likely to want to learn **less** about gender identity, and different sexual identities, than students who do not practice a faith. Secondary school students from rainbow communities want to learn about all RSE topics **earlier** than other students.

Recent school leavers report that there were significant gaps in their RSE learning.

We found that many school leavers who *didn't* learn about key RSE topics at school would have valued learning about them. Over three-quarters of the students didn't learn and would have liked to learn about consent (82 percent), managing feelings and emotions (78 percent), personal safety including online safety (78 percent), and changes to their body (75 percent).

Some students decide to miss school to avoid RSE, but others go to school because they want to learn RSE.

Seven percent of intermediate and secondary students report missing school due to RSE lessons, while 9 percent of students in intermediate and secondary schools report attending school specifically for RSE.

→ In the following sections we look at each of these findings in more detail.

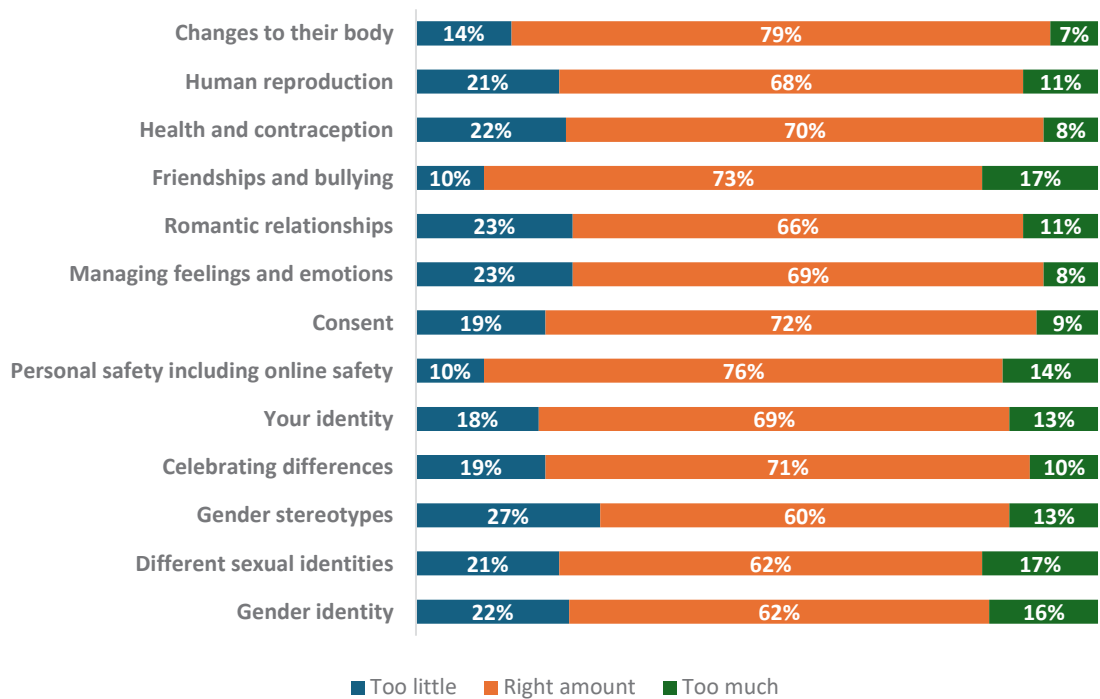
1) Is the right amount taught at the right time?

Students report they learn the right amount on most topics.

ERO asked students about the 13 topics of RSE set out in Chapter 3, and if they learnt the right amount of each topic to meet their needs.

Across most RSE topics, around seven in 10 students report that they are learning the right amount.

Figure 11: Students who report learning the right amount about topics



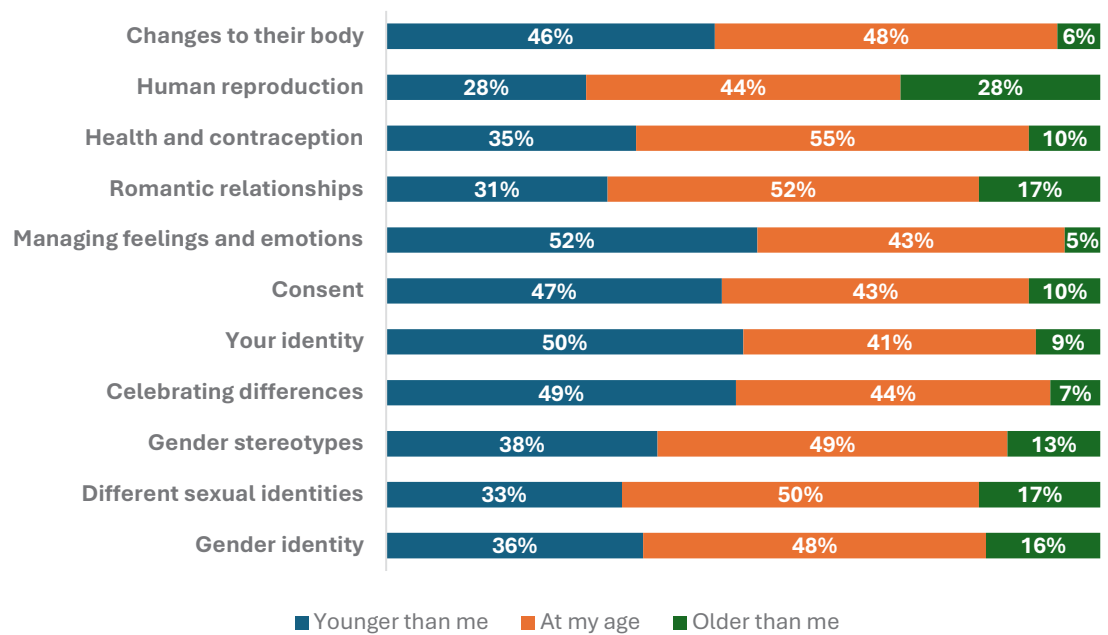
“[The teachers] cover a lot of areas pretty extensively. Each year they kind of cover the same thing, but in a little bit more depth... So you’re kind of like reiterating [and] adding a little bit more.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT

Students report they learn most topics at the right time.

We also asked students if they learnt topics at the right time or want to learn them earlier or later.

Around half (41 to 55 percent) of students report that they learn RSE topics at the right time.

Figure 12: *Students reporting when they would like to learn about RSE topics^m*

“I think the timing was pretty much spot on in terms of when you would start to talk about that sort of thing amongst your friends or notice it amongst your peers. That was when we were getting the learning about it at the same time at school.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT

Appendix 4 sets out student views on what they learnt, by year group.

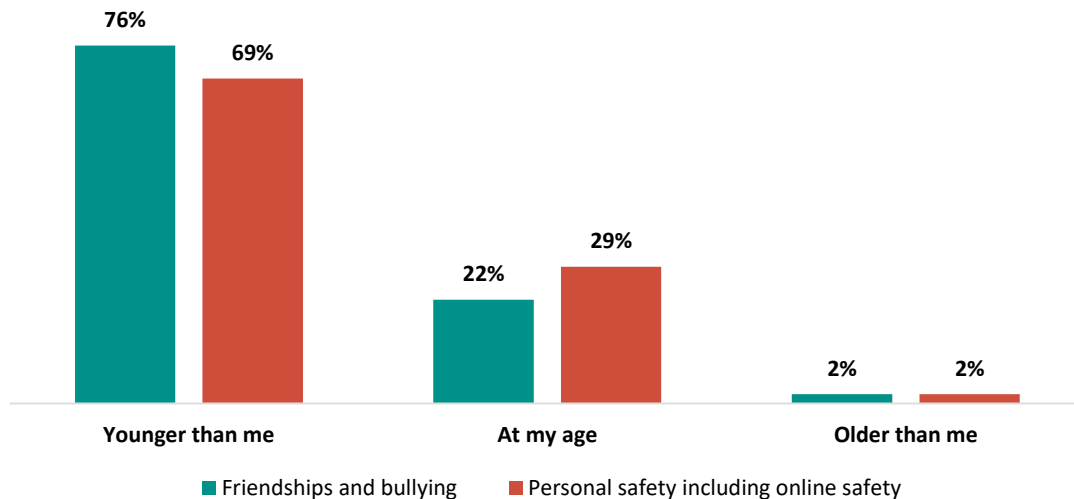
Most students want to learn about friendships and bullying, and personal safety, including online safety, earlier.

There are two key topics that students consistently want to learn earlier.

Most students want to learn about friendships and bullying (76 percent), and personal safety including online safety (69 percent) earlier.

^m We asked about learning about contraception and romantic relationships from Year 7-13 only.

Figure 13: *Students reporting when they would like to learn about friendships and bullying, and personal safety, including online safety*



ERO found students want these topics earlier because they are important for all students. Bullying is high in Aotearoa New Zealand – a third of Year 5 students are bullied on a monthly basis and two-thirds of 15-year-olds report have been bullied at some point.³⁶ Given the impact of bullying victimisation on general health and mental health,³⁷ it is unsurprising that students are interested in learning about it earlier. Students told us they want teaching not just on recognising bullying, but also how to intervene and respond to it.

Friendships are important for all young people because they are positively associated with life satisfaction and self-esteem,³⁸ especially for girls.³⁹ Students want to be taught practical ways of navigating friendships – depending on the age of students, they want to learn about how to make friends, how to maintain trust in friendships, and how to deal with friendship break-ups.

“I think that a big thing which is often just taken for granted is female friendships. They are the foundation of our happiness and when friendship breakups happen, it’s important to know how to handle and deal with it.”

YEAR 9-10 GIRL

We also found that online safety is an important topic due to the risks of harm online, including unwanted digital communications, which are relatively common. Previous research has found that seven in 10 teenagers in Aotearoa New Zealand have experienced at least one type of unwanted digital communication in the past year.⁴⁰ The main types are being contacted by a stranger and accidentally seeing inappropriate content.⁴¹

“For teenagers [it's] a scary world of technology where everything is super easy to access, but there's also a lot of information that collides with one another. I think the class was super beneficial, giving you not just healthy information, but also broader information.”

YEAR 13 STUDENT



Another form of harm online is cyberbullying, which raises the risk of self-harm or suicidal behaviour by 2.3 times.⁴² An Aotearoa New Zealand study found that 46 percent of 18–19-year-olds have experienced cyber-bullying, and 31 percent victims did not seek help.⁴³ By age 11, two-thirds of Aotearoa New Zealand students own their own mobile phone⁴⁴ and young people are more likely to experience online harm through mobile phones than other internet-based tools.⁴⁵

Girls are most at risk of online harm than boys.⁴⁶ Girls are more likely to encounter unwanted digital communication through social media compared to boys, who are more likely to encounter unwanted digital communication through online gaming.⁴⁷ There is also a rising trend in the online harms and hate speech against rainbow communities reported in various countries.⁴⁸

Both girls (75 percent) and boys (63 percent) want to learn about online safety earlier.

Student views are split about when and how much they learn about sensitive topics, like human reproduction, different sexual identities, and gender identity.

Human reproduction, different sexual identities, and gender identity are sensitive topics which can be interesting and relevant for students, but may also be uncomfortable to talk about. These are the topics where ERO found the most markedly split student views – meaning that there are significant groups at both ends, wanting to learn more/less, and earlier/later.

Human reproduction

Most students (68 percent) report they learn the right amount about human reproduction, but 28 percent of students want to learn about human reproduction earlier, and 28 percent want to learn about human reproduction later.

One in five students report they learn too little about human reproduction (21 percent), compared to one in 10 students who report they learn too much (11 percent).

Figure 14: *Students report when they want to learn about human reproduction*



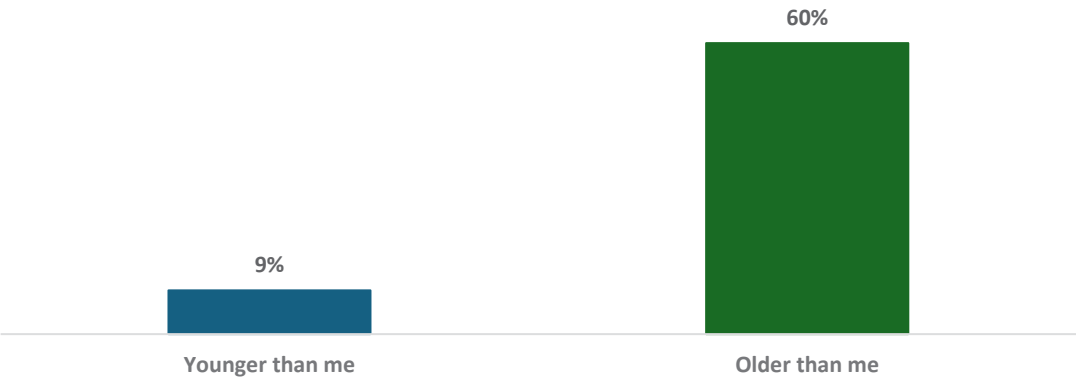
For the topic of human reproduction, which includes basic concepts about broader reproduction (e.g. example the life cycles of animals and insects) for young primary students, and safe sexual practices from early secondary secondary school, we found that students who want it to be taught less or when they are older often don't see the relevance of it. For example, it may not seem relevant if they haven't gone through puberty yet, aren't sexually active, or simply don't want to have children. School staff also told us about students having these sorts of views.

“[Students] do tune out of ‘irrelevant’ teaching if it isn’t something that affects you.”

INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

More than half (60 percent) of primary school students want to learn about human reproduction later.

Figure 15: *Primary school students report when they want to learn about human reproduction*



“Reproduction should be for older kids like Year 11 and up”

GIRL AT INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

Faith also plays a role in the divided views about if and when sex should be taught as part of RSE. Students of faith tend to align themselves with the views of their religious community in relation to when it is appropriate to have discussions about sex. This is a reason they prefer to be taught about sex at home or by their church. We say more on this later in this chapter.

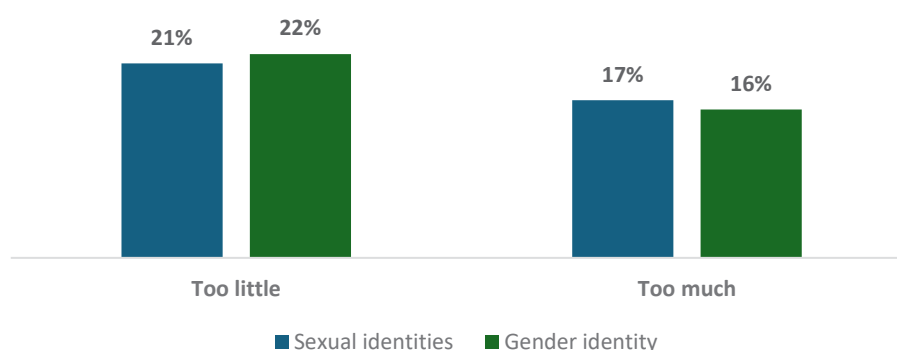
Sexual identities and gender identity

Students are most split about when and how much they learn about sexual and gender identities.

One in five students report they learn too little about different sexual identities (21 percent) and gender identity (22 percent). One in six students report they learn too much about different sexual identities (17 percent) and gender identity (16 percent).

One-third of students want to learn about different sexual identities (33 percent) and gender identity (36 percent) earlier, but one in six students want to learn about different sexual identities (17 percent) and gender identity (16 percent) later.

Figure 16: *Students report how much they learn about sexual identities and gender identity*



The split views of students on these topics reflects the increasingly strong split views in society.

ERO found that when students think they are learning too much or too early about genders and sexualities it is usually because they aren't interested in these topics, especially if they don't personally relate to them – for example not needing to know about different sexual identities if they are straight themselves. Less commonly, we heard that students don't want to be encouraged to think about their own identity when they don't feel ready – the content simply doesn't feel relevant to them.

“I think that the non-binary stuff is not really relevant to teach to those who do not [identify as such].”

YEAR 9-10 STUDENT

We also heard that students not wanting to cover these sensitive topics may reflect their parents' views. As discussed further in Chapter 5, some parents and whānau are worried that teaching these topics, especially to younger children, could confuse them or 'put ideas in their heads'. Some students, as with some parents and whānau, don't want these topics to be taught at all due to cultural or religious beliefs – which we talk about later in this chapter.

“I think you shouldn't be teaching this to younger audience and let the parents teach the kids when it is the right time, otherwise they get inflicted onto this.”

YEAR 9-10 STUDENT

Other students believe the opposite, that gender and sexual identities need to be taught in *more* depth and earlier. These students think being informed earlier can help them make sense of sensitive issues before they are exposed to misinformation. Students told us that they are concerned about exposure to misinformation at an increasingly younger age on the internet – so want to be able to be armed with accurate and clear messages through RSE.

“If we teach children from an early age how to be a better person not only with respecting those who are in the rainbow communities but in every attribute of life, this makes tough topics for my generation to talk about much easier.”

YEAR 11-12 STUDENT

This aligns with the more general finding from our research that students value RSE because it can help them understand and accept other people (as discussed in Chapter 2). Students who want to learn about different identities acknowledge the link between lack of understanding and bullying.

“Maybe if other people learn about what being gay is and how it works, then they will stop bullying other people. Maybe they'll get an understanding and won't use it so much as a negative term. When you learn more about it and your teachers and your classmates talk openly about it, it will get rid of the feeling that being gay is bad, it's not a joke, it's pretty offensive to those who are”

INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL STUDENT

These split views of students on when and how much gender and sexual identities should be taught reflects polarisation on these topics in wider society. While some groups have become liberal and open to talking about these topics, other groups are deeply worried about changing attitudes.⁴⁹

2) Does RSE meet all students' needs?

ERO looked at how RSE meets the needs of different groups of students. We were interested to find out how factors, such as gender, school setting, sexual identity, and practising a faith, impact on how students feel about their RSE learning. Some groups, including gender diverse students and MELAA students, had response rates that (while proportional to the wider population) are too low to statistically compare to other groups.

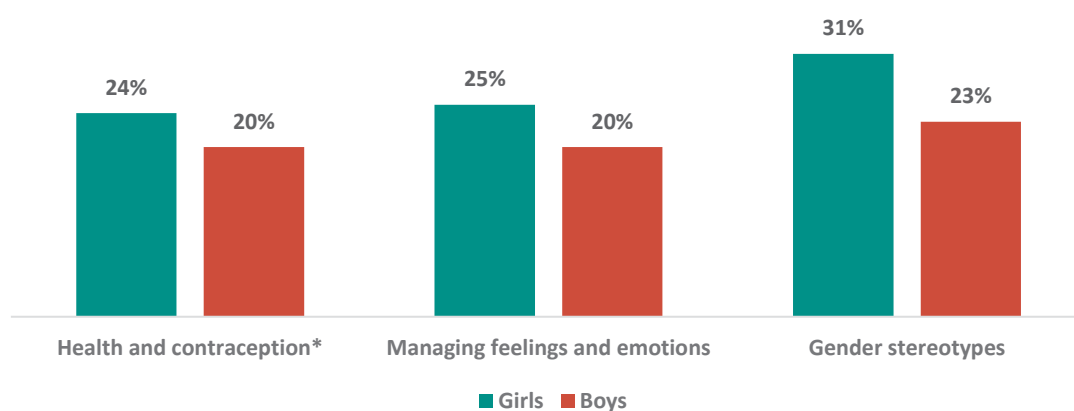
Girls want to learn more and earlier on key topics compared to boys.

Nearly one-third of girls want to learn more about gender stereotypes (31 percent), a quarter want to learn more about managing feelings and emotions (25 percent), and a quarter want to learn more about health and contraception (24 percent).

Eight in 10 girls want to learn about friendship and bullying earlier (82 percent), compared with seven in 10 boys (69 percent).

Three quarters of girls want to learn about personal safety, including online safety, earlier (75 percent), compared to just under two thirds of boys (63 percent).

Figure 17: *RSE topics girls want to learn more about compared to boys*



We know from the international literature that girls are more supportive of RSE being taught than boys,⁵⁰ and especially about topics that impact them, such as gender stereotypes that can disadvantage them in society, as well as contraception and unplanned pregnancies.

The international literature also tells us that girls have a stronger interest than boys in the topic of managing feelings and emotions because they are generally more eager to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and worries.⁵¹ Being able to manage their feelings and emotions helps with developing and maintaining friendships, which we know girls are more interested in than boys (discussed above).

Our research aligns with the wider evidence. We found that girls want to learn more about contraceptive options, and they want to learn about consent earlier, which is important for navigating healthy relationships.

“We definitely should learn more about consenting and relationships. We’re going to be seniors next year, so that might be more relevant [now].”

YEAR 10 STUDENT AT A GIRLS’ SCHOOL

We found that girls want to learn about other topics earlier. Girls are concerned about the possibility that by the time some topics are covered, particularly to do with bodies, consent, and romantic relationships, it is often ‘too late’. We heard that girls in primary schools want to learn about body changes as early as Year 4, *before* puberty happens to them. Girls in secondary school echoed this, saying that it would be better for younger girls to learn about their upcoming body changes in advance of needing to know.

“When my first period came, I was very unprepared, and stumbled through putting on my first pad, as it wasn’t taught. I wish I got more reassurance. I wish I knew that it was fine.”

YEAR 9-10 GIRL

Some girls would like to learn RSE separately from boys, even if the content is the same. This is related to feeling embarrassed to discuss RSE topics with boys, and in response to differences in maturity between boys and girls.

“[I would prefer to learn in separate groups] because at this age girls are way more mature, but boys joke around about everything.”

YEAR 7-8 GIRL AT AN INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

Girls have views about what boys should be taught.

We found that girls have strong views about what boys should cover in RSE. In particular, they wanted boys to cover topics that teach them how to interact with girls and women.

Older girls think boys should learn more about intimate relationships and consent, so they have realistic and healthy expectations of relationships. Girls told us that for boys to know what healthy relationships look like, they need to learn about social attitudes towards women, about sexual violence, and about the impacts of pornography. Secondary school girls told us that boys often don’t know that pornography isn’t real, which is concerning – we know that pornography rarely depicts meaningful consent, and often includes coercion and/or violence, particularly towards girls and women, as a ‘normal’ part of sexual encounters.⁵²

“There needs to be open conversations in school and at home to ask those vulnerable questions, and for parents and teachers to be teaching young males about pornography.”

YEAR 13 GIRL

We heard that girls are sharing these concerns with their teachers too.

“I don't think everyone is getting that message [about consent and healthy relationships]... I remember having a conversation with my Year 12s about how they were being treated by their boyfriends. You know, it was just like, 'Hey, that's not on.'”

TEACHER AT A SECONDARY GIRLS' SCHOOL

“[In our health classes we have to discuss] how do we deal with situations when we know that our partner is watching a lot of pornography and expecting these things of me that I don't feel comfortable doing.”

TEACHER AT A SECONDARY GIRLS' SCHOOL

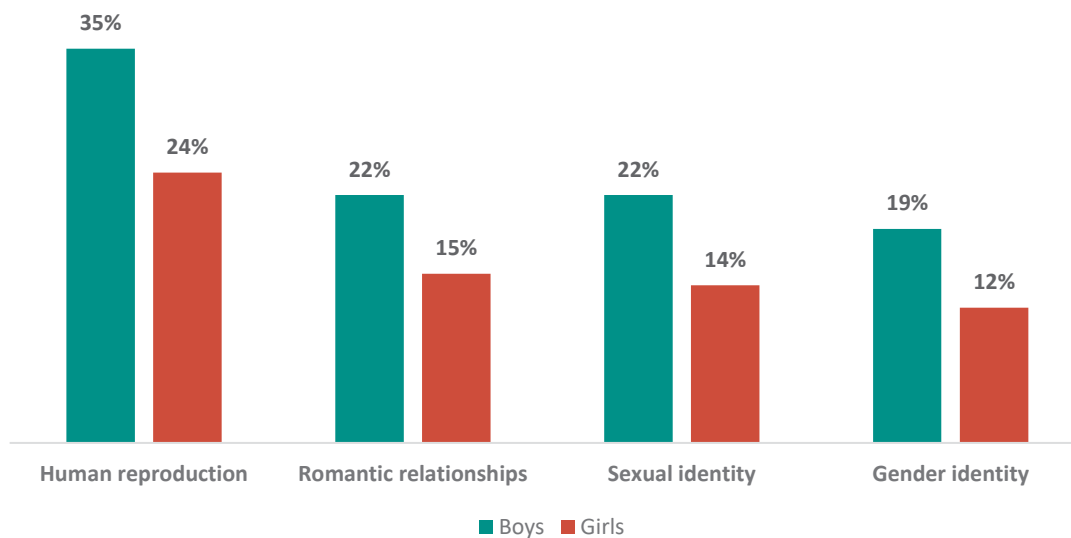
We heard that some younger girls want boys to understand the impact of puberty on girls, so they don't ask hurtful or embarrassing questions. Others told us they prefer separate content for different genders.

“I feel like some things that can be talked about with everyone, but there's some stuff that only girls need to know and there's some stuff only guys need to know.”

YEAR 7-8 GIRL

Boys are more likely to want to learn all topics later.

Across all topics, boys are more likely than girls to want to learn about topics later. The topics that boys are most likely to want to learn about later are human reproduction (35 percent), romantic relationships (22 percent), sexual identity (22 percent), and gender identity (19 percent).

Figure 18: Key RSE topics boys report they want to learn about later

We know that boys reach maturity later than girls,⁵³ which could explain why boys want to learn topics later. We heard that while boys in senior secondary school tend to have more buy-in to RSE learning, junior students show some resistance or ‘silly behaviours’ in RSE lessons. In the case of one boys’ secondary school, this led to a decision to delay teaching some RSE topics.

“I’d prefer separating the boys and girls. The boys make it very awkward and make me feel very uncomfortable. They always laugh and make jokes”

YEAR 7-8 GIRL AT CO-ED INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

We also know from the evidence base that peer pressure can impact on how teenage boys respond to RSE topics.⁵⁴ Research also shows that boys are more concerned with not appearing foolish about sex and their bodies, causing worry and embarrassment.⁵⁵ This may also explain why boys want to keep putting off RSE until later. Boys also think some RSE topics are simply not that relevant to them, especially if they are about girls’ sexual health.⁵⁶

Appendix 4 sets out in more detail boys’ and girls’ views on what they learn.

However, some boys at boys' schools report they learn too little.

We heard that there could be a tendency for boys' schools to prioritise 'more academic' learning and sports over 'softer' subjects like RSE. Boys in boys' schools are left with gaps in their knowledge or have to teach themselves.

“[I'd like more about] releasing emotions, how to speak about them, how to tell people how you feel about something if you don't like it. We didn't really go into really full depth of that when we learned that back in Year 9 and 10. So basically, I had to teach myself.”

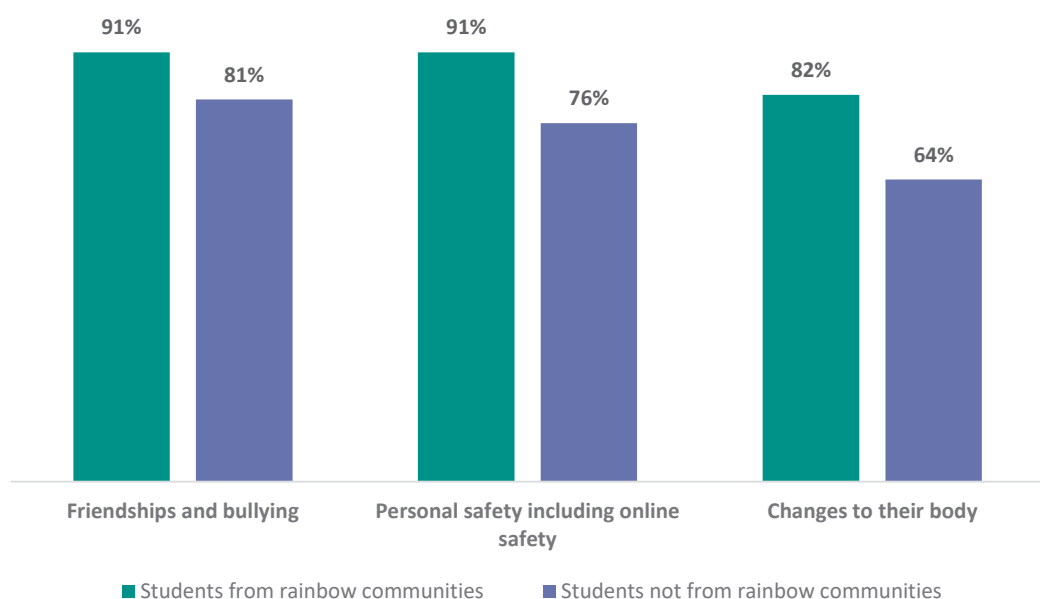
YEAR 11 STUDENT AT A BOYS' SCHOOL

Boys in boys' schools also told us that they want to learn more about puberty, including what happens to girls during puberty. This finding supports what we heard from girls, that they want boys to understand them better (see above).

Students from rainbow communities want more on every topic and earlier. The top topics they want to learn more about are friendships and bullying, personal safety, and changes to their body.

The three topics that secondary students from rainbow communitiesⁿ most want to learn *earlier* are friendship and bullying (91 percent), personal safety including online safety (91 percent), and changes to their body (82 percent).

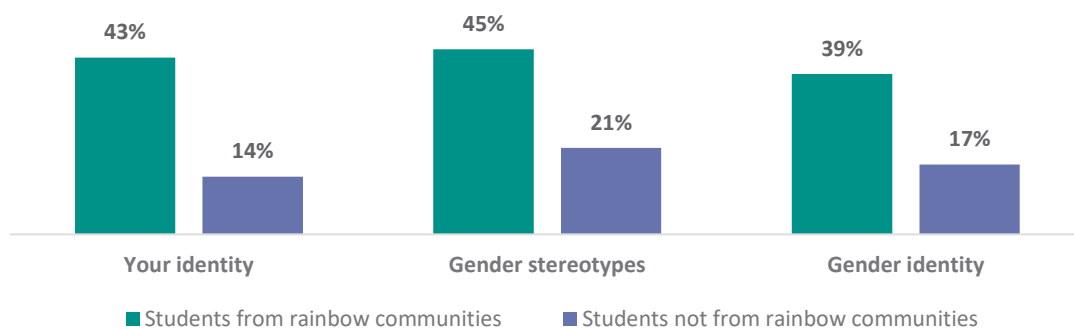
Figure 19: *Topics that students want to learn earlier, by rainbow community identification*



ⁿ On expert advice, ERO notes that a limitation of this finding is that some students from rainbow communities may not always feel ready, comfortable, or safe to identify this way. This means that some students from rainbow communities' views will not have been captured through the self-identification option in our surveys.

Students from rainbow communities want to learn *more* about their identity, gender stereotypes, and gender identity compared to other students. More than twice as many students from rainbow communities report that they want to learn more about these topics, compared to other students.

Figure 20: *Topics that students want to learn more about, by rainbow community identification*



Students from rainbow communities face higher rates of isolation and bullying,⁵⁷ and many want their non-rainbow peers to have greater understanding of gender identities and stereotypes to help with acceptance of difference.⁵⁸

ERO found that students from rainbow communities find identity and stereotyping conversations especially relevant, compared to their peers who may have fewer questions or challenges in this area. Within these RSE topics, students from rainbow communities also want deeper coverage on aspects such as body image (relationship with body) and how to take care of their bodies, as well as social issues, such as cultural perspectives on genders and mental health issues within rainbow communities.

“Not teaching students about healthy relationships will lead to students getting into unhealthy relationships. It'll create even more this intense sense of loneliness and isolation. It could make a teen suicide rate even worse.”

SENIOR SECONDARY STUDENT, RAINBOW FOCUS GROUP



However, we heard some students from rainbow communities can be uncomfortable with some RSE topics. For example, gender diverse students can be uncomfortable learning about body changes when what they are taught does not reflect their own experience. We also heard that the RSE learning experiences may not always be positive for students from rainbow communities. It can be awkward when teachers only cover issues like gender identity at a surface level (due to concerns about students' attitudes), and when peers don't get involved in the class discussions.

Gender diverse students value RSE that teaches them and their peers about diverse experiences.

A strong theme from ERO's focus groups with students from rainbow communities, including gender-diverse students, was the importance of RSE that reflects gender diverse experiences, alongside the experiences of other students.

We heard that this makes RSE more relevant to gender diverse students and supports their engagement in RSE learning, and they believe it helps their peers to understand diverse experiences.

“To see queer identities talked about and for others to learn about them.”

YEAR 13 STUDENT FROM RAINBOW COMMUNITIES



“By not teaching queer students that their identity is valid or even exists, it makes people feel like there is something wrong with them, or they are the only person having that experience.”

STUDENT FROM RAINBOW FOCUS GROUP



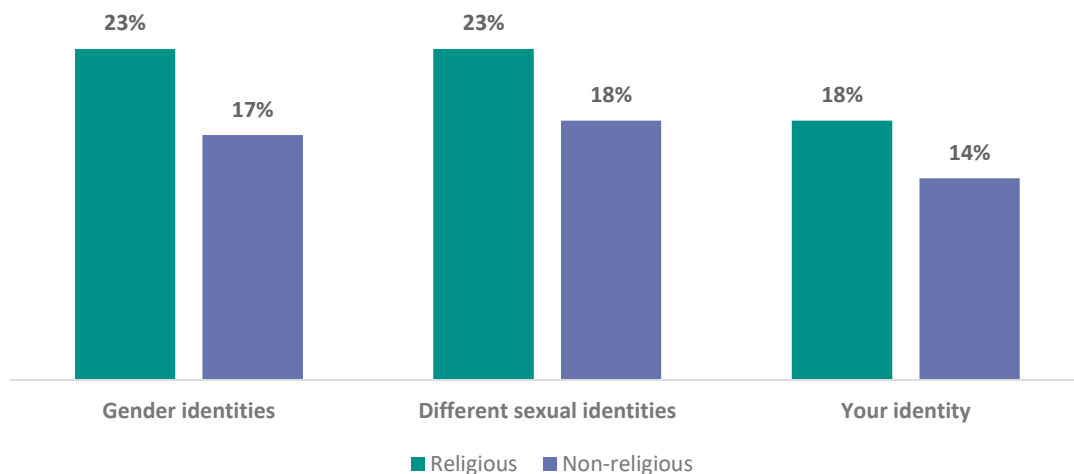
In the schools ERO visited for its 2018 report,⁵⁹ leaders often spoke about the importance of RSE that was inclusive for their sex-, gender-, and sexuality- diverse students.

