

Rights, Respect, Responsibility

A K-12 SEXUALITY EDUCATION CURRICULUM

Teacher's Guide

UPDATED 2024

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**Advocates
for Youth**

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Revised in 2024 by Lauren Barineau, MPH and Pascale Alcindor, MS

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Section I: Introduction to *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* (3Rs)

ABOUT ADVOCATES FOR YOUTH

Advocates for Youth partners with youth leaders, adult allies, and youth-serving organizations to advocate for policies and champion programs that recognize young people’s rights to honest sexual health information; accessible, confidential, and affordable sexual health services; and the resources and opportunities necessary to create sexual health equity for all youth. School personnel (teachers, administrators, and staff) are among the most important adult allies in this work.

Our Vision: *Rights, Respect, Responsibility*

Advocates for Youth envisions a society that views sexuality as normal and healthy and treats young people as valuable resources.

The core values of Rights, Respect, Responsibility animate this vision:

RIGHTS: Youth have the inalienable right to honest sexual health information; confidential, consensual sexual health services; and equitable opportunities to reach their full potential.

RESPECT: Youth deserve respect. Valuing young people means authentically making space for young people to collaborate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs and policies that affect their health and well-being.

RESPONSIBILITY: Society has the responsibility to provide young people with all of the tools and safe spaces they need to safeguard their sexual health, and young people have the responsibility to protect themselves.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The original authors of this pioneering curriculum were:

- Elizabeth Schroeder, EdD, MSW
- Eva S. Goldfarb, PhD
- Nora Gelperin, MEd

Since the curriculum’s original release in 2016, additional authors have contributed to it, writing new lessons, adapting lessons, and providing updates and new content. Supplemental lessons released in 2021 and the 2024 updated Teachers’ Guide were written by a team of authors, including the following leaders in sexuality education:

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Find more information about each of the 3Rs authors [here](#).

ABOUT YOUTH REVIEWERS

Advocates for Youth gratefully acknowledges the feedback from our youth activists that improved and refined this curriculum. The youth reviewers were:

- Thea Eigo,
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3RS DEDICATION

This curriculum is dedicated to the memory of our dear colleague Barbara Huberman, Advocates' Director of Education and Outreach from 1994 to 2014.

Barbara had a tremendous influence on our collective work at Advocates for Youth. It was she who coined the phrase “*Rights, Respect, Responsibility*” to reflect findings from her decade-long efforts coordinating the European Study Tour. Hundreds of youth-serving professionals participated, traveling to the Netherlands, France, and Germany in an effort to better understand the values, attitudes, policies, and programs that helped young people in northern Europe have much better sexual health outcomes than their peers in the United States. It is through this work that Barb helped Advocates to shape the values that underpin our mission to this day.

We honor Barb's vision and leadership by creating *Rights, Respect, Responsibility: A K-12 Sexuality Education Curriculum* and ensuring it is free for all to access so that money will no longer stand as a barrier to young people receiving the high-quality sexuality education to which they have a right.

ATTACKS AGAINST SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION

Today, LGBTQ-inclusive sexual health education is at risk. Certain small, organized factions across the United States continue to conduct coordinated attacks to gain control over what is taught and considered acceptable in public school including sexuality and HIV education. Especially targeted for attack are lessons regarding gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexual health disparities. You may observe that the people advocating for this culture of intolerance also work to ban books by Black authors or with gay or trans themes, and oppose gender-neutral bathrooms, trans girls' participation in sports, and the inclusion of LGBTQ and Black history in school curricula.

Although many school personnel may not feel that they can fight back against the attacks on sex education in an official capacity, it's important to understand that sexual health education is not controversial. When polled, 98% of people support sex ed in high school, and 89% support it in middle school. These are the polling numbers of wildly popular positions like clean water and public roads that do not historically need to be defended. It doesn't always feel that way—the opposition is so loud! But just because the opposition is louder does not mean there are more of them. They are NOT pushing a popular agenda, and that's exactly why they resort to disinformation tactics. Disinformation campaigns about sex education can be disorienting because they are designed to be so. Messages from disinformation campaigns may include:

- Classroom teachers are describing sexual acts and exposing students to pornography
- Condom demonstrations are being taught in elementary grades
- Discussions of gender identity and sexual orientation are not appropriate in secondary grades

In order to help communities fight back against the disinformation campaigns, Advocates for Youth created a [*Blueprint for Ensuring Schools Offer Quality Sex Education*](#). The *Blueprint* is for concerned community members, youth, parents, caregivers, educators, administrators, and advocates—anyone who recognizes that sexual health education is under attack and wants to know how to jump in, get involved, and help keep students informed and safe.

Many teachers and school leaders report that transparency often increases trust among parents. Just letting more parents know that sex ed is taught in your schools, why it's taught, and how students benefit provides a big win in gaining support. The truth is that the vast majority of parents you'll encounter are in complete agreement that sex ed is a necessary part of learning. Most likely, they have no idea it's under attack. The goal is to retain focus, assert your principles, and help parents understand that efforts to keep young people from learning about their bodies, their histories, and their world will negatively impact decades of work to shift systems and institutions and champion policies that support ALL students.

Section II: Theories and Research Supporting 3Rs

RATIONALE FOR THIS CURRICULUM

While many sexuality education materials have addressed the needs of adolescents, Advocates for Youth realized that such education must begin much earlier. Learning about good communication, safety in relationships, and growth and development lays a foundation that can support healthy relationships and healthy behaviors throughout a person's lifetime. This K-12 curriculum, therefore, is a collection of lesson plans on a wide range of topics including: self-understanding, family, growth and development, friendship, sexuality, life skills, and health promotion.

EVIDENCE UNDERLYING THIS CURRICULUM

Rights, Respect, Responsibility is a curriculum fully aligned with the *National Sex Education Standards (NSES)*; please see a detailed description of the NSES in Section III of this Teacher's Guide. The curriculum seeks to address both the functional knowledge related to sexuality and the specific skills necessary to adopt healthy behaviors. *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* reflects the tenets of social learning theory, social cognitive theory, and the social ecological model of prevention.

From social learning theory, which recognizes that "learning occurs not merely within the learner but also in a particular social context," several key concepts inform *Rights, Respect, Responsibility*, including:

Personalization. The ability of students to perceive the curriculum's core content and skills as relevant to their lives increases the likelihood that they will both learn and retain them. Ensuring that students see themselves represented in the materials and learning activities assists in furthering personalization.

Susceptibility. It is widely understood that many young people do not perceive that they are susceptible to the risks of certain behaviors, including sexual activity. Learning activities should encourage students to assess the relative risks of various behaviors, without exaggeration, and to highlight their susceptibility to the potential negative outcomes of those behaviors.

Self-Efficacy. Even if students believe they are susceptible, they may not believe they can do anything to reduce their level of risk. Helping students to overcome misinformation and develop confidence by practicing skills necessary to manage risk is key to a successful sexuality education curriculum.

Social Norms. Given that middle and high school students are highly influenced by their peers, the perception of what other students are, or are not, doing influences their behavior. Debunking misperceptions and highlighting positive behaviors among teens (i.e., the majority of teens are abstinent in middle school and early high school, and when they first engage in sexual intercourse many use condoms) can further the adoption of health-positive behaviors.

Skills. Mastery of functional knowledge is necessary but not sufficient to influence behaviors. Skill development is critical to a student's ability to apply core content to their lives.

In addition to social learning theory, social cognitive theory (SCT) is reflected throughout *Rights, Respect, Responsibility*. Like social learning theory, SCT emphasizes self-efficacy and additionally highlights the motivation of the learners and the affective or emotional learning domain, an invaluable component of learning about human sexuality.

