

SESSION SEVEN: Classroom Management



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session, teachers will be able to:

1. Describe the professional and personal boundaries that determine when they disclose information about themselves.
2. Identify potential consequences of disclosing personal information in an educational setting.
3. Explain possible rationales for disclosing personal information.
4. List at least three tips for how and when to disclose personal information to learners.
5. Identify various types of challenges they may face in answering questions by reflecting upon their own experience and participating in a large group discussion.
6. Identify strategies for overcoming barriers related to each type of challenge.
7. Demonstrate their ability to respond effectively to questions by practicing in small groups, answering questions that are typically asked by learners.

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1 Self-Disclosure

Activity 2 Answering Difficult Questions

Activity 1: Self-Disclosure

TOTAL TIME REQUIRED

1 hour

MATERIALS NEEDED

- ✓ Flip chart
- ✓ Markers
- ✓ Tape
- ✓ Pens/pencils
- ✓ 1, 2, 3, 4 signs

RESOURCES NEEDED

- ✓ Self-Disclosure Assessment Handout
- ✓ Guidelines for Self-Disclosure Handout
- ✓ Pre-written flip charts on:
 1. Disclosure Scenario Discussion Questions
 - What was the rationale for your choice?
 - What could be some positive consequences of your choice?
 - What could some of the negative consequences be?

RESOURCES NEEDED (CONTINUED)

2. Tips on Boundaries/Self-Disclosure Regarding:
 - Your clothing and workspace décor
 - Sharing information about your current personal or professional life
 - Sharing information about your own adolescence
 - Your choice of language OR Social Media

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2. Identify potential consequences of disclosing personal information in an educational setting.
3. Explain possible rationales for disclosing personal information.
4. List at least three tips for how and when to disclose personal information to learners

Activity 1: Self-Disclosure

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Introduce the activity and its purpose, which is to discuss when and how it is appropriate to share personal information in an educational setting, or self-disclosure.

Note that disclosure can be:

- One-to-one
- Could be in a group
- Could be non-verbal (wedding ring, photos, buttons, etc.)
- Could be on-line (Facebook: even pages that you like)

2. Distribute the Self-Disclosure Assessment handout. Tell participants that there may be some statements or situations that do not apply to them; if they do not, ask them to imagine who they **WOULD** tell **if this situation did apply to them**. Also, if they **HAVE** experienced the statement, they don't need to write down who they actually told—they should record who they **WOULD** tell today.

3. Assure them that they will not be expected to share the content on their forms with the entire group—but that they will be discussing the **process** of doing this with at least one other person, and will be encouraged to discuss what **patterns** they observed in their decision-making.

4. Ask participants to complete the assessment individually. After about 5–10 minutes, give each person a moment to reflect on their individual worksheet. Ask them to find a partner.

5. Reveal the flip chart with the guiding questions they should use to process the activity with their partner.

6. Emphasize again that they do **NOT** need to share anything that's on their worksheet unless they wish to, but simply reflect on the process.

Activity 1: Self-Disclosure

INSTRUCTIONS (CONTINUED)

7. After a few moments of discussion among the pairs, call the groups attention back and ask the following questions:
 - What was it like to do this? What was _____ about it?
 - What did you notice about who you disclosed to?
 - How did you decide who you would disclose to?
 - What's something you learned about yourself (or were reminded of) by doing this?
8. Ask everyone to turn the worksheet over and to complete this sentence: "One way this activity could potentially impact how I do my work is..."
9. Ask for volunteers to share responses in the large group.
10. Now ask participants to think about any experiences they have had in an educational setting where the educator/trainer disclosed personal information. This can be from when they were a student in school or when they attended training as a participant.
11. Ask for a volunteer or two to briefly share their experience by asking the following guiding questions:
 - What was the experience?
 - Did the disclosure help or hinder the learning?
 - Did the disclosure seem strategic/planned or spontaneous?
12. Ask teachers, "So from what we've seen in this activity, what are some of the potential positive consequences of self-disclosure?" Record responses on a flip chart. Supplement participants' responses as needed with the following:
 - Increase student participation, sharing, comfort, and motivation
 - Decrease power difference between educator and students
 - Develop rapport between students and educator

Activity 1: Self-Disclosure

INSTRUCTIONS (CONTINUED)

13. Ask, “What are some of the potential negative consequences of self-disclosure?” Record responses on a flip chart. Supplement participants’ responses as needed with the following:

- Interferes with students' learning
- Enhances power of educator beliefs
- Focus shifted to educator, not students
- Questions educator professionalism
- Creates role confusion

14. Note that as it relates to social media and self-disclosure, there are similar issues and pros and cons. That said, there are also some issues that are unique to social media that teachers should be aware of, such as the viral nature of social media (that messages can be forwarded instantly to many people at once).