The effectiveness of RSE for gender diverse students (and their peers, regarding learning about gender diversity) also matters for health and safety reasons – this group of students are at much greater risk of poor outcomes including depression, self-harm, unsafe environments, and higher levels of social and school isolation.⁶⁰

Students who practice a faith want less taught about gender identity and sexual identity.

Nearly one in four secondary students who practice a faith want to learn less about gender identity (23 percent), different sexual identities (23 percent), and nearly one in five want to learn less about their identity (18 percent).

Figure 21: *Areas students want to learn less about, by religious belief*



International evidence shows that gender identities and sexual identities are contentious topics and are the most challenging parts of RSE,⁶¹ for some faith-based groups, across a range of religions including some denominations of Muslims and Christians.⁶²

This wider evidence helps explain why students of faith prefer to learn less about gender identities and sexual identities. Some faiths have specific views and/or guidance about genders and sexualities, which may not always align with what is taught at school. For example, some students practising a faith told us they believe in two genders and aren't comfortable learning about gender diversity in RSE.

“Education about reproduction and puberty should be compulsory but everything else should not be compulsory. Some students who do not want to learn this or have other reasons to not want to learn this should be able to [withdraw].”

YEAR 11-12 STUDENT WHO PRACTICES A FAITH

“Educate parents [provide a booklet], so they can teach their own children about sexuality according to their beliefs”

YEAR 11-12 STUDENT WHO PRACTICES A FAITH

Other students of faith told us they *do* want to cover topics like gender diversity and sexual identities, but through the lens of their own religion. For example, teaching these topics can be aligned with the faith-based teaching regarding loving all people equally regardless of differences.

“At our school there's definitely a broad range of students that [identify] as different sexualities. That's taught all the students to have this mutual respect naturally. And it ties back down to the school's values, in terms of Catholic teachings, like human dignity to respect everyone.”

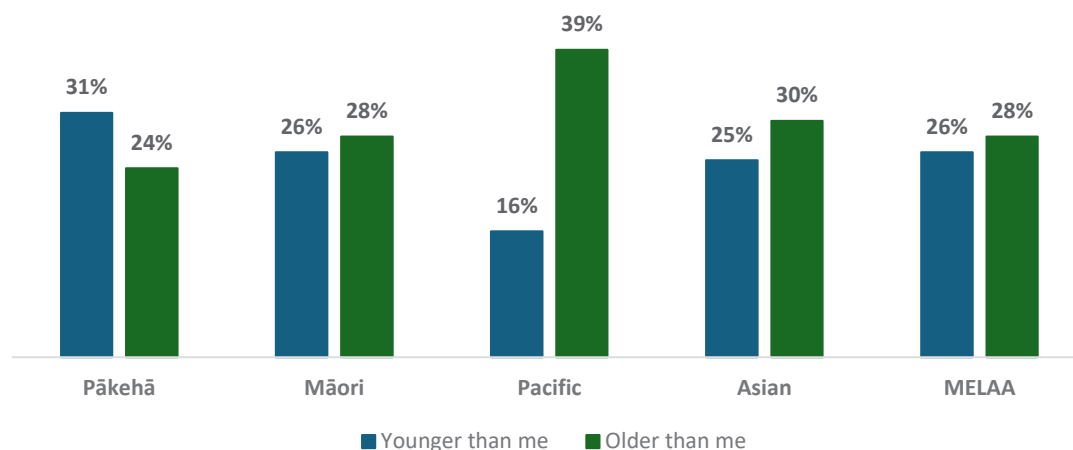
YEAR 12-13 STUDENT AT A CATHOLIC SCHOOL

Pacific students want to learn about RSE later than other students.

Across most RSE topics, Pacific students report they want to learn things later compared to students of other ethnicities.

In particular, Pacific students want to learn about human reproduction later (39 percent) than students of other ethnicities.

Figure 22: *Students want to learn about human reproduction earlier and later by ethnicity*



Pacific students wanting to learn content later may reflect their parents' views. As set out in Chapter 2, Pacific parents are generally less supportive of RSE, particularly topics related to bodies and sex, than parents and whānau of other ethnicities.

However, this isn't always the case for their children. Research has found that intergenerational differences between migrant and Aotearoa New Zealand born Pacific peoples can result in diverse worldviews,⁶³ which means that Pacific young people growing up in Aotearoa New Zealand can feel 'caught between cultures.'⁶⁴

“At home it's not a topic we usually talk about. Our parents need to know about it. It's a topic we need to focus on and can't just let it slide.”

YEAR 8 PACIFIC STUDENT

This wider evidence can help explain why we heard a range of views from Pacific students. Some Pacific students support the teaching of RSE. Others are less supportive or simply want content later when they will be more prepared for it. Even students who are supportive recognise that some RSE content doesn't align well with the cultural and faith-based views of their communities.

“We're Samoans and we don't really talk about sexuality and relationships because it's a sacred gap [vā] in our cultures. But I think that it shouldn't stay like the old ways. They should try to elevate it and bring some change to it. We want our culture to be different and should still keep the gap there, but we don't want them to always stay like this.”

PACIFIC STUDENT IN CATHOLIC SCHOOL

“[Pacific students’ views about RSE are] a combination of cultural and religious... and there are varying views across generations.”

PACIFIC SCHOOL COUNSELLOR

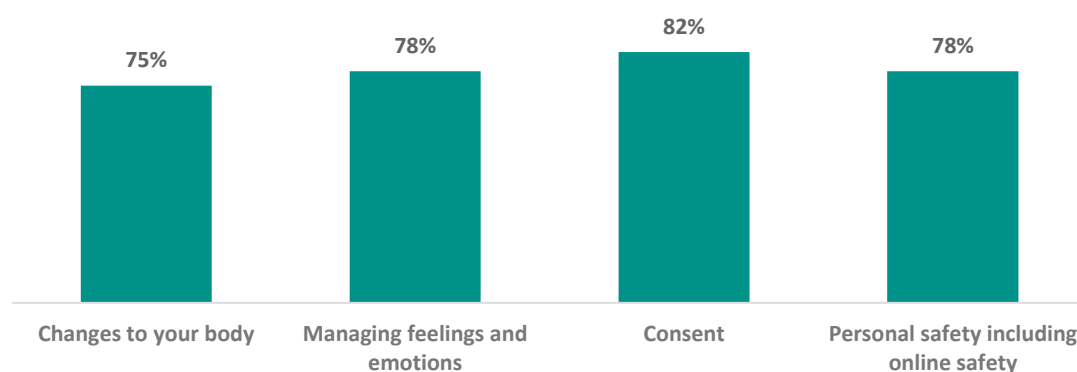
Recent school leavers report that there were significant gaps in their RSE learning.

To understand how well RSE meets student needs across the years, ERO surveyed students who left school in the last four years (i.e., their last years were between 2020 and 2024) to find out how well their RSE learning in school met their needs. We found that there were key gaps in their learning.

We found that many school leavers who *didn't* learn about key RSE topics at school would have valued learning about them.

Over four in five of the students who didn't learn about consent would have liked to (82 percent), and at least three quarters of those that didn't learn about managing feelings and emotions (78 percent), personal safety, including online safety (78 percent), and changes to their body (75 percent) would have liked to learn about these topics.

Figure 23: *Topics that recent school leavers report they didn't learn about but would have liked to.*



School leavers were able to reflect on how RSE could have prepared them better for life after school. A strong theme was that their teachers hadn't been direct enough, due to being awkward around the topics.

We heard that the teaching about contraception had been partial or not practical enough (e.g., only focusing on condoms; and not on other methods of contraception, female contraception, side effects of contraception pills, consequences of pregnancies, etc.). As context to this, we heard that some topics can be optional, including contraception. This means students may have missed out on coverage altogether, leaving them trying to find information from other sources, which may not be inaccurate or misleading.

“I learnt so much more from the Internet. [I want to learn more about] misconceptions and how inaccurate porn is, how the birth control pill works, Plan B for birth control, and all that.”

SCHOOL LEAVER

“Around sex education at school, all I really remember was putting a condom on a banana. We definitely need more teaching on consent and what it is and how you can tell someone's not into it. And more about identity, who you are, who you're into, who you're not into, etc.”

SCHOOL LEAVER

School leavers also reported they wish they had learned more about romantic relationships because these topics are harder to research independently, and students have missed out on open discussions in a safe space. Romantic relationships may have been less relevant in school, but quickly become important as young people enter adulthood.

3) Does RSE impact attendance?

While RSE can be interesting for students, it can also broach uncomfortable topics.

We asked students if they have ever gone to school specifically because they have RSE lessons, or if they have ever missed school because they have RSE lessons.

Some students miss school to avoid RSE but others go to school because they want to learn RSE.

Seven percent of intermediate and secondary students report missing school due to RSE lessons, while 9 percent of students in intermediate and secondary schools report attending school specifically for RSE.

As discussed above, students, as well as their parents and whānau, can be uncomfortable with some RSE topics due to cultural or religious reasons. Depending on the level of discomfort, this can lead students to withdraw from RSE fully or partially, or they may simply not attend school when these topics are scheduled to be taught. We heard this was a reason for non-attendance for some Pacific students and some new migrant students.

“Many students feel uncomfortable and they don't like attending those classes. It can also cause anxiety in students as it is in general uncomfortable and just overall pointless.”

YEAR 9-10 GIRL



Alternatively, we heard students are generally interested in RSE. Many want to learn more about certain topics, such as consent, different types of relationships (including intimate relationships), practical advice on dealing with unsafe situations – and covering these topics can make it more likely that they want to go to school. The relevance of RSE topics is, therefore, an important factor.

“I think I've learnt more from health than in all my other subjects combined – it is such an important thing to learn about and these topics will apply in everyday situations. the consequences of not learning it are really quite big.”

YEAR 12-13 STUDENT



Conclusion

The challenges faced by children and young people are changing, with increased risks, for example around online content.

ERO found widespread support from students for having RSE in schools. Many students tell us they are taught the right amount of most topics, and at the right age. They also share common views on the essential topics they wish to see addressed at an earlier stage, such as friendships, bullying, safety (including online safety), managing emotions, and understanding consent. Most students want to learn about personal safety and friendships and bullying earlier than they currently do.

However, there are still areas where RSE could be improved to better meet students' needs. Students aren't always getting the content that they need, at the right time for when they need it. We found that boys in particular want to learn about RSE later – when topics become more relevant to them. We also saw that students' faith and sexuality impacts their views, particularly on key topics related to gender and reproduction. Recent school leavers report that they did not receive all of the RSE knowledge that they needed for their life beyond school.

In the next chapter, we look at the views of parents and whānau on RSE content.



Chapter 5: How well does RSE meet the expectations of parents and whānau?

RSE is unique in the way it involves parents and whānau. Schools are required to consult with them about their RSE teaching, and parents and whānau can choose to withdraw their children from some or all RSE lessons. This is not the case with other school subjects.

Parents and whānau are largely supportive of RSE being taught, however many would like to change what and when RSE is taught, and a small proportion don't think it should be taught at all. Parent and whānau views are split on sensitive topics, particularly gender identity, gender stereotypes, and sexual identities.

In this chapter, we set out what we found out about parent and whānau views on RSE.

Teaching and learning at school benefits from the support and involvement of students' parents and whānau.⁶⁵ Parents and whānau have the option to withdraw their children from RSE learning, so meeting parent and whānau expectations is particularly important for RSE.

To understand parent and whānau views, we looked at:

- interviews and focus groups with parents and whānau
- interviews and focus groups with experts and sector groups
- our surveys of parents and whānau^o
- local and international research.

This chapter sets out how well RSE is currently meeting parent and whānau expectations. It covers:

- 1) parent and whānau expectations on the amount taught and when it is taught
- 2) parent and whānau expectations, by different groups.

^o We surveyed parents and whānau through selected schools, and an additional survey through a panel provider to ensure we have a representative sample. For more about this, see our companion technical report.

What we found: An overview

A third of parents and whānau want to change what or how RSE is taught, and over one in ten do not want it taught in schools.

Thirty-four percent of parents and whānau think that RSE should be taught, but that it should be taught differently. The proportion is higher for primary school parents and whānau (38 percent) than secondary school parents and whānau (32 percent).

For most RSE topics, parents and whānau agree their child is learning the right amount.

More than six in 10 parents and whānau think that the right amount of each individual RSE topic is being taught.

Many parents and whānau want their children to learn more about consent, relationships, and health, and learn earlier about friendships, safety and managing emotions.

The most common topics that parents and whānau want their children to learn more about are consent (31 percent), romantic relationships (28 percent), and health and contraception (27 percent). The most common topics that parents want their children to learn earlier are friendships and bullying (61 percent), personal safety including online safety (58 percent), and managing feelings and emotions (47 percent).

Parents and whānau of girls want their children to learn about changes to their body and consent earlier, compared to parents and whānau of boys.

Parent and whānau views are split on topics of gender identity, different sexual identities, and gender stereotypes.

Twenty-five percent want gender identity taught earlier, but 37 percent want it taught later. Twenty-two of parents want more taught, but 26 percent want less.

Thirty-one percent of parents and whānau want different sexual identities taught earlier, 24 percent want it taught later. Twenty-two percent want more to be taught, and 20 percent want less.

Thirty percent of parents and whānau want gender stereotypes taught earlier, and 30 percent want it taught later. Twenty-six percent parents and whānau want more to be taught, and 19 percent want less.

More than half of primary school parents and whānau want more sensitive topics taught later.

More than half of primary school parents and whānau want human reproduction (63 percent), gender identity (54 percent), and gender stereotypes (51 percent) covered later.

Parents and whānau who practice a faith want less RSE.

Parents and whānau who practice a faith want less RSE, in particular around gender identity, different sexual identities, and gender stereotypes.

Parents and whānau of students from rainbow communities are more likely to want their children to learn about all RSE topics earlier, especially gender identity and changes to the body.

Parents and whānau of students from rainbow communities are much more likely to want their children to learn earlier about gender identity (61 percent compared to 23 percent of parents and whānau of students who aren't from rainbow communities) and changes to the body (72 percent compared to 35 percent).

Many mothers want more RSE, whilst many fathers want less.

Mothers are more likely to report their children are learning too little, in particular around consent (33 percent), managing feelings and emotions (30 percent), gender stereotypes (28 percent), and friendships and bullying (26 percent). Fathers are more likely to report that their child is learning too much, particularly around gender identity (32 percent), different sexual identities (26 percent), and gender stereotypes (25 percent).

In the following sections we look at each of these findings in more detail.

1) Parent and whānau expectations on the amount taught and when it is taught

For most RSE topics, parents and whānau agree their child is learning the right amount, but a third of parents and whānau want to change what or how it is taught. Over one in 10 do not want it taught in schools.

A third (34 percent) of parents and whānau have told us that they want to change what or how RSE is taught. Over half (53 percent) support it being taught as it is now. Thirteen percent think it shouldn't be taught at all.

Primary school parents are slightly more likely to want RSE to be taught differently. Almost two-fifths of primary parents and whānau (38 percent) think that it should be taught differently, compared to 32 percent of secondary parents and whānau. As noted in Chapter 2, primary parents and whānau are more likely to think it shouldn't be taught (18 percent), compared to secondary parents and whānau (11 percent).


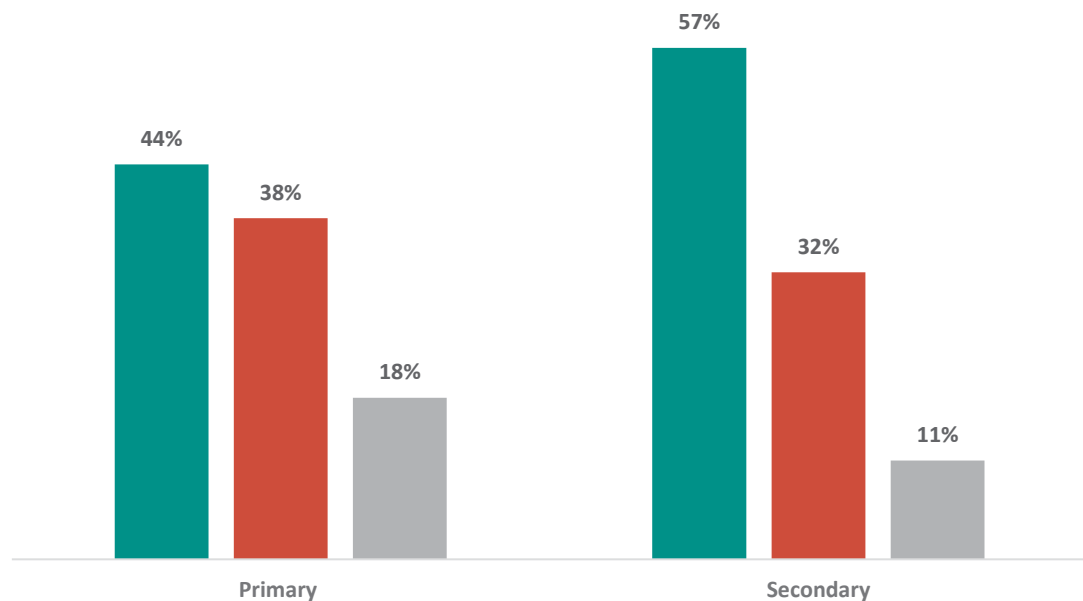
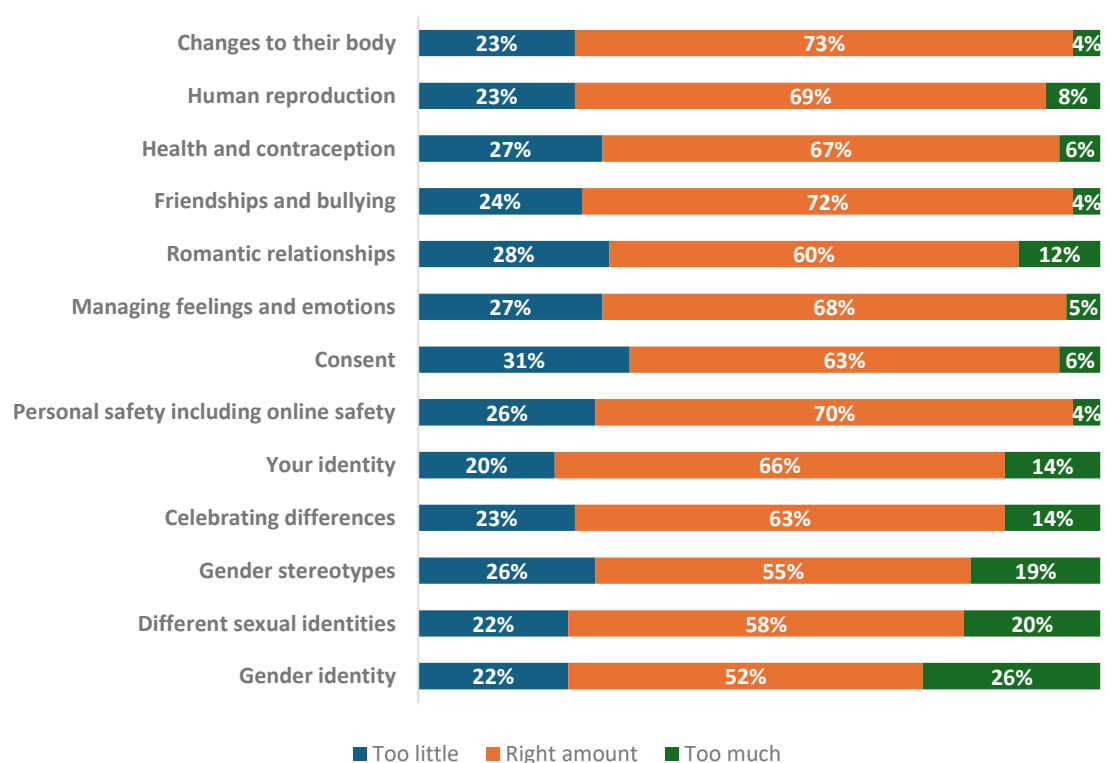


Figure 24: *Parent and whānau views on whether RSE should be taught, by primary and secondary school.*



Across most topics, more than six in 10 parents think their child is taught the right amount, and 40 – 55 percent of parents think their child is taught at the right age. For most topics, they are more likely to report that their children learn too little than too much – however there are some key, more sensitive topics, where parents and whānau views are split.

Figure 25: *Parent and whānau views on whether their children learnt the right amount.*



“They teach the necessary amount of information, which is good. But I think they could just maybe talk less about sex since I’m not sure many people will want to know that stuff.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU

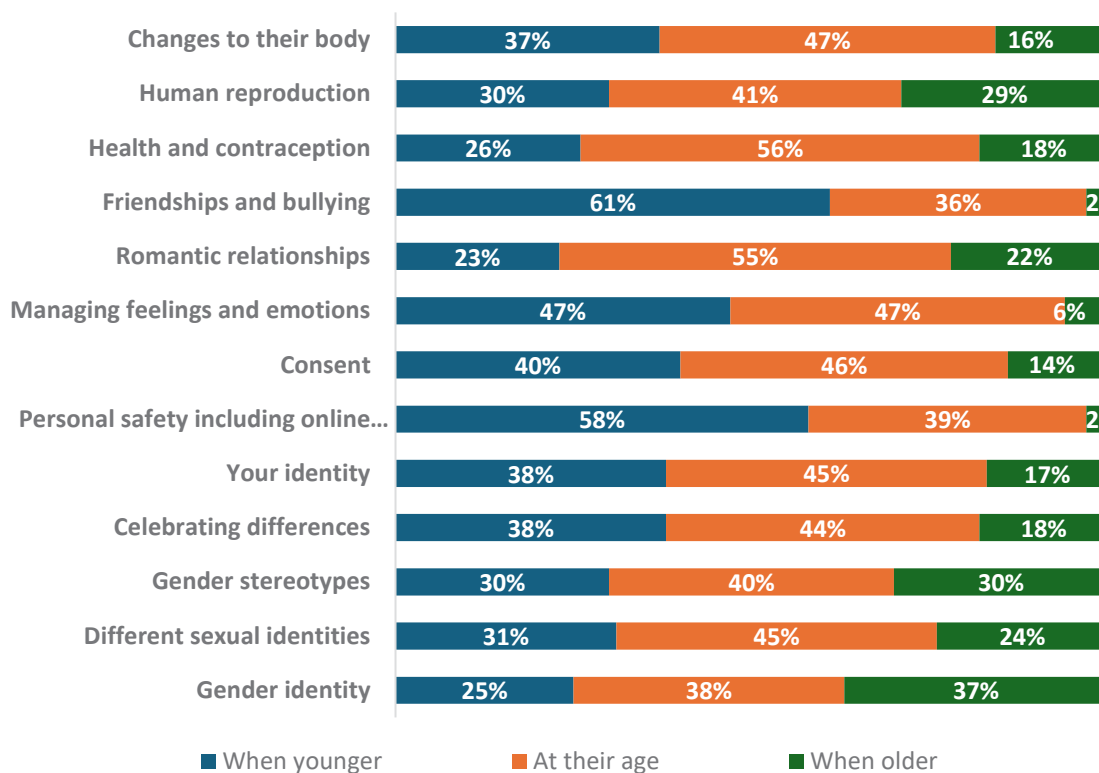
Many parents and whānau want their children to learn more about consent, relationships and health, and learn earlier about friendships, safety and managing emotions.

As highlighted in Figure 26 above, parents and whānau across all years want their children to learn *more* about:

- consent (31 percent want more, 6 percent want less)
- relationships (28 percent want more, 12 percent want less)
- and health^p (27 percent want more, 6 percent want less).

The topics parents and whānau are most likely to want covered *earlier* are friendships and bullying (61 percent), personal safety including online safety (58 percent), and managing feelings and emotions (47 percent).

Figure 26: *Parent and whānau views on when their children should learn about RSE topics*



^p This includes contraception for Year 9 and above

We found that parents and whānau are most likely to want their children to learn about friendships and bullying, personal safety, and managing feelings and emotions when they are younger because these topics can be relevant for children as young as 5 and 6 years, compared to other topics which are more relevant for older children. Wanting their children to start learning about bullying and personal safety earlier also aligns with wanting to keep their children safe. As discussed in Chapter 4, bullying (including cyberbullying) is a growing concern.

“It feels like children are all getting stuff earlier. Everyone is online. My kids catch the bus and they hear horrendous stuff. Sadly, teaching these topics has to come a bit earlier. And I think that’s hard for parents because we didn’t grow up in that world. But our world has changed significantly. And it takes the school system so long to catch up sometimes too.”

PRIMARY PARENT/WHĀNAU

Also, in the interests of keeping their children safe, parents and whānau want consent to be covered in more depth and earlier. Parents and whānau raise some concerns about *how* consent would be taught to younger children, but they recognised it would be valuable across all ages if learning is age appropriate.

This is because consent applies across the full range of relationships. It isn’t solely about consent within intimate relationships, it is also about appropriate and inappropriate touch within other types of relationships, including friendships, within a classroom setting, with family, and in romantic relationships.

Consent was thought to be especially important for older students – parents and whānau told us they want consent to be covered in more depth at secondary school, especially for boys. This is understandable in the context of high rates of sexual violence in Aotearoa New Zealand and the long-lasting impact on people’s lives.⁶⁶ The 2021 New Zealand Crime and Victims Survey (NZCVS) revealed that over a third (35 percent) of women, and 12 percent of men experienced sexual assaults in their lifetime. About one in nine adults (11 percent) from rainbow communities are sexually assaulted within a 12-month period, which is five times higher than the Aotearoa New Zealand average (2 percent). Sexual assault is especially high for young people, with 18 percent of 15–19-year-olds already victimised in their lifetime.⁶⁷

“Consent is a core concept in early childhood education that can be built onto in age appropriate ways. A focus on boys and violence/coercion needs to be included.”

PRIMARY PARENT/WHĀNAU

Parent and whānau views are split on gender identity, sexual identity, and gender stereotypes.

Parents and whānau views are split on more contentious RSE topics, which reflects what ERO and others have found previously in Aotearoa New Zealand,⁶⁸ and the experiences of other countries.⁶⁹ A 'split' view means that there are significant groups at both ends, wanting to learn more/less, and earlier/later.

Three in 10 parents and whānau want gender stereotypes taught earlier (30 percent) and a three in 10 want gender stereotypes taught later (30 percent). A quarter of parents and whānau want more to be taught on gender stereotypes (26 percent), and a fifth want less (19 percent).

Parents and whānau are also divided on sexual identity. Three in 10 parents and whānau want different sexual identities taught earlier (31 percent) and a quarter want it taught later (24 percent). One in five parents want more to be taught on different sexual identities (22 percent), and a fifth want less (20 percent).

One quarter of parents (25 percent) want gender identity taught earlier but over a third (37 percent) want it taught later. One-fifth of parents want more taught to their child about gender identity (22 percent), but a quarter want less (26 percent). Interestingly, our study found that much less than a quarter (6-15 percent) of primary schools are teaching about gender identity (see Chapter 2), suggesting that parents and whānau may be overestimating their school's coverage of this topic.

Figure 27: *Parent and whānau views on when gender identity, different sexual identities, and gender stereotypes should be taught.*

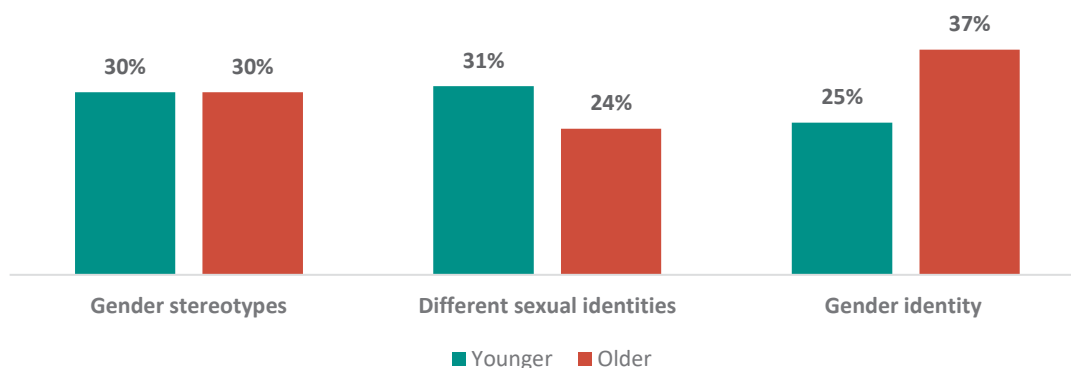
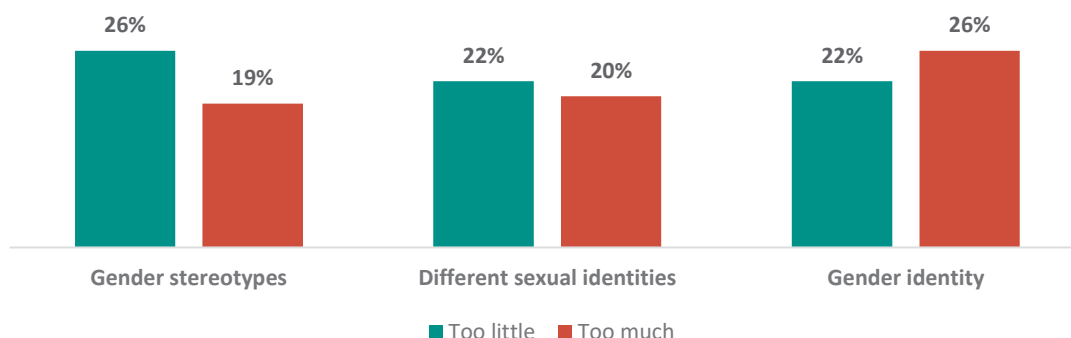


Figure 28: *Parent and whānau views on how much gender identity, different sexual identities, and gender stereotypes should be taught.*



As discussed in Chapter 4, there is polarisation in wider society on the topics of gender and sexual identities,⁷⁰ which is likely being reflected in the split views of parents and whānau on if and how much these topics should be taught to their children in RSE.

ERO found that parents and whānau who want gender stereotypes and identities and sexual identities to be covered believe these topics help their children to understand and accept people who are different from them.

“Even though it is a minority of students that find themselves gender fluid, I think it is very important that gender identity is covered around the time of puberty, so those students can find resources to help them navigate what must be a challenging time, and to also educate other students to be tolerant and accepting of students that may feel different than themselves regarding their gender. It is important for the school to touch on this issue, for the very reason that a student's parents, religion and/or culture may not be accepting their child.”

PRIMARY PARENT/WHĀNAU

Parents and whānau who report that too much about these topics are covered in RSE are worried that their children will be encouraged to ‘label’ themselves before they have matured, which could be confusing and limiting for them. Parents and whānau who have these concerns don't necessarily want the topics to be *excluded* from RSE. Often, they want the coverage to be *limited*. They also place importance on ‘how’ the topics are covered, especially for younger students.

Other parents and whānau have very strong views related to genders and sexualities. They don't believe it's the schools' role to teach these things and are worried about misinformation or an ‘ideology’ being taught. We heard particular concerns that their children would be taught about how to change their sex. Neither the New Zealand Curriculum nor the RSE guidelines include guidance to instruct students on how to change sex.

“Pre-pubescent children do not need to be ‘taught’ about gender identity. This is an ideology, not facts of life. It causes confusion amongst children who are already challenged emotionally by changes they are going through. Teaching general values like mutual respect and considerations and compassion is much more appropriate.”

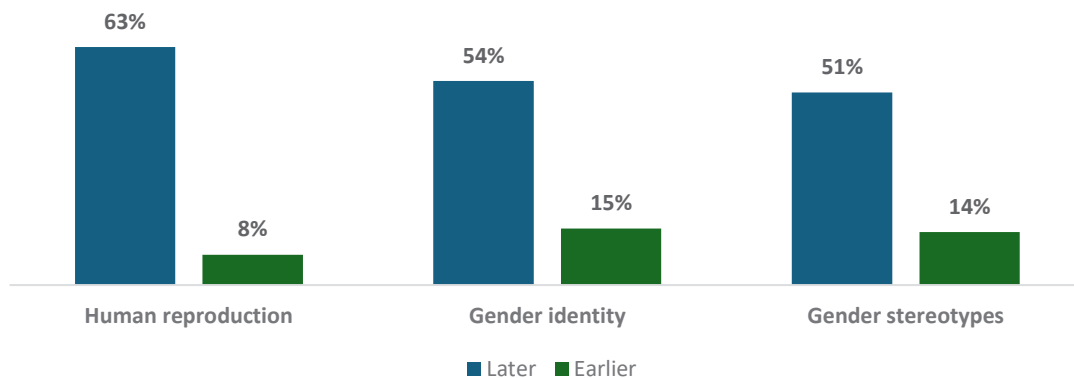
PRIMARY PARENT/WHĀNAU

2) Does RSE meet all parent and whānau needs?

More than half of primary school parents and whānau want some sensitive topics taught later.

More than half of primary school parents and whānau want sensitive topics including human reproduction (63 percent), gender identity (54 percent), and gender stereotypes (51 percent) covered later.

Figure 29: *The top three topics parents and whānau of primary students would like covered later.*



Based on our interviews, we found that parents and whānau wanted these sensitive topics to be taught later are concerned that they are ‘too sensitive’, especially for primary school children. Parents and whānau are concerned that exposure to these topics ‘too early’, especially if taught ‘too explicitly’, may confuse their children.

In relation to human reproduction, parents and whānau frequently told us that they want school to stay focused on the ‘scientific’ side of these topics in subjects such as biology, health, and anatomy. Other aspects can be covered at home when the child is ready, which is important because children mature at different rates.

Some parents are concerned that leaning about sex too early can give children an unnatural interest in it, even if research indicates that this is unlikely. International studies show that comprehensive RSE is more likely to delay students’ sexual activity, to encourage students to use of contraception when they become sexually active, and to have healthier relationships.⁷¹

“There’s a worry for parents with primary school-aged children, that their kids are growing up too fast. Whether it’s seeing stuff on social media, getting into TV shows that are before their time or not age appropriate, using words that aren’t appropriate or ‘adult words’. It can feel like their baby is growing up too fast.”