Finally, the social ecological model of prevention also informed this curriculum. This model focuses on individual, interpersonal, community, and societal influences and the role of these influences on people over time. In keeping with the level of cognitive development of students aged 5 to 7, the core content and skills for kindergarten and early elementary grades focus on the individual student and their immediate surroundings (e.g., their family). At the middle and high school levels, core content and skills focus on the expanding world of students that includes their friends and peers, the media, and other societal and cultural influences.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Doug Kirby, the premier researcher on elements of sexuality education that produce desired outcomes, identified the following characteristics of effective programs in 2007:

- Focus on specific behavioral outcomes.
- Address individual values and group norms that support health-enhancing behaviors.
- Focus on increasing personal perceptions of risk and harmfulness of engaging in specific health risk behaviors, as well as reinforcing protective factors.
- Address social pressures and influences.
- Build personal and social confidence.
- Provide functional knowledge that is basic, accurate, and directly contributes to health-promoting decisions and behaviors.
- Use strategies designed to personalize information and engage students.
- Provide age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate information and learning strategies, teaching methods, and materials.
- Incorporate learning strategies, teaching methodologies, and learning materials that are culturally inclusive.
- Provide adequate time for instruction and learning.
- Provide opportunities to reinforce skills and positive health behaviors.
- Provide opportunities to make connections with other influential persons.
- Include teacher information and plan for teacher development and training to enhance effectiveness of instruction and enhance student learning.¹

Learn more about sexuality education: [Sexuality Education: Building an Evidence- and Rights-Based Approach to Healthy Decision-Making](#)

STUDENTS' RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Students have the right to:

- Ask any questions they have about issues such as puberty, sex, reproduction, and relationships.
- Receive complete, age-appropriate, and medically accurate information about their bodies.
- Explore issues that interest them related to their sexual development.
- Develop the skills necessary to form healthy friendships, and later healthy romantic partnerships, as they grow.
- Have support from caring adults who respect, affirm, and celebrate them for who they are.

They also have these responsibilities in regard to themselves and others:

- Open communication is an important part of maintaining healthy relationships.
- It is good for young people to be able to talk openly and comfortably about sexuality issues with their parents/caregivers, peers, trusted adults, and current or future romantic partners.
- Relationships should never be coercive or exploitative, but instead should be based on mutual respect.
- It is normal to have sexual feelings; however, feelings should not always be acted upon.
- Until a teen is old enough to act responsibly and protect themselves and their partners, it is healthiest to seek ways other than vaginal, oral, or anal sex to express their romantic and sexual feelings.
- Young people have the responsibility to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections by abstaining from risky behavior or using effective contraception and/or condoms.²

1. Kirby D, Roller LA, Wilson, MM. (2007). Tool to Assess the Characteristics of Effective Sex and STD/HIV Education Programs. 2007. An expanded and updated version of this tool can be downloaded as a free e-book at <https://www.etr.org/store/product/tool-to-assess-the-characteristics-of-effective-sex-hiv-education-programs/>

2. Adapted from Will Power/Won't Power. A Sexuality Program for Girls Ages 12-14. New York, NY: Girls' Inc.; 1988. A page was adapted and partly reprinted with permission.

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Human development is a lifelong process of physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional growth and change. In the early stages of life—from babyhood to childhood, childhood to adolescence, and adolescence to adulthood—enormous changes take place. Throughout the process, each person develops attitudes and values that guide choices, relationships, and understanding.

Sexual development is also a lifelong process. Infants, children, teens, and adults are sexual beings. Just as it is important to enhance a child’s physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, so it is important to lay foundations for a child’s sexual growth. Adults have a responsibility to help young people understand and accept their evolving sexuality.

Each stage of development encompasses specific markers. Developmental guidelines apply to most children in the age groups specified. However, each child is an individual and may reach these stages of development earlier or later than other children the same age. When concerns arise about a specific child’s development, parents or other caregivers should consult a doctor or other child development professional.

[Visit Advocates for Youth’s website for factsheets on age groups.](#)

Section III: Values and Assumptions in 3Rs

IMPLICIT VALUES IN 3RS

Rather than attempting to be “values-free,” **Rights, Respect, Responsibility** consciously embraces a set of values that are widely accepted in our society. It is important for teachers and health professionals to be aware of the curriculum’s point of view in order to be able to communicate its underlying values not only to students, but also to parents, media, current and potential funders, and other interested individuals.

The following values should be stressed implicitly and, when appropriate, explicitly whenever possible:

- Parents/caregivers are the primary sexuality educators of their children. School districts and community organizations should function as partners with parents/caregivers in providing sexuality education. Together, these parents/caregivers and institutions have the responsibility to provide young people with honest, age-appropriate sexuality education.
- Sexuality is a natural and healthy part of being human.
- At every stage of their development, children have the right to age-appropriate information about health, sexuality, and relationships.
- Every person has dignity and worth and deserves respect. Diversity in gender, identity, race, religion, culture, and sexual orientation should be celebrated.
- It is wrong to use psychological pressure, fear, or physical force to make people do things without their consent.
- People are responsible for their own behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors.
- Cisgender boys and men are often demonized or simply ignored when it comes to sexuality education.

But boys aren’t the bad guys. In fact, no one is. Normalizing *everyone’s* right and ability to make positive choices about sexuality, sex, and relationships, regardless of what their peers are doing—regardless of their gender or the gender of their partners—can send a powerful message to all students.

STUDENTS’ RIGHT TO LEARN ABOUT SEXUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Young people have the right to learn about sex and sexuality. At the same time, however, educators need to follow applicable laws and policies. Sexuality education content, coursework, and delivery should always follow state laws and district, local, and school policies. Before planning to use this curriculum, it’s important to research existing policies and procedures that govern sexuality education content and requirements. Some states have health education standards with which educators must align their curricula, while other states leave curricular decisions up to each school district. It is particularly important to get clarification from your supervisor or building principal about any lessons or activities about which you have questions.

The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) compiles state regulations on its website, www.siecus.org. You may be able to find the regulations by looking at your state’s education department or state government website. Your school board and school superintendent should also be aware of these policies.

NATIONAL SEX EDUCATION STANDARDS

The [National Sex Education Standards: Core Content and Skills](#), K-12³ (NSES) were developed by the Future of Sex Education (FoSE) Initiative, a partnership between Advocates for Youth, Answer, and SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change, that seeks to create a national dialogue about the future of sex education and to promote the institutionalization of quality sex education in public schools. The goal of the NSES is to provide clear, consistent guidance on the essential minimum core content and skills needed for sex education to be age-appropriate and effective for students in grades K-12. The standards are written to identify the key concepts and skills that students broadly need to be sexually healthy during their school years and throughout their lifespan. The NSES can be used to create lessons and/or curricula with learning objectives that will align with the standards. The NSES provide voluntary guidance and do not ascribe or mandate any particular teaching practice, curriculum, or assessment method by an authorizing body. A great deal is left to the discretion of educators, administrators, and curriculum developers.

3. Future of Sex Education Initiative. (2020). National Sex Education Standards: Core Content and Skills, K-12. Second Edition. rmission.

The *National Sex Education Standards* were first published in 2012 and updated in a second edition in 2020. The updated standards differ from the original ones in that the new standards:

- Incorporate a trauma-informed lens.
- Promote principles of reproductive justice, racial justice, social justice, and equity.
- Address social determinants of health and how these can lead to inequitable health outcomes.
- Take an intersectional approach to sexuality education.
- Use less cisgender and heteronormative language, reflecting a broader range of relationships and identities.
- Prioritize both content and skill-based learning to acknowledge that it is essential to couple functional knowledge with skills to promote healthy decision-making.
- Reflect recent research that supports introducing some topics earlier while preparing students for more complex content and skills as they age.
- Present core content and skills in more specific grade level bands to better reflect what is age-appropriate. The updated NSES use the following grade bandwidths: grades K-2, grades 3-5, grades 6-8, grades 9-10, and grades 11-12.
- Provide increased guidance to educators on a number of issues previously unaddressed.

