

ESTABLISHING A GROUP AGREEMENT FOR RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION



What is a group agreement and why is it important?

A group agreement for relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is a set of agreed behaviours and conduct that supports the creation of a safe space. Given the sensitive nature of RSE, it is important for students to not only feel safe but actually be safe to express their thoughts, opinions and values without fear of judgement or discrimination. The group agreement can be a useful reminder about respecting confidentiality and privacy (as discussed below); and for behaviour management during RSE, as you can refer to it if a student's behaviour falls foul of the agreement.

How do you use the group agreement?

The group agreement is developed with students in the first RSE session. Each student must agree to abide by what is set out in the group agreement. The agreement should then be placed in a prominent part of the classroom before each lesson begins and discussed as part of the lesson welcome and introduction. For the group agreement to be most effective, students should recommit to the agreement at the start of each lesson.

How do you develop a group agreement?

Explain: *To help everyone in the group feel safe to talk about things that may be sensitive, we need to work out some boundaries about what's OK and what's not OK to say and do in these sessions. What kind of behaviour from us and the other participants is going to make you feel comfortable and confident enough to talk about the things you want to in these sessions?*

Write all suggestions that the whole group agrees with on butcher's paper; negotiate any points of disagreement.

Two things that must be on every group agreement:

- 1 Right to pass: the more each student participates the more they will learn and gain from the lesson, and the more other people in the group will learn. But it's important to explain to the group that we will not force anyone to do anything in this space that makes them feel unsafe. This means everyone has the right to decline talking about something they're not comfortable with, or not to participate in a group activity.
- 2 Confidentiality or "what's said in here, stays in here": Conversations about confidentiality must cover three aspects—

a) What we mean by confidentiality

Explain: *Confidentiality is important and means we can feel safe in group discussions. It's OK to share information we've learned about relationships with people outside the group—but it's not OK to share personal information we've learned about other people. It's also not OK to repeat what other members of the group have said in the lessons.*

Ask: *When we say things like "what's said in here stays in here", what do we mean? *Do we all agree this means that personal information or questions that people ask in here mustn't be shared with people outside of this group?** (*Make sure that everyone nods or says yes in agreement.)

b) Limits to confidentiality for the group facilitator

Explain: Confidentiality is a bit different for me though and I need to be up front about this. As the group facilitator I have a responsibility to keep everyone in the group safe. I must also follow the law. Part of this responsibility means that in some cases I must tell other people about some things. I need to tell someone else if I hear that:

- 1 someone is hurting you or abusing you in some way
- 2 you are going to seriously hurt someone else
- 3 you are going to hurt yourself (suicide, or harm yourself in some way).

I would not be able to keep these things just between you and me because the law says I can't. If I do need to tell someone else your personal story, I will tell you who I am going to speak to and what I am going to tell them beforehand.

c) Strategy for maintaining privacy (one step removed)

Explain: You may have a real-life situation that you have a question about. That's great, our school wants to support our students where we can. However, a group or whole class discussion is usually not the safest or best place to share personal stories. I would encourage you to speak to me after or before class or speak with staff at student services. If however, you still want to use this group to get information and it's relevant to our discussion, it's important to remove yourself from the scenario and protect the identity of all people involved. Never refer to other people's names—even first names or nicknames—or any identifying information, including naming of a particular community. Say something like "What would you do if ..." or "suppose someone ..." or "what if a friend told you ...". This means you can still encourage discussion of real-life scenarios while protecting privacy.

(HINT: it may be a good idea to have these opening statements written on butchers' paper in the room)

Possible things to suggest or discuss further:

- Respect: this is often suggested by groups—when it comes up encourage the group to explain what respect looks like. Try asking "how do you know you are being respected?". Add the responses to the group agreement.
- Agree on mobile phone use: e.g. are people expected to have phones on silent? And tell the group that while in the session they are not permitted to take photos of each other with their phones or any other devices with cameras.
- Encourage the group not to spin yarns/gossip about each other or other people in the community when they are with you in this space.
- It can be nice to include "have fun" on your group agreement: Sexual health can be funny to talk about and it's okay to laugh and have fun during the sessions—however, we don't want to be laughing at individuals.

Out of session support

As part of keeping students safe, it's a good idea to make yourself or other support staff available after each lesson. You could say: "If anything comes up for you that you'd like to discuss with me but not in front of the whole group, please come and talk to me after the lesson. Remember I am a teacher, not a health professional, so I may not have all the answers, but I can assist you in getting help or further info".