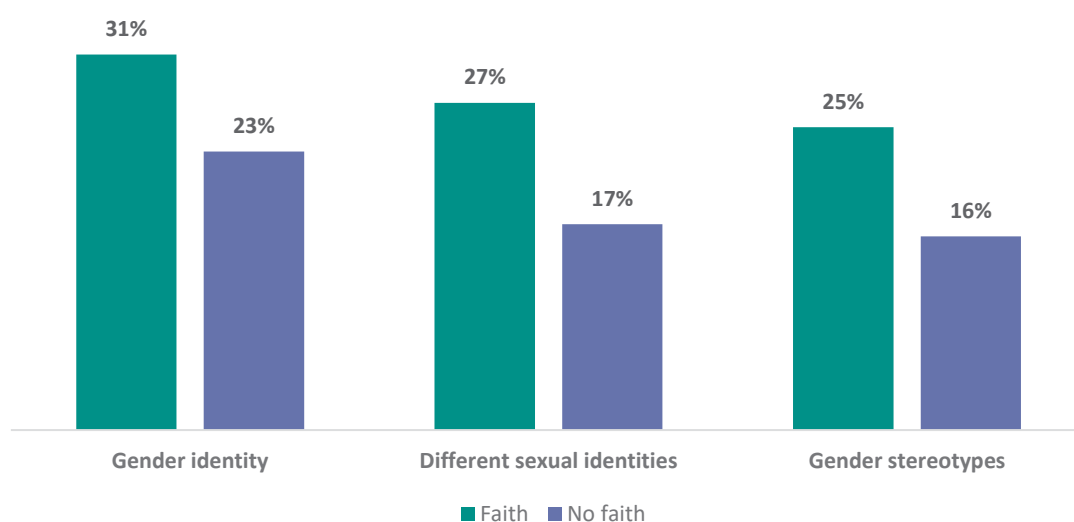
PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER

The minority of parents and whānau who think these sensitive topics should be taught earlier were of the view that 'the sooner the better' can help to normalise conversations, which is protective against misinformation and any feelings of shame that may arise for students.

Parents and whānau who practice a faith want less RSE.

Parents and whānau who practice a faith are more likely (compared to parents and whānau without a faith) to report their children are learning too much about topics such as gender identity, different sexual identities, and gender stereotypes.

Figure 30: *Parent and whānau views on whether students are learning too much on specific topics – by whether they practice a faith.*



We found that parents and whānau practising a faith are concerned about these topics because they think what is being covered conflicts with their own views and/or because they think these topics should be taught at home and not by school. They want to be able to educate their children at home in a way that does align with their values and beliefs. The potential for their child to be taught things they don't agree with is why some parents and whānau feel, very strongly, that the school should provide clear information on what is being taught, or the school should consult them so they can help decide what is covered.

“RSE themes will be different for families of different cultures, religions, and beliefs. Again, this is not able to be adequately dealt with by one curriculum or one teacher and should be left to the families to educate their children in this area.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU WITH FAITH



Short story: Responding to faith-based concerns about RSE

The Head of Department (HOD) for health at a large, urban secondary school shared how their school addressed concerns about RSE raised by Muslim families in their community.

A group of families had withdrawn their eight children from the school's RSE programme due to concerns relating to topics around gender and different sexual identities, and worries that content related to sex could encourage sex outside of marriage.^q Not having premarital sex is a core religious value of many in the Islamic faith.

To resolve this, the HOD partnered with a local Muslim community leader who acted as a representative to communicate the school's objectives and approach, and to help unpack the families' concerns. Together, they worked to ensure that the families were better informed about RSE content and delivery, and to better align it with the families' values.

- To address concerns about topics around gender and different sexual identities, the content was framed around empathy – that there are a range of people in the world and knowledge about them fits Muslim beliefs around being respectful and empathetic to people.
- To address concerns that sex-related teaching could promote sex outside of marriage, this topic was framed around making informed decisions (noting that education is a factor in the decision to have sex later in life), facts about sex, and discussions about consent and how to deal with peer pressure.

Through open communication and partnering with a member of the community, the HOD was able to address the families' concerns and build trust. As a result of this collaboration, children from these families are now participating in RSE alongside their peers.

Ethnicity does not significantly impact parent and whānau views about RSE topics.

Parents and whānau with different ethnicities do not have significantly different views on the amount of, and age RSE is taught. Māori, Pacific, and Asian parents were relatively similar when looking across topics, with only small or non-statistically significant differences found. There is an indication that MELAA parents are more likely to report their child is learning too much – although this difference is not statistically significant, due to the small number of MELAA parents who responded.

Parents and whānau of students from rainbow communities want their children to learn about all RSE topics earlier, especially topics on diverse identities and bodies.

Most parents and whānau who report that their children identify as a members of rainbow communities have secondary school-age children.

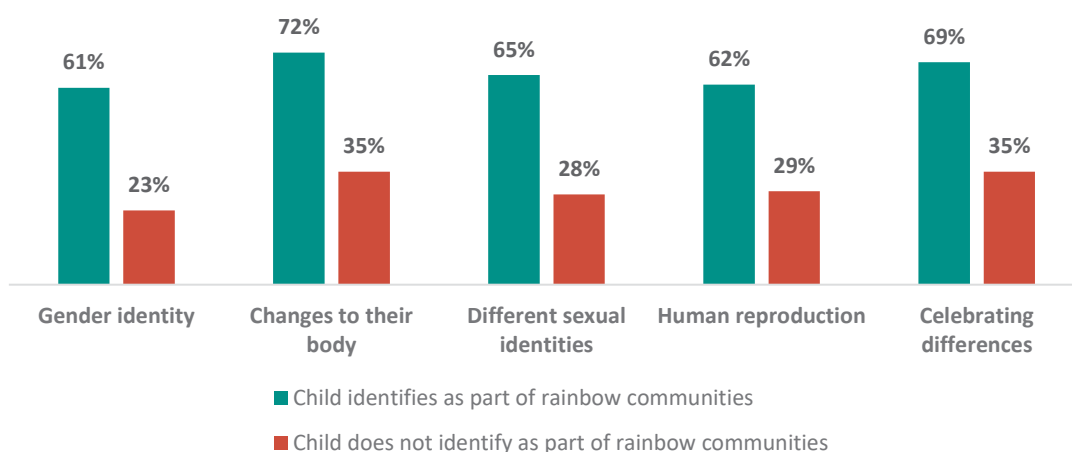
^q On expert advice, we note that premarital sex is a key issue for many Muslims and some orthodox faith communities, and that it is useful for leaders and teachers to be aware that different faiths and cultures have different views about the acceptability of premarital sex.

Across all topics, parents and whānau of students from rainbow communities are much more likely to report that they want their children to learn about all topics earlier compared to parents and whānau of non-rainbow students. This is particularly notable for topics on diverse identities and bodies.

Over six in 10 parents and whānau of students from rainbow communities want their children to learn to about gender identity earlier (61 percent), different sexual identities (65 percent), and human reproduction (62 percent) earlier. Seven in 10 parents and whānau of students from rainbow communities want their children to learn about changes to your body (72 percent) and celebrating differences (69 percent) earlier.

Parents and whānau of non-rainbow students are less likely to want their children to learn about these topics earlier.

Figure 31: *Parents and whānau who report they want their children to learn about RSE topics earlier, by whether or not their child identifies as part of rainbow communities.*



Parents and whānau of students from rainbow communities told us that they want coverage of these topics so that their children can be confident with their body and body image, feel empowered, and feel a sense of belonging by seeing themselves in their learning. Some of these parents and whānau note that teachers need to have good training and knowledge about sexuality and gender diversity to do this well – to support children navigating their identities and to ensure an inclusive classroom environment.

“The curriculum appears to be supportive of all genders and sexualities and informed consent, which works really well on the whole to us. It needs to ensure that there is tolerance towards people of different genders and sexualities in earlier years, such as in primary and intermediate school, because the lack of this at those levels leads to bullying and gender/sexuality phobias and persecution.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU OF STUDENT FROM RAINBOW COMMUNITIES



Parents and whānau of all students expressed concerns about bullying and safety for their children. Those with children from rainbow communities also shared their concerns about unsafe situations, such as bullying and cyberbullying, and also worry about homophobic and transphobic attitudes, and unwanted advances that their children might face. They want RSE teaching that equips their children with critical thinking and practical strategies to get out of harmful situations and seek help.

“I’d like them to learn more about consent, and what a loving relationship and sexual relationship should look like. I’d like them to learn more about addressing unwanted advances and what to do when they are uncomfortable with their peers, and outside peer groups.”

PARENT/WHĀNAU OF STUDENT FROM RAINBOW COMMUNITIES

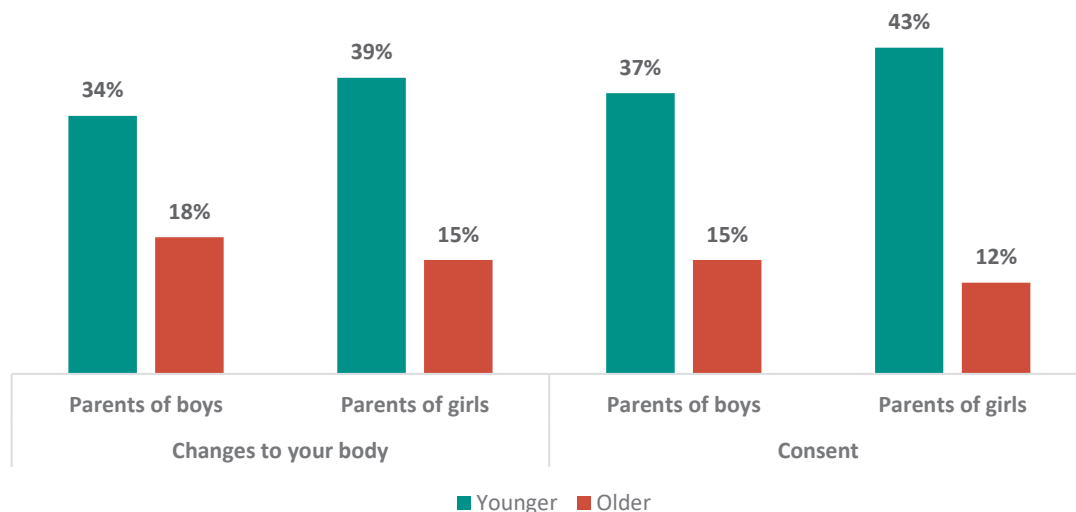
Parents and whānau of girls want their children to learn about changes to their body and consent earlier, than parents and whānau of boys.

There are some notable differences in how parents and whānau view certain RSE topics, depending on whether they have sons or daughters. The top areas of difference are consent and body changes.

Forty-three percent of parents and whānau of girls report they want their children to learn about consent earlier, compared to 37 percent of parents and whānau of boys.

Thirty-nine percent of parents and whānau of girls report they want their children to learn about changes to their body earlier, compared to 34 percent of parents and whānau of boys.

Figure 32: *Parents and whānau on when they want their children to learn about changes to their body and consent*



Parents and whānau of girls are supportive of these topics as they are of particular relevance to girls. Parents and whānau want teaching that helps their daughters understand their bodies and body parts, and how to take care of their bodies, for example through good personal hygiene. They also want RSE teaching to highlight puberty and its effect on both body and mood changes for girls. Parents also want a stronger focus on consent, to equip girls with knowledge and strategies to help keep themselves safe.

“More information about period products and hygiene options. Need more information about body changes due to puberty (hair and voice [are] not covered, changes to feelings [are] not discussed)”

PARENT/WHĀNAU OF A GIRL

We know from our interviews that parents and whānau of boys are concerned about what their children are exposed to online, including pornography and violent video games. Parents want teaching on ways to regulate and managing big emotions, dealing with external pressures, and respect for others.

“For me to have ourselves or the school engage with our kids before they learn from the Internet is important. It's sad that it feels younger and younger but knowing what gentle, safe relationships are, before [they see] porn examples [of intimate relationships] is important to me. Maybe introducing a 'response to porn and internet scam' curriculum for primary kids?”

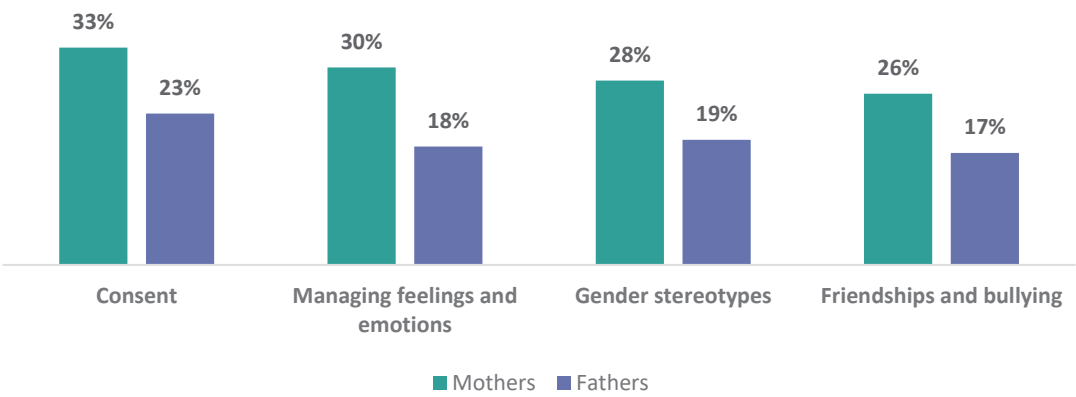
PARENT/WHĀNAU OF A BOY

Many mothers want more RSE, while many fathers want less.

We surveyed parents and whānau individually and found that there is a difference between what mothers and fathers' report. Mothers are more likely than fathers to report their child has learnt too little about all topic areas. The largest differences are for managing feelings and emotions, consent, gender stereotypes, and friendships and bullying.

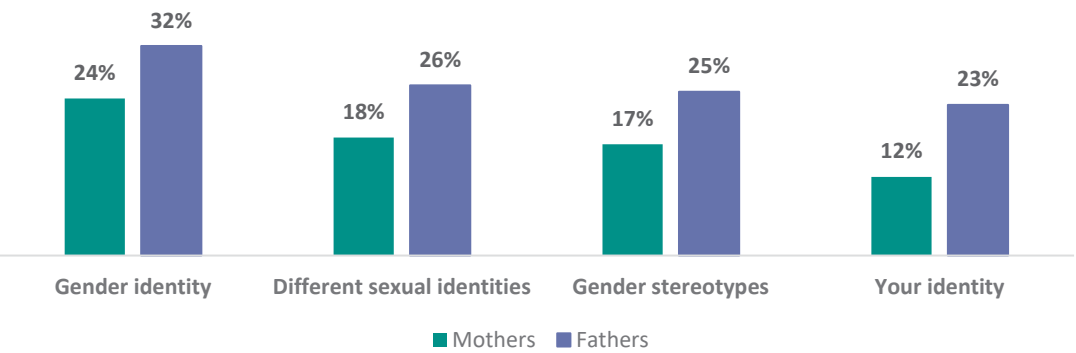
^r We have referred to 'mothers and fathers' in this section for simplicity, however readers should note that 'mothers' also refers to other female and female-identifying caregivers and family and whānau members, and 'fathers' will also refer to other male and male-identifying caregivers and family and whānau members.

Figure 33: *Mother and father views on topics that their children are learning too little about*



Fathers are more likely to believe their child is learning too much, particularly about gender identity, different sexual identities, personal identities, and gender stereotypes.

Figure 34: *Mother and father views on topics that their children are learning too much about*



We found that mothers usually want RSE to include more teaching on sexual health, especially on contraception and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including how and where their child can seek help. Mothers also want more RSE content focusing on consent and sexual abuse (including coercion). These are all topics that support their child’s health and safety. This finding aligns with other studies that have found mothers are more likely to describe themselves as protective than fathers and to worry about a range of issues.⁷²

Mothers are also more likely to be aware of the risks and consequences for their children by a lack of understanding about consent – a third of women in Aotearoa New Zealand have experienced physical, sexual, or coercive violence from an intimate partner in their lifetimes; and the rate is even higher for Māori women (wāhine Māori), Pacific women, disabled women, and rainbow communities.⁷³

“More about different forms of consent and different ways consent is withdrawn. That kind of stuff. This stuff was never taught to us in school and so many of my age group are victims of sexual abuse and worse.”

MOTHER

Through our interviews and surveys we found that fathers are more likely to think their child is learning too much about RSE because they can place greater importance on parents as ‘first teachers,’ place greater value on the teaching of facts than talking about emotions and feelings, and prefer teaching that aligns with traditional family values. This fits with the traditional role of fathers in some communities as head of the family.⁷⁴

The difference between mothers and fathers’ views on RSE may also be explained by a political gender divide. US Gallup data shows that, historically, the sexes have been spread roughly equally across liberal and conservative world views, but a divide has developed and women aged 18 to 30 are now 30 percentage points more liberal than their male contemporaries.⁷⁵

“I object to the gender ideology that has been incorporated into this curriculum. I would like to see a more traditional approach taken.”

FATHER

Conclusion

There is overall parent and whānau support for RSE, although parents and whānau have different views about the amount that should be taught, and the age that different topics should be taught. The main areas of difference are around what is covered at primary school, particularly on more sensitive topics including human reproduction, gender identity and gender stereotypes. There is also a consistent interest by parents and whānau for more to be taught on friendships and bullying, emotions and personal safety, and for these topics to be taught earlier.

In the next chapter, we share the experiences of schools in teaching RSE, including the challenges they face in managing consultation and relationships with parents and whānau on topics where there may be disagreement.



Chapter 6: Is teaching RSE manageable for schools?

There are unique requirements relating to RSE for schools around consultation and curriculum development, as well as sensitive content that can cause challenges for schools. There are also challenges around teacher confidence and risks to school's relationships with their school community.

In this chapter, we cover the challenges around consultation, how comfortable and capable teachers are, and whether schools find the curriculum, guidelines and other resources helpful.

RSE has unique requirements for schools on consultation and curriculum development, and the topic can be challenging for some teachers depending on their background, the school context, and experience in teaching the topic.

In this chapter, we looked at:

- interviews and focus groups with board chairs, school leaders and teachers, and relevant stakeholders
- on-site visits at 20 schools
- our surveys of board chairs and presiding members, school leaders, and teachers
- international and local evidence about school experiences in teaching RSE.

This chapter sets out what we found about:

- 1) schools' awareness and support for consultation on RSE
- 2) experiences in consulting the school community (as required in legislation)
- 3) experiences in delivering RSE for leaders
- 4) the ways in which schools are delivering RSE
- 5) experiences of teachers
- 6) how useful schools find the curriculum and RSE guidelines.

What we found: An overview

Most, but not all schools are meeting the consultation requirement.

Almost two-thirds of board chairs (63 percent) know they are required to consult every two years, but just over a quarter (28 percent) don't know they are required to consult every two years. Concerningly, almost one in 10 board chairs (9 percent) are not at all aware of their requirement to consult their community on how RSE is delivered.

Worryingly, almost one in 10 board chairs (8 percent) last consulted their community *more* than two years ago. One-fifth of board chairs (20 percent) *don't know* when their school last consulted.

School leaders' views on consultation are split. Almost half of school leaders do not think schools should be required to consult on RSE.

Almost half of school leaders (47 percent) do not think that schools should be required to consult with their communities on RSE delivery. This group is made up of two viewpoint groups: one third (35 percent) say that it should be compulsory, but schools should not have to do it themselves, and 12 percent say that consultation should not be required at all.

Schools find consulting difficult and divisive.

Almost half of school leaders (45 percent) find consultation challenging. The main aspects of consultation schools find challenging are balancing different views, managing influences outside the school community, and getting community engagement.

Rural schools and schools with a high Māori roll find consultation particularly challenging.

Rural schools find it particularly challenging to maintain relationships with parents and whānau during consultation. Over four in 10 rural schools (44 percent) find maintaining relations challenging compared to one third of urban schools (34 percent). Schools with a high Māori roll find it more challenging to consult with their community (52 percent compared to 39 percent). New principals find it more challenging (60 percent find it challenging).

Schools most commonly deliver RSE as modules, but nearly a quarter deliver RSE on an ad-hoc basis.

Schools have flexibility in how and when they deliver RSE. They can deliver it at any time they want through the year through modules, by integrating it across the curriculum, or as they think it is needed. This means there is variation in the RSE education students receive.

A third of school leaders find it difficult to deliver RSE.

RSE can have content that is difficult for schools to navigate. One-third of school leaders (32 percent) find delivering RSE hard. However, less than one in 10 (8 percent) report it takes up too much of their time.

Most schools are using teachers from their school to deliver RSE, either exclusively or in combination with external providers.

Over half (57 percent) of schools use teachers from their school to teach RSE. Just over a third (37 percent) use a mix of teachers and external providers to teach RSE. Only a small proportion only use external providers (6 percent).

Schools use a range of resources and agencies to guide their RSE programme. Most use the health curriculum, and nearly two thirds use the RSE guidelines.

The two most common resources schools use to guide their RSE programme are the health curriculum and the RSE guidelines. Four in five school leaders (82 percent) report they use the health curriculum to guide the content of their RSE programme. Nearly two thirds (63 percent) use the RSE guidelines, but 37 percent do not.

Leaders report most teachers have the capability they need to teach RSE, although many find it stressful, particularly in primary school.

Almost nine in 10 school leaders report the teachers at their school are capable to teach RSE but almost one-third (32 percent) of teachers find teaching RSE stressful. Primary (37 percent) and intermediate (39 percent) teachers are more likely to find it stressful than secondary school (20 percent) teachers.

Most schools find the curriculum and RSE guidelines useful.

Over four in five school leaders find the curriculum (79 percent) and RSE guidelines (85 percent) useful for developing their school approach to RSE. Teachers who *don't* use the RSE guidelines are more stressed.

In the following sections we look at each of these findings in more detail.

1) Are schools aware of the requirement to consult on RSE?

We asked board chairs and presiding members^s of school boards whether they are aware of the requirement to consult with their community on the health curriculum, including RSE.

Most school boards are aware of their requirement to consult (91 percent), but not all are aware it is required to happen at least once every two years.

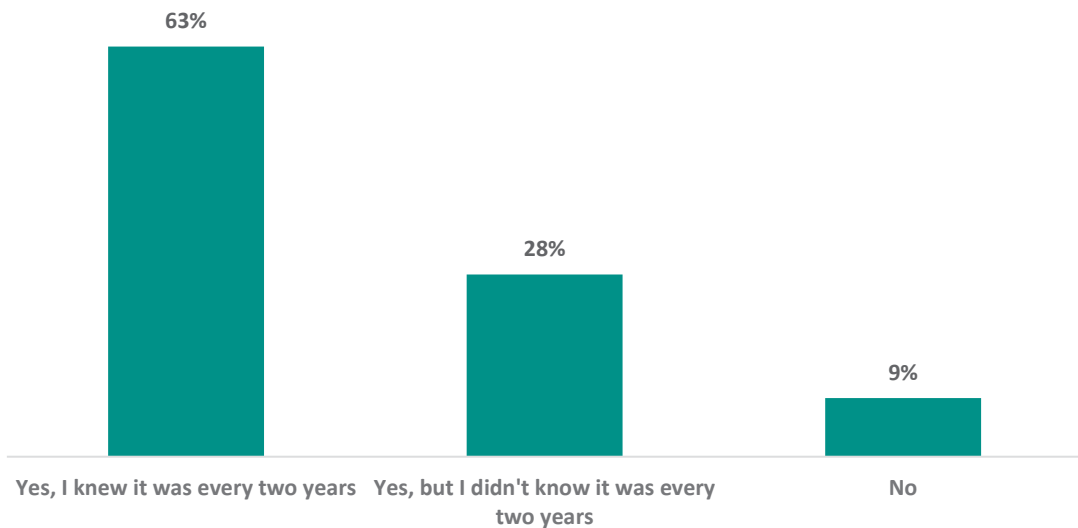
Schools are required to consult on the needs of their community for their health programme (including RSE). Board chairs find out about this requirement by referring to the Ministry of Education guidelines regarding consultation or working with principals.

Concerningly, almost one in 10 board chairs (9 percent) are not at all aware of their requirement to consult their community on how RSE is delivered.

Almost two-thirds of board chairs (63 percent) know they are required to consult at least once every two years, but just over a quarter (28 percent) are not aware of this timing requirement.

^s For simplicity, both *board chairs* and *presiding members* are referred to as 'board chairs' in this section.

Figure 35: *School board chairs know they are required to consult with their community on RSE*



“The principal would signal ahead that consultation is coming up. And then of course we take action on how input is going to be sought.”

BOARD CHAIR AT A SECONDARY SCHOOL

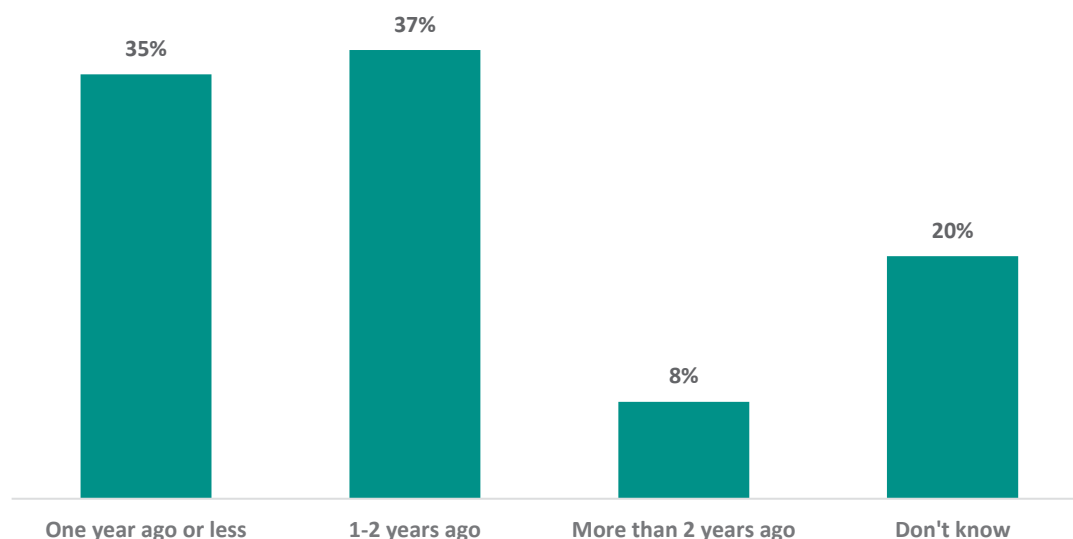
Most, but not all schools are consulting on RSE every two years.

We also asked board chairs *when* their school last consulted their community on the health curriculum, including RSE.

Almost three-quarters (72 percent) of board chairs report their school last consulted their community on RSE within the last two years (35 percent report they consulted their community one year ago or less, and 37 percent report they consulted 1-2 years ago).

Worryingly almost one in 10 (8 percent) last consulted their community more than two years ago. One-fifth of board chairs (20 percent) don't know when their school last consulted.

Figure 36: *Board chairs report their school last consulted on the health curriculum, including RSE*



Some schools don't consult every two years when they don't know, or have lost track of, the timing of the last consultation. School boards are less likely to know when the last consultation took place if board chairs are new, or if both the board chair and the principal are new to the school.

“We’ve had new people on board, and a lot of them haven’t been on boards before. So they might not know about process and things.”

BOARD CHAIR AT A SECONDARY SCHOOL

It is possible that some board members responding to our survey may not have been able to recall when their last consultation round simply because it wasn't memorable – for example if there was little or no feedback from their community, or if the process went very smoothly.

2) Is there support for consultation on RSE?

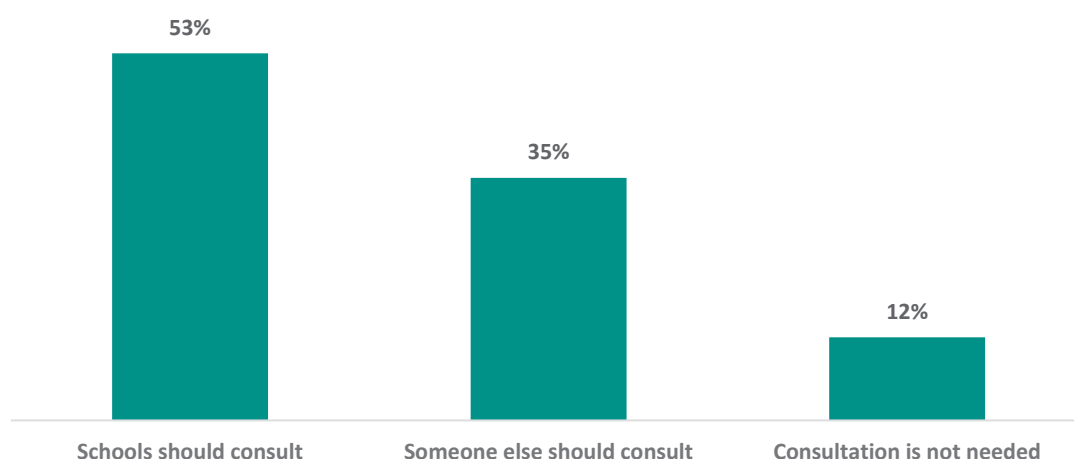
School leaders' views on consultation are split. Almost half of school leaders do not think schools should be required to consult on RSE.

Forty-seven percent of school leaders *do not* think that schools should be required to consult on the delivery of their health curriculum (which includes RSE). This group is made up of two different views:

- Thirty-five percent of leaders say that consulting should be compulsory but that schools should not have to do it themselves.
- Twelve percent of leaders say that consultation should not be required at all.

Fifty-three percent of school leaders think that schools *should* be required to consult, in the way that is currently required.

Figure 37: *School leaders support for consultation on RSE*



ERO consistently heard that schools see the importance of informing parents and whānau about what is or isn't included in their RSE teaching, especially where parents and whānau are receiving incorrect or incomplete information from sources outside the school. However, school leaders are split on whether this information needs to part of a consultation, or whether it can be shared in other ways.

Leaders who don't think schools should be required to consult with parents and whānau are of the view that RSE should be treated like other aspects of the curriculum. This involves schools using their professional judgement to design course content based on the learning that matters identified in the national curriculum.

School leaders are most often against consulting on RSE because the process can be divisive, between the school and the community, and between different groups within the community. Consultation can also result in content being removed from RSE that schools believe is important for students to understand.

“Why do we consult? We don’t ask what we should teach in maths. It makes it too hard when we have a curriculum that we are expected to teach, but also the opportunity to withdraw students, and what are we supposed to do with those withdrawn students? It also makes for a really divisive time.”

SCHOOL LEADER

“[Gender identity content was removed] to appease, to calm, and to ensure that RSE continued in our school.”

PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

If consultation is required, some school leaders want it to be a national consultation led by the Ministry of Education, or they want greater standardisation for school consultations. It was suggested that greater standardisation can be achieved by the Ministry providing a template that all schools can use. School leaders also want further guidance on how to run the consultation process as support for all the staff involved. Making sure RSE consultations run smoothly is critical for maintaining trusting relationships with parents and whānau.

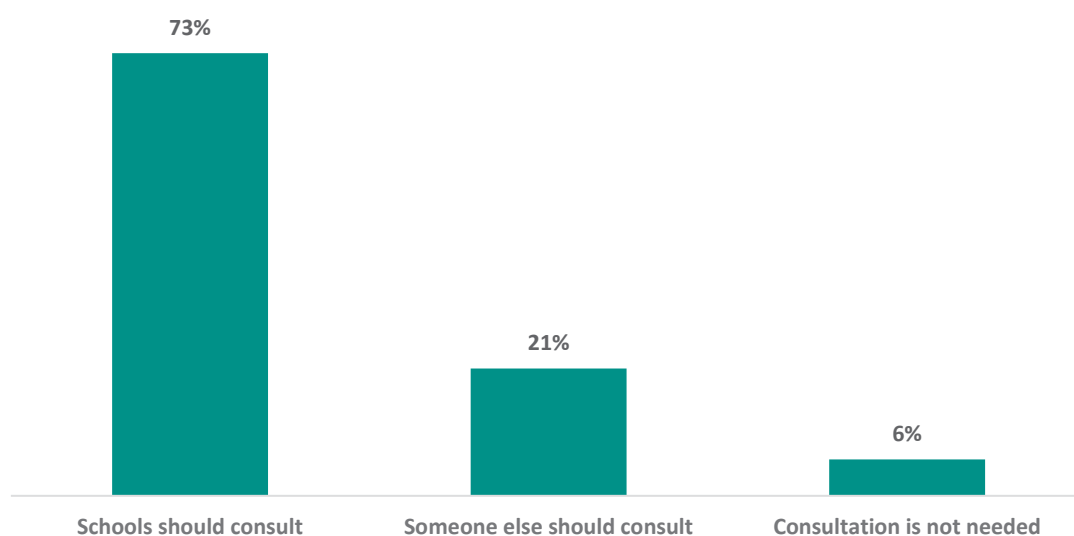
“If you have a lot of trust, you have to live up to that trust”

SCHOOL LEADER

Some school leaders think it is ‘absolutely essential’ to consult with the community because they want to know their community and be sure that the school is working for their community.

Board chairs are more supportive of consultation, though almost three in 10¹ board chairs do not think consultation should be compulsory.

Twenty-seven percent of board chairs do not think schools should be required to consult, and 73 percent of board chairs think that consultation should be compulsory.

Figure 38: *Board chairs support for consultation on RSE*

Boards are generally supportive of consultation, seeing it as a crucial process so that schools can engage with their community, especially to discuss *why* RSE should be taught. They think this type of engagement helps with maintaining transparent and trusting relationships between schools and communities.

“Parents have to have a lot of trust and faith in the teacher that’s handling the curriculum, presenting this material, and also a lot of faith and trust in the school and what the health and relationship curriculum is.”

BOARD PRESIDING MEMBER, SECONDARY SCHOOL

On this basis, we heard that some boards would want to consult with their communities even if consultation wasn’t required.

3) Is consulting on RSE manageable for schools?