Review these tips with teachers:

- Avoid putting information about politics on your pages
- Limit the personal information you share
- Be aware that what others comment on your page can be seen by students
- Refrain from using social media to spy or gossip about learners
- Don’t lecture learners about information you may have seen on their page.

15. Next provide each teacher with a copy of the handout, *Guidelines for Self-Disclosure* and review this in a large group, asking teachers to share their thoughts or examples as you walk through them.

Activity 1: Self-Disclosure

INSTRUCTIONS (CONTINUED)

16. End the activity by asking the following questions:
- ✓ What was it like to spend time discussing the issue of self-disclosure?
 - ✓ Why is it important to think through when and how much information to share with learners?
 - ✓ What is an important lesson that you have taken from these activities?
 - ✓ How might this discussion impact how you approach information sharing in the classroom?
17. Conclude by underscoring the importance of reflecting on when and what to disclose to learners in a classroom setting, noting that oftentimes one may not realize the negative impacts of self-disclosure, which is why it is so important to be selective and intentional about what and when to share.

Self-Disclosure Assessment Handout

For each of the items below, place a check mark under each type of person with whom you would disclose that piece of information (or note if you would choose not to disclose). Please answer honestly. You will not need to share anything that's on this worksheet unless you wish to, but you will be asked to reflect on the process.

With Whom Would You Disclose If You...?

	CO-WORKER(S)	SUPERVISOR	PARENTS OF LEARNERS	LEARNERS	WOULD NOT DISCLOSE
1. Were married/in a committed relationship					
2. Had children					
3. Had ever been arrested					
4. Ever used birth control and which type					
5. Were ever in a sexual relationship with someone of the same gender					
6. Were ever in a sexual relationship with someone of a different gender					
7. Ever had a Sexually Transmitted Infection					
8. Ever had an affair					
9. Had sex as a young person					
10. Or your partner were pregnant					
11. Or your partner had ever had an abortion					
12. Had strong feelings about the next election					
13. Ever found a young person you teach sexually attractive					
14. Have strong religious beliefs and what they are					

Adapted by Advocates for Youth, 2014 from Rutgers Training Institute in Sexual Health Education, based on an adapted work developed by Elizabeth Schroeder Ed.D., M.S.W.

Guidelines for Self-Disclosure Handout



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We disclose information about ourselves every day, often without thinking about it. When it comes to answering questions about sexuality—especially when working with young people—there is a bit more of a slippery slope to consider.

While some people believe that disclosing personal information will help to build a sense of trust with young people, others are able to make very strong connections with teens without doing so—or, by maintaining very clear boundaries about what topics are and are not off limits.

Every professional must make the decision of whether to disclose personal information—and how much to disclose—for her or himself. The following are some issues professionals may wish to consider when making these important decisions:

When you might choose to disclose:

- Only with an established individual or group with lots of trust.
- Only when it enhances learning and the example makes a good point.

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 group members.

Six Tips on Self-Disclosure:

1. **Know the organization's policy.** As long as you work within a particular school or youth-serving organization, your professional responsibility is to that organization and its policies.
2. **Notice what things you already disclose** about yourself every day without thinking about them—symbols of relationship status, religion, or political affiliations, and other things that give messages about who we are—both accurate and inaccurate!
3. Once you disclose something or cross a boundary, **you can't undo it.**
4. **Ask yourself why** you would disclose the information?
If it is to make yourself feel better, then don't disclose.

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5. **Think about the secondary message** that disclosing can give: i.e., about abortion: i.e., “I have never had an abortion, but” or about sexual orientation: i.e., “I’m not gay, but ...”
6. It is possible to connect with young people without sharing too much personal information. Use your own experiences **in the third person**. For example, “I know someone who...”

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

- You can’t take it back.
- You have no control over what that person will do with the information. Young people 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 professional/student relationship has an inherent power differential. Therefore, if a young person asks you what type of condoms or other birth control you use and you share that information, the young person 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.