To learn about these topics and more, visit www.futureofsexed.org

CONTENT INTRODUCED IN 2021 3RS NEW LESSONS

The original 3Rs curriculum was released in 2016. In 2020, the updated version of the *National Sex Education Standards* was released, and a team of authors added more than 30 supplemental lessons to 3Rs in 2021 to align with the updated standards. The content of the original curriculum and the additional supplemental lessons can be used together to create a robust sex education unit that meets state standards and/or school district requirements. The supplemental lessons include many new or expanded topics with up-to-date medical information. Details about the new content follow below.

Content about Biomedical Advances in HIV/STI Prevention and Pregnancy Prevention (PrEP, PEP, and Opill)

New biomedical approaches to prevent human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) have emerged since the original publication of 3Rs in 2016. To address these changes, the original versions of lessons about STIs and birth control have been updated with current content related to advances in preventing HIV, STIs, and unintended pregnancy.

There are two lessons, one at the middle school level and one at the high school level, that reframe HIV as a chronic, manageable condition that can be prevented by using pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) or post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). These lessons also explore the idea of treatment as prevention (often referred to by the catchphrase “Undetectable = Untransmittable”).

- PrEP is a medication for people who are trying to prevent HIV infection.
- PEP is a medication that can be taken immediately after suspected HIV exposure to reduce the risk of infection.
- “Treatment as prevention” means that if a person with HIV has an undetectable viral load as a result of taking medication, they are unable to transmit HIV to another person.

For up-to-date information about HIV prevention methods, visit the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/disease-prevention/).

Opill is a birth control pill available over the counter and without a prescription. Opill is a progesterone-only birth control pill that must be taken every day at the same time to prevent pregnancy. Opill has been added to 3Rs lessons that discuss birth control options.

For up-to-date information and FAQs about Opill, including information about access and cost, visit [opill.com](https://www.opill.com)

Content About Trafficking

Sex trafficking rates continue to increase, and unfortunately, young people are often targeted. Two lessons on trafficking, one in high school and one in middle school, focus on informing students about what trafficking is, its prevalence, and how young people can recognize recruitment tactics and get help.

Commitment to Racial Justice in Sex Education

Advocates for Youth is deeply invested in prioritizing equity across all programs, projects, and partnerships. One way Advocates reflects this commitment was to add 35 new lesson plans to 3Rs, addressing concepts of health disparities, racial justice, and reproductive justice. The new lesson plans include “What’s Racism Got To Do With It,” “Reproductive Justice: Past, Present and Future”; “Making the Unconscious Conscious”; and “Impacts of Racism and Inequity on Sexual Health.”

The lessons added to 3Rs in 2021 include content that explicitly covers racial justice principles and racism’s impact on sexual health. Authors of the 3Rs curriculum recognize that racial justice is central to the sexual health and rights of all people and therefore have provided sexual health education content that is intended to train educators delivering sex education to center racial justice in their work.

Some of the racial justice topics included in the updated 3Rs middle school and high school lessons are:

- Racism and Sexual Health Outcomes
- Impacts of Stigma and Bias
- Power and Privilege
- Introducing Reproductive Justice
- Sexual Agency
- Impacts of Racism and Inequity on Sexual Health

To have truly comprehensive and inclusive sexual health education, teachers must commit to teaching about racial justice, racism, and its impacts on sexual health. However, this can feel difficult for teachers because they worry that they are not able to effectively navigate these conversations about race and racism without causing further harm to students.

Luckily, there are many resources to support your continued professional development and learning so that you can effectively discuss racism and sexual health in the classroom. This work is continuous—requiring reflection, critical analysis, and strengthening your ability to recognize and address bias. The [Professional Learning Standards for Sex Education](#) by the [Sex Education Collaborative](#) and the [National Teacher Preparation Standards for Sexuality Education](#) outline the specific skills that educators can build to implement these lessons effectively.

Free resources include:

- [Advocates for Youth’s 10 online self-paced e-learning modules focused on Racial Justice in Sex Education.](#)
- [Sex, Race, and Politics in the U.S.: A Call to Action To Address Racial Justice in Sexuality Education](#) by [SIECUS: Sex Ed for Social Change](#) and [Women of Color Sexual Health Network](#).
- [Centering Racial Justice in Sex Education: Strategies for Engaging Professionals and Young People](#) by Rena Dixon, et. al.

Content About Intersex People

Being intersex means having a variation of the expected hormones, chromosomes, or reproductive anatomy that are typical of a body assigned male or female at birth. There are likely more intersex people that we realize. A new high school anatomy lesson plan explicitly introduces intersex variations as part of the discussion of reproductive systems.

For more information about intersex bodies, visit the [website of InterACT](#).

Section IV: Instructional Strategies and Resources

HOW TO USE THIS CURRICULUM

Rights, Respect, Responsibility was designed to be used either as a sequential curriculum, or in parts, according to the needs of the educator. While the curriculum can be used in its entirety (and when presented this way meets the *National Sex Education Standards*, Second Edition, 2020), we recognize that very few schools have sufficient time allotted to sexuality education to be able to use every lesson. Educators may decide when a lesson or series of lessons might fit into their preexisting curriculum. Educators may use one grade level, one topic strand, or an individual lesson to supplement their existing materials, as needed.

A Note About Supplemental Lessons

In 2021, supplemental lessons were added to *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* to align with the *National Sex Education Standards*, Second Edition, 2020. These lessons cover topics that did not explicitly exist in the original 3Rs, such as racial justice, sex trafficking, biomedical advances for HIV/STI prevention and pregnancy prevention, etc. Any of the supplemental lessons in 3Rs can be embedded into the original sequence of the original lessons. For example, teachers could create a unit plan consisting of both original and supplemental lessons based on topics required by their standards or policies. For the elementary and middle school lessons, a specific grade is suggested, and the high school lessons can be used in any grade in high school.

Using the indicators from the *National Sex Education Standards*, we have provided a [recommended sequence](#) for implementing *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* in the “Educator Resources” section of the 3Rs website.

CURRICULUM FORMAT OVERVIEW

Lessons are 40 minutes long in grades K-5 and 50 minutes in grades 6-12. The front page of each lesson includes the *National Sex Education Standards* the lesson aligns with, the learning objectives, the required materials to teach the lesson, and any advance preparation required by the teacher. Most lessons in grades K-9 have family homework activities to facilitate ways for students and their parents/caregivers to have important conversations. “Notes to the Teacher” guide novice instructors by providing tips for implementing sexual health education.

FOSTERING RESPECT IN THE CLASSROOM

Rights, Respect, Responsibility is designed to involve young people in discussing personal, sometimes sensitive, topics. To do this effectively, it is important to create and maintain a safe, respectful environment in which participants can share freely. You can create and maintain a safe, respectful environment by introducing and reinforcing ground rules. Engage all participants in creating, understanding, agreeing to, and respecting the ground rules. Post the ground rules on a wall or create a digital version that is at the start of every slide deck for every session. Remind students, when necessary, that everyone has agreed to abide by the ground rules.