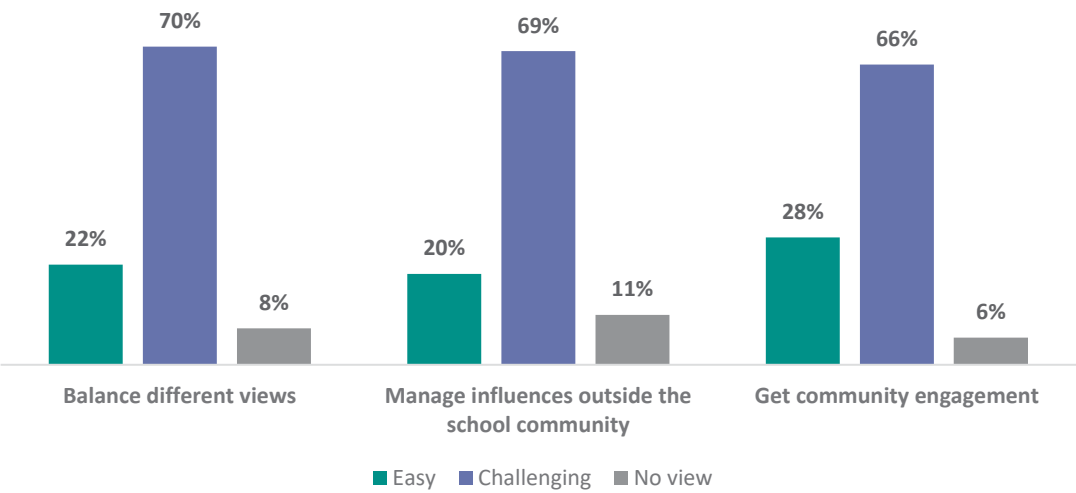
We asked school leaders how easy it is to consult the community on RSE. Consulting on the Health and Physical Education learning area of the curriculum (which includes RSE) is the only area they are required to consult on. Consultation is the responsibility of the school board, although it is often conducted by school leaders.

Schools find consulting difficult and divisive.

Almost half of school leaders (45 percent) find consultation challenging or very challenging. Half (50 percent) find consultation easy, and 5 percent have no view.

The main aspects of consultation schools find challenging are balancing different views (70 percent), managing influences outside the school community (69 percent), and getting community engagement (66 percent).

Figure 39: *School leader views on how challenging they find aspects of consultation*



The main challenges, however, relate to vocal groups that disrupt the consultation process. These groups have been most vocal about issues about genders and sexualities and are ‘triggered by even the mention’ of these terms. Their contributions can introduce misinformation into the consultation process. We heard from schools that these vocal parents and whānau are sometimes influenced, or led, by groups outside the school community, groups that are well-known for their views on genders and sexualities. We also heard that objections to RSE content is increasing, reflecting what is being seen globally.

“It’s gotten worse. There has been much more pushback [from parents and whānau] in the most recent consult than the time before. It’s the same resource, but WAY more pushback.”

INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL LEADER

Vocal groups at consultation events can drive the discussion to the extremes, and this makes it difficult to hear from parents and whānau ‘in the middle.’ We found that schools are finding it difficult to build trust with the community through consultation processes like these. In fact, trust is more likely to be broken.

“[RSE consultation] puts us and our boards in a really uncomfortable position.”

PRINCIPAL

“You can be as transparent as you like, so respectful and patient. Your school's programme is still ripped apart.”

DEPUTY PRINCIPAL

Due to the challenges posed by consultation over RSE content, boards and school leaders are concerned about the safety of school staff, especially because staff haven't had the necessary training. Schools tell us they want clearer guidance on how to run a good consultation, or would prefer to use external facilitators.

“When you're faced with the uncertainty of what some quite extreme views are going to bring to the table, or how people might conduct themselves in the meeting or how they might try to derail it or say things that are really inappropriate, I think it makes you create a few more checks and balances around how you're going to run that kind of consultation process.”

SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

ERO heard many examples from schools, of community consultation experiences that were worrying and harmful for teachers and leaders – and that did not result in positive impacts for students' RSE learning. Across these many and varied experiences, we heard that negative responses outweighed and overshadowed the views of the majority of parents and whānau. Often, people not directly connected to the school would be involved, through advocacy organisations or social media movements. In many cases, the consultation experience resulted in schools reducing content.

“I believe that the school, with respect to its RSE education, has gone backwards because of the process. Now we're in a situation where we've lost ground – fear from our staff that they're going to get slammed, and heightened fear in the community that the school is going to slip stuff in.”

BOARD PRESIDING MEMBER AT A PRIMARY SCHOOL

“[School leaders] are saying, even if it's only 3 percent of our parent population [that object to some RSE content], they'll cut it out – just so there's no pushback.”

DEPUTY PRINCIPAL AT AN INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

“Teacher confidence has been eroded by the spotlight on this area...
We veer away from anything that might look like ‘sex ed’.”

INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL LEADER

Short story: Consultation processes result in less RSE learning for students

We heard from leaders at three different schools we visited (two primary and one secondary), how they had removed content from their RSE curriculum due to backlash from elements of the school community, and wider community. These experiences were echoed by a range of stakeholders and experts that we interviewed, who shared that this is a common experience for schools they have worked with.

In one example from ERO's site visits, the board chair at a large primary school told us how sudden backlash from the community due to the spread of misinformation meant the school had to remove RSE content that previously had not caused any concern from their parent and whānau community.

“The school has lost [the] confidence, freedom to do what we were doing.”

BOARD CHAIR

We found that in-person consultations are challenging for larger schools, due to the logistical challenges of arranging and running them with large numbers of parents and whānau. Schools have tried a range of other methods for consultation, including online surveys, but these don't work well with communities that poor access to the internet and/or have low levels of digital literacy.

Short stories: Large-scale consultation at large schools results in police intervention

A large, urban secondary school experienced ongoing pressure about their RSE programme, including disruption and aggression toward staff which resulted in police intervention.

As part of their consultation process, the school organised an information evening for parents and whānau, which took a month of preparations. Although the majority of their parent and whānau community was supportive of RSE, leaders and the school board were concerned that a ‘vocal minority’ were spreading misinformation, which caused high levels of anxiety across leaders, teachers, and the school board. They had been experiencing ongoing and increasing pressure about their RSE programme, and became concerned about the safety of school staff.

Leaders involved the local police in their planning for the RSE information evening. The school offered parents and whānau an opportunity to talk to staff, but deliberately chose not to hold a group Q&A session to avoid escalating tension. Even so, a small group of attendees caused unrest and repeatedly dominated discussions, which meant that other parents and whānau present were not able to ask their own questions about what was being taught. The police had to remove aggressive attendees.

Reflecting on the consultation process, this school's principal expressed frustration, observing how a few disruptors repeatedly tried to redirect discussions and rally others against RSE. The school had also attempted to channel outside interest in their RSE programme in a manageable way by constructing an online survey where these people could share their views and concerns. However, this was not a successful strategy, with respondents continuing to contact the school and insist on further discussions.

We heard from a **large primary** school how large-scale misinformation and social media campaigns led to community backlash about their school's RSE programme. People from outside the school community who opposed RSE had been handing out fliers to parents and students during pick-up and drop-off times.

Board members told us how a board meeting was 'crashed' by dozens of people, many not directly related to the school and from an older generation. Misinformation had circulated that board would 'certify' their RSE programme. Even though the meeting was not intended as consultation, people were granted limited speaking rights. However, a board member described how the meeting then "descended into bigotry and hate speech... it was very unpleasant."

Soon police had to be called as board members and school leaders feared for their safety.

“A lot of it was literally unsafe – having to shut down a board meeting and walk out of our own school to de-escalate a situation that was going to turn into fisty-cuffs.”

Our findings around consultation difficulties align with the evidence base, which shows that 'navigating community concerns' is a key challenge for Aotearoa New Zealand primary leaders and teachers. This challenge was found to be related to three issues: people's misunderstanding of RSE, parental opposition, and balancing different perspectives.⁷⁶

Aotearoa New Zealand research on secondary teachers' experiences found that, for 38 percent of respondents, feedback from school community consultation was a *barrier* to effective RSE practice in their school.⁷⁷

Rural schools and schools with a high Māori roll find consultation particularly challenging.

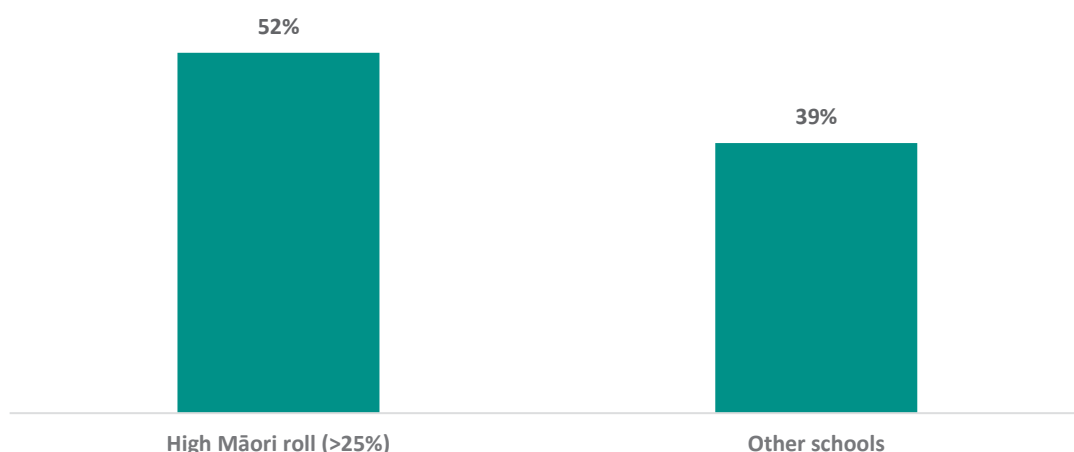
Rural schools find it challenging to maintain relationships with parents and whānau during consultation. Forty-four percent of rural schools find maintaining relations challenging compared to 34 percent of urban schools.

Figure 40: *School leader views on whether it is challenging to maintain relationships with parents and whānau, by rural or urban school*



Schools with a high Māori roll find it more challenging to consult with their community, with 52 percent finding it challenging or very challenging compared to 39 percent of other schools.

Figure 41: *School leader views on whether it is challenging to consult with their community, by Māori roll*



For **high Māori roll schools**, we heard that the challenge is around getting engagement, with schools finding it hard to get responses from whānau Māori in their consultation processes. We heard that where whānau Māori do not actively engage in consultation processes (not necessarily related to RSE), particularly when there is a larger proportion of Māori on the roll, this is an indicator that more attention is required by the school to find better methods of building trust.

“[School leaders] have to be adaptable and creative – and often they’re not like that, they’re very ‘template’. Whereas it has to be specific to your kura [school]. You need to figure it out, why you don’t know your students, or your whānau...”

TE AO MĀORI SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER



Whānau Māori can also be reluctant to engage with RSE-related consultation in particular, because of fears of being misunderstood, ‘sharing too much’, or ‘being seen in a certain way’. Again, this is related to issues of trust between whānau and the school. We heard that careful consideration of who runs consultation, and clarifying to whānau Māori who will be teaching RSE content to their children, can help with trust-building.

“We can be shy when it comes to these topics... Having the right person to run the [RSE] programme is vital”

TE AO MĀORI SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER



We heard that where schools do this well, it is valuable to engage the community earlier and use direct methods. Schools told us that digital engagements, such as online surveys, haven’t worked so well. Engagement with Māori whānau has worked best when it is in-person (kanohi ki te kanohi) – for example one school held a hui at the marae – or through one-to-one telephone conversations with whānau. These direct methods work better but they are more resource intensive for schools.

ERO’s regression analysis shows that schools with a high Māori roll find it difficult to consult with the community regardless of their rurality and school size.

While higher-Māori school rolls experience challenges around getting *enough* community engagement, the opposite appears to be true for rural schools.

Through our interviews we found that **rural schools** experience unique challenges around community consultations, as they can involve the wider community, not only school parents and whānau. This is because rural communities often don’t separate themselves in this way. They tend to be more tightly connected. For example in small rural towns where ‘everyone knows everyone’, people are interested in issues even if they, or their children, aren’t directly impacted.

This collective approach can mean schools have to manage responses from the wider community when consulting on RSE, as they do for other consultations. When community responses are particularly negative for RSE, schools have struggled to manage this. For example, we heard about a vocal group in one rural community responding as soon as the consultation was publicised by picketing at the school, and handing out misinformation to teachers and students in the form of leaflets. Another rural school had to call the police to calm a situation at their consultation process.

Short stories: Worrying community consultation experiences at rural schools

Leaders and the board chair from a small, rural primary school told us about their recent experience consulting with their community about RSE delivery, for the first time. The principal affirmed that he considered it a 'must' for the school to bring in this important area of teaching and learning – and that doing so came with significant challenges for him and the school.

“[RSE] is an important part of the curriculum and the school had not taught this before – when it should have – and so being the first time, there was a lot of misinformation created by some in the school community as to what was being taught.”

PRINCIPAL

The principal and board chair shared that because the topic of the consultation was RSE, some of their parent and whānau community felt they didn't have to act professionally or respectfully when giving feedback. This included personal insults, persistent and abusive phone calls, and being approached without warning outside of school hours. We heard how much of the feedback from these parents and whānau related to anti-transgender advocacy groups and regularly referenced the board's 'secret agenda.' The experience made the board chair consider leaving the role, for their own safety and wellbeing.

“It was an actual minefield.”

DEPUTY PRINCIPAL

Similarly to many other teachers and leaders that ERO talked to, the principal of this school told us that the school's RSE curriculum had 'gone backwards' as a result of the consultation. The 'open' rather than mandated curriculum had resulted in *more* stress, fear, and misinformed objections, with the result of *less* RSE teaching and learning in their classes. We heard that this did not serve their students, which disappointed the principal and board chair personally.

“If I'm honest, I can't see how any of it worked. I think not having some programme or something from the Ministry of Education did us a massive disservice within the school.”

BOARD CHAIR

The experience was incredibly challenging for the school community, with a wider impact beyond RSE, affecting the parent and whānau views and trust in the school, with people questioning other decisions of the board.

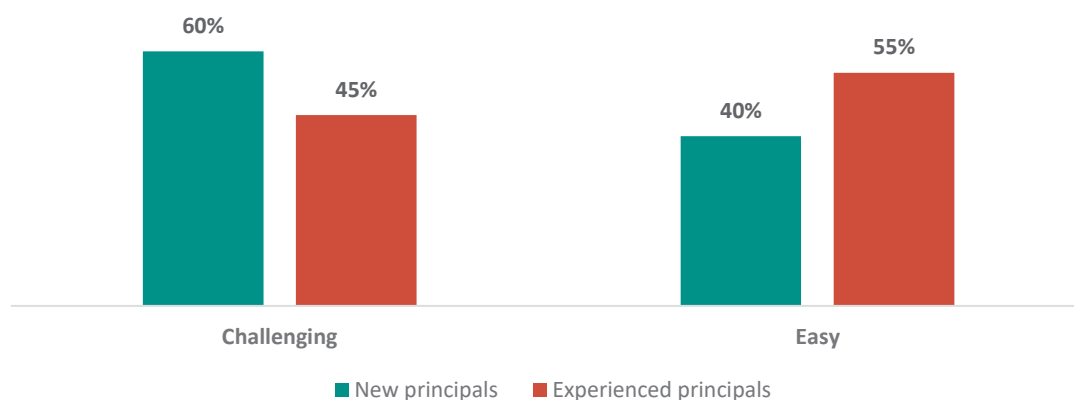
A principal at a large, rural primary school told us about being physically intimidated and verbally abused while walking with her family, following a backlash about her school's RSE curriculum related to content around gender. Many of the people who acted in extreme ways – some from outside the school community – were already associated with each other through anti-vaccine and anti-Government movements.

After this the principal felt nervous about going out in public and had to take time off from the role to recover. "I couldn't go to the supermarket, I couldn't go to the beach, I couldn't go to the pub, because everywhere I went, I was either accosted very nicely about some things, or accosted in a mean way. The lack of support that we encountered... was horrendous."

New principals are 1.3 times more likely to find consulting the community challenging than experienced principals.

Six in 10 new principals^t (60 percent) report they find consulting with the community on RSE challenging, compared to just over four in 10 (45 percent) experienced principals.

Figure 42: *How easy or challenging principals find consulting with the community*



Community consultation, if done well, requires the principal to liaise closely with the school board and Heads of Department, and to have an understanding of the community. We know from our previous research that new principals are not always well prepared for all aspects of their new role, including not being prepared for working with the diverse community of parents and whānau, working with board members, or ensuring the delivery of high-quality teaching practices.⁷⁸ These earlier findings underpin what we found about delivering RSE.

^t New principals are principals with less than two years' experience.

We found that new principals can find consultation and implementing RSE more challenging compared to principals who have been in the role for longer. In particular, new principals find running consultations difficult when they have to manage opposing views. They believe that the Ministry should be running these types of consultations or New Principals would like more guidance from the Ministry on how to run them within the school. They also find it challenging knowing how to support teachers who don't feel confident to deliver RSE, or aspects of it.

“We need support and backing of the school from the Ministry so that the community understand it is national curriculum, carefully developed and carefully implemented.”

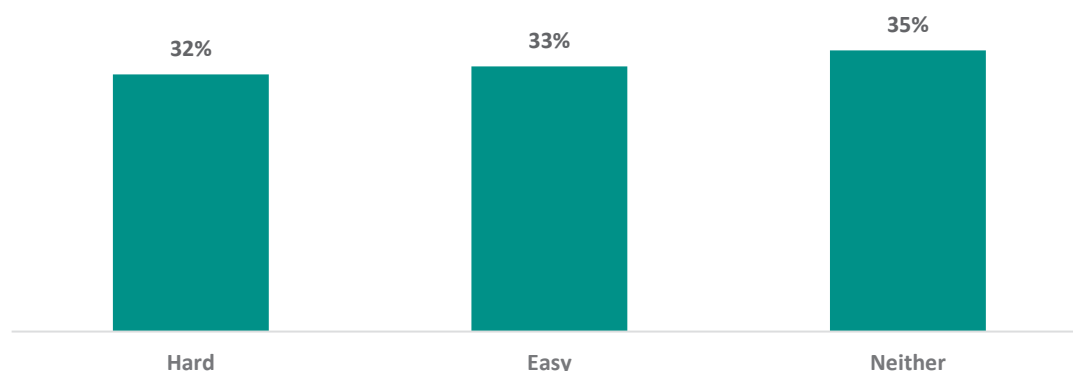
NEW PRINCIPAL

4) Do school leaders find it difficult to deliver RSE?

A third of school leaders find it difficult to deliver RSE.

RSE can have content that is difficult for schools to navigate. One-third of school leaders (32 percent) find delivering RSE hard, and one-third find it easy (33 percent). Just over one-third (35 percent) find it neither hard nor easy to deliver RSE.

Figure 43: *How difficult school leaders find delivering RSE*



We found that school leaders find it difficult navigating what to teach and how based on the results of the community consultation, to ensure that the content is inclusive and comprehensive, as well as age appropriate. School leaders find the requirement to consult at least once every two years an additional challenge, as this can mean they have to re-design their RSE courses each time to align with the wishes of the new parents and whānau for each year group.

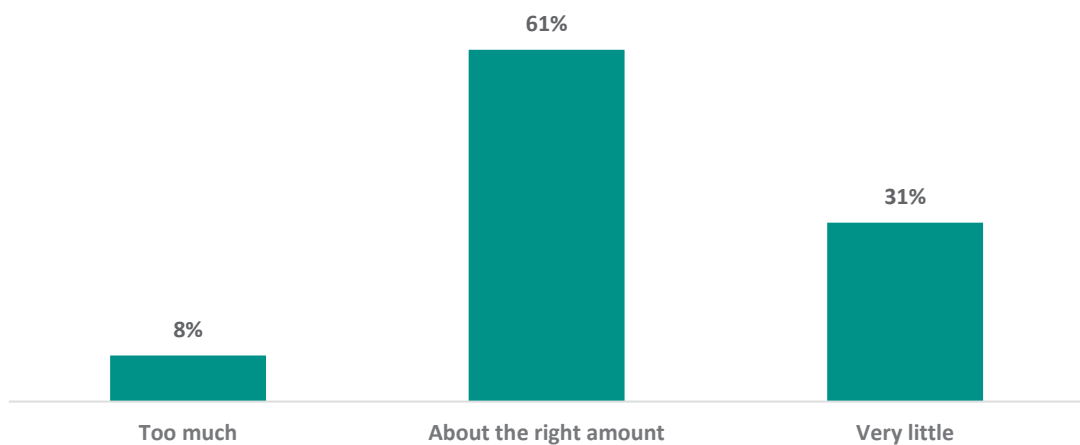
“The RSE was just thrown at schools. Yes, there was the consultation side of things but it certainly has strained relationships with families at schools. This is extra stress that schools just don't need.”

SCHOOL LEADER

While it is often difficult, most school leaders do not find RSE takes up a lot of their time.

We asked school leaders how much of their time consulting on and delivering RSE takes up. Most leaders do not find it overly time consuming. Six in 10 (61 percent) report RSE takes up about the right amount of their time, and three in 10 (31 percent) report it takes up very little of their time. However, for some leaders it is more difficult, nearly one in 10 (8 percent) report it takes up too much of their time.

Figure 44: *How much of school leader's time RSE takes up*



School leaders play a role in the consultation process, and this takes up their time but is manageable within their wider role. School leaders can be directly involved in the consultation with parents and whānau, and indirectly by designing and collating data and feedback, to be shared back to the community. While the consultation often requires changes to RSE course material, as detailed above, this is again manageable. However, school leaders who are new on the job can find that RSE takes up more time.

“The current model for consultation at our school works well. However, it does put a lot of pressure on boards and school leadership to consult every two years, on a minor part of the wider curriculum.”

SCHOOL LEADER



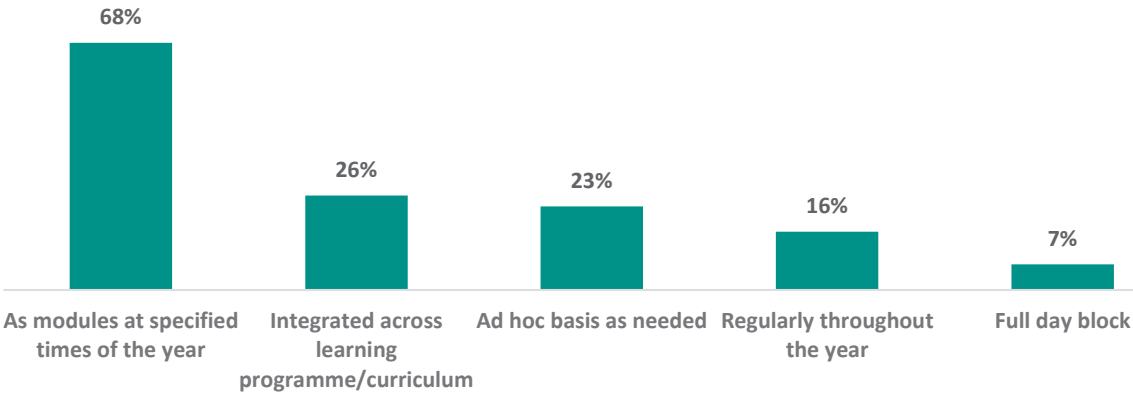
5) How do schools deliver RSE?

Schools most commonly deliver RSE as modules, but nearly a quarter deliver RSE on an ad-hoc basis.

Schools have flexibility in how and when they deliver RSE. They can deliver it at any time they want through the year through modules, by integrating it across the curriculum, or as they think it is needed. This means there is variation in the RSE education students receive.

- Sixty-eight percent of schools deliver RSE as modules at specified times of the year.
- Twenty-six percent of schools integrate RSE across their learning programme/curriculum.
- Twenty-three percent deliver RSE on an ad-hoc basis, as needed.
- Sixteen percent of schools deliver their RSE lessons regularly throughout the year.
- Seven percent of schools deliver RSE in full day block(s).

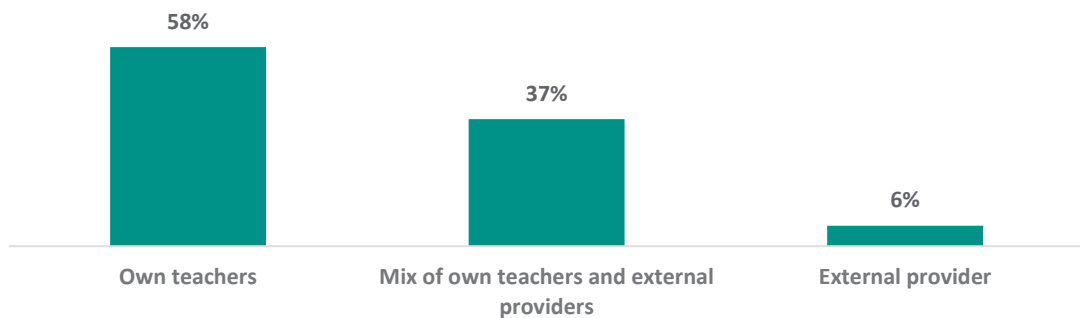
Figure 45: *School leaders report when they deliver RSE lessons at their school*



Most schools are using their own teachers to deliver RSE, either exclusively or in combination with external providers.

Schools can deliver RSE by using their own teachers, external providers, or a mix of these.

Over half (58 percent) of schools use teachers from their school to teach RSE. Just over a third (37 percent) use a mix of teachers and external providers to teach RSE. Only a small proportion only use external providers (6 percent). This finding aligns with research that found two-thirds (67 percent) of primary teachers did not use external providers to provide support for RSE.⁷⁹

Figure 46: *School leaders report how they deliver RSE*

We found that schools tend to use their own teachers because they think it is the best way to ensure RSE sessions are delivered routinely, and as part of the curriculum. Schools told us that they also want to ensure there is a trusting relationship with the students, which they think is important for providing a safe environment and enabling open discussions.

“Trusting relationships between students and teachers is important. We need to know what students want to know.”

TEACHER

This finding aligns with what students told us, which is that they usually prefer their own teachers to cover RSE topics because they have a trusting relationship with them. Students also told us that it helps when their teachers are confident in delivering sensitive content, are open to discussion, but set firm ground rules for this.

However, for some of the more sensitive RSE topics, or topics that require specialist knowledge, schools do sometimes use external providers. Schools noted some downsides to this, including that because presenters are not teachers, they sometimes deliver content in ways that aren't relatable to students. Students also told us that some external providers can be repetitive.

To mitigate the risks of using external providers, schools sometimes have their own teachers working alongside them. Teachers can add context so that students can understand the content better and they can follow-up on in classroom activities afterwards to reinforce learning.

“If we use external facilitators we collaborate with them about what is going to be taught or delivered by them to our students e.g., Nest organisation with puberty, the police with Keeping Ourselves Safe, and Kia Kaha.”

SCHOOL LEADER

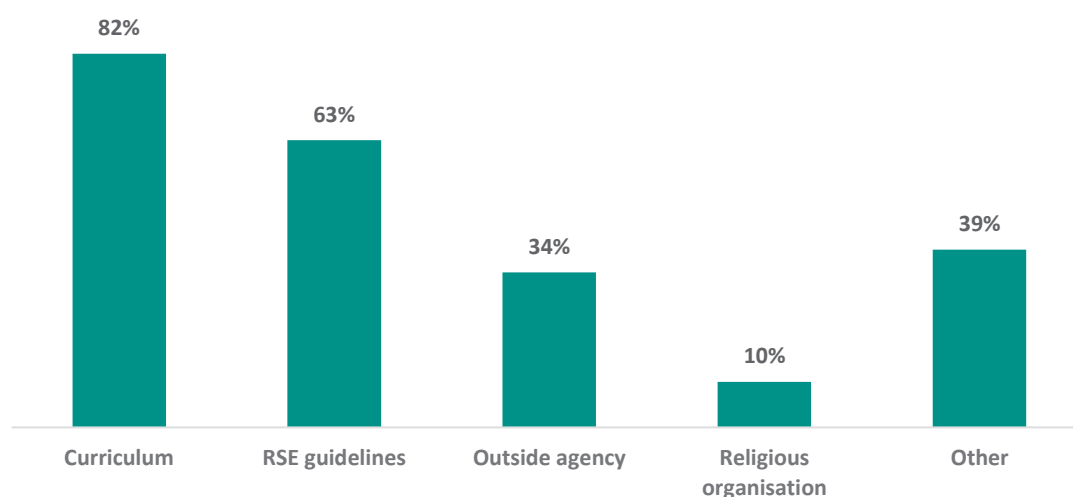
Schools use a range of resources and agencies to guide their RSE programme. Most use the health curriculum, and nearly two-thirds use the RSE guidelines.

The two most common resources schools use to guide their RSE programme are the health curriculum and the RSE guidelines. Four in five school leaders (82 percent) report they use the health curriculum to guide the content of their RSE programme. Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) use the RSE guidelines.

Some schools also use wider resources. One third (34 percent) of school leaders report using an outside provider to develop their curriculum (for example, Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa). One in 10 (10 percent) report using material from a religious organisation to guide the content of their programme.

Thirty-nine percent of schools report they use other resources to help develop their RSE curriculum. The most common resources mentioned were resources from Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa.

Figure 47: *What school leaders use to guide the content of their RSE programme*



We heard most schools use the curriculum and guidelines to inform what is taught, especially given the changing nature of RSE as societal norms change. Teachers also value the guidelines as ‘something to stand on’ when being challenged by families. We say more about the usefulness of the curriculum and RSE guidelines later in this chapter.

In addition to the New Zealand Curriculum and the RSE guidelines, schools draw on other resources to inform and develop their RSE content. These can be wide ranging, including resources from Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa (formerly Family Planning) – its website has a section for educators in school-based settings delivering RSE to primary and secondary school students. Schools also tell us that they refer to written materials provided by the Catholic Church. Schools often adapt the materials they source from other sources to make sure they are fit for purpose and appropriate for the community that they serve, rather than just in its original form.

“We have developed our own content to fit with the teachings of the Catholic Church but guided by the Sexuality and Relationships material”

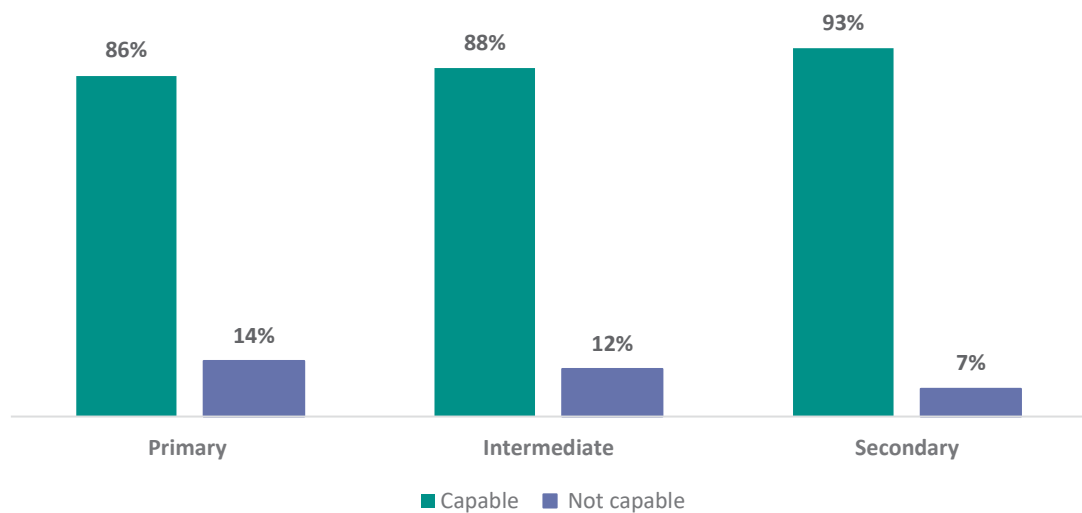
SCHOOL LEADER

6) Do teachers have the capability they need?

Leaders report most teachers have the capability they need to teach RSE.

Almost nine in 10 school leaders (88 percent) report the teachers at their school are capable to teach RSE. Secondary school leaders (93 percent) are more likely to agree teachers in their school are more capable to teach RSE than teachers in intermediate (88 percent) and primary school (86 percent).

Figure 48: *School leaders' reported capability of teachers to teach RSE*



As detailed above, schools tend to use their own teachers to deliver RSE for most topics. In secondary schools, RSE is mainly delivered by health and physical education teachers, which means they are specialists in this area of the curriculum and are more confident to deliver the content. Teachers across schools recognised that content knowledge on its own isn't enough for delivering RSE. They also needed to be able to deal with difficult conversations with and between students. Teachers told us that they could develop these skills on the job with additional training and through co-teaching. Team meetings were also a source of upskilling.

Short story: Teaching to students' interests and concerns

An experienced senior health teacher and Head of Faculty (HOF) at a large, co-ed, urban school told us how she co-constructs some of her school's RSE curriculum with her senior students. After listening to her students, she prioritises parts of the health curriculum that are most relevant for her students, along with other topics that they are concerned about, including the effects of pornography, and domestic violence.

“We create an environment where the kids can ask questions that may be poignant to them.”

HEAD OF FACULTY

The HOF told us she has had to constantly adapt her school's RSE curriculum because what children are being exposed to and experiencing is changing as often as “every month”.

“It is so scary to hear what the kids want to talk about... the stuff that they're experiencing and trying to wade through and get their head around... is more and more complex.”

HEAD OF FACULTY

Students told us that one of the things they like the most about RSE lessons is how their teacher responds to their input, and that they are “listened to.” One student told us it feels like they've “built the space together.”

Short story: Teachers collaborate to build confidence when teaching about sensitive topics

A male Provisionally Certificated Teacher (PCT) at a large, co-ed, urban secondary school shared how he felt uncomfortable teaching about menstruation to his female students. He told us that rather than avoid the topic, he decided to be proactive and talked with the Head of Faculty (HOF) for health. The HOF then organised for a female teacher come into the PCT's class to co-teach and show him how he can approach the topic of menstruation.

The teacher told us that this was a valuable learning moment for him – and ensured that his students didn't miss out on an important topic just because their teacher lacked confidence. He also learnt from the more experienced female teacher how to approach the topic in a way that is simple and factual.