Adapted by Advocates for Youth, 2014, from the Rutgers University Training Institute in Sexual Health Education adaptation on the work of Dr. Eva S. Goldfarb, Ph.D., Montclair State University, NJ

Activity 2: Answering Difficult Questions

TOTAL TIME REQUIRED

1 hour 30 minutes

MATERIALS NEEDED

- ✓ Flip chart
- ✓ Markers
- ✓ Note cards

RESOURCES NEEDED

- ✓ The Meaning Behind a Question Handout
- ✓ Beyond the Lesson Plan: Tips for Responding to Challenging Questions and Comments Handout
- ✓ Leader's Resource of 20 Sample Questions
- ✓ 20 sample questions prepared in advance on half-sheets
- ✓ 2 pre-written flip charts each with one of the following questions:
 1. When did you have sex for the first time?
 2. What happens when a person has sex with an animal?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this session, teachers will be able to:

1. Identify various types of challenges they may face in answering questions by reflecting upon their own experience and participating in a large group discussion.
2. Identify strategies for overcoming barriers related to each type of challenge, by listening to discussion led by a facilitator.
3. Demonstrate their ability to respond effectively to questions by practicing in small groups, answering questions that are typically asked by participants.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Introduce the activity and its purpose, which is to discuss the types of questions that sexuality education teachers can encounter and how to effectively respond to them.
2. Remind teachers that as part of healthy adolescent development, learners are curious, can worry about whether they are normal or not, and care about peers and how they are perceived by them. They will therefore ask questions because they want to understand the world around them and it is important to treat questions with respect and without judgment.
3. Distribute note cards and ask teachers the following: "Visualize a time when you asked someone a difficult question and felt you heard an effective response."
4. Write this question down on your note card and what the other person did to make the response effective.
5. Ask teachers to put the note card aside for later use.

Activity 2: Answering Difficult Questions

INSTRUCTIONS (CONTINUED)

6. Review the five types of questions that educators are typically asked when teaching sexuality education:
 1. Information seeking
 2. Am I normal?
 3. Permission seeking/advice
 4. Personal beliefs or experiences
 5. Shockers

7. Refer to the handout, *The Meaning Behind a Question*, to go over the types of questions and provide one example for each.

8. Next, ask teachers under what circumstances such questions could be asked and jot down answers on flip chart paper.

If teachers have not mentioned the following, complete the list with these:

- During a group education session
 - One-on-one outside the session
 - Anonymous question box
 - On-line via e-mail, text, or other social media
9. Note that the focus of this activity will be more on how to manage in-person interactions.
 10. Ask teachers, “Why can some questions feel challenging? What other barriers are there to responding effectively?”
 11. Solicit ideas and jot on flip chart. (Possible examples could include: teacher discomfort, agency policy restricts what can be said, distractions in the room, curriculum requires fidelity).
 12. Direct teachers to form pairs. Hand each pair ONE sample question. Say, “Practice identifying the type of question you have—there may be more than one type that applies. If you and your partner disagree about the type, discuss why. You have 5 minutes.”
 13. Lead a brainstorm of some strategies to successfully respond to challenging questions or situations and write examples on a flip chart.

Activity 2: Answering Difficult Questions

INSTRUCTIONS (CONTINUED)

14. Distribute the Beyond the Lesson Plan: Tips for Responding to Challenging Questions and Comments handout. Allow people time to read it. Invite suggestions for additional tips missing from this and the flip chart.
15. Direct teachers to form new pairs, and swap questions with another pair so that every pair has a fresh question.
16. Ask pairs to role-play (2 minutes per person) as teacher and learner. It is okay for both to see the question as written—no surprises required. Explain that the learner can add details on context such as their age, gender, etc. to help the teacher. Advise the teacher to try to apply some of the tips that were just reviewed. If they finish before 2 minutes they can step out of their roles and discuss what worked about the interaction (or what could have improved it).
17. Direct teachers to form new pairs and to swap their question out for a new one. At the signal, they can role-play the new question. Advise them to stop after 2 minutes.

Ask teachers:

- ✓ How did it feel to learners to ask the question? How did it feel to teachers to respond?
- ✓ What tips did teachers use to respond effectively?
- ✓ Have you experienced something similar in your work?
- ✓ What might you do as a result next time you encounter a similar type question in the classroom?

