

# Exploring relationships through real-life couples



## Factfile

### Organisation

Explore

### Activity

Couples visiting schools

### Age range

Years 9–13

### How widely used

Workshops delivered to more than 100,000 young people over 18 years

Real-life couples open themselves up to frank questioning by young people in the classroom, enabling students to think differently about commitment and long-term relationships.

‘Teenagers today are starved of hope and authenticity,’ says Rosie Simpson of educational charity Explore, which provides workshops that feed into schools’ RSE learning. ‘The media and social media present a world of fakery; [teenagers are] never sure what is real.’ Explore seeks to combat this by bringing ‘ordinary’ couples into schools to speak honestly and openly about their relationships.

Student feedback shows that the charity’s model, which draws on youth-led experiential learning (and is verified

by Tavistock Relationships and the Grubb Institute), has a real-time effect on student attitudes to commitment and relationships. ‘Students often start the session feeling very cynical, sometimes with no hope,’ explains Rosie, ‘And by the end, I see a shift into hoping for something better.’

The workshops use marriage as one example of committed relationships. The focus is on the underlying values in relationships between people – irrespective of gender or marital status. ‘We make it very clear that the life skills



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Workshops usually last 55 minutes, though 90-minute sessions can include two couples, allowing for comparison. A trained facilitator opens the sessions, teasing out the young people's influences and expectations of relationships, and their fears. The students brainstorm a wish-list of their ideal ingredients in a long-term relationship.

The main session is totally student-led. A 'normal', imperfect, couple simply sit and answer questions about anything – from arguments to infidelity – with complete honesty. Rosie says, 'The students are in charge of finding out whatever they want to know. It can sometimes be frustrating for the adults who wish a conversation would move in a particular direction, but student ownership is key to the methodology because it makes the content memorable and meaningful to the young people.'

The session is rounded off by the facilitator, who pulls out key themes for the students, asking, 'What did you notice about how they dealt with conflict?' and clarifies anything that might have been misconstrued. Because each session is student-led, each one is completely different, so the couple and facilitator must react in real time, which adds to the authenticity of the experience.

Students have described learning points as 'seeing what true love looks like', 'learning how to overcome arguments' and 'being with the same person all your life isn't boring because you grow together'.

'Afterwards, I've had some students say, "I've realised not all men are trash."' says Rosie. 'So, this is a girl who has only ever come across men who treat women badly, or has been told that they do, and who hadn't yet seen anything to counter that view. But now, she's seen a bloke who loves his wife well. Up until then, she wouldn't have looked for anything better than that – because she didn't think it was out there. But now, she knows it is.'

A longitudinal study by Tavistock Relationships and Exeter University to assess longer-term impact is underway.

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## Learning points

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**Experiential learning using real couples has a strong impact on students and staff alike.**

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**Students learn that their ideal relationship is possible if they are prepared to work at it.**

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**Positive role models show there are possibilities beyond a student's lived experience.**