“It's really important how you set up the lesson... instead of going in ‘I'm the expert' even though I have no uterus... acknowledging the facts and moving forward, instead of avoiding it completely.”

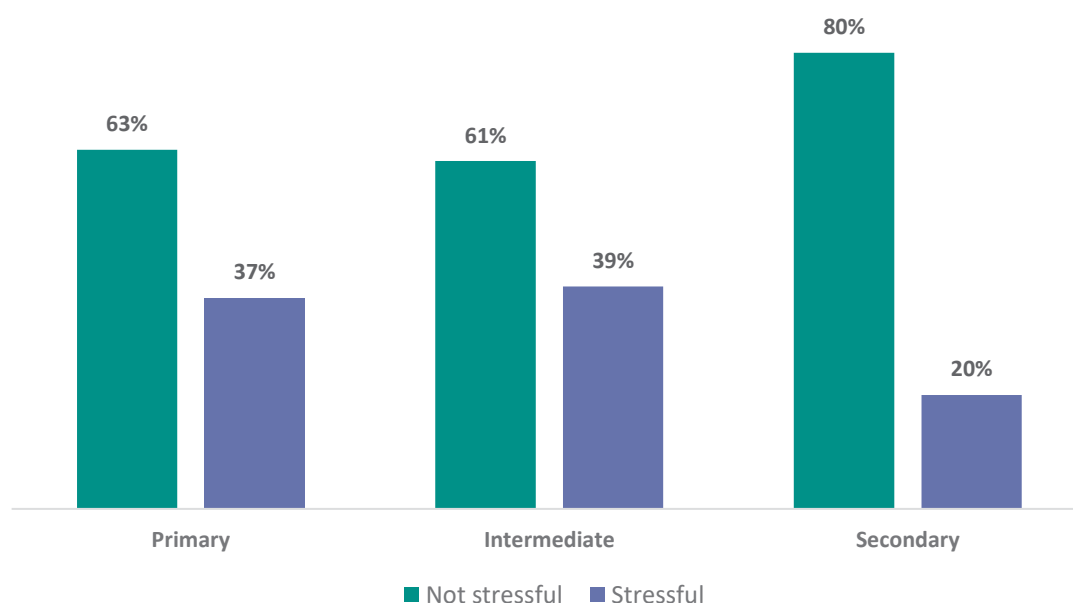
MALE TEACHER

The female teacher was able to provide personal expertise and experience about a topic that was gender specific. The result was a positive learning experience for the students and the male PCT, who by observing his colleague, felt more confident to teach the topic in the future.

Many teachers find teaching RSE stressful, particularly in primary school.

Teachers' stress impacts on the quality of teaching, and reflect the support and training provided to teachers to teach RSE. It can also be related to their comfort in teaching topics that may not align with their beliefs or cultural values. We asked teachers about how stressful they find teaching RSE.

Almost one-third (32 percent) of teachers find teaching RSE stressful. Primary school (37 percent) and intermediate (39 percent) teachers are more likely to find it stressful than secondary school (20 percent) teachers. This aligns with research that found that primary school teachers indicated lower confidence for planning and teaching RSE than secondary teachers (who were specialist health education or health and physical education teachers).⁸⁰

Figure 49: *Teachers report how stressful they find teaching RSE*

Regression analysis shows that not using the RSE guide is linked to stress. Teachers who don't use the guide are 1.6 times more likely to find teaching RSE stressful. Other factors that contribute to stress are teaching at primary (1.6 times) or intermediate (1.8 times), and not being supported by school leadership (1.9 times).^u

Teachers across schools and year levels are worried about unintentionally causing offence to students or parents and whānau. Because of this, teachers are less confident teaching content on sensitive topics, which are most likely to cause offence.

“It is a lot to expect from a primary trained teacher, especially at intermediate level, to feel confident and comfortable teaching students, especially tweens, about sexuality education. It's one thing for us to be teaching puberty (which is also very difficult) but it's an entirely new matter to start teaching intermediate students about reproduction”

PRIMARY TEACHER

“Even if you're in a great school like I am, I don't feel comfortable teaching about sexuality or gender ... there's an optics factor, that I consider because I identify as part of the rainbow communities myself.”

PRIMARY TEACHER

^u Primary and not being supported by school leadership are significant at $p < 0.1$.

Primary school teachers are the most stressed because they are aware that many parents and whānau are worried about content being taught 'too early' and before their children are able to make sense of it. This can be due to misinformation and misunderstandings. For example, we heard from teachers that parents and whānau at their school don't understand that their classes' RSE content is focused on health, friendship, and hygiene; with one teacher telling us that instead, "People think we're trying to teach children about sex." We heard that teachers in some primary schools have been verbally abused by parents and whānau because of RSE.

"RSE covers a multitude of topics. Concepts such as 'keeping ourselves safe' and consent are so important for students to learn – even just understanding that you need consent to use someone else's stationery is so important in the early years of school, it isn't all about romantic or sexual relationships."

PRIMARY TEACHER

"Parents become abusive to teachers, and even start very difficult conversations outside of school – in the street or supermarket. They are very picky about every word that is used. As teachers, if we mis-speak once, just a wrong word or even looking the wrong way then we can be under fire from the parent community"

PRIMARY TEACHER

The Pacific community can find body and sex-related topics challenging or inappropriate to talk about outside of home, and for this reason some Pacific teachers, especially in primary schools, sometimes don't want to teach RSE.

In our interviews and focus groups, we heard that teachers who are well set-up with the right skills and the right support enjoy the challenges of RSE teaching. They emphasise the importance of this learning, and value the opportunity to positively impact students' lives.

"Specifically in my Year 9 health class – [on some topics I tell them] 'Park this until you're ready... I want to tell you now, because I might not get the opportunity again.'"

TEACHER

“It takes a certain kind of person to be able to do that and to facilitate a safe space... [You need] consistent delivery with appropriate, adequate, and robust resources.”

TEACHER

“Why I teach some of the stuff that I do – So that students understand differences and different ideas and also the ability to be able to value that diversity. And I think if we don't teach some of that stuff, then kids don't get it... the ability to value the diversity of others, to be empathetic, to support other people, [are] really important skills.”

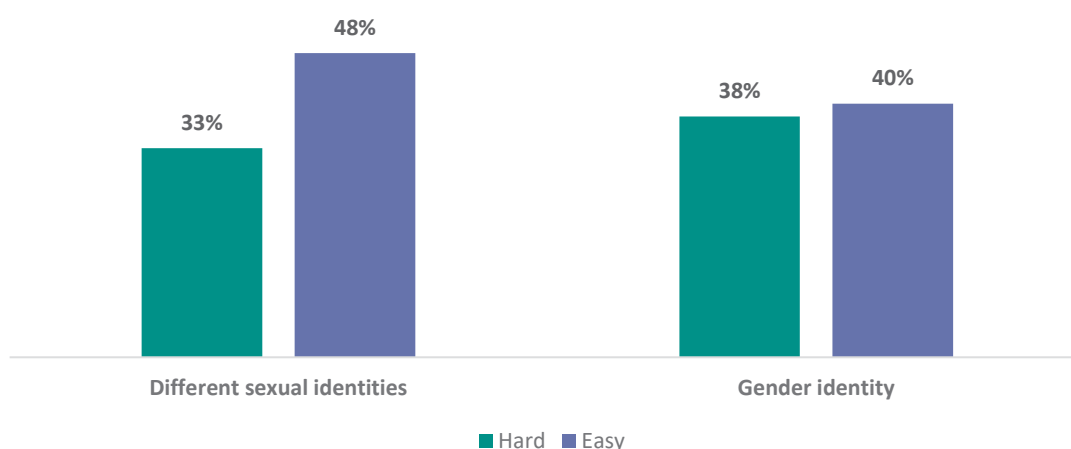
TEACHER

Teachers find teaching different sexual identities and gender identity the most difficult.

Across year levels, teachers report teaching sexual identities and gender identity is hardest. As the year levels get younger, the more difficult teachers find it to teach each of these topics.

One third of teachers (33 percent) find teaching about different sexual identities challenging, whilst almost half (48 percent) find it easy. Nearly two in five teachers (38 percent) find teaching about gender identity difficult, whilst two in five (40 percent) find it easy.

Figure 50: Teachers reporting difficulty of teaching RSE topics



As discussed above, teachers are less confident teaching sensitive topics because they are most likely to cause offence. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, genders and sexualities are two of the most contentious topics, as well as human reproduction.

This aligns with research that found that primary teachers often found topics related to gender identity and sexual identity challenging to navigate.⁸¹

Teachers are aware that students of faith are especially likely to be offended by content on genders and sexualities (set out in more detail in Chapter 4). This can make it stressful for teachers to deliver RSE in schools that are affiliated to a religion.

“It becomes difficult to teach certain things such as gender differences due to different cultural beliefs within our school. There is also the question about how young can students be when you start teaching this? Teachers would rather keep themselves safe by not teaching these things so they don't get into conflict with parents”

PRIMARY TEACHER

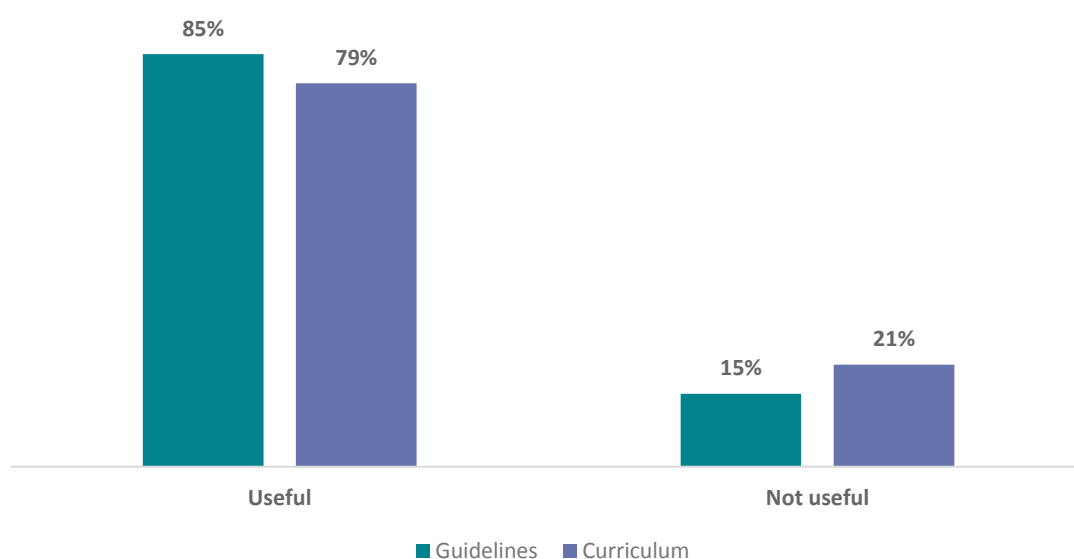
7) Are the curriculum and guidelines useful?

Most schools find the curriculum and RSE guidelines useful.

As outlined in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3, the two key documents that inform what is taught as part of RSE are the curriculum, and the RSE Guidelines. The curriculum for RSE is high-level, with information on the topics that should be covered included in the RSE guidelines.

Over four in five school leaders find the curriculum (79 percent) and RSE guidelines (85 percent) useful for developing their school approach to RSE.

Figure 51: School leaders views on whether the curriculum and guidelines are useful



As discussed earlier, schools are using the curriculum and guidelines to inform what is taught and to provide information to parents.

“Removal of guidelines around RSE will cause schools only teaching the things that they think are important. For example, if a school is in a conservative area then they might not teach queer sex ed at all, or not even teach sex ed.”

TEACHER

They also find that having established, ‘official’ documents supports their challenging conversations with parents and whānau, as these help to ‘back up’ what they are teaching.

“It’s been useful to have ‘Navigating the Journey’, to have something to stand on.”

INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL LEADER

“My school is very traditional, conservative. The ‘Aroha and Diversity [in Catholic Schools]’ document helped, with talking to the board. Showing that they [students from rainbow communities] have a right to be here.”

SCHOOL COUNSELLOR AT A CATHOLIC BOYS’ SCHOOL

However, leaders and teachers who don’t find the guidelines useful, told us that they contain too much information for teachers to be able to engage with, given the time that they have. Some leaders also find some language in RSE guidelines is not written in a way parents and whānau can easily understand and can lead to misinterpretation.

School boards told us that some of the language could be improved to make the guidelines more useful to schools. In some cases, schools had shared the guidelines with parents and whānau, and the language really hadn’t been sensitised for this audience.

“Throughout the RSE guidelines there are several small, but what we perceive to be inflammatory, remarks that put people off the entire document, when a lot of it was really good content.”

BOARD CHAIR AT A PRIMARY SCHOOL

Conclusion

With our current curriculum and consultation settings, against the backdrop of increasing community division on key topics, RSE is becoming very difficult for many Aotearoa New Zealand schools.

The requirement for school boards to consult with the school community at least once every two years is creating significant challenges. On some topics parents and whānau are split in their views on what to teach, how much to teach, and when to teach it. Agreement is often impossible, and leaders and teachers get caught in the middle of opposing views of parents and whānau – and often, additional intervention from people that aren't directly connected to the school. School staff can be subject to ongoing abuse and intimidation. To protect themselves, some schools respond by reducing teaching RSE teaching and learning, meaning that students miss out.

We also found that not all teachers are well prepared to teach RSE, particularly in primary schools where RSE is often taught by the classroom teacher, rather than a specialist health teacher like most secondary schools. One in three teachers find teaching RSE stressful. It is important all teachers have the skills and support they need for this critical area of our students' learning.

The next chapter brings together ERO's overall findings and recommendations from our evaluation, including opportunities to address these challenges for schools.



Chapter 7: Findings and areas for action

The seven questions that we asked as part of this evaluation have led to 21 key findings. Based on these findings we have identified three key areas of action, that will improve the quality and consistency of RSE being taught across the country, improving the safety and health of children and young people.

ERO was commissioned to carry out an evaluation of RSE to look at how RSE is currently taught and how well it meets the needs of students, expectations of parents, and capabilities of schools. In undertaking this evaluation, we drew on evidence from a range of data and analysis, including:

- an in-depth review of national and international literature
- in-depth reviews of national and international guidance and policy documents
- ERO's own data collection including over 12,000 survey responses, visits to 20 schools, and interviews with over 300 participants – with students, teachers, school leaders, board chairs and presiding members, parents and whānau, recent school leavers, and other expert informants.

From this evidence, we have identified 20 key findings across the following five areas.

- **Area 1:** Is teaching RSE in schools supported?
- **Area 2:** What is being taught in RSE?
- **Area 3:** Does RSE meet students' needs?
- **Area 4:** Does RSE meet the expectations of parents and whānau?
- **Area 5:** Is teaching RSE manageable for schools?

Context

Relationships and Sexuality Education focuses on a range of key issues for children and young people, including preventing bullying, promoting healthy relationships and sexual health, and reducing discrimination in the classroom and more widely in society. In Aotearoa New Zealand we continue to have a range of worrying health and safety issues that directly relate to relationships and sexuality, including family and sexual violence, bullying, and racism. At a time where young people are increasingly exposed to harmful online content, including pornography and misinformation through social media, and hate speech, RSE plays an increasingly important role.

Aotearoa New Zealand has a similar requirement to teach RSE as other countries, but a less prescriptive curriculum, stronger requirements for consultation, and less guidance and support for teachers. RSE falls under the 'Health and Physical Education' learning area of the New Zealand Curriculum, which is compulsory in Years 1-10 (approx. ages 5-14). RSE-related learning is woven into the curriculum, but there isn't a specified set of teaching or learning outcomes that schools must cover, or a dedicated RSE 'unit' that schools have to teach. Schools design their own RSE programmes, using the New Zealand Curriculum or optional guidelines from the Ministry of Education. School boards are required to consult their school community on RSE (as part of their health programme) at least once every two years.

Our evaluation led to 21 key findings in five areas.

Area 1: Is teaching RSE in schools supported?

We looked at whether students and parents and whānau support RSE being taught in schools.

Finding 1: There is wide support from students and parents and whānau for RSE being taught in schools.

- Over nine in 10 (91 percent) students support RSE being taught in schools. Girls are more likely to support it being taught, with 95 percent of girls and 88 percent of boys supporting it.
- Most parents and whānau (87 percent) support RSE being taught in schools.
- Parents and whānau who know what is being taught are happier with RSE.
- Some students decide to miss school to avoid RSE (7 percent), but others go to school because they want to learn RSE (9 percent).

Finding 2: Pacific parents, parents of primary aged students, and parents of faith are less supportive.

- Nearly three in 10 (29 percent) Pacific parents do not support RSE being taught in schools, due to cultural beliefs and reasons to do with their faith. Seventy-one percent do support it.
- Primary school parents and whānau are slightly less supportive (82 percent) than intermediate (89 percent) and secondary school (89 percent) parents and whānau, due to concerns about RSE content being appropriate for their children's age.
- Parents and whānau who practice a faith are over two times more likely to not support RSE being taught. Over one in five parents who practice a faith (22 percent) do not support RSE being taught, compared to 9 percent of parents who do not practice a faith.
- Six percent of parents and whānau withdraw their child from RSE.

Area 2: What is being taught in RSE?

Finding 3: What students learn about depends on where they go to school.

- There is a lot of flexibility for schools around exactly which RSE content is taught, and how it is taught. Schools can develop their own programmes, rely on external providers, or both. No RSE content is compulsory, which means what students learn depends entirely on their school.
- RSE teaching across the country includes coverage of a wide range of topics, which relate broadly to personal safety, managing feelings, bodies, health, diverse identities, wellbeing, and relationships with other people.
- Students in girls' schools are more likely to learn about consent, different sexual identities, and gender identity than students at co-ed schools. For example, eight in 10 students in girls' schools learn about consent but only half (58 percent) of students in co-ed schools do.

Finding 4: What students are taught changes as they grow up.

- In Years 0-4 (ages 5-8), almost all students learn about feelings and emotions, friendships and bullying, and personal safety. As they progress through Years 5-8 (ages 8-12), they begin to learn about getting help with their health and changes to their body.
- At Years 9-10 (ages 12-14), around eight in 10 students learn about consent, romantic relationships, sexual identities, human reproduction, and gender identity.
- Students do not have to learn RSE in Years 11-13 (ages 14-18), but many do.

Finding 5: Sensitive topics are taught later. Different sexual identities, gender identity, and human reproduction are mostly taught in secondary school.

- Less than one in five teachers of students aged 8-10 report teaching sexual identities, gender identity, and human reproduction, compared to three-quarters of teachers of students aged 12-14.

Finding 6: What is taught in RSE is changing over time, as society changes.

- Only around one third of recent school leavers report they learnt about gender identity, gender stereotypes, and celebrating differences, compared to over two-thirds of current Year 11-13 students who report they learn about these topics



Area 3: Does RSE meet students' needs?

We looked at how well RSE is meeting the needs of students, and how this differs across different groups.

Finding 7: Most students agree that they are taught the right amount of most RSE topics and at the right age, though some topics aren't being delivered at the right time to meet students' needs.

- Across most topics, seven in 10 students say they are being taught the right amount and around half (41-55 percent) agree that they are learning it at the right time.
- Seven in 10 students want to learn about personal safety (including online safety) and friendships and bullying earlier.
- Students think the middle school years are too early for human reproduction learning. Six in 10 of Years 5-6 (60 percent) and half of Years 7-8 students (51 percent) want to learn about human reproduction later.

Finding 8: Boys are more likely to want to learn all topics later than girls, reflecting that boys may go through puberty later.

- Boys are more likely to want to learn all topics later than girls. The most common topics they want to learn about later are human reproduction (35 percent), different sexual identities (22 percent), and romantic relationships including intimate relationships (22 percent).
- Girls often want to learn more and earlier on key topics. Over a quarter of girls want to learn more about managing feelings and emotions (25 percent) and gender stereotypes (31 percent). Over three-quarters of girls want to learn about friendship and bullying (82 percent) and personal safety including online safety (75 percent) earlier.

Finding 9: Students' views are split about when and how much they learn about human reproduction, different sexual identities, gender identity, and romantic relationships.

- Three in 10 students want to learn about human reproduction earlier (28 percent), and three in 10 want to learn it later (28 percent).
- A third of students want to learn about different sexual identities (33 percent), gender identity (36 percent), and romantic relationships (31 percent) earlier, and nearly one in five want to learn about these subjects later (16-18 percent).

Finding 10: Students' faith and sexuality impacts how well RSE meets their needs.

- Students of faith are more likely to want to learn less about gender identity and different sexual identities than students who do not practice a faith.
- Secondary school students from rainbow communities want to learn about all RSE topics earlier than other students.

Finding 11: Recent school leavers report that there were significant gaps in their RSE learning.

- Over three-quarters of the students didn't learn and would have liked to learn about consent (82 percent), managing feelings and emotions (78 percent), personal safety, including online safety (78 percent), and changes to their body (75 percent). This reflects that what they learn depends on schools individual programmes.

Area 4: Does RSE meet the expectations of parents and whānau?

We looked at how well RSE is meeting the needs of parents and whānau, and how this differs across different groups.

Finding 12: A third of parents and whānau want to change what or how RSE is taught, and over one in 10 do not want it taught in schools.

- Thirty-four percent of parents and whānau think that RSE should be taught, but what or how it is taught should change. The proportion is higher for primary school parents and whānau (38 percent) than secondary (32 percent) because they are concerned about RSE content not being age appropriate.
- Fifty-three percent of parents and whānau think that what or how RSE is taught should stay as it is now. The proportion is higher for secondary school parents and whānau (57 percent) than for primary (44 percent).
- Thirteen percent of parents and whānau do not want RSE taught in schools.

Finding 13: For most RSE topics, parents and whānau broadly agree their child is learning the right amount, but primary school parents more often want sensitive topics taught later.

- More than six in 10 parents and whānau think that the right amount of each individual RSE topic is being taught.
- More than half of primary school parents and whānau want human reproduction (63 percent), gender identity (54 percent), and gender stereotypes (51 percent) covered later because they are concerned about age appropriateness.

Finding 14: Many parents and whānau want their children to learn more about consent, relationships, and health, and learn earlier about friendships, safety, and managing emotions.

- The most common topics that parents and whānau want their children to learn more about are consent (31 percent), romantic relationships (28 percent), and health and contraception (27 percent). The most common topics that parents want their children to learn earlier are friendships and bullying (61 percent), personal safety including online safety (58 percent), and managing feelings and emotions (47 percent), often because they want them to be safe.

Finding 15: Parent and whānau views are split on teaching about gender identity, different sexual identities, and gender stereotypes.

- Almost a third of parents and whānau want different sexual identities taught earlier and a quarter want it taught more. A quarter want it taught later / less.
- Almost a third of parents and whānau want gender stereotypes taught earlier and a quarter want it taught more. Almost a third want it taught later and a quarter want it taught less.
- A quarter of parents and whānau want gender identity taught earlier and one-fifth want it taught more. A third want it taught later and a quarter want it taught less.

Finding 16: Parents' gender, faith, and their children's identities, impacts how well RSE meets their expectations.

- Mothers are more likely to report their children are learning too little, in particular around consent, managing feelings and emotions, gender stereotypes, and friendships and bullying, because of protective concerns about their children's safety.
- Fathers are more likely to report that their child is learning too much, particularly around gender identity, different sexual identities, and gender stereotypes, in line with more traditional values.
- Parents and whānau that practice a faith want less RSE, in particular around gender identity, different sexual identities, and gender stereotypes, because of concerns that this content does not align with the views outlined in their faith, and that it is the role of their church or faith-based community to teach RSE to their child – especially some of the more sensitive topics.
- Parents and whānau of students from rainbow communities are more likely to want their children to learn about all RSE topics earlier, especially topics on diverse identities and bodies.
- Parents and whānau of girls want their children to learn about changes to their body and consent earlier, compared to parents and whānau of boys.

Area 5: Is teaching RSE manageable for schools?

We looked at how school leaders, teachers, and boards are finding the current settings and requirements for RSE teaching.

Finding 17: Most, but not all schools are meeting the current consultation requirement.

- Just over a quarter (28 percent) don't know they are required to consult at least once every two years, and worryingly almost one in 10 board chairs (8 percent) last consulted their community *more* than two years ago. One-fifth of board chairs (20 percent) *don't know* when their school last consulted.

Finding 18: Schools face significant challenges in consulting on what to teach in RSE, particularly rural schools and schools with a high Māori roll.

- Schools find consulting difficult and divisive – almost half of schools find consulting challenging or very challenging. In the worst cases, consultation processes result in abuse and aggression.
- Rural schools find it particularly challenging to maintain relationships with parents and whānau during consultation. Over four in 10 rural schools (44 percent) find maintaining relationships challenging, compared to one third of urban schools (34 percent), because consultations often involve the wider community, not only school parents and whānau.
- Around half of schools with a high Māori roll find it challenging to consult with their community (52 percent), because schools often need to consider more carefully how to build trust with whānau Māori and which methods of engagement will work best.

Finding 19: Schools most commonly deliver RSE as modules, but nearly a quarter deliver RSE on an ad-hoc basis.

- Schools have flexibility in how and when they deliver RSE which means there is wide variation.
- Only 16 percent of schools deliver RSE lessons regularly throughout the year.
- Most schools (68 percent) deliver RSE as modules at particular times of the year.
- A quarter (23 percent) deliver RSE on an ad-hoc basis.

Finding 20: Most, but not all teachers have the capability they need to teach RSE and many find it stressful, particularly in primary.

- Most schools are using teachers from their school to deliver RSE, either exclusively (58 percent) or in combination with external providers (37 percent).
- One in 10 school leaders do not think their teachers have the capability to teach RSE, this rises to one in seven in primary schools.
 - Almost one third of teachers find teaching RSE stressful. Teachers in primary school find it more stressful than teachers in secondary school because they usually aren't subject specialists and because they are often dealing with parents and whānau concerns about what is age appropriate to teach.

Finding 21: Most schools find the Curriculum and RSE guidelines useful.

- Four in five school leaders find the curriculum (79 percent) and RSE guidelines (85 percent) useful for developing their school's approach to RSE. Teachers who don't use the RSE guidelines are 1.6 times more likely to be stressed.

Areas for action

Based on these 21 key findings, ERO has identified three areas that require action to improve RSE and support the impact that it needs to have. These are set out below.

Area 1: Extend teaching and learning of RSE into senior secondary school.

The findings show that RSE is a key area of learning for children and young people, particularly at a time of increased risks through social media and harmful online content.

ERO found widespread support from parents and whānau and students for RSE to be taught in schools. Eighty-seven percent of parents and 91 percent of students support RSE being taught in schools.

However, we also found that students aren't always getting the content that they need, at the right time for when they need it. We found that boys in particular want to learn about RSE later when key topics become more relevant to them. Boys later maturity means that stopping RSE at Year 10 may be too early. We also heard from young people who have finished secondary school that they did not receive RSE knowledge that they need for their life beyond school.

In the senior secondary school timetables are crowded and students have choice about the subjects they study. But even in this context RSE is too important to leave to chance.

Recommendation 1: RSE continues to be compulsory from Years 1 to 10.

Recommendation 2: The Government consider how to extend RSE teaching and learning into Years 11 to 13 (including whether it should be compulsory), and schools look at how they can prioritise it.

Area 2: Increase consistency of what is taught.

The findings show that RSE is not being consistently taught across schools. There is variability in what students are taught and when they are taught it depending on where they go to school. This was highlighted in ERO's previous reviews (2018 and 2007) and remains a problem.

Aotearoa New Zealand's approach to RSE is significantly less prescriptive than other countries, where there are clearer and consistent national expectations for what will be covered. The flexibility of our curriculum, combined with the autonomy given to individual schools and teachers in delivering RSE, has led to significant variations in the education received by our children and young people.

The challenges our children and young people face are also changing, for example from increased risks of social media and online bullying and abuse. Many parents and students agree on the essential topics they wish to see addressed in RSE at an earlier stage, such as friendships, combating bullying, safety (including online safety), managing emotions, and understanding consent.

ERO has also found that not all teachers are well prepared to teach RSE, particularly in primary schools where RSE is often taught by the classroom teacher. One in three teachers find teaching RSE stressful. It is important all teachers have the skills and support they need.

Recommendation 3: The Ministry of Education review the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) curriculum (within the Health and Physical Education learning area) to ensure clarity on what should be taught and when, spanning from Years 0 to 13. This review should clarify the knowledge, skills, and understanding students are expected to develop.

Recommendation 4: The Ministry of Education provides evidence based resources and supports for school leaders and teachers, including curriculum and teaching guidance.

Recommendation 5: Teachers, especially those in primary schools, receive the professional development necessary to effectively teach RSE. This support should include training during their initial teacher education, as well as ongoing professional development.

Area 3: Look at the consultation requirement on boards.

ERO has found that the requirement for school boards to consult at least once every two years is creating significant challenges for schools. The increasingly divided views on sensitive topics that are being seen globally are reflected in our findings. On some topics parents and whānau have conflicting views on what should be taught, the extent of that teaching, and the appropriate timing for teaching it. Achieving consensus is frequently difficult, leaving schools caught between opposing perspectives from parents and whānau, as well as external influence from individuals and groups not directly connected to the school. School staff can be subject to ongoing abuse and intimidation. Some schools respond by scaling back RSE teaching, which results in students missing out on learning opportunities.

A more prescriptive curriculum (Recommendation 3) could reduce the need for schools to consult their community as there will be less local variation in what they will teach.

Aotearoa New Zealand is unique in the level of consultation that is required for RSE. The Health and Physical Education learning area is the only part of our national curriculum that mandates consultation at least every two years. Other countries require less or no consultation, instead *informing* parents about the content and delivery of in-school RSE programmes and allowing them to opt out of lessons if it doesn't fit their needs. Our study found that parents and whānau do take up the option of withdrawing their children. We also found that the provision of clear information for parents and whānau about what will be taught significantly increases how happy they are with a school's RSE programme. Parents who know most of what is being taught are most likely to be happy with RSE being taught as it is now. Parents who don't know what is being taught are most likely to disagree that RSE should be taught.

Recommendation 6: Consider replacing the requirement on school boards to **consult** the school community on RSE (as part of the Health and Physical Education curriculum) with a requirement to **inform** parents and whānau about *what* they plan to teach and *how* they plan to teach it, before they teach it. Schools should continue to take steps to understand students' needs. Schools should also ensure that parents and whānau know that they can withdraw their children from any element of RSE that they are uncomfortable with.

Recommendation 7: Retain the ability for parents and whānau to withdraw their children from RSE lessons and provide clear information about how to do this.

Conclusion

We found that relationships and sexuality education is critical to the learning, development, and wellbeing of Aotearoa New Zealand's young people. We also heard that this is more important than ever, considering increased access to harmful online content and social media, global division on key topics of gender and sexuality, and our own country's worrying climate of bullying, sexual harm, and relationship – and sexuality-related violence. Our schools need to provide clear, consistent, and useful RSE knowledge and skills.

The areas for action we have identified have the potential to make significant improvements that serve our children and young people, their parents and whānau, and our valued school leaders and teachers.



Appendix 1: Summary table of achievement objectives in the New Zealand Curriculum

The four tables below give a sample of achievement objectives (from the Health and Physical Education learning area) that could be used to develop a school's RSE programme. These achievement objectives could be met using learning contexts related to RSE, or other contexts.

Schools develop their RSE programmes using a combination of curriculum achievement objectives and key learning statements from the RSE guidelines (see Appendix 2).

For the full list of achievement objectives for health and physical education see:
[The New Zealand Curriculum – Health and physical education](#)

Personal Health and Physical Development	
Level 1 (age 5–7 approx.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Describe feelings and ask questions about their health, growth, development, and personal needs and wants. → Describe and use safe practices in a range of contexts and identify people who can help. → Describe themselves in relation to a range of contexts. 	Level 2 (age 7–9 approx.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Describe their stages of growth and their development needs and demonstrate increasing responsibility for self-care. → Identify risk and use safe practices in a range of contexts. → Identify personal qualities that contribute to a sense of self-worth.
Level 3 (age 9–11 approx.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Identify factors that affect personal, physical, social, and emotional growth, and develop skills to manage changes. → Identify risks and their causes and describe safe practices to manage these. → Describe how their own feelings, beliefs, and actions, and those of other people, contribute to their personal sense of self-worth. 	Level 4 (age 11–13 approx.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Describe the characteristics of pubertal change and discuss positive adjustment strategies. → Access and use information to make and action safe choices in a range of contexts. → Describe how social messages and stereotypes, including those in the media, can affect feelings of self-worth.

Personal Health and Physical Development	
<p>Level 5 (age 13–15 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Describe physical, social, emotional, and intellectual processes of growth and relate these to features of adolescent development and effective self-management strategies. → Investigate and practise safety procedures and strategies to manage risk situations. → Investigate and describe the ways in which individuals define their own identity and sense of self-worth and how this influences the ways in which they describe other people. 	<p>Level 6 (age 14–16 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Investigate and understand reasons for the choices people make that affect their well-being and explore and evaluate options and consequences. → Choose and maintain ongoing involvement in appropriate physical activities and examine factors influencing their participation. → Demonstrate understanding of responsible behaviours required to ensure that challenges and risks are managed safely in physical and social environments. → Demonstrate an understanding of factors that contribute to personal identity and celebrate individuality and affirm diversity.
<p>Level 7 (age 15–17 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Assess their health needs and identify strategies to ensure personal wellbeing across their lifespan. → Analyse the difference between perceived and residual risks in physical and social environments and develop skills and behaviour for managing responsible action. → Critically evaluate societal attitudes, values, and expectations that affect people's awareness of their personal identity and sense of self-worth in a range of life situations. 	<p>Level 8 (age 17–18 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Critically evaluate a range of qualitative and quantitative data to devise strategies to meet their current and future needs for wellbeing. → Critically analyse dilemmas and contemporary ethical issues that influence their own health and safety and that of other people. → Critically analyse the impacts that conceptions of personal, cultural, and national identity have on people's wellbeing.

Movement concepts and motor skills

Level 1 (age 5-7 approx.)

- Participate in a range of games and activities and identify the factors that make participation safe and enjoyable.

