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+ Eamon Martin

Healthy and  
life-giving  
relationships

# Healthy and life-giving relationships\*

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Learning to form healthy and life-giving relationships is an essential aspect of all education, firstly at home, and then supported by schools. There is no doubt that the pursuit of individualism and instant gratification, that is a hallmark of Western culture, can take a heavy toll on our youth. Ironically, despite the revolution in social media and communications technology, too many young people lack essential skills in personal communication; many can only form fleeting and cosmetic friendships and find themselves unable to manage their feelings or relate to others, particularly in moments of crisis, loss or anxiety. How sad it is that so many of our young people today feel so isolated and alone that they turn to addictive behaviours and may even consider taking their own lives. Catholic schools should therefore model and encourage relationships marked by respect, understanding, forgiveness, empathy and selflessness.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

For many years now families and schools have grappled with the challenge of monitoring the use of smartphones and other mobile devices by children and young people. It is estimated that approximately a quarter of 8-11 year olds already have a social media profile. The debate in recent days about the ‘digital age of consent’ raises many important questions for families and also for schools.

As educators you no doubt value the positive impact that access to online resources can have on learning and teaching. Increasingly however, we are aware of the more threatening nature of much online activity for our young people, and its undoubted impact on their health and well-being. Issues mentioned include sleep deprivation, obesity, cyber-bullying, vulnerability to targeted advertising, harvesting of their data, access to hard-core pornography, the dangers of sexting and “sextortion”, and the addictive nature of many popular ‘apps’.

\* This is an abridged version of an address delivered by Archbishop Eamon Martin to a conference on Catholic Schools.

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## HEALTHY AND LIFE-GIVING RELATIONSHIPS

Year heads and other pastoral staff in your schools will be aware of young people who become dependent on online affirmation and popularity, who display anxiety at being left out of online forums and conversations, or being the target of others' bullying attentions.

Families and parents will welcome debate and discussion within schools on all these issues. Internet security and literacy is now an essential life-skill for pupils and parents alike. Parents will be interested in your advice about boundaries, guidelines and “digital breaks”, about the age appropriateness of various digital activities, on ways of talking to their children about issues as they arise, on how to monitor and be vigilant about their son or daughter's use of the internet and on recognising signs of problems before they become critical.

### RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION

The particular danger presented by online pornography brings us to the issue of relationships and sexuality education. In *Amoris Laetitia* chapter seven, Pope Francis questions whether we have yet taken seriously the challenge of developing what the Second Vatican Council called “a positive and prudent sex education” with “due weight being given to the advances in psychological, pedagogical and didactic sciences (*AL* 280)”.

“It is not easy”, he adds, “to approach the issue of sex education in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialised and impoverished. It can only be seen within the broader framework of an education for love, for actual self-giving”.

In this, Pope Francis is repeating the long held view of many educationalists and parents that relationships and sexuality education should not be reduced to the imparting of so-called “objective” information, dissociated from a morals and values framework or from the totality of relationships communicated via the ethos or characteristic spirit of any school - Catholic or otherwise. As Pope Saint John Paul II said:

“Sexuality is an enrichment of the whole person - body, emotions and soul - and manifests its inmost meaning in leading the person to the gift of self in love” (*FC* 37).

During the recent (18 April) second stage debate in Dáil Éireann on the Provision of Objective Sex Education Bill 2018, the approach of Catholic Schools to Relationships and Sexuality Education was variously described by some as “backward”, “grossly distorted”, not “objective”, non “factual”, and even biologically incorrect. It was argued that relationships and sexuality education has to be “non-ethos based”. These negative perceptions of the approach to relationships and sexuality education in our schools will sound unfair, harsh, uninformed and agenda-driven to many parents and

to those who have been sensitively working in this area within our Catholic schools. I agree that a review of relationships and sexuality education in all schools, including our Catholic schools, is essential if we are to help young people cope with the risks to their health and well-being presented in both the virtual and real worlds they inhabit.