USING GROUND RULES WITH THIS CURRICULUM

Establishing ground rules, which are shared guidelines about how everyone—teachers and students—will interact during lessons, is an important step in creating a sense of trust, support, and safety among students and teachers. Ground rules help to increase comfort and facilitate learning for everyone in the classroom. This is especially important because the lessons in this curriculum often include discussion of personal topics, such as values and sexuality. Ground rules, and the methods by which they are created and introduced, will vary at different grade levels.

In Grades K-5, existing classroom rules may be used for this purpose. While such guidelines are often posted in the classroom throughout the year, it can be helpful to give a gentle reminder to students about these rules before a lesson or unit on sexuality. Alternatively, the teacher may ask students if they can think of any rules they would like to have for working together in a group. Their suggestions may include not interrupting, raising hands to talk, etc.

In middle school and high school, it is important to create a separate set of ground rules to specifically discuss sexual and reproductive health. In these grade levels, teachers should emphasize ground rules for sharing personal stories and asking personal questions and about using appropriate and inappropriate language. They should clarify the extent to which shared information can be kept confidential.

ADDRESSING CONFIDENTIALITY IN GROUND RULES

Most lists of group agreements or ground rules include a rule related to confidentiality, which has often been described as “what is said in this room stays in this room.” This is not an effective description of confidentiality for a classroom for a few reasons. First, it can raise anxiety among parents and other adults in the community who may be concerned that the teacher is trying to keep whatever is discussed about sexuality secret from them.

Second, it is inaccurate. As teachers and other youth-serving professionals know well, there are situations in which confidentiality cannot be guaranteed or must be broken. As mandated reporters, teachers are required to report situations in which a student is at risk to hurt themselves or others. Therefore, telling students that the discussions will be confidential becomes problematic if their confidentiality must be broken. Finally, true confidentiality is impossible to enforce. Believing that what is shared will be kept confidential may lead a student to share something deeply personal that may likely get “leaked” by someone in the class.

Thus, while it is important to write something simple in the ground rules about “aiming to ensure confidentiality to the extent possible,” an effective way a teacher can include this is to write it in the ground rules and also explain aloud, ***“To keep something confidential means that it’s kept private or secret. I certainly don’t want you to keep the information we talk about here private from anyone. In fact, the more you talk with your friends about it, the better! What is important, however, is that we all agree not to share anything personal that someone in the class may have shared. That’s disrespectful and unfair to that person. Instead, you can simply say, ‘I know someone who...’ if you want to share a good point someone made. Also, as you may already know, there are some things that I, as a teacher, cannot keep private. If a student were to come to me and say that someone is hurting them, or that they were thinking of hurting themselves or someone else, I’d have to tell someone about it, so that this student could get some help.”***

OPTIONS FOR ESTABLISHING GROUND RULES

At the middle and high school levels, it can be useful to involve students directly in the creation of shared ground rules, thereby increasing their sense of ownership and “buy-in” to the rules. The teacher may start this process by asking students, ***“What might make it difficult for us to feel comfortable as we talk about sexuality?”*** After a list of barriers is generated (possible responses might include embarrassment, being made fun of, not knowing what to say, not wanting other people to know what we talk about, etc.), the teacher can then write “Ground Rules” on newsprint or the board and ask, ***“What are some rules we can establish in our class that will help us feel more comfortable learning about this topic and that will help ensure that no one feels put down or disrespected?”***

With that question, the teacher invites students to generate a list of agreements about how the class will operate and how students and the teacher will interact. The ground rules should be established through agreement by the group. The teacher should write down students’ ideas and then suggest any important basic rules that students did not include.

Depending on time availability, other options for establishing ground rules are for the teacher to present a pre-written list and ask for student feedback, as well as additional suggestions. The teacher may also wish to make a game out of presenting ground rules by introducing them Pictionary style (using diagrams to represent the ground rules and having students guess what they are) or by acting them out or having students act them out as in the game Charades, and having other students guess.

The teacher should list the agreed-upon ground rules on a piece of chart paper and hang the list on a wall where it can remain, so that students and the teacher can refer to them at any time. As many classrooms shift into digital environments, it may also be appropriate to create a list of digital ground rules and have them appear at the start of every slide deck.

In some classes, once the ground rules have been established, the teacher may ask every student to agree verbally to the ground rules and/or to sign the ground rules or a contract, as a way of sharing authorship and responsibility for enforcing the rules.

Once agreed-upon ground rules are established, they can be revisited at any time and revised to meet the needs of the class. Additionally, it is important that students feel empowered not only to follow the ground rules themselves but to monitor one another’s adherence to them and to ensure that they are being followed.

To support teachers in creating ground rules at the start of the curriculum, 3Rs has created “Climate Setting” lessons for each grade band, which include establishing ground rules as an activity within the lesson. [The 3Rs “Climate Setting” lessons can be downloaded here.](#)

FOUNDATIONAL PRACTICES IN TEACHING SEX ED

In 2018, the [Sex Education Collaborative](#) released the [Professional Learning Standards for Sex Education \(PLSSE\)](#). These standards outline the content, skills, and professional disposition needed to implement sex education effectively. As you prepare to teach 3Rs, take note of the content and skills that you feel confident in, and those in which you could use additional learning, by completing the [PLSSE self-assessment](#). There are numerous avenues to receive free professional development in sex education, many of which can be found at the links below:

- [Racial Justice in Sex Education](#) e-learning modules from Advocates for Youth
- [Sex Ed To-Go for Teachers](#) from Planned Parenthood
- [The Teacher's Guide to Sex Ed](#) from Healthy Teen Network

A short video that outlines foundational skills for teachers to increase their comfort to teach sexual health can be found [here](#).

ANSWERING STUDENTS' QUESTIONS

Rights, Respect, Responsibility encourages students to ask questions, whether in class during specific activities or through the use of an Anonymous Questions Box (further details provided under the subheading “Anonymous Questions” below). For the teacher, a foundational skill is being able to provide clear, accurate answers to these questions in a non-judgmental manner. It is also important to know which questions you should not answer and how best to respond when those questions come up.

There are different ways that students may ask questions in the classroom. How questions are asked often depends on the procedures put in place by the teacher and may include:

- During class with other students present
- One-on-one with the teacher outside of a regular lesson
- Anonymously on an index card or through an Anonymous Questions Box

While many of the lessons in *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* include time for students to ask questions, some teachers like to provide additional opportunities for students to ask questions that may arise outside of a particular lesson and/or that they may want to ask anonymously because of fear or embarrassment. For many teachers, preparing a lesson plan and leading activities is the easy part of the job. It is those spontaneous comments or questions from students that can cause the most anxiety.

TYPES OF QUESTIONS:

Before answering any question, it is important for the teacher to try to ascertain, as well as possible, what information the student seeks and/or the purpose of the question. Sometimes students ask forthright questions; at other times, questions seem a bit murky and the real “question behind a question” may not be apparent. Below are several types of questions and challenges, and some suggestions for responding to them effectively.

1. Knowledge or Skills Questions

Usually, these questions are very straightforward and have specific factual answers. These include:

- How does a baby get out?
- What is the most common sexually transmitted disease?
- How does a condom work?
- What does “oral sex” mean?
- How does PrEP prevent HIV?
- Can anyone buy Opill at a pharmacy?

Knowledge or skills questions often appear to be the easiest to answer, since they ask for concrete information rather than being about feelings, attitudes, or behaviors. Yet, students still need guidance along with the facts. These questions offer opportunities to reinforce the Rights, Respect, Responsibility values and to provide guidance for positive, healthy behaviors. Sometimes, however, a question will challenge the limits of the teacher’s own knowledge, or it will be unclear whether it’s appropriate to answer given the parameters of the school’s sex education curriculum and/or policy governing certain content.