Level 2 (age 7-9 approx.)

- Participate in and create a variety of games and activities and discuss the enjoyment that these activities can bring to them and others.
- Develop and apply rules and practices in games and activities to promote fair, safe, and culturally appropriate participation for all.

Level 3 (age 9-11 approx.)

- Develop movement skills in challenging situations and describe how these challenges impact on themselves and others.
- Participate in co-operative and competitive activities and describe how cooperation and competition can affect people's behaviour and the quality of the experience.

Level 4 (age 11-13 approx.)

- Participate in and demonstrate an understanding of how social and cultural practices are expressed through movement.

Level 5 (age 13-15 approx.)

- Develop skills and responsible attitudes in challenging physical situations.
- Investigate and experience ways in which people's physical competence and participation are influenced by social and cultural factors.

Level 6 (age 14-16 approx.)

- Demonstrate and examine responsible attitudes in challenging physical situations.
- Demonstrate understanding and affirmation of people's diverse social and cultural needs and practices when participating in physical activities.

Level 7 (age 15-17 approx.)

- Adapt skills and appraise responsible attitudes in challenging physical situations and unfamiliar environments.
- Appraise, adapt, and use physical activities to ensure that specific social and cultural needs are met.

Level 8 (age 17-18 approx.)

- Devise, apply, and appraise strategies through which they and other people can participate responsibly in challenging physical situations.
- Devise and apply strategies to ensure that social and cultural needs are met in personal and group physical activities.

Relationships with other people	
<p>Level 1 (age 5–7 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Explore and share ideas about relationships with other people. → Demonstrate respect through sharing and co-operation in groups. → Express their own ideas, needs, wants, and feelings clearly and listen to those of other people. 	<p>Level 2 (age 7–9 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Identify and demonstrate ways of maintaining and enhancing relationships between individuals and within groups. → Describe how individuals and groups share characteristics and are also unique. → Express their ideas, needs, wants, and feelings appropriately and listen sensitively to other people and affirm them.
<p>Level 3 (age 9–11 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Identify and compare ways of establishing relationships and managing changing relationships. → Identify ways in which people discriminate and ways to act responsibly to support themselves and other people. → Identify the pressures that can influence interactions with other people and demonstrate basic assertiveness strategies to manage these. 	<p>Level 4 (age 11–13 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Identify the effects of changing situations, roles, and responsibilities on relationships and describe appropriate responses. → Recognise instances of discrimination and act responsibly to support their own rights and feelings and those of other people. → Describe and demonstrate a range of assertive communication skills and processes that enable them to interact appropriately with other people.

Relationships with other people

Level 5 (age 13–15 approx.)

- Identify issues associated with relationships and describe options to achieve positive outcomes.
- Demonstrate an understanding of how attitudes and values relating to difference influence their own safety and that of other people.
- Demonstrate a range of interpersonal skills and processes that help them to make safe choices for themselves and other people in a variety of settings.

Level 6 (age 14–16 approx.)

- Demonstrate an understanding of how individuals and groups affect relationships by influencing people's behaviour, beliefs, decisions, and sense of self-worth.
- Plan and evaluate strategies recognising their own and other people's rights and responsibilities to avoid or minimise risks in social situations.
- Plan strategies and demonstrate interpersonal skills to respond to challenging situations appropriately.

Level 7 (age 15–17 approx.)

- Analyse the nature and benefits of meaningful interpersonal relationships.
- Analyse the beliefs, attitudes, and practices that reinforce stereotypes and role expectations, identifying ways in which these shape people's choices at individual, group, and societal levels.
- Evaluate information, make informed decisions, and use interpersonal skills effectively to manage conflict, competition, and change in relationships.

Level 8 (age 17–18 approx.)

- Critically analyse the dynamics of effective relationships in a range of social contexts.
- Critically analyse attitudes, values, and behaviours that contribute to conflict and identify and describe ways of creating more harmonious relationships.
- Analyse and evaluate attitudes and interpersonal skills that enable people to participate fully and effectively as community members in various situations.

Healthy communities and environments	
<p>Level 1 (age 5–7 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Identify and discuss obvious hazards in their home, school, and local environment and adopt simple safety practices. → Take individual and collective action to contribute to environments that can be enjoyed by all. 	<p>Level 2 (age 7–9 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Explore how people's attitudes, values, and actions contribute to healthy physical and social environments. → Contribute to and use simple guidelines and practices that promote physically and socially healthy classrooms, schools, and local environments.
<p>Level 3 (age 9–11 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Identify how health care and physical activity practices are influenced by community and environmental factors. → Participate in communal events and describe how such events enhance the well-being of the community. → Research and describe current health and safety guidelines and practices in their school and take action to enhance their effectiveness. → Plan and implement a programme to enhance an identified social or physical aspect of their classroom or school environment. 	<p>Level 4 (age 11–13 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Investigate and describe lifestyle factors and media influences that contribute to the wellbeing of people in Aotearoa New Zealand. → Investigate and/or access a range of community resources that support well-being and evaluate the contribution made by each to the wellbeing of community members. → Specify individual responsibilities and take collective action for the care and safety of other people in their school and in the wider community.

Healthy communities and environments

Level 5 (age 13–15 approx.)

- Investigate societal influences on the well-being of student communities.
- Investigate community services that support and promote people's wellbeing and take action to promote personal and group involvement.
- Identify the rights and responsibilities of consumers and use this information to evaluate health and recreational services and products in the community.
- Investigate and evaluate aspects of the school environment that affect people's wellbeing and take action to enhance these aspects.

Level 6 (age 14–16 approx.)

- Analyse societal influences that shape community health goals and physical activity patterns.
- Advocate for the development of services and facilities to meet identified needs in the school and the community.
- Compare and contrast personal values and practices with policies, rules, and laws and investigate how the latter contribute to safety in the school and community.
- Investigate the roles and the effectiveness of local, national, and international organisations that promote wellbeing and environmental care.

Level 7 (age 15–17 approx.)

- Analyse ways in which events and social organisations promote healthy communities and evaluate the effects they have.
- Evaluate school and community initiatives that promote young people's well-being and develop an action plan to instigate or support these.
- Evaluate laws, policies, practices, and regulations in terms of their contribution to social justice at school and in the wider community.

Level 8 (age 17–18 approx.)

- Critically analyse societal attitudes and practices and legislation influencing contemporary health and sporting issues, in relation to the need to promote mentally healthy and physically safe communities.
- Establish and justify priorities for equitable distribution of available health and recreational resources and advocate change where necessary.
- Demonstrate the use of health promotion strategies by implementing a plan of action to enhance the wellbeing of the school, community, or environment.



Appendix 2: Summary table of key learning statements in the RSE guidelines

The three tables below give the key learning statements from the RSE guides (for Years 1-8 and Years 9-13).

Schools can develop their RSE programmes using a combination of curriculum achievement objectives (see Appendix 1) and key learning statements from the RSE guides.

For the full RSE guides see: [Relationships and sexuality education guide](#)

Ko au — All about me	
<p>Level 1 (age 5-7 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Recognise body parts, including genitals, and can name them (in te reo Māori and in English), and understand basic concepts about reproduction. → Know about body safety, including hygiene and appropriate touching, know how to show respect for themselves and others, and can use strategies to keep themselves safe (including basic safety strategies online and on devices). 	<p>Level 2 (age 7-9 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Know about human anatomy, about how bodies are diverse and how they change over time, and about human reproductive processes. → Understand what consent means in a range of contexts, including online contexts. → Are able to give and receive consent (e.g., at the doctor, in the playground, or online).

Ko au — All about me

Level 3 (age 9–11 approx.)

- Know about pubertal change and how it is different for different people, and understand associated needs that relate to people's social, emotional, and physical wellbeing.
- Are able to take part in collective action to implement school and community policies that support young people during pubertal change.
- Understand different types of relationships (e.g., friendships, romantic relationships, relationships between whānau, team, and church members, and online relationships) and understand how relationships influence their own wellbeing and that of others.

Level 4 (age 11–13 approx.)

- Know about pubertal change (including hormonal changes, menstruation, body development, and the development of gender identities), and about how pubertal change relates to social norms around gender and sexuality, and can make plans to support their own wellbeing and that of others.
- Understand various differing approaches to conception and contraception and how these relate to social norms, choice, consent, and wellbeing.

Level 5 (age 13–15 approx.)

- Know about a range of cultural approaches to issues of gender and sexuality and how these relate to holistic understandings of wellbeing, e.g., in terms of:
 - varying perspectives on contraception and reproduction for different people, such as teens, heterosexual couples, same-sex couples, and single parents
 - cultural, generational, and personal values related to gender and sexual identities.
- Take part in a range of practices and activities (e.g., physical activity and sport, school and community events, classroom activities, and interactions on social media), reflect critically on how these practices connect with issues of body image and gender norms, and develop strategies to promote inclusion and wellbeing.

Level 6 (age 14–16 approx.)

- Are able to examine how gender and sexual identities can shift in different contexts and over time, and understand how these identities can be affected by relationships, family, media, popular culture, religion, spirituality, and youth cultures.

Ko au — All about me**Level 7** (age 15–17 approx.)

- Understand how sex, gender, and sexuality might change across the lifespan.
- Understand physical change across the lifespan for different people, including changes relating to fertility, menstruation, and the menopause, and explore the impacts of people's choices relating to sexual health (e.g., choices about using contraceptives, hormone blockers, or drugs, and about dealing with STIs).
- Are able to identify risks arising from intimate relationships in online and offline environments, and can explain their personal values and needs (e.g., in relation to dating, the influence of pornography, or issues of consent).

Level 8 (age 17–18 approx.)

- Are able to critically evaluate a range of data and devise strategies to meet their current and future sexual health needs.
- Are able to reflect on their personal identity (which will include their gender, sexuality, body, ethnicity, culture, location, ability, and age) and to explore identity politics and related issues in diverse contexts (including issues around labels such as 'LGBTQI+', 'rainbow', 'takatāpui', and 'MVPFAFF').

Ko aku hoa — Friendships and relationships with others**Level 1** (age 5–7 approx.)

- Are able to make friends, be a good friend, be inclusive, and accept and celebrate difference in a range of contexts (including in games, play, classroom activities, and at home).
- Are able to express their own feelings and needs and can listen and be sensitive to others by showing aroha, care, respect, and manaakitanga in a range of contexts.
- Know about belonging and about roles and responsibilities at school and within the whānau and wider community.
- Know who to trust and how to ask for help.

Level 2 (age 7–9 approx.)

- Are able to name and express a wide range of feelings and use skills to manage their feelings.
- Engage positively with peers and others during play, games, classroom activities, and online (by listening, affirming others, waiting, taking turns, recognising others' feeling and respecting them, and showing manaakitanga, aroha, and responsibility).

Ko aku hoa — Friendships and relationships with others

Level 3 (age 9–11 approx.)

- Understand consent, pressure, coercion, and rights, and have skills for giving or withholding consent and for staying safe and engaging respectfully in a range of contexts, including online contexts.
- Are able to use strategies to address relationship challenges (in friendships, groups, and teams, with whānau, and online).
- Know about a range of health and community services and have strategies for seeking help (for themselves and others), including at school and within their whānau.

Level 4 (age 11–13 approx.)

- Are able to manage intimate relationships (involving attraction, love, and desire) and relationship changes (including changes to relationships online and using social media), through:
 - knowledge of rights and responsibilities
 - knowledge of the need to give and receive consent and to make informed choices
 - assertive communication.

Level 5 (age 13–15 approx.)

- Have skills for enhancing relationships, including skills for:
 - strengthening personal identity
 - effective communication
 - assertiveness
 - negotiating intimacy
 - giving and receiving consent
 - dealing with pressure
 - demonstrating care and respect.
- Understand how people's ideas about love, intimacy, attraction, desire, romance, and pleasure can affect wellbeing and relationships.

Level 6 (age 14–16 approx.)

- Have knowledge and skills to enhance wellbeing in intimate relationships, including knowledge and skills about:
 - rights and responsibilities
 - consent, decision-making, and problem-solving
 - considering risks and safe sexual practices.
- Recognise how different values affect people's behaviours in intimate relationships and can develop interpersonal skills and plan strategies for responding to needs and challenges, solving problems, and making decisions.

Ko aku hoa — Friendships and relationships with others	
<p>Level 7 (age 15–17 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Are able to analyse their own close friendships, partnerships, and social interactions, and can plan actions to enhance communication and wellbeing in a range of situations (including online situations and situations involving alcohol and other drugs). 	<p>Level 8 (age 17–18 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Are able to critically analyse values, practices, and legislation for promoting safer and more pleasurable sexual practices (e.g., by examining health promotion strategies, law changes, and health policies). → Are able to explore desire, pleasure, consent, and attraction as interpersonal, social, and ethical concepts, and can plan to actively promote positive, equitable, and supportive relationships.
Ko tōku ao — Me and the world	
<p>Level 1 (age 5–7 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Understand the relationship between gender, identity, and wellbeing. → Are able to stand up for themselves and others (e.g., if there is unfairness, teasing, bullying, or inappropriate touch). 	<p>Level 2 (age 7–9 approx.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Understand that personal identities differ (e.g., in terms of gender, ethnicity, language, religion, and whakapapa). → Are able to identify gender stereotypes, understand the difference between gender and sex, and know that there are diverse gender and sexual identities in society. → Are able to contribute to and follow guidelines that support inclusive environments in the classroom and school.

Ko tōku ao — Me and the world

Level 3 (age 9–11 approx.)

- Understand how communities develop and use inclusive policies and practices to support gender and sexual diversity (e.g., at public events, during physical activity and sports, within whānau, in community organisations, and online).
- Are able to critique the ways in which social media and other media represent bodies and appearance, relationships, and gender, and can identify a range of ways in which these affect wellbeing.

Level 4 (age 11–13 approx.)

- Understand how school and community contexts (e.g., school procedures and rules, sports and physical activities, and community facilities and environments) link with people's gender and sexual identities, and can take action for inclusion.
- Know how to access help for themselves and others, know about a range of strategies and resources that support health and wellbeing, and understand how these can enhance wellbeing, mitigate risk, and support gender and sexual identity.
- Are able to identify connections between people's wellbeing and media representations of relationships, gender, and bodies (including representations in social media, in films, and on television).

Level 5 (age 13–15 approx.)

- Are able to analyse representations of sex, sexuality, and relationships (in social media, advertising, and entertainment) in terms of their impacts on relationships and wellbeing, and can use a range of strategies to take action when these affect their own wellbeing or that of others.
- Understand school and community policies and events that support sex, gender, and sexual diversity, and know how to take action to support these policies.

Level 6 (age 14–16 approx.)

- Are able to compare concepts of love, attraction, romance, pleasure, and consent from different perspectives and in different situations, and can take ethical standpoints (e.g., by considering cultural values, church values, family values, and the values portrayed in social media and films).
- Are able to critique heteronormative messages and practices in the school or community and recommend actions to address these.

Ko tōku ao — Me and the world

Level 7 (age 15–17 approx.)

- Are able to evaluate societal and cultural influences on partnerships, families, and childcare relationships
- Are able to analyse beliefs, attitudes, and practices that influence choices by reinforcing stereotypes (such as sexism, homophobia, and transphobia).
- Are able to use principles of social justice to advocate for inclusive practices.

Level 8 (age 17–18 approx.)

- Are able to critically evaluate societal attitudes to sex and sexuality (including attitudes in families, communities, religious contexts, and online), and can apply health promotion strategies to enhance sexual health and affirm diversity.
- Are able to critically analyse a range of issues that affect relationships, gender identity, and sexuality (e.g., by considering the social impacts of online dating and pornography as well as the social and environmental impacts of menstrual products, contraceptive devices, fertility treatments, and pharmaceuticals), and can advocate for sexual and environmental justice and for inclusive cultures.



Appendix 3: Methods

This section summarise the methods used in this report. Further information can be found in the technical report (<https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/technical-report-review-of-relationships-and-sexuality-education>).

Our evaluation questions

This evaluation identifies options for improving relationships and sexuality education, how the current settings impact how RSE is currently taught, and how well it meets the needs of students, expectations of parents and whānau, and capability of schools. Our research answers 7 key questions:

- 1) What is RSE and what is required of schools?
- 2) Why is RSE important and is teaching it in schools supported?
- 3) What are students taught in RSE?
- 4) Does RSE meet students' needs?
- 5) Does RSE meet the expectations of parents and whānau?
- 6) Is teaching RSE manageable for schools?
- 7) What improvements could be made?

Mixed-methods approach to data collection

ERO has taken a mixed-methods approach to assess what is and isn't working in RSE, and why. We focused our investigation on experiences of students, teachers, leaders, school boards, and parents and whānau across Aotearoa New Zealand in English-medium state and state-integrated primary, intermediate, and secondary schools.

Our mixed-methods approach integrates quantitative data (surveys) and qualitative data (surveys, focus groups, and interviews) – triangulating the evidence across these different data sources. We used the triangulation process to test and refine our findings statements, allowing the weight of this collective data to form the conclusions. The rigour of the data and validity of these findings were further tested through iterative sense-making sessions with key stakeholders.

To ensure **breadth** in providing judgement on the key evaluation questions we used:

Surveys of:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → school leaders → teachers → students → board chairs and presiding members → recent school leavers → parents and whānau.
Data from:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → an in-depth review of national and international literature → in-depth reviews of national and international guidance and policy documents.

To ensure **depth** in understanding of what works and what needs to improve we used:

Interviews and focus groups with:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → students → teachers → school leaders → board members → parents and whānau → a range of stakeholders.
Site visits at:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → 20 English-medium schools.
Sense-making through:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Expert group discussions.

Surveys

ERO surveyed students (Years 5-13), teachers, school leaders, board chairs, recent school leavers, and parents and whānau. 500 schools, selected for breadth of representation, were selected to take part in the surveys. Participating schools were sent unique and trackable survey links.

On advice from practitioners, we also provided opportunities for teachers, leaders, and board chairs/presiding members from outside of the selected school sample to respond to our surveys.

We used a survey company to survey 1,000 parents and whānau, in addition to the over 3,000 parent responses we had from surveys sent to our selected schools. We did this to ensure a representative sample of all parents, and so we could check for bias in the wider sample. We also tracked the unique links that were sent to each school and monitored these for evidence of being shared more widely.

Where surveys were publicly shared (for example on websites and social media) we were able to see which unique link was being shared and remove responses from that link from our sample. We also found some surveys returned by the same IP address multiple times. These were removed from the sample.

Statistical significance tests were carried out using chi-squared tests. We used a binary logistic regression for regression analysis. Surveys and response rates are included in the technical report (<https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/technical-report-review-of-relationships-and-sexuality-education>).

Interviews and site visits

A sample of 20 schools across the country were invited to participate in the case study component of this evaluation.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted for students, school leaders, teachers, and parents and whānau from July to September 2024. Most interviews were conducted during site visits. Some interviews were conducted online to better suit participants.

All interviews were carried out by members of the project team, which included evaluation partners who work directly with schools. Interviews were semi-structured, developed from domains and indicators developed from international and national literature, and refined through discussions with experts. Most interviews had two project team members. We conducted interviews with:

- 156 students
- 55 teachers
- 42 school leaders
- 19 board members
- 38 parents and whānau
- a range of stakeholders.

Quality assurance

The data in this report was subjected to a rigorous internal review process for both quantitative and qualitative data and was carried out at multiple stages across the evaluation process.

Ethics

Informed consent

All participants were informed of the purpose of the evaluation before they agreed to participate in an interview. Participants were informed that:

- participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time
- their words may be included in reporting, but no identifying details would be shared
- permission to use their information could be withdrawn at any time
- interviews were not an evaluation of their school, and their school or provider would not be identified in the resulting national report
- their information was confidential and would be kept securely, subject to the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982, Privacy Act 1993, and the Public Records Act 2005 on the release and retention of information.

Interviewees consented to take part in an interview via email, or by submitting a written consent form to ERO. Their verbal consent was also sought to record their online interviews. Participants were given opportunities to query the evaluation team if they needed further information about the consent process.

Data security

Data collected from interviews, surveys, and administrative data will be stored digitally for a period of six months after the full completion of the evaluation. During this time, all data will be password-protected and have limited accessibility.



Appendix 4: Graphs

Students

Figure 52: Boys who report learning the right amount about topics

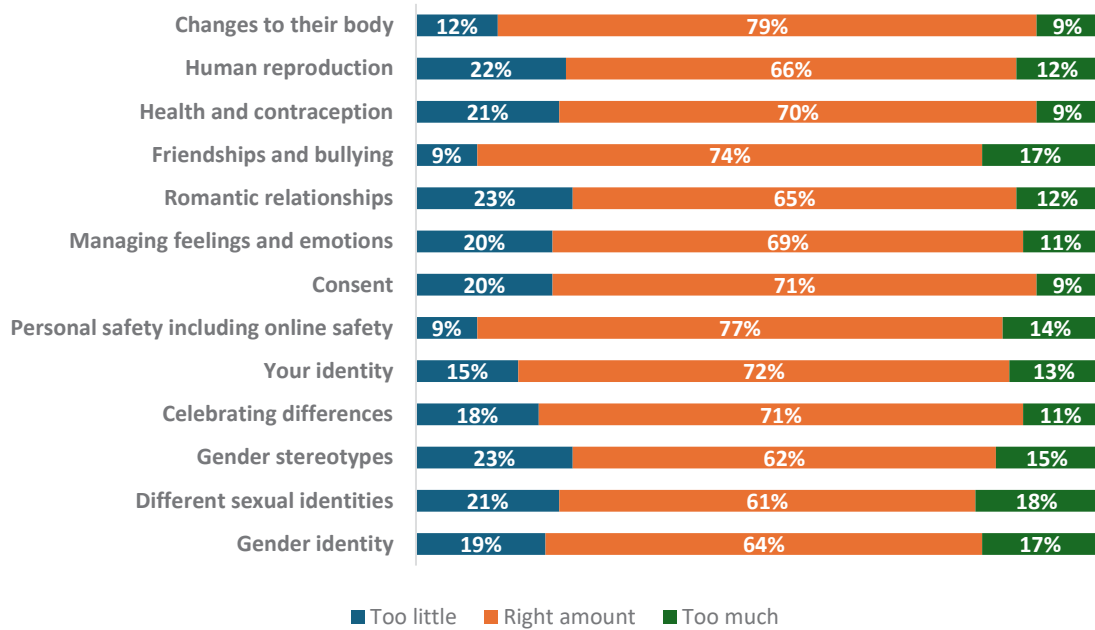


Figure 53: Girls who report learning the right amount about topics

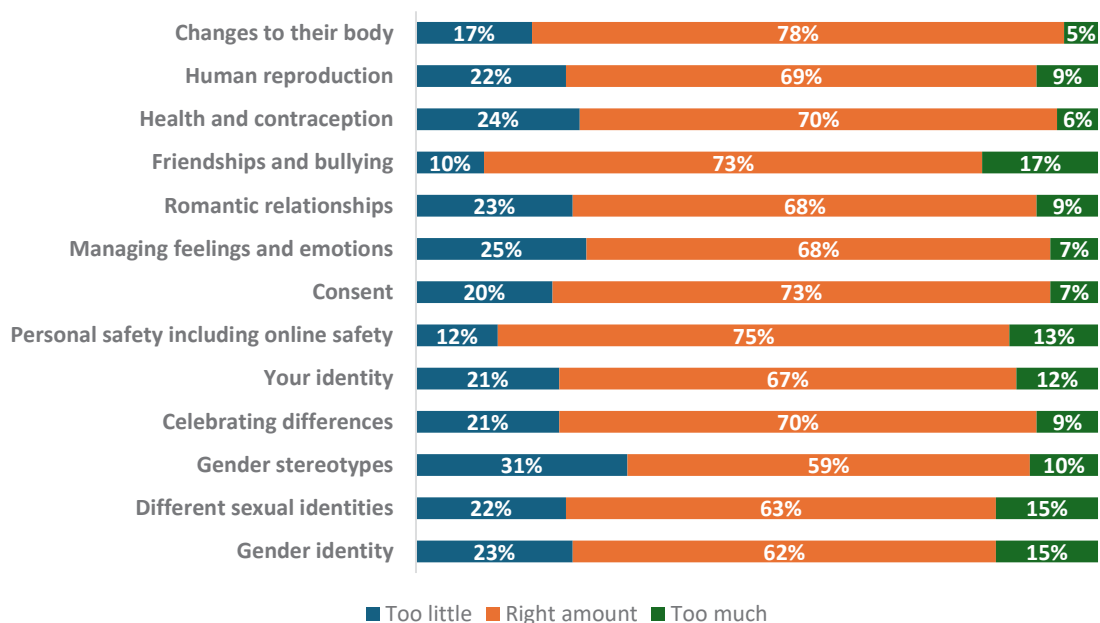


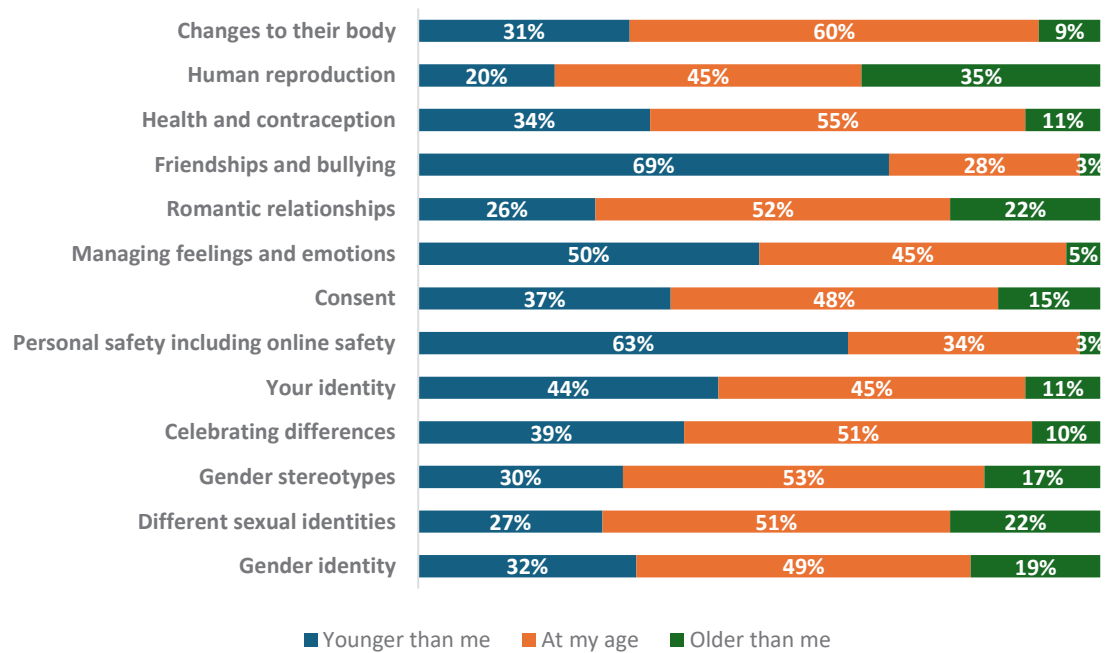
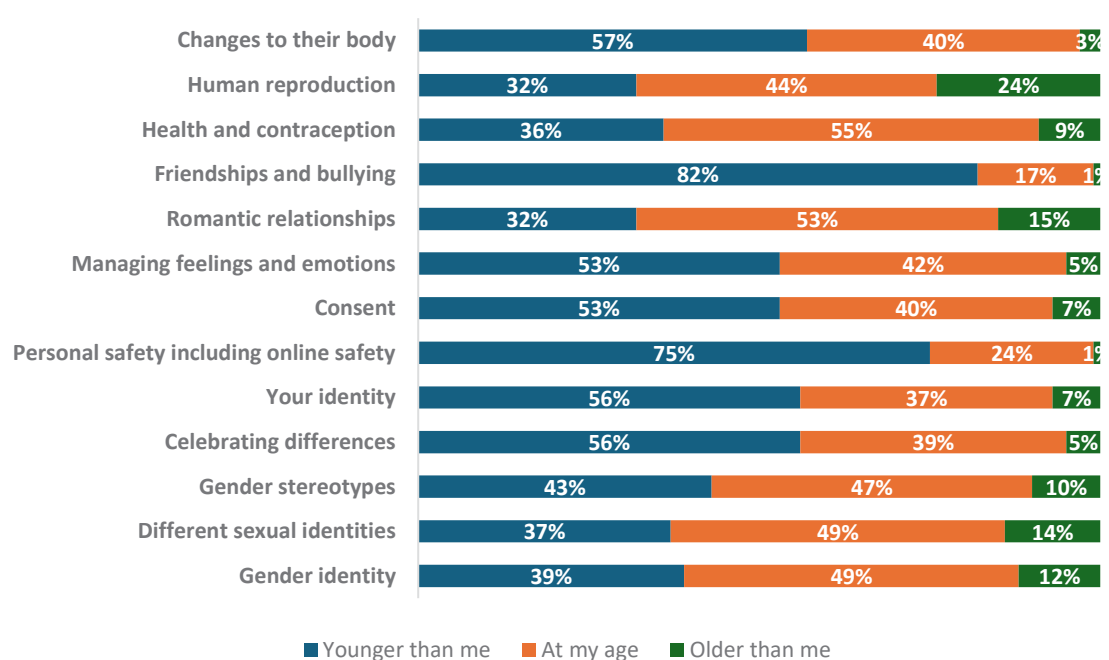
Figure 54: *Boys report when they are taught RSE topics***Figure 55:** *Girls report when they are taught RSE topics*

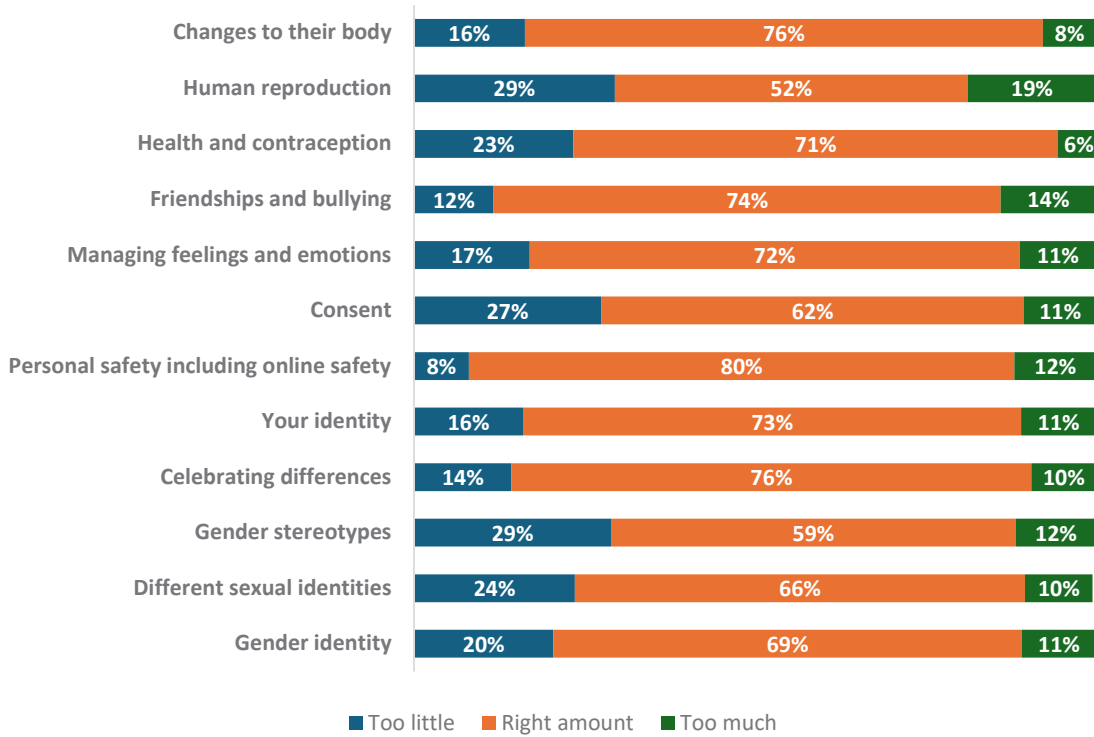
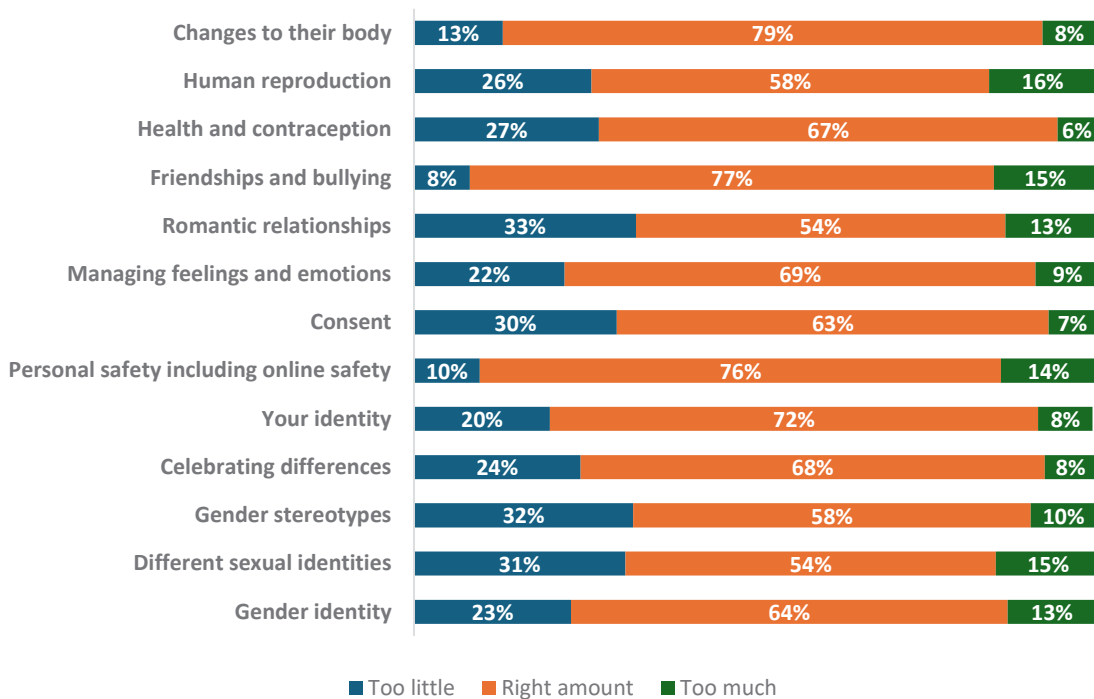
Figure 56: Year 5–6 students who report learning the right amount about topics**Figure 57:** Year 7–8 students who report learning the right amount about topics