** If you see that teachers may be unclear on factual information, ask if they need clarification and provide it. If you aren't sure yourself about the answer, find out and provide it later in the day before closing or the next morning before beginning. **

Activity 2: Answering Difficult Questions

INSTRUCTIONS (CONTINUED)

18. Direct teachers to form new pairs. Explain that all pairs will work on the same question, noted on the flip chart paper as follows:

When did you have sex for the first time?

Pairs can determine who will start as teacher and learner. Explain that there will be a second question so that they will have the chance to reverse roles.

19. Note that the key for this role-play pairing is to tailor the response as if it were to the learners that you actually serve in real life.

20. After 2 minutes, ask pairs to switch and to role-play using the question noted on the flip chart paper as follows:

What happens when a person has sex with an animal?

Ask teachers:

- ✓ How did it feel to learners to ask the question? How did it feel to teachers to respond?
- ✓ What tips did teachers use to respond effectively?
- ✓ What was important to understand about your real-life learners when crafting a response? (e.g. your agency policy, learners' developmental level, etc.)
- ✓ What might you do differently next time you encounter a similar type question in the classroom?

21. Ask teachers to take out the note cards they completed at the start of the plenary and invite a few examples for sharing with the large group—what did the other person do or say to make an effective response to your difficult question? How is that similar to the tips discussed during this exercise?

22. Close with concluding remarks:

- Learners will inevitably ask you tough questions and this is part of healthy adolescent development.
- Being aware of the types of questions you can encounter when teaching sexuality education and tips for addressing these can equip you to better respond to learners' inquiries and to do so respectfully and without judgment.

The Meaning Behind a Question Handout



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1. INFORMATION-SEEKING

These are basically very straightforward questions that have specific, factual answers.

Examples:

- How does a condom work?
- What does oral sex mean?
- Can you get an STI from a toilet seat?

SAMPLE RESPONSE—Since most STIs are caused by germs and bacteria that are very fragile, it is not possible to get a disease from a toilet seat, because the bacteria or virus could not stay alive there.

2. AM-I-NORMAL

These questions are often about something a person worries about and needs reassurance about. So while there may be a factual response, the person needs to know that wanting to know the answer is normal.

Examples:

- Is it possible to masturbate too much?
- What is the average size of a penis?
- Why are boys horny all the time?

SAMPLE RESPONSE—It really does seem as though all boys are horny all the time, but we know that not only are some boys not at all interested in sex, but girls can be very interested in sex and we don't often hear about that. It is really normal for teens to think about sex a lot, be curious and even masturbate a lot. It is also normal for those feelings not to be very strong at all. People develop at different times and so a person's interest in sex is a really individual thing. Why do you think we have this stereotype that all guys are horny?

3. PERMISSION-SEEKING/ADVICE

These questions are really about something that a teen is trying to make a decision about and needs permission to make a decision. Sometimes they are looking to be talked out of something, and sometimes they really want to know the steps to figuring out the answer for themselves.

Examples:

- What is the correct age to have sex?
- How do you give a blow job?
- What are the consequences of dating someone who is older than you?

The Meaning Behind a Question Handout



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SAMPLE RESPONSE—Dating an older person can be wonderful, but there are certainly some cautions to keep in mind. In some situations, an older person will try to control a younger person, or may keep the younger person from doing things that someone his or her age might wish to do. An older person may expect sex when a younger person may not be ready. Depending on the age differences, sex between the older and younger person might be considered illegal.

4. PERSONAL BELIEFS OR EXPERIENCES QUESTIONS

These questions are again a test of how much you are willing to share about yourself. Most of the time, sharing personal information is not appropriate, but generally explaining that your experiences happened at a time very different from today, and therefore are not relevant to them, is a safe way to avoid answering those questions.

Examples:

- How old were you when you had sex for the first time?
- Do you think abortion is wrong?
- If you were me, what would you do?

SAMPLE RESPONSE—Since I am NOT you, and I do not have to live with the consequences of the choice, it does not make sense for me to give you an answer. We can talk together about the choice you have to make, and then maybe it will be easier for you to make a decision that is right for you.

5. SHOCK QUESTIONS

These questions are asked to test the facilitator. This is a check of your sense of humor, your ability to think on your feet, and your ability to not get flustered or upset by a question. Sometimes it is best to ignore the question, but other times, it helps to give a serious answer.

Examples:

- I want to f—k you.
- If I have sex with 300 guys does that make me a slut?
- My girlfriend smells like dead stinky fish, what should I do?