Keep in mind:

- It's okay not to know something, and to be honest about it.
- Any moment can be an educational opportunity to model that no one should be embarrassed at not knowing everything.
- Ask the class if anyone knows more.
- If the question contains slang that you don't know, ask to be educated (this will help build rapport between you and the students).
- Promise to get the answer—and follow through!
- When a topic is difficult to explain, check in to be sure the class understood your answer.

2. Values Questions

Some teachers worry about responding to questions about their personal values concerning issues such as sexual behavior, abortion, and sexual orientation (“Do you think it’s wrong to...?”). Some schools do not allow teachers to answer such questions; teachers are to refer students to parents/caregivers and/or faith leaders for guidance. When allowed, however, teachers should facilitate a discussion that encourages students to explore their own and others’ attitudes and feelings about these issues without the teacher sharing their own values.

Teachers can then refer students to parents/caregivers and faith leaders, if the students require more input. When discussing values related to sexuality, the teacher’s goals are to: 1) increase awareness among participants of their personal values; 2) promote the value of respect for differing opinions; 3) model and teach how to engage in respectful discussion; and 4) promote universal values (e.g., human dignity, respect for oneself and others, honesty, fairness).

Tips:

- Do not impose your personal values.
- Explore a range of values. For example, *“Some people believe this about abortion while other people believe this about abortion. You should figure out what you believe by talking with trusted adults in your life.”*
- Use the “reporter technique.” Give the facts and “report” examples of views on both sides of the issue. Then ask the group to discuss the matter.
- When a strong opinion is stated, ask for responses from the group.
- If the group seems to be discussing one point of view, make sure other possibilities are explored. Ask the group if there are alternative points of view or state them yourself.
- Be careful about putting people on the spot for their personal opinions. It might be less threatening to ask *“Why might some people choose to...?”* rather than *“What do you believe...?”*
- Encourage discussing sensitive matters with the moral authorities in the learners’ lives: parents/caregivers, faith leaders, other trusted adults.
- Know your “hot buttons” ahead of time. When those topics arise, breathe!

3. Am I Normal? Questions

Young people, especially preteens, need and seek a great deal of reassurance that their bodies, feelings, and behaviors are normal. (They may ask: “What is the average age that a girl’s breasts start to show?” “All my friends’ voices have changed, when will mine change?”). Many of these questions seeking reassurance begin with “I have a friend who...” or “I heard about someone who...” These questions usually end with “Are they normal?” The proper response is to calmly normalize the issue in question while providing information, or, when appropriate (for example, in response to a question such as “If a 17-year-old girl still hasn’t gotten her period, is that okay?”), calmly suggest a student may want to seek input from a health care provider or other adult with relevant expertise.

Tips:

- Remind the group that human beings are each unique and that individual variation is definitely normal—in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.
- Suggest a range of differences in the specific issue raised.
- Point out, when appropriate, that a student might talk with a parent/caregiver, health care provider, or other trusted adult about specific concerns.

4. Personal and Permission– or Advice–Seeking Questions

Sometimes teachers are asked to disclose their experiences (“Have you ever...?”); or something about their personal identities or lives (“Are you straight?” “Do you have kids?”). They may be asked to give advice (“What do you think I should do?”) or permission (“Is it okay for a 16-year-old to...?”). The teacher’s responses to these questions have implications about their role in the lives of their students. The teacher should carefully deliberate beforehand how they will approach requests to share personal information or advice. In the moment, they should take extreme care, erring on the side of non-disclosure. And, in many cases, schools or districts have established Codes of Conduct or other policies that may have restrictions or guidelines for what personal information teachers can or cannot share. Make sure to check and follow this guidance if it exists. Extensive guidance on a teacher’s choice to self-disclose is shared below.

Tips:

- It is usually preferable to not answer personal questions.
- You always have the right to not answer a personal question.
- Never discuss personal sexual behavior.
- If you make an exception and share personal information, it should always be done for a specific positive reason—to demonstrate empathy, to model appropriate sharing, etc.
- You should never share personal information to meet your own needs (just to get your students to like you or laugh at your jokes, etc.).
- Consider setting a ground rule ahead of time—in which you announce that you won’t answer personal questions. Explain, *“It’s just as we’ll respect anyone’s right not to share personal information.”*
- When asked to “grant permission” or share advice, generalize the issue: explore a range of options; discuss pros/cons; share a variety of viewpoints.

Further guidance is offered below in “Guidelines for Teacher’s Personal Disclosure to Students” and “Crisis, Legal Matters, and Student Disclosures.”

5. “The Heart” and Other Complicated Questions

“How do you know when you’re in love?” “Why are guys always grabbing themselves?” “Should everyone report it if they’re raped?” Some questions are asked as “factual,” but there just isn’t a straightforward answer. A helpful approach here is to facilitate a discussion rather than give an answer. Extensive guidance on a teacher’s choice to self-disclose is shared below.

Tips:

Bounce the question back: “What do you all think?” If only one or two students give a response, check in to see if there are other thoughts on the matter.

- Explore various possibilities: *“What do you think would happen if...?” “How might a person feel if their partner...?”*
- If you wish, give a few possible answers and qualify them as your educated guesses. For example, in response to a question of how you know when you’re in love, you might say, *“That is a tough question, and it might be different for different people. Some of the things that come to mind that I think might be important are that when you think about this person it makes you happy; you miss this person when you’re apart; you like them and like being with them; it is important to you that your friends and/or family like them; you are happy for them when they achieve something or do something special, even if you don’t do that same thing.”*
- Ask, *“What are some other possible signs that you might be in love that other people can think of?”* and take responses from the students.
- Check in to see if the questioner feels the question was answered adequately. When questions do not have straightforward answers or may have more than one possible response, it is useful, when a student asks a question publicly, to ask them if your answer addressed their question appropriately. If the question is asked anonymously, you can finish your response by saying, *“I’m not sure if I’ve interpreted the question correctly or if I’ve given a sufficient answer. If I haven’t, I hope the person who asked the question will ask it again and maybe give me some more information so I can give them a better answer.”*

6. Shock-Value Questions

Teachers usually recognize questions instantly that are asked in order to shock or entertain. Nevertheless, anyone can be caught off guard, particularly if a question touches on a personally sensitive issue. In this situation, the teacher may decide to raise the issue of the question having been asked in order to shock or get a reaction as a way to lessen the impact. To defuse shock-value questions and to retain credibility with the students, the teacher might decide to give a calm, factual answer after they have pointed out that the basic intent of the question was simply to shock or upset others. It is also important to keep in mind, however, that not all shocking questions are asked for shock value. In other words, even though the question may be shocking to the teacher, it may be an honest question. If so, it deserves a calm, honest answer.

Tips:

- If you're "unshockable," any purposeful behavior on the part of the questioner will become unsatisfying.
- Option one: answer the question at face value, as if it were sincerely asked.
- Option two: say, *"Here's a question dealing with xx, but I'm not sure the person really wants an answer—it may be just for a laugh. For now, I'm going to move on. If I've misunderstood your question, feel free to see me afterward and I'll be happy to answer it."*

SOME ADDITIONAL GENERAL GUIDELINES

1. Pay attention to the way you answer a question beyond just your words. Think about your body language, tone of voice, level of calmness, etc. In addition to imparting information and skills, the teacher's job is also to:
 - Normalize and demystify
 - Reduce discomfort
 - Affirm learners

This means that the emotional content of your answer is as important as the informational content. How you say something is as important as what you say. Work to avoid non-verbal cues such as wrinkled brows or frowns that may imply judgment, disapproval, etc.