Figure 58: Year 9-10 students who report learning the right amount about topics

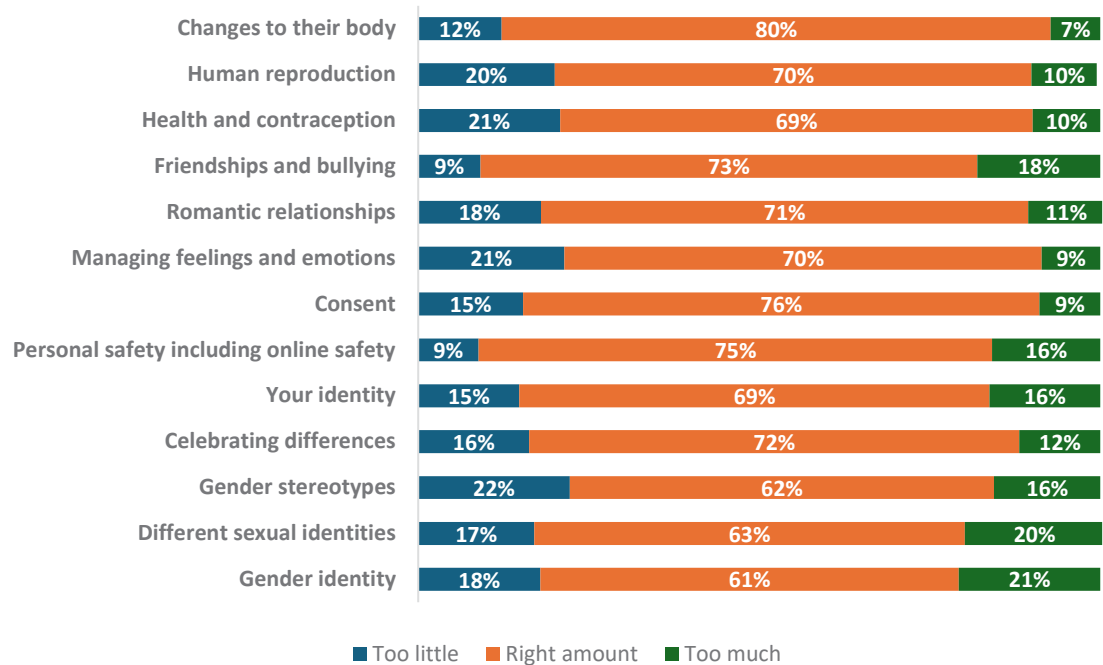


Figure 59: Year 11-13 students who report learning the right amount about topics

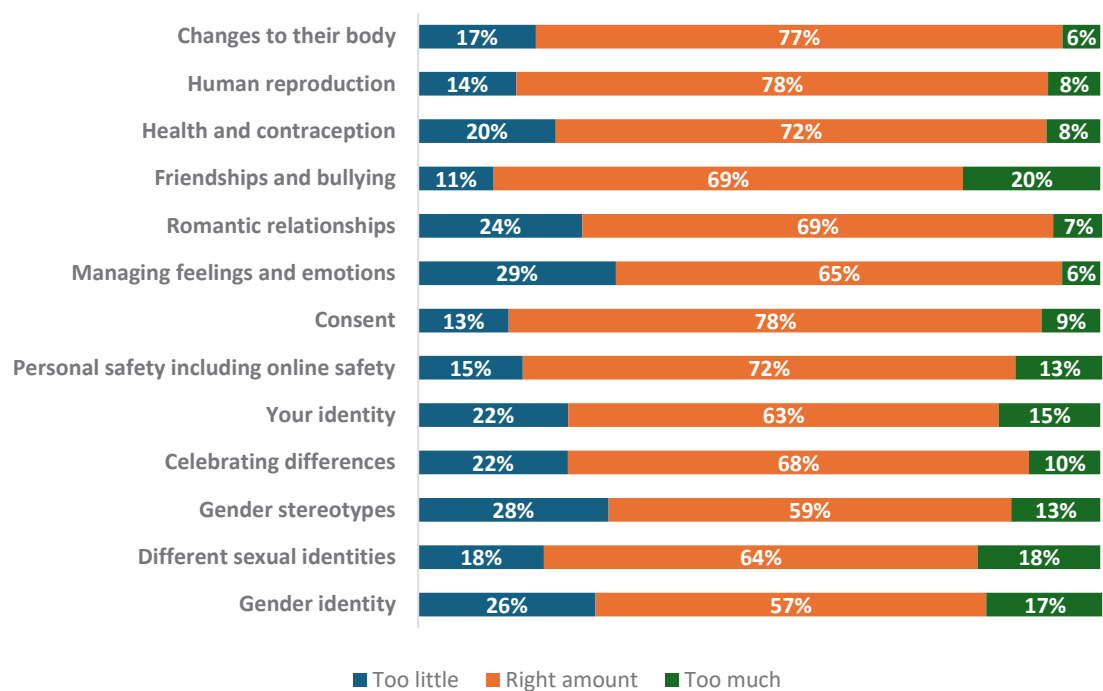


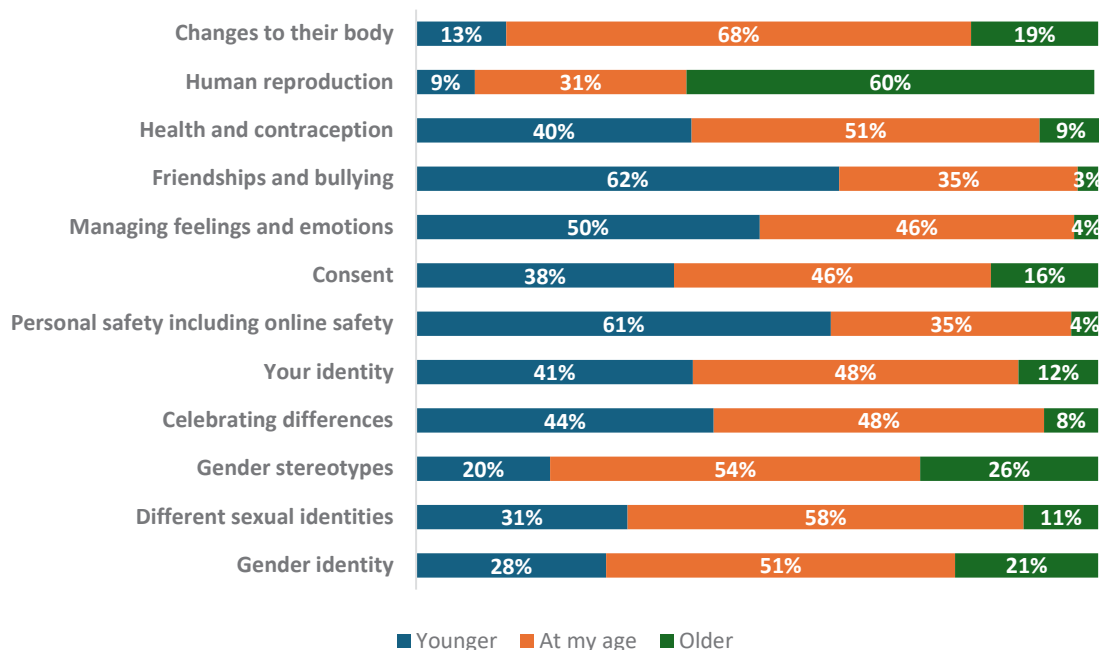
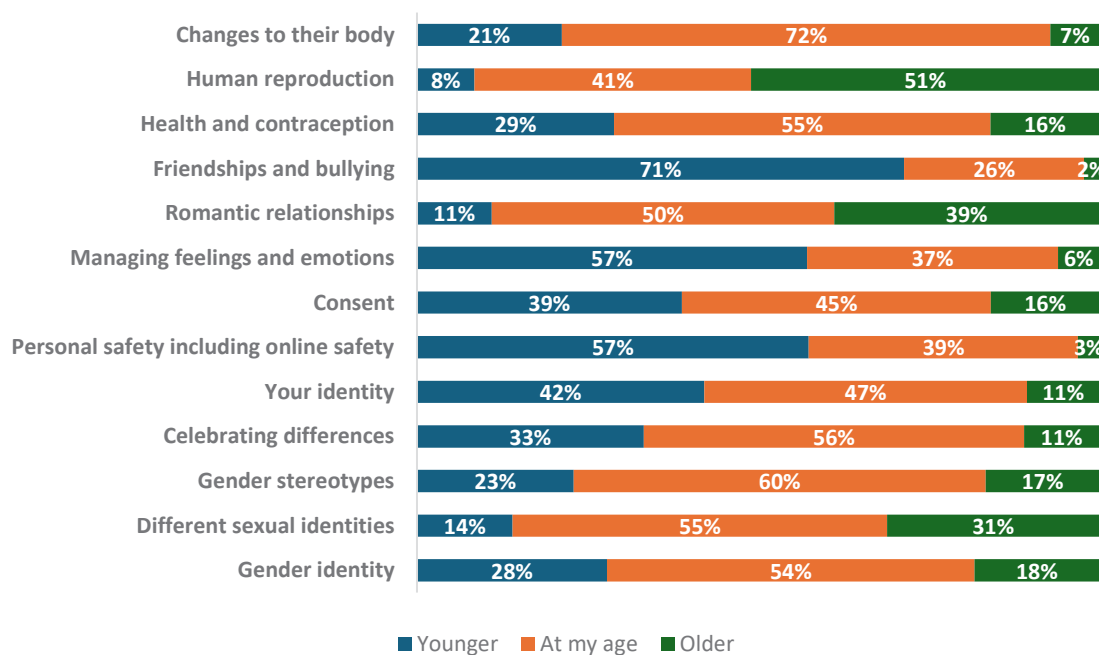
Figure 60: Year 5–6 students report when they would like to learn about RSE topics**Figure 61:** Year 7–8 students report when they would like to learn about RSE topics

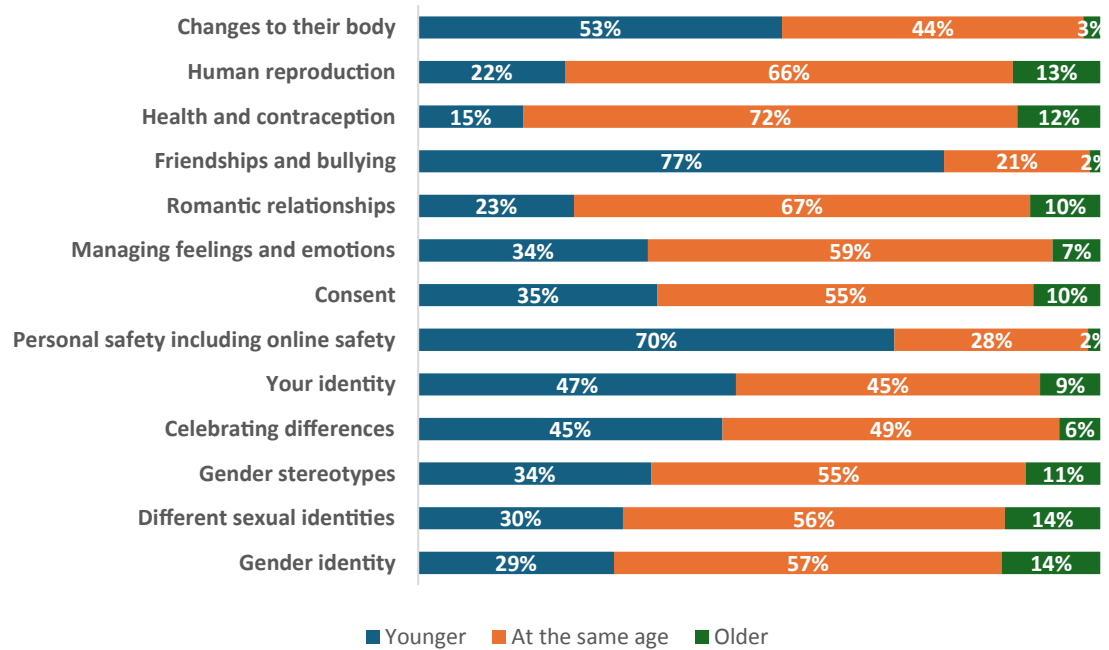
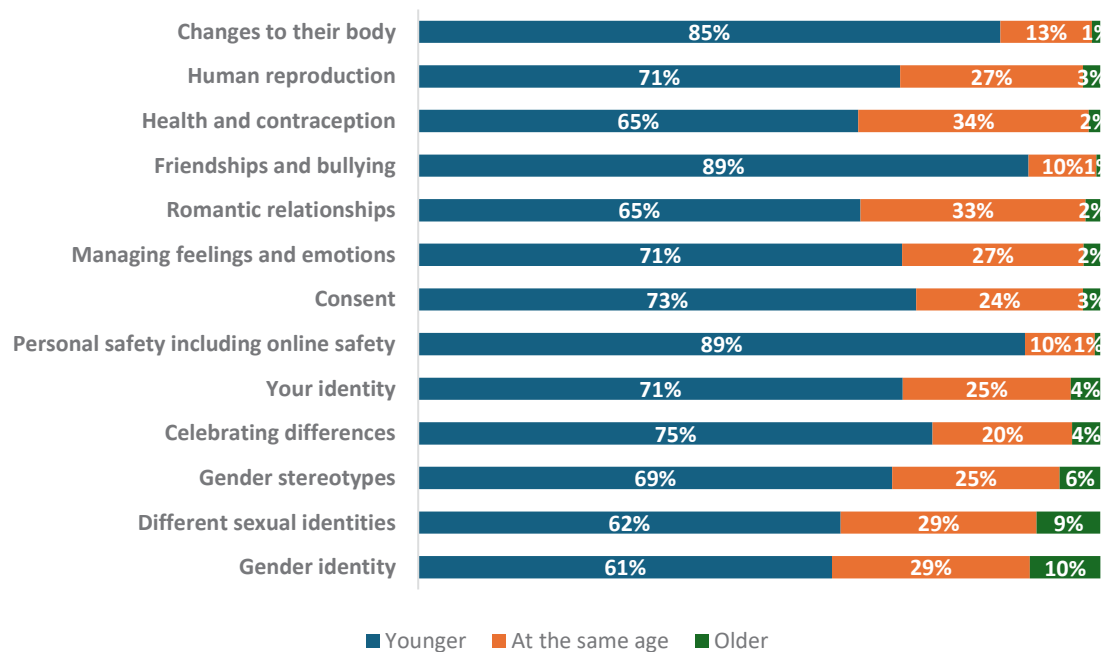
Figure 62: Year 9-10 students report when they would like to learn about RSE topics**Figure 63:** Year 11-13 students report when they would like to learn about RSE topics

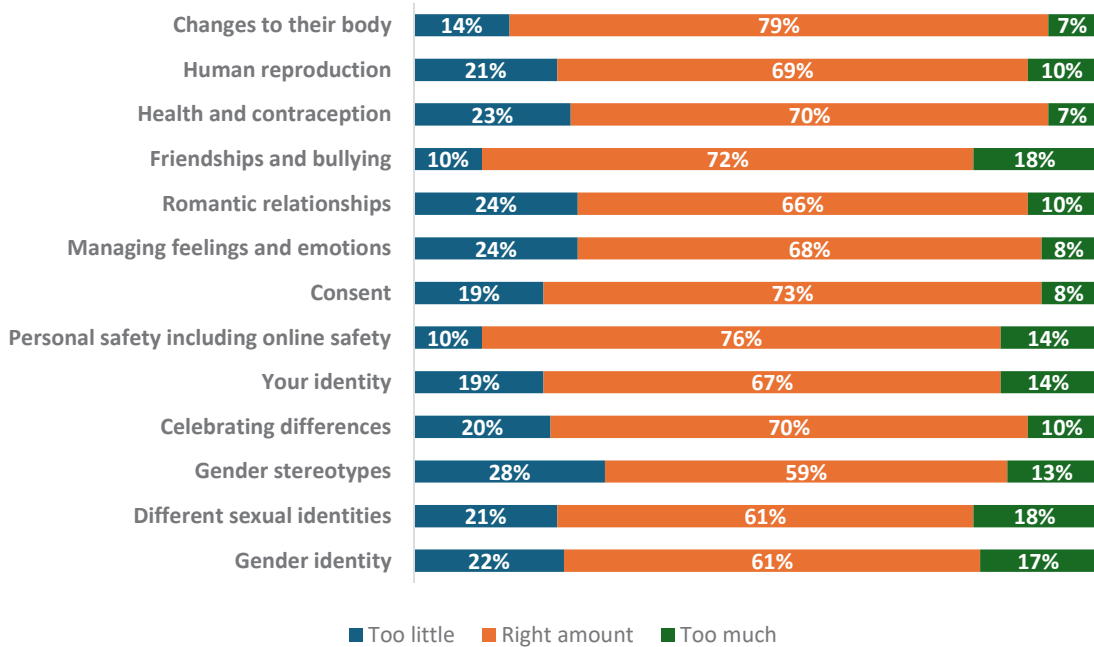
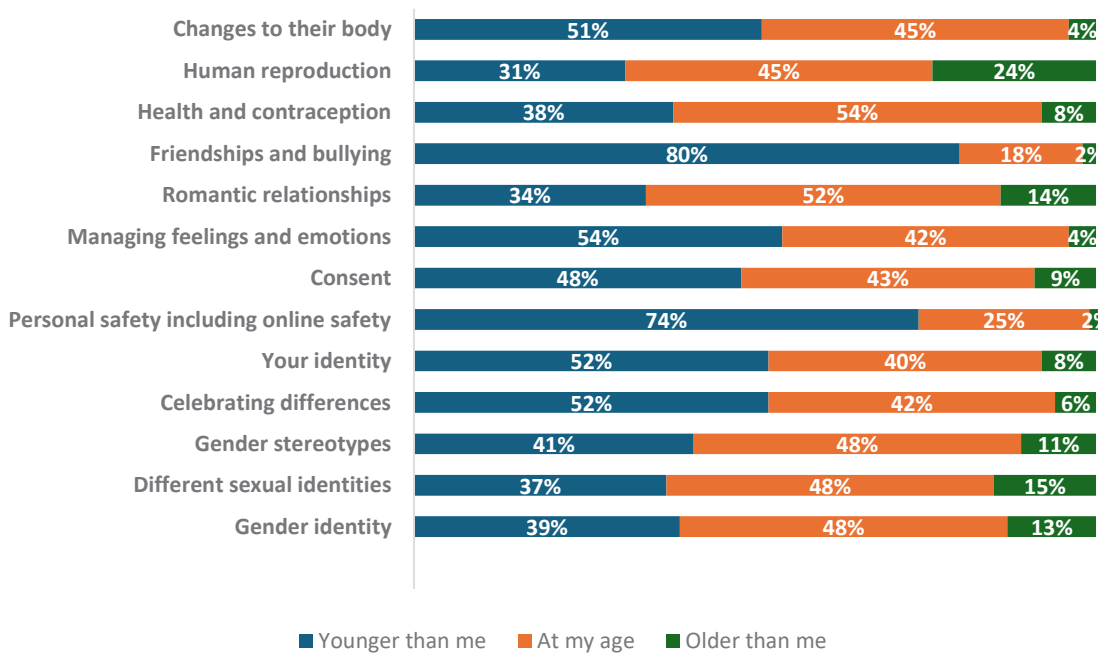
Figure 64: *Pākehā students who report learning the right amount about topics***Figure 65:** *Pākehā students report when they would like to learn about RSE topics*

Figure 66: *Māori students report when they would like to learn about RSE topics*

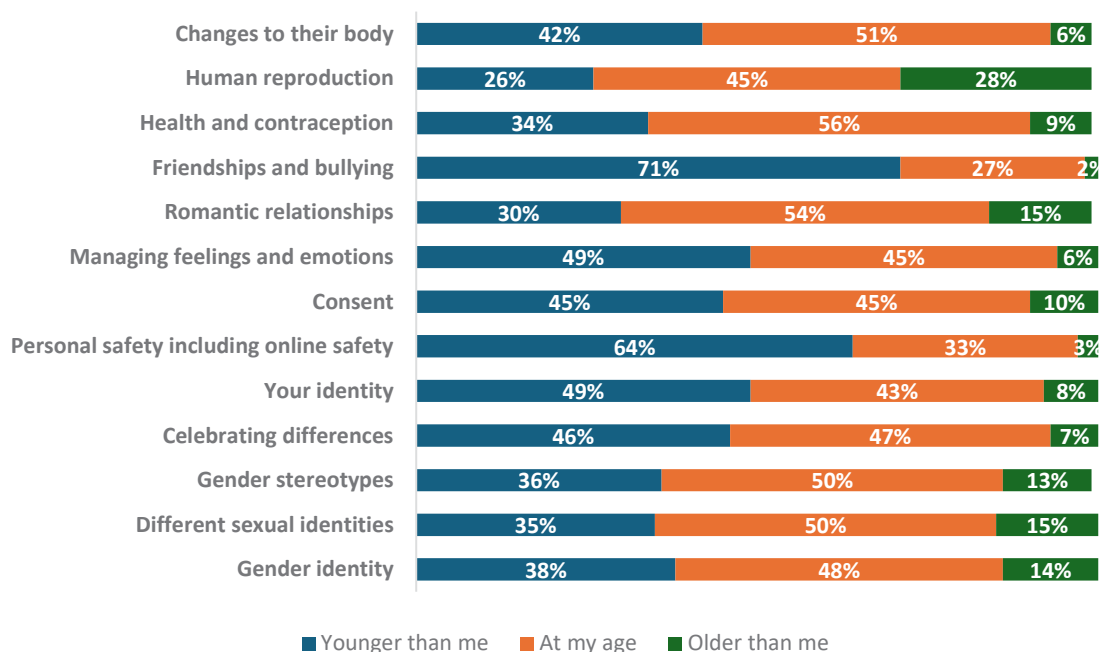


Figure 67: *Māori students who report learning the right amount about topics*

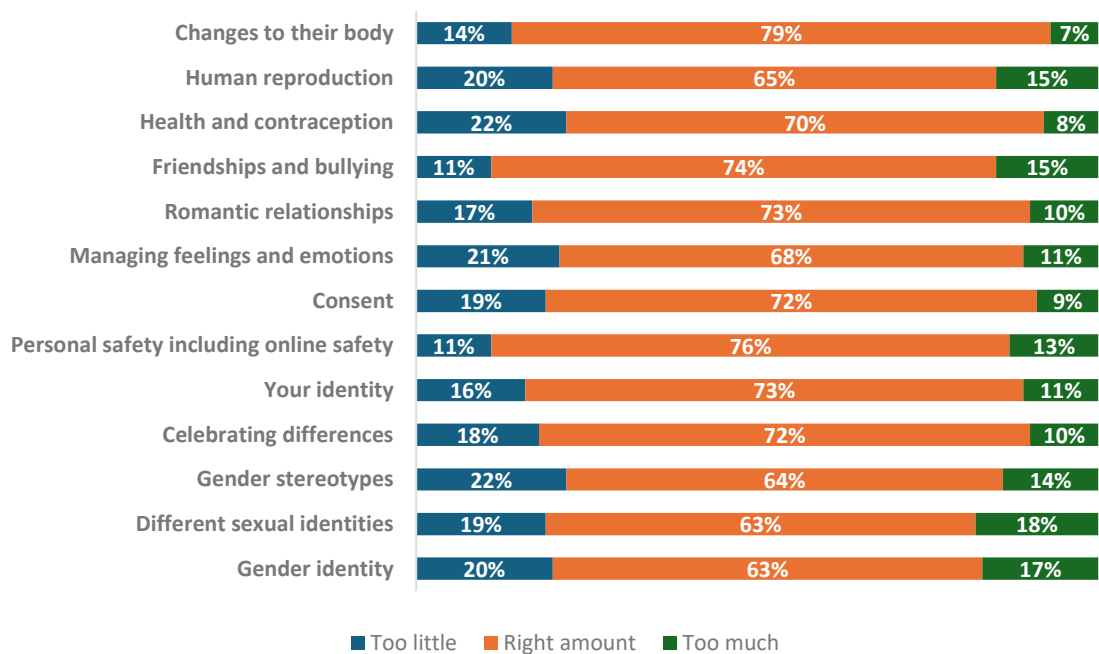


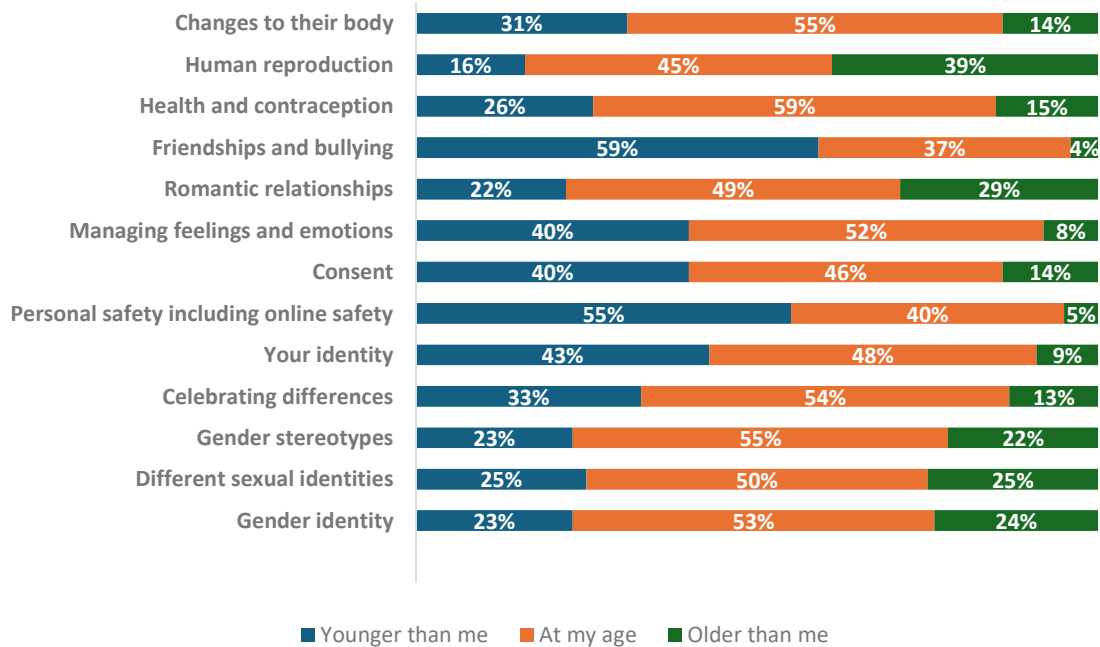
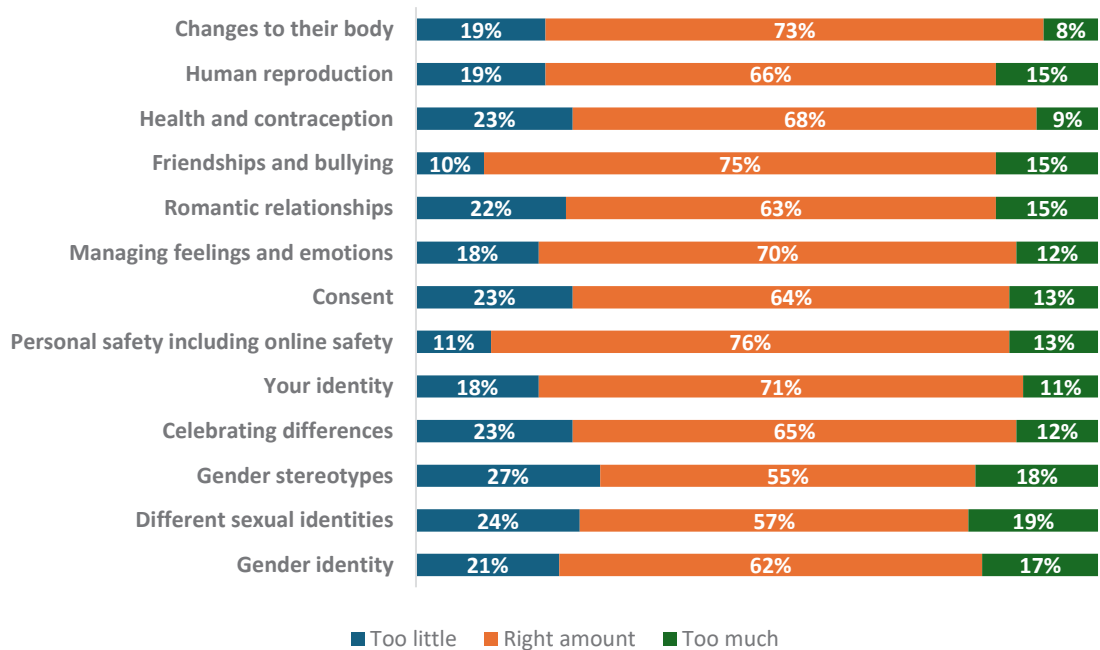
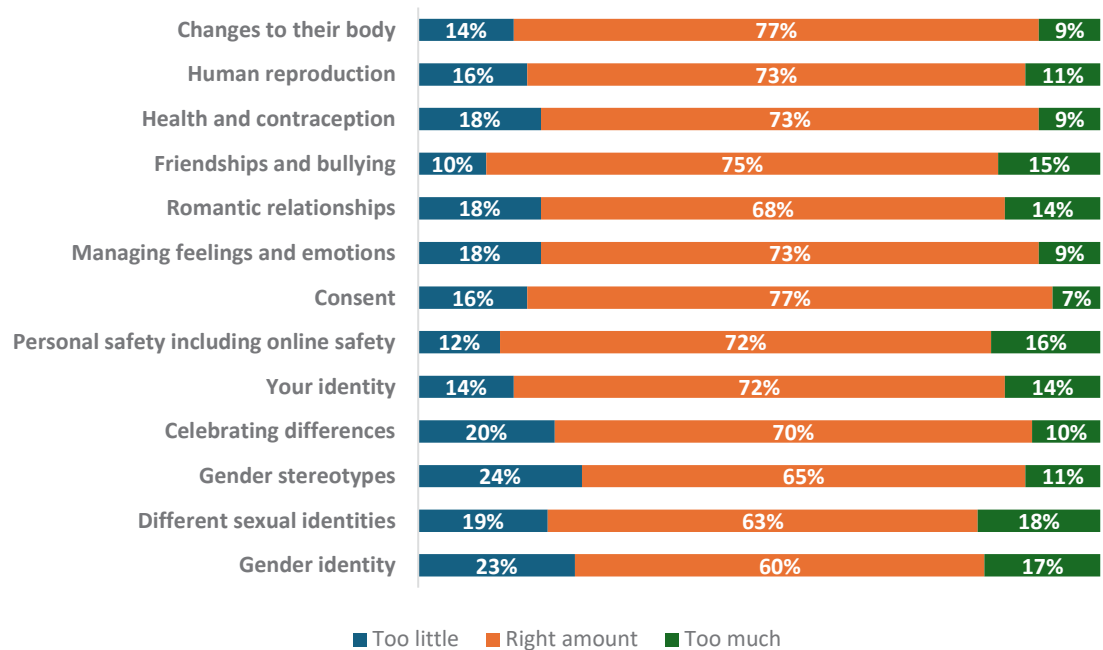
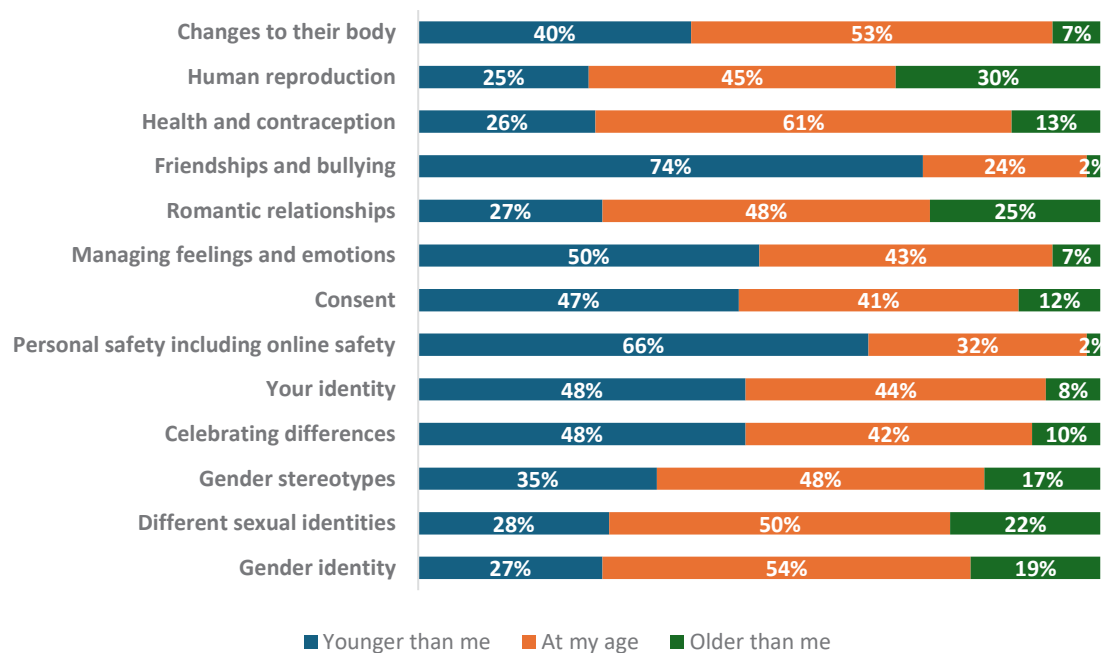
Figure 68: *Pacific students report when they would like to learn about RSE topics***Figure 69:** *Pacific students who report learning the right amount about topics*

Figure 70: Asian students who report learning the right amount about topics**Figure 71:** Asian students report when they would like to learn about RSE topics