It is true that relationships and sexuality education in Catholic schools is situated within a morals and values framework that is derived ultimately from the life and teaching of Christ and transmitted through the teaching of the Catholic Church. Catholic schools should seek to promote a positive self-image and attitude to our bodies, an appreciation of the gift of sexuality. They should help educate young people in taking responsibility and making well informed decisions regarding their choices, including being aware of their own values and those of others who may differ from them.

This questions and challenges facing young people in living their lives today should not be ignored or skimmed over. A sound relationships and sexuality programme, developed in consultation with parents, will include age appropriate information, debate and discussion about contraception, sexually transmitted infections, same sex attraction and unions and the full meaning of consent - recent coverage of the Belfast trial and the international #MeToo movement also focuses minds on the issues of sexual violence and harassment. In choosing to send their children to a Catholic school, parents will want schools to help young people develop what *Amoris Laetitia* describes as a “critical sense in dealing with the onslaught of new ideas and suggestions, the flood of pornography and the overload of stimuli that can deform sexuality (*AL* 281)”.

Relationships and Sexuality Education ought therefore to be an integral part of the curriculum in a Catholic school. It should present the positive, yet challenging Catholic vision for relationships, chastity, marriage and the family. This will include the Good News that: human life is sacred, that each human being comes from God, who created us, male and female; that we are willed by God who loves each and every one of us; that self-giving love and commitment in the marriage of a man and a woman open to life is not only possible, but is a beautiful and fulfilling gift with the power of God’s grace; that chastity is achievable, healthy and good for our young people; that the giving of oneself to another in marriage for life is special, rewarding and a wonderful symbol of Christ’s forgiving, faithful love for his Church.

In light of much public discussion about LGBT and gender issues, it is important that we, in Catholic schools, also evaluate the support offered to students who are facing new and deep questions relating to their sexual identity as they mature. All young people

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must be treated with compassion and be helped to understand that they are loved by God and their inherent human dignity is valued and respected. The prevalence of sexual bullying and ostracisation can so easily leave them susceptible to feelings of rejection, distress, self-harm and risk-taking behaviours. This cannot be tolerated in any school, never mind a Catholic school which holds, as a core value, the dignity of every human person.

In the context of the current debate about relationships and sexuality education in Ireland it would be helpful for us to evaluate, at both local and national level, how our Catholic schools can ensure the safest and most healthy learning environment for all young people. Given that many Catholic schools have already been sensitively offering support to pupils who are beginning to express same sex attractions or raising personal questions about gender identity, it is timely to identify, develop and disseminate best practice in this area across all our Catholic schools. While recognising the challenges at the interface between the Church's moral teaching and pastoral practice, it would be helpful for us to share learning about: inclusive school structures and relationships; sensitive pastoral outreach and support for students; age-appropriate pastoral programmes together with curricular methodologies and resources; quality professional development and training for staff. At all times, the needs and views of parents should be fully considered in such a review and resources and methods should be developed which reflect and enhance the characteristic spirit of a Catholic school.

To conclude, let me recall again what Pope Francis says in chapter seven of *Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love)*. In cautioning parents against being “obsessive” in wanting to control their children's every experience and movement (*AL* 261), he says “The real question, then, is not where our children are physically, or whom they are with at any given time, but rather where they are existentially, where they stand in terms of their convictions, goals, desires and dreams”. Pope Francis continues: “The questions I would put to parents are these: ‘Do we seek to understand ‘where’ our children really are in their journey? Where is their soul, do we really know? And above all, do we want to know?’” We, in Catholic schools might ask ourselves similar questions. By supporting parents in the ways I have described, leaders and boards of management in Catholic schools are saying with families:

We do want to know. We want to understand where young people are on their journey. We care about where they are existentially; we are concerned about where is their soul; we want them to make responsible use of freedom, to have a sound morals and values framework and to develop healthy and life-giving relationships.