SAMPLE RESPONSE—This question has two parts to it. In one part, it is asking about something we often hear—that a girl’s vagina smells dirty or bad, but the way it is asked is part of the problem. It is true that all girls and women’s vaginas have a scent and that some scents are stronger and more noticeable than others, this is very normal. It is not right to make a girl or woman feel bad about her body since the scent is normal and natural. A strong scent could be a sign of infection.

Beyond the Lesson Plan: Tips for Responding to Challenging Questions and Comments Handout

For many sexuality educators, preparing a lesson plan and leading activities is the easy part of the job. It's those spur-of-the-moment comments or questions that can cause the most anxiety. Below are several types of challenges, and some suggestions for dealing with them.

1. Knowledge or Skills

Usually, these questions are very straightforward questions that have specific, factual answers. How does a condom work? What does oral sex mean? Can you get an STI from a toilet seat? How can you get an appointment to see about contraception? However, sometimes a question will challenge the limits of our own knowledge or skills.

Tips:

- It's OK not to know something, and to be honest about it.
- This moment is an educational opportunity to “model” that no one should be embarrassed at not knowing everything.
- Ask the group 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 learners).
- Promise to get the answer. (And follow through!)
- When a topic is difficult to explain, check in to be sure the audience understood your answer.

2. Comfort

Most educators will become embarrassed at one time or another. Of course, being calm and matter-of-fact is the overall goal. Being calm helps normalize talking about sexuality and helps “absorb” the natural discomfort of learners (discomfort which can distract from the learning process). However, a moment in which the educator is clearly embarrassed is an opportunity for him/her to model, “What should we do when we're embarrassed by the topic?” (The answer: Keep discussing anyway!)

Tips:

In the moment:

- Breathe. Literally. Breathing helps relax us.
- If you can remain outwardly calm, do so. Try not to send the message that the question warrants embarrassment.
- Stall for time, so you can gain composure—nod your head, use a general phrase, like “You know, I'm really glad this question came up.”
- If it's too late (your face is flushed, your voice shakes, you've begun laughing), acknowledge it. It immediately puts you with the crowd that may be laughing at you. *(Note: If you do acknowledge being embarrassed, if appropriate be sure to underscore that the question is valid, and an important one to ask.)*
- Then, answer the question if it's appropriate.

Beyond the Lesson Plan: Tips for Responding to Challenging Questions and Comments Handout

Does it seem that the purpose of the question is to shock you or entertain the class?

- Not all shocking questions are asked for shock value. In other words, it may be an honest question. If so, it deserves a calm, honest answer.
- 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."

Addressing Discomfort On Your Own Time:

- Examine your discomfort. Your feelings have presented an opportunity for increased self-understanding and growth, which helps you become a better sexuality educator.
- If it's just the "Get-over-it" type of discomfort, practice can help—as you teach, in discussions with co-workers, or repeating words/phrases in a private setting.
- If you experience deep-seated discomfort, it may mean you have some healing to do regarding past experiences. If that's the case, you deserve a chance to get assistance from a reliable resource. (It's not fair to the educator or learners for an educator to be forced to teach sexuality when it causes him/her emotional distress.)

3. Values Issues

When discussing values related to sexuality, the goals of the educator are to:

- Increase awareness among participants of their personal values.
- Promote the value of respect for differing opinions.
- Model and teach how to engage in respectful discussion.
- Promote universal values.

Tips:

- Do not impose your personal values. (If you make a rare exception and share a personal opinion, surround it with comments that validate alternative viewpoints.)
- Explore a range of values.
- Use the "reporter technique." Give the facts, "report" examples of views on both sides of the issue. (Then turn it to the group for discussion.)
- 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.

Beyond the Lesson Plan on Tips for Responding to Challenging Questions and Comments

- 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 such matters with the moral authorities in the learners’ lives—Parents, clergy, and other trusted adults.
- Know what can get you upset or uncomfortable ahead of time so that you can be ready to react calmly. When the topics arise, pause, and breathe!

4. Your Role (Personal Questions, Permission, Advice)

Sometimes educators are asked to disclose their values (Do you think it’s wrong to...?); 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 OK for a 16 year-old to...?).

Our responses to these questions have implications about the professional’s role in the lives of his/her students. There is no “one size fits all”—In some settings, the professional is a guest speaker. In others, the professional is a live-in counselor, taking a quasi-parental role. In others, it is something in-between. Whatever his or her setting and role, the professional should carefully deliberate beforehand how she/he will approach requests to share personal information or advice. In the moment, she/he should take extreme care, choosing non-disclosure (i.e. not sharing personal information) over possibly inappropriate disclosure.