2. Convey gratitude for the questions and comments that arise. Use the exercise to underscore the idea that discussing these topics is a good thing.
3. Use the third person ("*a person's...*," "*someone who...*," "*two people...*") as the subject in your sentences rather than the pronoun "you" when answering students' personalized questions in a group setting.
4. Use gender-neutral and sexual orientation-neutral language when describing behavior, people, and relationships.
5. Be truthful. Never lie or tell half-truths. You can choose not to respond to a question, but if you are going to answer, give them the complete and truthful response. Young people especially can see through a lie, and if you get caught in a lie, you will lose your credibility. It is even better to say, "*I will lose my job if I answer that question*" or "*Unfortunately, I'm not allowed to answer that question*" than to lie about it.
6. Keep a sense of humor and a little perspective. Being able to laugh at yourself and with your students can go a long way to building trust and comfort. Also, keep in mind that if you are unhappy with the way you respond to a particular question, you can usually get a second chance. During the next lesson, you can always say, "*Yesterday, when I was responding to a question about _____, I don't think I did a very good job of conveying some important information*" or "*I forgot to include something really important*" or "*I don't think I did a very good job answering this yesterday and I think it is an important question, so I want to try to answer it a different way.*" Students will not hold it against you that you are imperfect. If anything, it will make you seem more human to them, only improving your relationship with them.
7. It's okay to feel embarrassed—most educators will, at some point. Being calm and matter-of-fact is the overall goal, because that demeanor helps to normalize talking about sexuality and can make students feel more comfortable. If you feel embarrassed, it's an opportunity to model, "*What should we do when we're embarrassed by this topic?*" (the answer: keep discussing anyway!)

ANONYMOUS QUESTIONS

If the teacher would like to provide additional opportunities for students to ask questions anonymously, there are a few options. One way is to periodically pass out index cards or paper and give students time to write any questions they may have on a particular topic that they may not want to ask aloud.

These questions will then be placed in an Anonymous Questions Box. An Anonymous Questions Box can be part of a specific lesson or placed in a spot in the classroom where students can access it whenever they wish. As classrooms are using more digital devices, many teachers have opted to use a digital Anonymous Questions Box—for example, a QR code students can scan that links them to a Google form where they can anonymously submit their questions.

GUIDELINES FOR TEACHER’S PERSONAL DISCLOSURE TO STUDENTS

Teachers disclose personal information about themselves every day, whether they are aware of it or not. Disclosure of some personal information (e.g., ethnicity, style preferences, regional accents) people have no control over. Ultimately, though, everything teachers disclose, deliberate or not, affects how students learn. Therefore, disclosures of a personal nature over which teachers do have control should only be made deliberately and after thorough consideration. In sexuality education, teachers are often confronted with the decision about whether or not to disclose personal information about themselves to students. The decision one makes may ultimately depend on a number of factors, including:

- **The purpose of the disclosure**—It is critically important, when considering whether or not to share a piece of personal information, to ask yourself, “Why would I want to do this?” Only valid educational rationales should be used to support the decision to disclose. The rationale for disclosing certain personal information with elementary and middle school students is described below. With older students, sharing that families can be created in many ways—for example, choosing to share that you have two stepchildren with whom you’re very close—can help students expand their understanding of and respect for diverse family constellations.
- **The age of your students**—In younger grades, children tend to be curious about their teachers’ private lives, and teachers often find that sharing some personal information builds rapport and closeness with students, which can enhance comfort and learning. Information such as whether you are a parent, how many siblings you have, and where you grew up are pieces of information that, for the most part, are benign and yet can strengthen relationships between students and teachers. Even in middle school, students often remain interested in these types of details about teachers. From middle school and into high school, however, this information may not have the same educational impact. Once a teacher discloses one piece of personal information, students may seek additional information a teacher may not be ready to give, putting them in an uncomfortable and awkward position of having to set what appear to be uneven boundaries, which can undermine, rather than increase, class cohesiveness.
- **The type of disclosure you are considering**—For example, that you are the parent of young children or that you are a fan of a particular baseball team vs. your sexual orientation or some personal sexual experience you have or have not had.
- **Policies or guidelines in your school or district**—Policies set forth by your school district regarding personal disclosure must take precedence over a teacher’s inclination. If no such policy exists, ask your supervisor for guidance on how to manage this issue and/or recommend that such a policy be created for your district.

While some people believe that disclosing personal information will help to build a sense of trust with young people, others are able to make strong connections with students without doing so—or, by maintaining clear boundaries about what topics are and are not off limits. This approach can keep the learning focused on the students and eliminates the risk of information being repeated out of context and/or misconstrued.

Every teacher must make the decision of whether or not to disclose personal information—and how much to disclose—for themselves. The following are some issues teachers may wish to consider when making these important decisions:

When you might choose to disclose:

- Only with a student or class with whom you have established a strong relationship in which there is a lot of trust.
- Only when it enhances students’ learning, and the example makes a good educational point that is consistent with the goals of the lesson or the curriculum.

When NOT to disclose:

- For ego-enhancement, to get a laugh, or to make others like you.
- When it is about your personal sex life.
- When it is something that you would not want someone else sharing about themselves.
- When it could jeopardize the future education or safety of students

Keep in mind that once a piece of information has been disclosed...

- **You can't take it back.**
- **You have no control over what students will do with the information.** Teens in particular are at a developmental level where they may use personal information inappropriately.
- **It often carries more weight than general information.** The nature of a teacher/student relationship has an inherent power differential. Therefore, if a student asks you what type of condoms or other birth control you use and you share that information, the student is not making her or his own decision. Your brand/type will carry more weight for them just because they know and trust you. However, what is right for you is not necessarily right for your students or anyone else.
- **It creates pressure to disclose more and again.** Once you disclose personal information, you send a signal to students that you are willing to share in that way. As a result, students may come to expect it. For example, suppose you share with high school students that you decided to wait to have sex until you were married (note that you are disclosing a personal behavior decision, a sexual behavior experience, and a relationship status). In the next class, when discussing the impact of alcohol on sexual decision-making, a student may ask you if you ever had sex while drunk or if you ever consumed alcohol when you were a teen. If you decline to answer because it is a personal question you do not want to address, students may then think that, in fact, you did engage in those behaviors because if you hadn't you would have shared the information. Once you disclose, you will find yourself having to defend your choice not to disclose on subsequent occasions.

After including in the ground rules the right to pass on speaking in the classroom for both students and teachers alike and keeping in mind the cautions against disclosing personal information, teachers should establish for themselves their own guidelines for when, what, and under what conditions they will share personal information with students.⁴

CRISIS, LEGAL MATTERS, AND STUDENT DISCLOSURES

All teachers need to be aware that according to statistics at least one or more of their students is a survivor of sexual abuse or assault. This is of particular relevance for teachers of *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* or other curricula or programs about human sexuality and relationships. The intimate nature of teaching students about human sexuality, along with a welcoming environment, and a deliberately designed process that encourages students to ask questions and share their thoughts and feelings increase the likelihood that a student might disclose their abuse either to the teacher in private or in front of the whole class. Because of this likelihood, teachers of this curriculum need to be prepared to respond appropriately, in the best interests of the student who discloses, as well as the rest of the class.

1. When addressing sensitive topics, ask the school counselor or another teacher to sit in the back of the room.
2. If students disclose information that concerns you, tell the school counselor immediately.
3. As noted in the [National Teacher Preparation Standards for Sexuality Education](#), be sure to adhere to state, federal, and district policies that pertain to confidentiality and your responsibilities to report these types of disclosures.