Parents and whānau

Figure 72: *Parents and whānau of Year 0-4 children who report their children learnt the right amount*

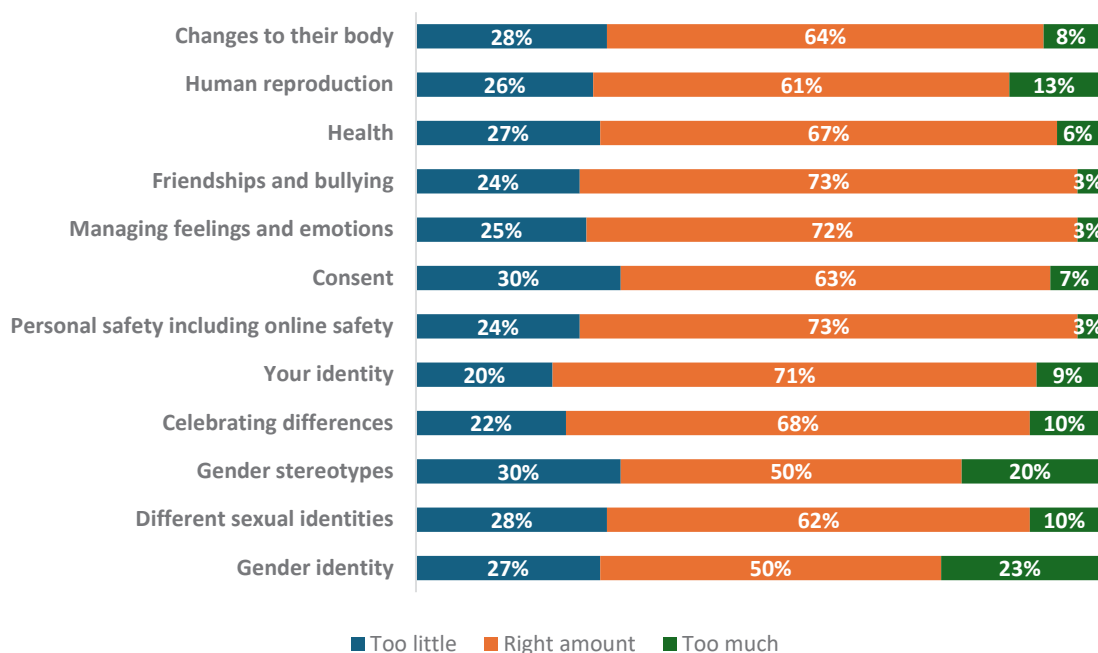


Figure 73: *Parents and whānau of Year 5-6 children who report their children learnt the right amount*

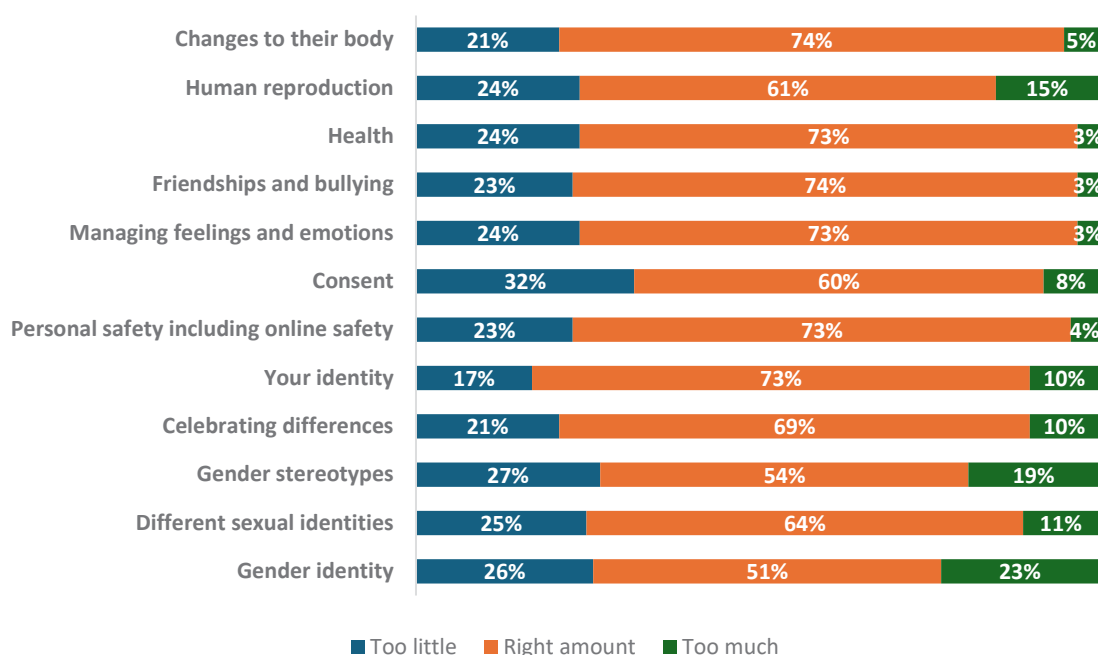


Figure 74: *Parents and whānau of Year 7-8 children who report their children learnt the right amount*

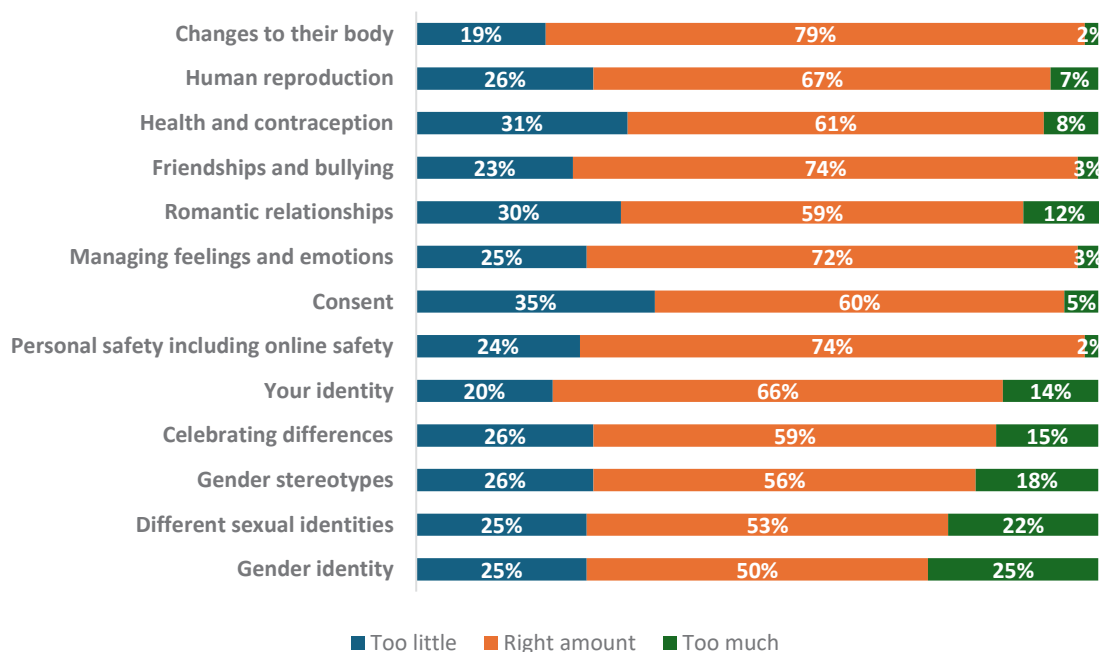


Figure 75: *Parents and whānau of Year 9-10 children who report their children learnt the right amount*

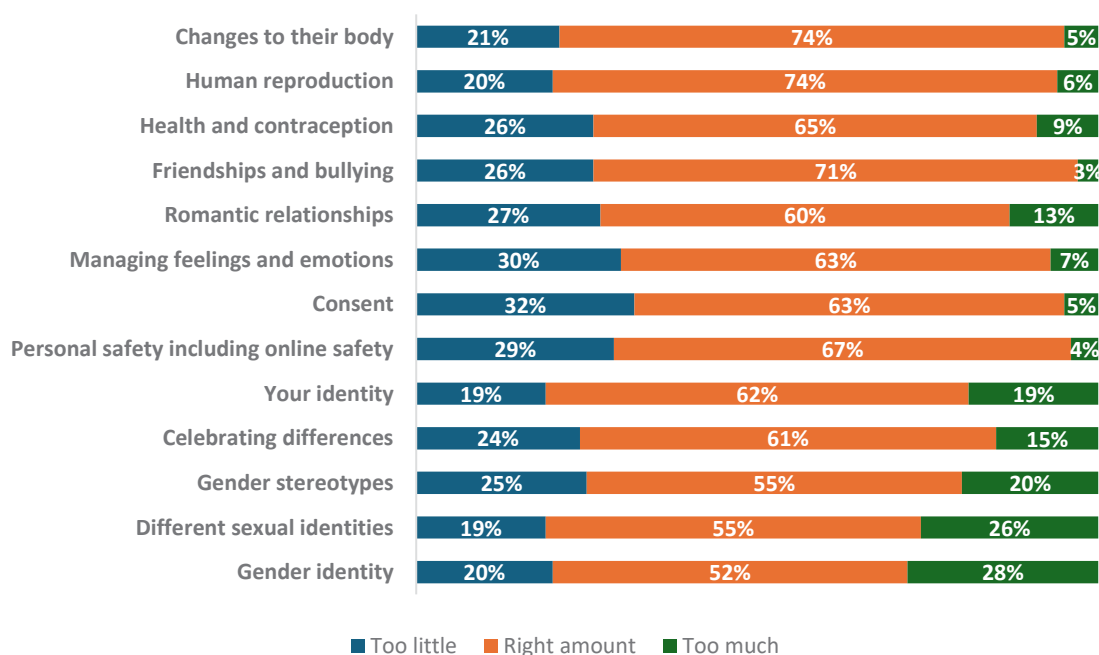


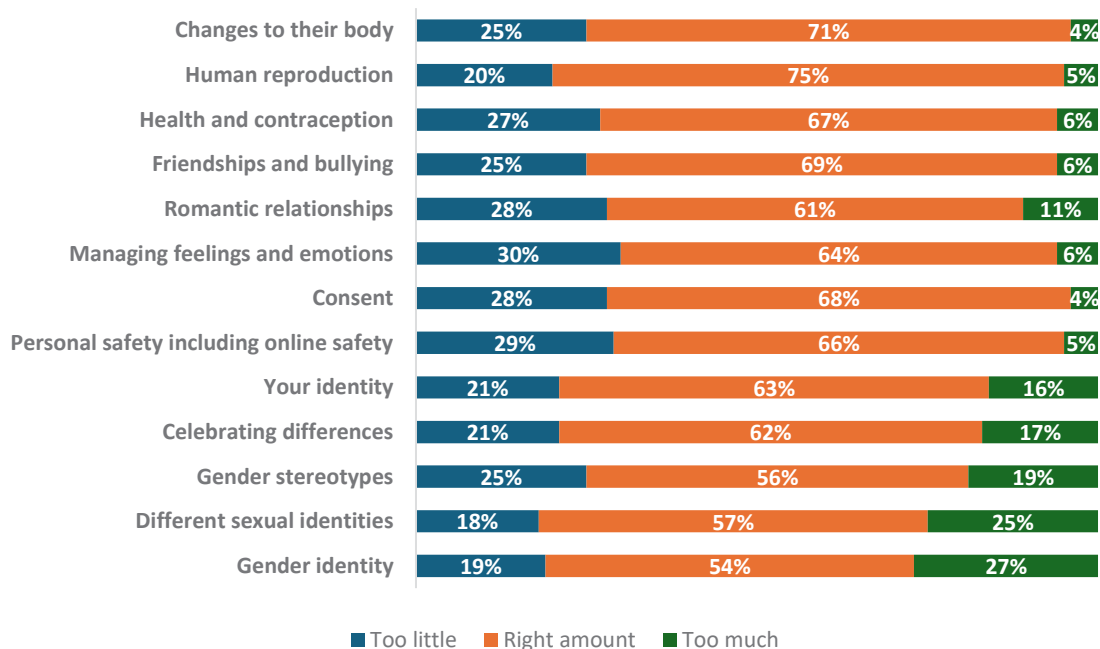
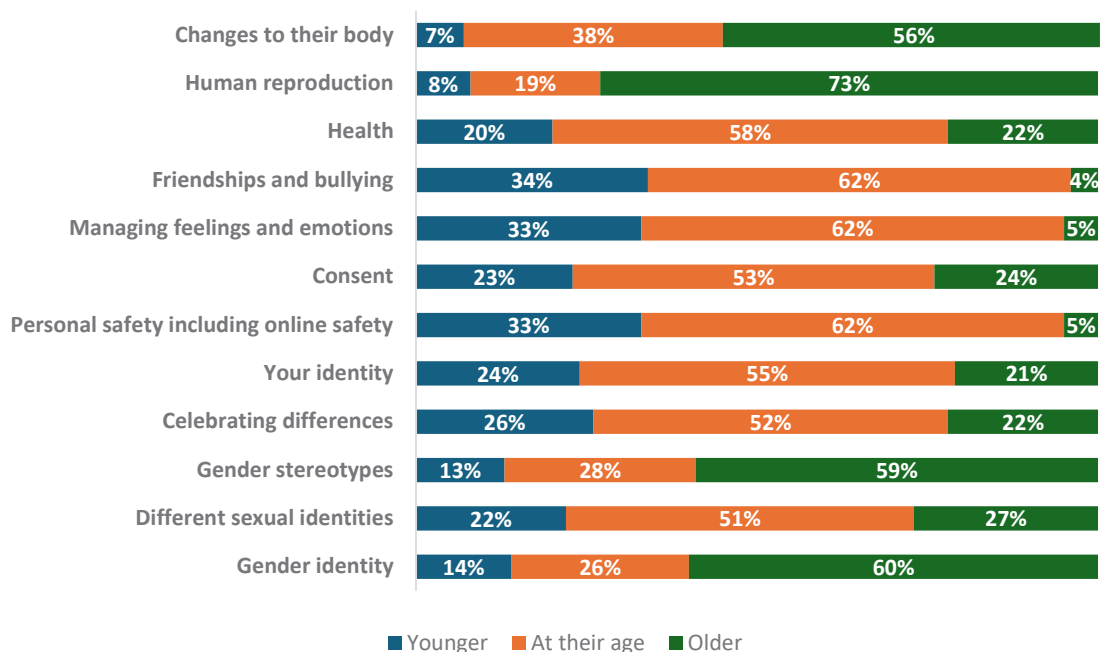
Figure 76: *Parents and whānau of Year 11-13 children who report their children learnt the right amount***Figure 77:** *Parents and whānau of Year 0-4 children report when their children should learn RSE topics*

Figure 78: *Parents and whānau of Year 5-6 children report when their children should learn RSE topics*

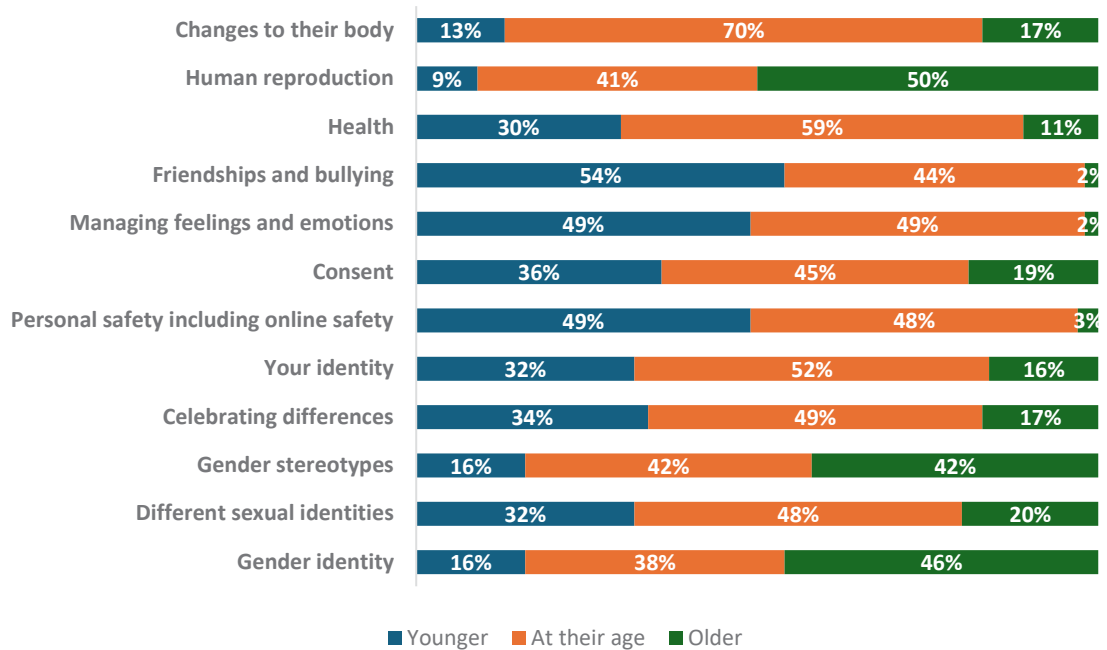


Figure 79: *Parents and whānau of Year 7-8 children report when their children should learn RSE topics*

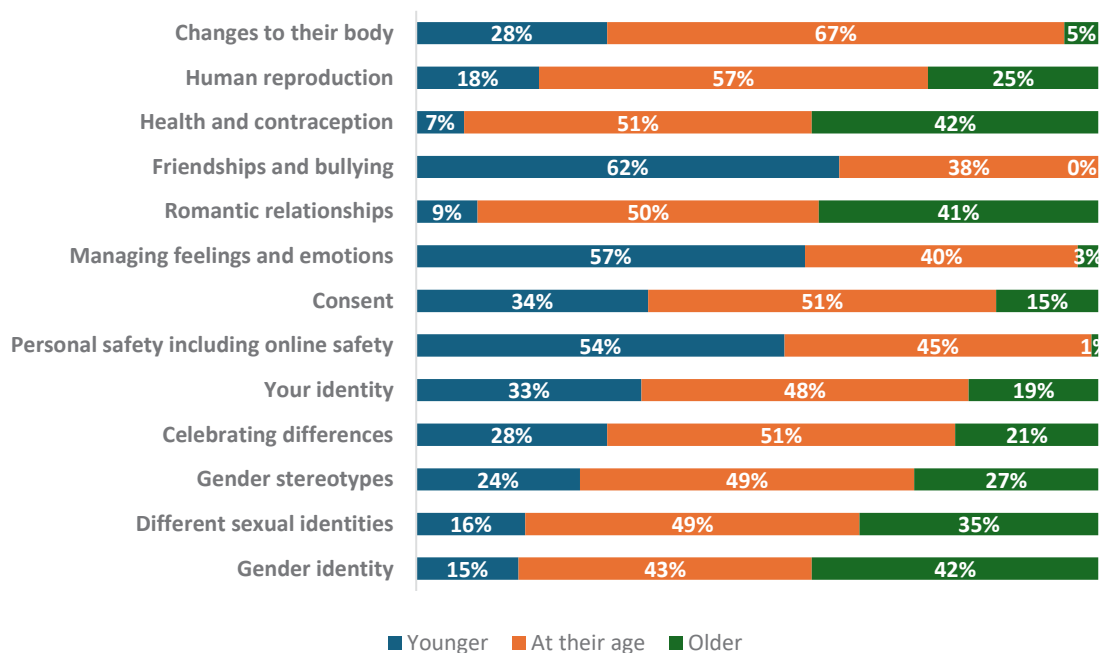


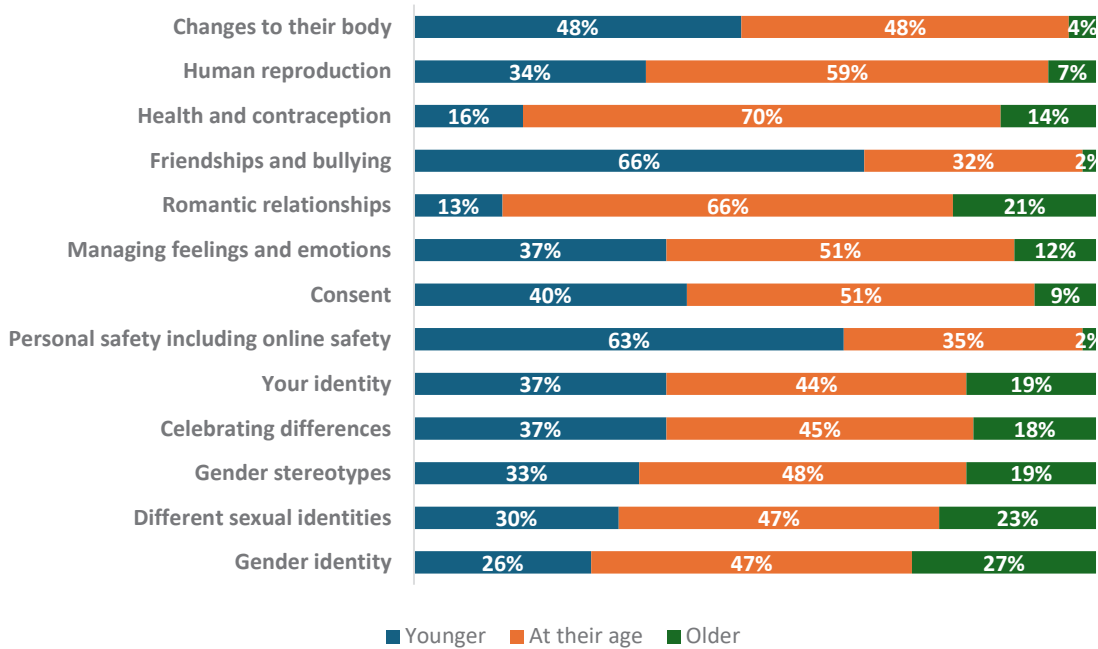
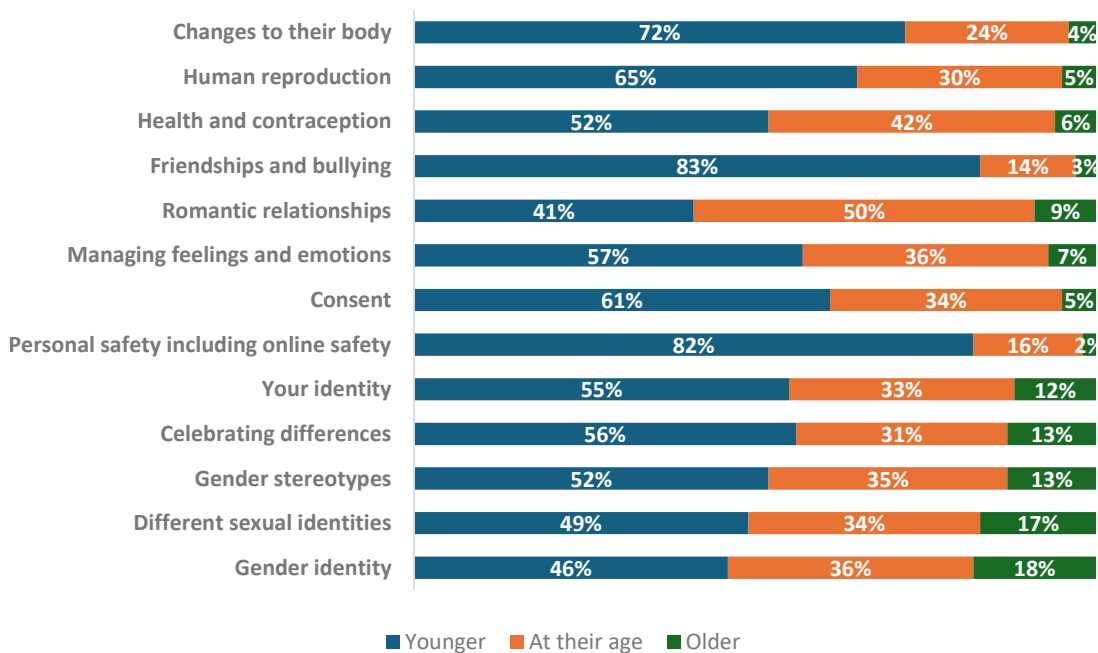
Figure 80: *Parents and whānau of Year 9–10 children report when their children should learn RSE topics***Figure 81:** *Parents and whānau of Year 11–13 children report when their children should learn RSE topics*

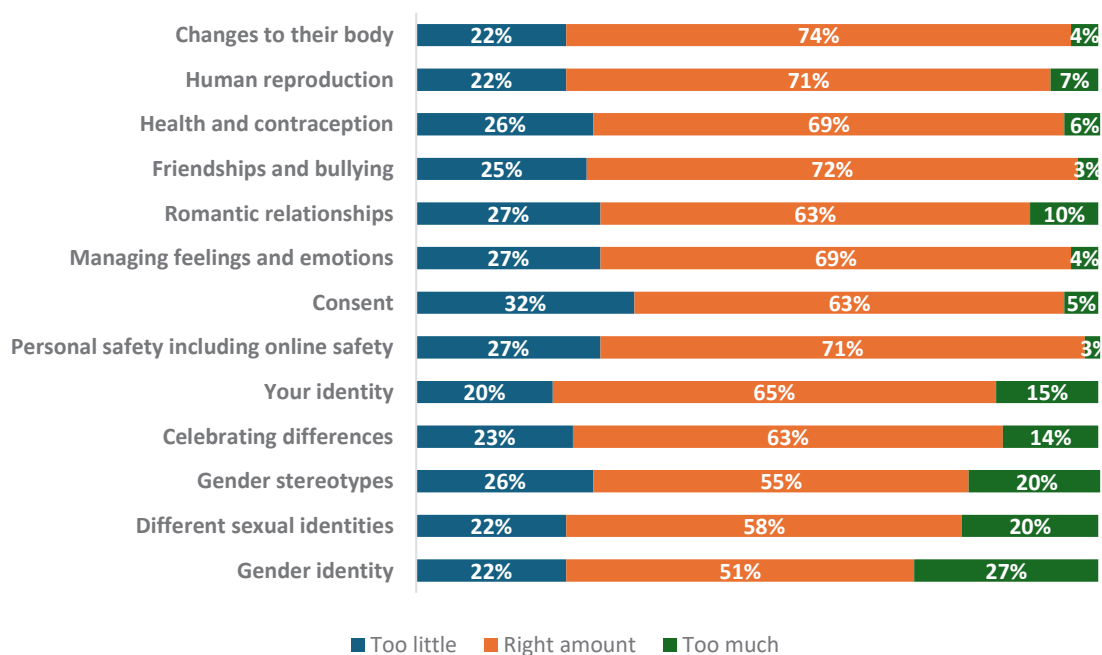
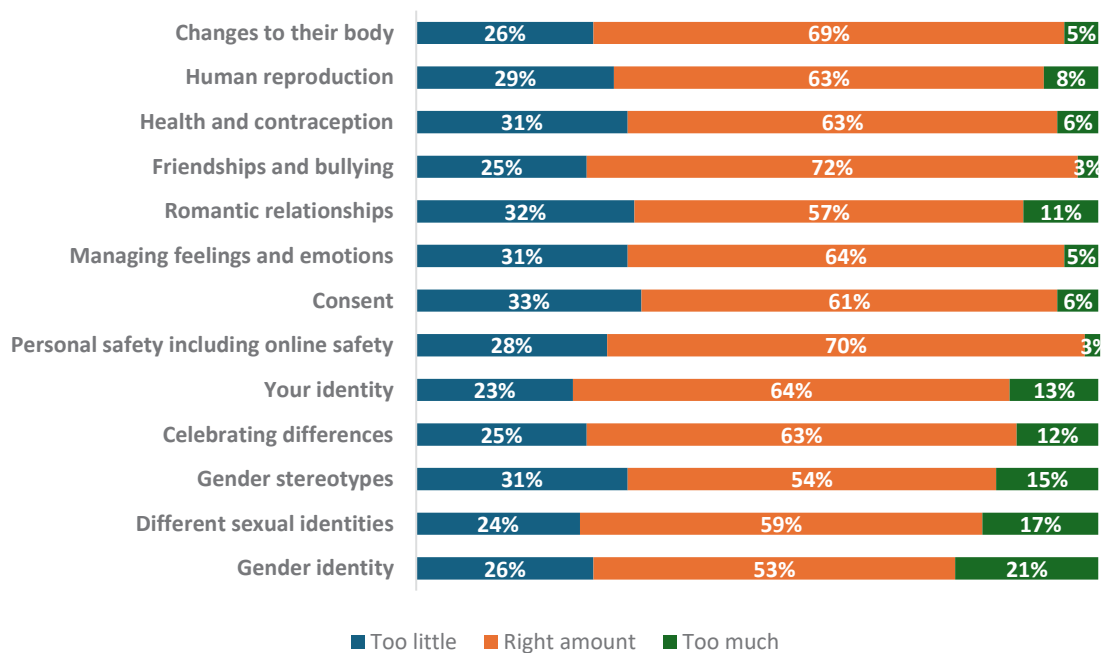
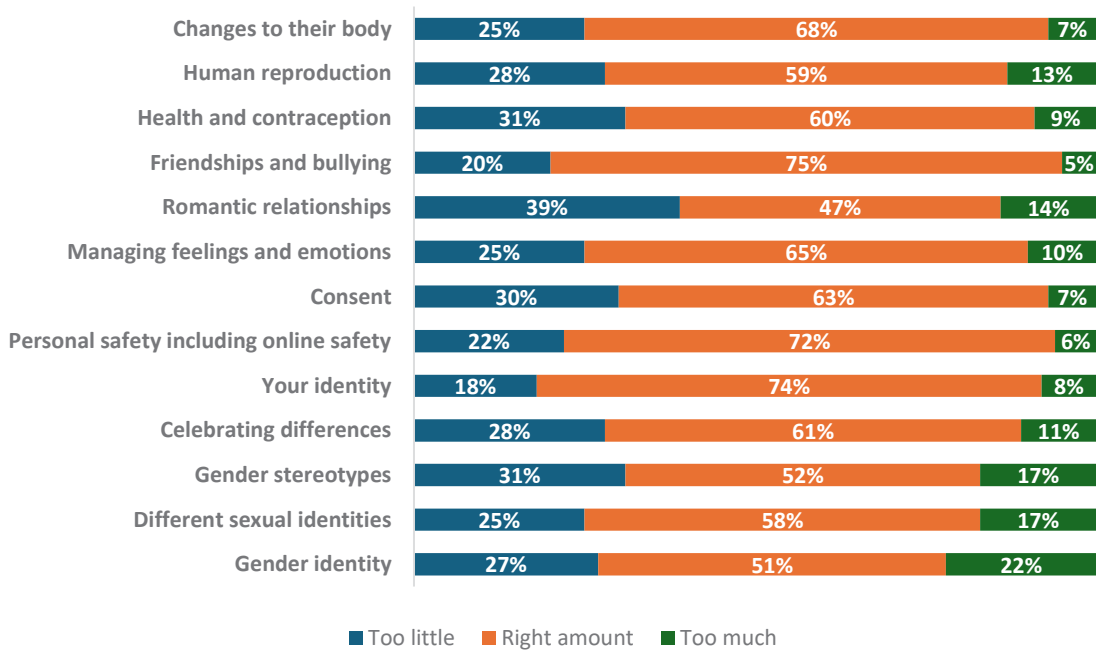
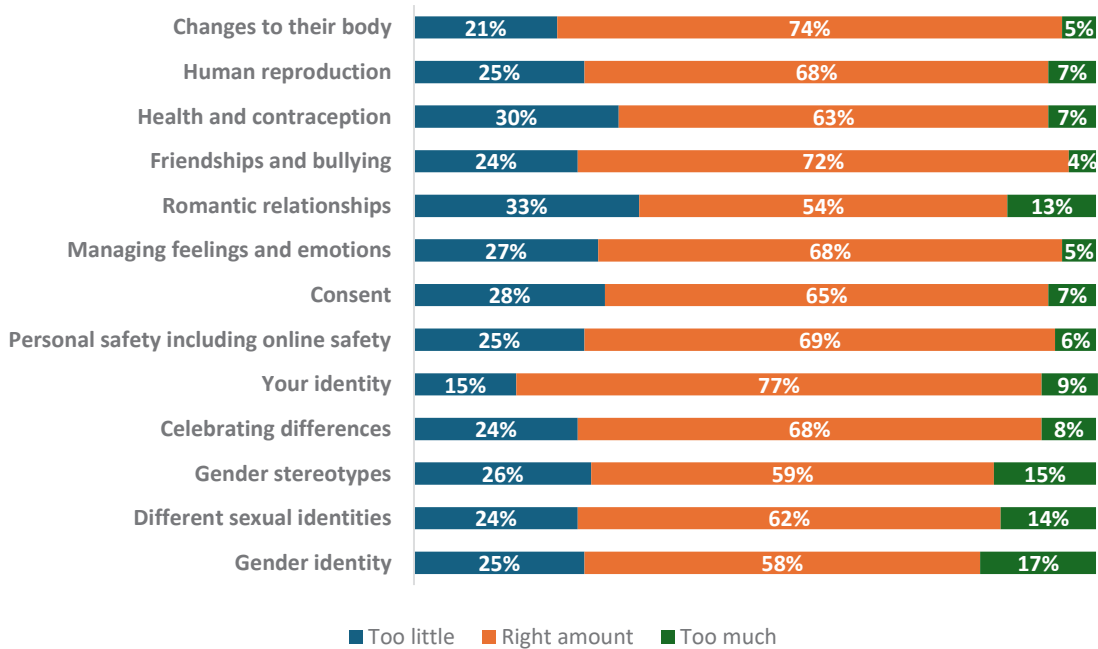
Figure 82: *Pākeha parents who report their children learnt the right amount***Figure 83:** *Māori parents and whānau who report their children learnt the right amount*

Figure 84: *Pacific parents who report their children learnt the right amount***Figure 85:** *Asian parents who report their children learnt the right amount*



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EDUCATION REVIEW OFFICE
Te Tari Arotake Mātauranga

www.ero.govt.nz

Let's talk about it: Review of relationships and sexuality education

Published 2024

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Digital: 978-1-991126-81-8

Print: 978-1-991126-80-1



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