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 the 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.
- Consider setting a ground-rule ahead of time—in which you announce that you won’t answer personal questions (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.

Beyond the Lesson Plan on Tips for Responding to Challenging Questions and Comments

5. Crisis, Legal Matters, or Disclosures of Trouble

Occasionally, a question or comment will reveal a personal crisis that a group member is facing. In these situations, the educator is juggling several needs and interests—attending to a participant’s very important personal situation (perhaps involving protecting his/her safety); protecting the privacy of that individual; sharing pertinent information; maintaining calm in the group; and advancing the original learning goals of the session.

Tips

- If possible (anonymous written question), generalize the issue, so as to not draw attention to an individual.
- Encourage anyone who is facing that type of situation to talk to you or another group leader afterward.
- If a person discloses a personal trauma to the group, respond empathetically (I’m sorry to hear that you had to go through that), then switch to general comments and information about the topic (When a person has been a victim of rape, it’s usually very helpful for them to talk about it with people they trust. Often, a counselor who is specially trained can offer the most help...)
- If a group member seems interested in “processing” his/her situation in front of the group, politely seek buy-in to move on. (It’s very important that you have a chance to ask questions about your situation. Because we’re here as a group to hear about a range of other things, I’d like to move on. If you’d like to talk with me after the class is over, I’m more than happy to stick around. Would that be OK?)
- Be familiar with, and comply with, mandatory reporting laws in your state.
- When discussing a situation with an individual that triggers mandatory reporting, it is usually best to let him/her know that you will need to report what he/she is sharing.

6. “The Heart” and Other Complicated Topics

How do you know when you’re in love? Why are boys always touching their private parts? Some questions are asked as “factual,” but there just may not be a straightforward answer. A helpful approach here is to facilitate a discussion rather than give an answer.

Tips:

- Bounce the question back: “What do you all think?”
- Explore various possibilities: “What do you think would happen if...?” “How might a person feel if their partner...?”
- If you offer up an answer, give a few possibilities and note that they are educated guesses.
- Check in to see if there are other thoughts on the matter.
- Check in to see if the questioner feels the question was answered adequately.

Beyond the Lesson Plan on Tips for Responding to Challenging Questions and Comments

Some General Guidelines

1. Remember that in addition to imparting information and skills, the educator's job is also to:

- Normalize and de-mystify.
- Absorb 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.

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. Be aware of the "question behind the question." Often, the real question is underneath the surface.

Examples are:

- "Am I normal?" question (What is the average age that a girl's breasts start to show?)

Proper response: Calmly normalize, or calmly suggest a person get attention from an expert.

- "Permission" question (Is it OK for a 16 year-old to...?)

Proper response: Explore a variety of possibilities, opinions, possible outcomes, etc.

- "Crisis/trouble" question (Is it incest if a girl's step-father asks her to have sex?).

Proper response: Be as general in your answer as you can; if appropriate encourage people in those situations to seek assistance; offer to be available to talk to any student individually.

4. Be aware that nonverbal communication can speak volumes. Work to avoid nonverbal cues such as wrinkled brows or frowns that may imply judgment, disapproval, etc.

5. Use third person (a girl's...a boy's..., two people...) rather than the pronoun "you" when answering very personalized questions in a group setting.

6. Use gender-neutral and orientation-neutral language when describing behavior and people.

Leader's Resource of 20 Sample Questions

Use any of the following sample questions for the activity and/or use questions that teachers may have already come across and/or are especially common in your country.

1. How does a condom prevent HIV?
2. What does oral sex mean?
3. Can you get an STI from a toilet seat?
4. How can you get an appointment to see about contraception?
5. What is an erection?
6. Should you worry if you're 14 and you haven't gotten your period?
7. How do you know when you're in love?
8. Is it okay to masturbate?
9. What causes menstrual cramps?
10. How old were you when you first had sex?
11. What is the average age that a girl's breasts start to show?
12. Is it okay for a 16 year-old have had sex?
13. Is it incest if a girl's step-father asks her to have sex?
14. Can you get pregnant the first time you have sex?
15. What is a normal penis size?
16. Can you get HIV from oral sex?
17. Have you ever had an STI?
18. Do you think having sex before marriage okay?
19. How much sperm is normal when you ejaculate?
20. Is it okay if one breast is bigger than the other?