3RS APPROACH TO GENDER, GENDER IDENTITY, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Rights, Respect, Responsibility is designed to be inclusive of all genders, gender identities, gender expressions, bodies, and sexual orientations. To that end, the language used and examples provided within lessons recognize the spectrum of gender, gender identities and expressions, and sexual orientations. Teachers are strongly encouraged to model this inclusivity in their teaching. The information included here is intended to aid teachers in their efforts to support all students across these spectrums.

4. This section on the teacher's personal disclosure was adapted, in part, with permission from a lesson in Goldfarb E, Schroeder E. (2004). Making SMART Choices about Sex: A Curriculum for Young People. Rochester, NY: Metrix Marketing.

TEACHING ABOUT GENDER IDENTITY IN SCHOOL IS AGE-APPROPRIATE

Everyone has a gender identity. Most people’s sense of their gender (known as their gender identity) matches their sex assigned at birth. For some, however, their sense of their gender does not match their sex assigned at birth. Most typically, children between the ages of 18 months and 2 to 3 years begin to articulate some understanding of their gender identity,^{5,6,7} and children have a clear sense of their gender identity by age 4 or 5.⁸ At these ages, children also begin to develop speech and may begin to communicate how they understand their gender. Often, transgender children will state with confidence at young ages, “I am a boy” or “Do not call me a ‘girl.’”

It is also true that general expressions of gender exploration in children are common and do not always indicate gender variance. Directly addressing and deconstructing gender stereotypes in the classroom is one way to create a safe space for students to express themselves through dress, language, and play.

An inclusive curriculum leads to improved academic and health outcomes for youth. According to GLSEN, students who experienced an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum:

- Were less likely to feel unsafe due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.
- Were less likely to miss school.
- Felt greater belonging to their school community.
- Reported better psychological well-being, including higher levels of self-esteem, lower levels of depression, and a lower likelihood of having seriously considered suicide in the past year.

CREATING LGBTQ-INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students can be of any sexual orientation and are at particular risk for teasing, bullying, and/or social isolation. They are also often rendered invisible by a curriculum and rarely see themselves or people like them in lessons and teachers’ examples throughout a curriculum. Teachers are encouraged to work actively against stereotyped assumptions about how their students should behave based on gender. By offering students the widest possible opportunities for self-expression, teachers can help all students develop more complex and nuanced ways of understanding gender.

More information and research related to the importance of expanding concepts of gender expression for all students are available from [Gender Spectrum](#).

The lessons in *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* are specifically written to challenge the gender binary and to be inclusive, respectful, and supportive of all gender expressions. There are many great resources offering additional ways for teachers to support transgender and non-binary students. They include:

- Advocates for Youth’s [Trans-Affirming Schools Project Resource Guide](#)
- [Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network \(GLSEN\)](#)
- *The Teaching Transgender Toolkit* available for purchase at www.TeachingTransgender.com

Advocates for Youth does not support separating students by gender for instruction because this practice is not aligned with the 3Rs approaches to gender identity and expression and our commitment to creating inclusive learning environments for all students. In particular, the needs of students who identify as non-binary and/or genderqueer make it harmful to separate students based on a binary sense of gender.

More information about creating safe learning environments for students who identify as LGBTQ can be found in this short [video](#).

More information about creating safe learning environments for students who identify as transgender, non-binary, or gender-expansive can be found in this short [video](#).

5. Olson KR, Durwood L, DeMeules M, McLaughlin, KA. (2016, February). Mental Health of Transgender Children Who Are Supported in Their Identities. *Pediatrics*. doi:10.1542/peds.2015-3223

6. World Professional Association for Transgender Health. (2012). Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender-Nonconforming People. Retrieved from https://www.wpath.org/media/cms/Documents/SOC%20v7/SOC%20V7_English2012.pdf?_t=1613669341

7. Wyckoff, AS. (2022, January 6). AAP [American Academy of Pediatrics] continues to support care of transgender youths as more states push restrictions. *AAP News*. Retrieved from <https://publications.aap.org/aapnews/news/19021/AAP-continues-to-support-care-of-transgender?autologincheck=redirected>

8. Bright Futures, an initiative of the American Academy of Pediatrics. (2022, July). Guidelines for Health Supervision of Infants, Children, and Adolescents, Fourth Edition. Downloaded from <https://www.aap.org/en/practice-management/bright-futures/bright-futures-materials-and-tools/bright-futures-guidelines-and-pocket-guide/>

Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms

Advocates for Youth is committed to strengthening teachers' abilities to create culturally responsive sexual health education for all students. Along with the racial justice content that was added to *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* in 2021, a foundational health educator skill is the ability to recognize one's unconscious bias, reduce its impact, and enhance cross-cultural communication. Additionally, sex ed teachers should be able to discuss racism and power, and their impact on sexual health outcomes. Each of these indicators and skills is outlined in the [Professional Learning Standards for Sex Education](#).

To learn how to increase your cultural responsiveness while teaching sex ed, [watch this short video](#).

USING INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Advocates for Youth strongly believes in the rights of transgender youth and the importance of intentional and authentic inclusion of transgender issues. *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* introduces gender-neutral names and a wide range of identities and is careful to note that biological sex characteristics are separate from gender identity. Recommendations from the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) confirm what we know about gender development—an effective way to support young people's sexuality and gender identity is to “discuss and explore gender identity in a developmentally appropriate way with all children beginning at ages 4 to 5 years.”¹⁰

Rights, Respect, Responsibility aligns with the concept of a gender spectrum. In the earlier grades, gender- binary language is used to accommodate the developmental levels of younger students. Even when there are transgender or gender non-conforming students in younger grades, they are more likely to identify with the gender binary at that age. Therefore, the terms “boys” and “girls” are used in the early grades, and this language evolves to be increasingly inclusive and non-binary at upper grade levels, along with lessons explicitly exploring the concepts of gender and gender expression. *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* also creates space for diversity in gender identity and expression by urging teachers in the early grades to use inclusive language like “most girls have a vulva” or “most boys have a penis” rather than using exclusive words like “all” or other exclusive language.

Similarly, in early grades, relationships may be described using gender-neutral language, such as “when two people are in love” or “a couple...,” or teachers may discuss families with “two mommies” or “two daddies” while not explicitly discussing sexual orientation. This approach keeps the earlier grade lessons fully inclusive and supportive of all sexual orientations and relationships while remaining developmentally appropriate by not specifically discussing the more complex concept of sexual orientation. Later lessons, however, explicitly introduce and explore the concept of sexual orientation as falling along a spectrum. In middle school and high school lessons, the terms “partner” and “same-sex relationships” are used deliberately and proactively both to avoid heteronormativity (the assumption that people and relationships are heterosexual unless proven otherwise) and to help students explore, at a developmentally appropriate level, the full range of sexual feelings and expressions both in and out of relationships.

In this curriculum, we use the phrase “parent or caregiver” to acknowledge the variety of family formations. We also use “trusted adult” to refer to a parent, coach, faith leader, teacher, or other adult who may not be an immediate family member but is someone a young person knows and can trust and who may be able to respond appropriately to the young person.

TERMS RELATED TO GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

For many teachers, understanding the language and terminology related to sexual orientation and gender identity is a useful place to start. There are many good sources for defining terms related to gender and sexual orientation. The Glossary below lists terms that are either directly quoted or adapted from various definitions in order to provide the clearest guidance for teachers using this curriculum. However, don't let not understanding the difference between “asexual” and “pansexual” prevent you from teaching the basics of sexual orientation and gender identity.

TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES TO SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION

Unfortunately, many students have experienced trauma. Trauma, often linked to adverse childhood experiences, can be caused by singular acute events, such as a natural disaster or the death of a parent or guardian, or it can be caused by

10. Bright Futures, an initiative of the American Academy of Pediatrics. (2022, July). Guidelines for Health Supervision of Infants, Children, and Adolescents, Fourth Edition. Downloaded from <https://www.aap.org/en/practice-management/bright-futures/bright-futures-materials-and-tools/bright-futures-guidelines-and-pocket-guide/>

chronic events, such as sexual abuse, racism, homophobia, and other marginalizing experiences over time. After people experience trauma, they are often scanning their environment for threats and can easily have a disturbing memory of trauma during the discussion of sexual health.

When teaching sexual health education, it is important to be sensitive and respond to the traumatic experiences of students. One key way to do this is to provide a content warning at the start of each class, which has already been written into many 3Rs lessons. Allow opportunities for students to pass, or self-regulate their emotional responses to the content, by providing specific options for students to remove themselves from the classroom.

To learn more about key principles of trauma-informed teaching and its application to sexual health education, [watch this short video.](#)

Section V: Glossary

The terms used throughout the 3Rs curriculum are extensive. In many cases, clear definitions are provided in the lessons themselves and in some cases it's helpful to have additional student-friendly definitions to share.

More glossaries for a variety of topics can be found in the following resources:

- [National Sex Education Standards](#), Second Edition, 2020 (glossary begins on page 58)
- Advocates for Youth's [Racial Justice in Sex Education: E-Learning Modules](#) (glossary included in each module)
- Advocates for Youth's [Trans-Affirming Schools Project Resource Guide](#) (glossary begins on page 34)

Vulva: body part on the outside of the body that contains the vaginal opening, the urethral opening, and the clitoris.

Urethra: carries urine from the bladder to the outside of the body; in a person with a penis, where urine exits the penis.

Penis: body part that contains the urethra, which urine and semen pass through to leave the body; very sensitive to touching or rubbing which can cause pleasure or orgasm.

Testicles: reproductive organ on a person with a penis that makes sperm, needed to make a baby.

Scrotum: pouch of skin that holds the testicles.

Bladder: body part that stores urine.

Sperm: the reproductive cell of a person with a penis.

Ovary: body part (there are two ovaries) in a person with a uterus that stores eggs (or ova); eggs are the reproductive cell of a person with a uterus.

Uterus: this is the part of a person where the fetus, or baby, grows.

Vagina: the passageway between the uterus and the vaginal opening through which a baby comes out when it is time to be born.

Vaginal Opening: the opening to the vagina through which a baby is born and through which blood passes during menstruation.

Orgasm: a moment of intense pleasure as a body's tension during sex is released; orgasms usually result from stimulation of the penis (typically accompanied by ejaculation) and of the clitoris.

Clitoris: body part located above the urethral opening, very sensitive to touch and often produces pleasure

Anus: the opening where solid waste, or poop, leaves the body.

Infection: caused by tiny organisms, or germs, that make us sick.

Sexual Abuse: all touching of private parts between an adult and a child is sexual abuse. If an adult (or an older child) engages in any sexual behavior (looking, showing, or touching) with a child to meet the older person's interest or sexual needs, it is sexual abuse.

Communicable: an infection that can be spread from person to person.

Non-communicable: cannot be spread from one person to another.

Fallopian Tube: the passageway that connects the ovary to the uterus.

Fertilize: when a sperm cell attaches to an egg cell in the fallopian tube.

Personal Boundaries: a boundary you keep in mind and convey to others regarding your body or personal space; the boundary is intended to stop physical contact with your body or belongings.

Sexual Harassment: a behavior, including words or actions, unwanted attention, or jokes about bodies or doing something sexual that makes the person feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or bad about themselves.

Transmitted: passed from one person with an infection to another person without an infection.

Ejaculation: when semen is released from an erect penis.

HIV: human immunodeficiency virus, a virus that attacks the immune system, making it hard to fight off infections.

Safe/Safer: an activity that reduces or removes risk.

Sperm: tiny cells that are needed to make a baby, found in the testicles of a person with a penis.

Immune System: the body system that enables us to fight off infections.

TERMS RELATED TO SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

Biological Sex: the sex of an individual is determined by chromosomes (such as XX or XY), hormones, internal anatomy (such as gonads), hormone levels, hormone receptors, genes, and external anatomy (such as genitalia). Typically, individuals are assigned as male or female at birth. (National Sex Education Standards, Second Edition, 2020).

Intersex: umbrella term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with variations in reproductive and/or sexual anatomy or chromosomes that do not fit the typical binary definitions of female or male. Intersex variations are not always discernible at birth, and awareness of internal anatomy present at birth may not be known to the person until puberty, if it is known at all. (National Sex Education Standards, Second Edition, 2020).

Gender: a set of cultural identities, expressions, and roles—typically attached to a person’s sex assigned at birth and codified as feminine or masculine—that are assigned to people based upon the interpretation of their bodies and, more specifically, their sexual and reproductive anatomy. Gender is socially constructed, and it is, therefore, possible to reject or modify the assignment made and develop something that feels truer to oneself. (National Sex Education Standards, Second Edition, 2020).

Gender Identity: a person’s deep internal sense of who they are as a gendered being—specifically, the gender with which they identify. All people have a gender identity. Some gender identities may include cisgender, transgender, non-binary, agender, genderqueer, bigender, genderfluid, and gender non-conforming. Lessons in Rights, Respect, Responsibility explore this concept throughout grade levels in ways that are age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate. (Teaching Transgender Toolkit, Eli R. Green and Luca Maurer, 2015).

Cisgender: a person whose gender identity is aligned with their biological sex or sex assigned at birth.

Gender Expression: a person’s outward gender presentation, usually comprised of personal style, clothing, hairstyle, makeup, jewelry, vocal inflection, and body language. You will notice in Rights, Respect, Responsibility that the authors intentionally give examples of students who express their gender in a variety of ways. (Teaching Transgender Toolkit, Eli R. Green and Luca Maurer, 2015).

Transgender: a person whose gender identity and/or expression is not aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Sexual Orientation: the gender or genders of people one is attracted to emotionally, sexually, and/or romantically. Everyone has a sexual orientation. It is not necessary to engage in sexual behaviors to know what your sexual orientation is. Some sexual orientations include asexual, bisexual, gay, heterosexual, lesbian, pansexual, and queer.

TERMS RELATED TO RACIAL JUSTICE IN SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION

Equity: a culture of fairness and justice that can create a positive outcome for a specific group based on their cultural challenges, needs, and histories. Equity is a step beyond diversity or equality; it requires systemic approaches to intentionally create, support, and sustain social justice.

Implicit bias: characteristics that impact our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These characteristics include attitudes, beliefs, or stereotypes that we have about people, places, and things. Implicit bias often shows up in the forms of microaggressions and stereotypes.

Marginalization: the treatment of a person, group, or concept as insignificant or peripheral.

Prejudice: a preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.

Privilege: an unearned special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group.

Power: the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events. When a person or a group of people hold political, social, or economic power, they have privilege that benefits them while oppressing others.

Race: the concept of stratifying people by placing them into groups based on their physical characteristics (phenotype). Social meaning is also ascribed to those groups.

Racial Justice: the systematic fair treatment of people of all races, resulting in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all.

Racism: the belief that groups of humans possess different behavioral traits corresponding to inherited attributes and can be ranked based on the superiority of one race over another. It may also mean prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against other people because they are of a different race or ethnicity.

Reproductive Health: the condition of male and female reproductive systems during all life stages.

Reproductive Justice: a framework created by Black women—drawing upon Black Feminist Theory and the human rights framework—that centers those most vulnerable, their leadership, and lived experience. This framework challenges reproductive oppression in an intersectional manner that is applicable to all people.