



Strategies for Answering Student Questions
About Sexual Health

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Personal Questions

Students sometimes ask questions that contain a personal element. The question could be about you, such as, “How old were you the first time you had sex?” It could be about the student himself or herself, such as, “I have a rash that I’m worried about, what should I do?” Or, it could be a personal question about someone else, such as, “Is Mr. Smith gay?”

Students ask these questions for a variety of reasons. They are curious about the trusted adults in their life. They are newly learning about boundaries. They are seeking to normalize their own experiences. They are applying the things they are learning in sexual health class to themselves and the people in their lives. And, they find you a credible and accurate source of information about things that are important to them.

There are many useful strategies for answering these questions in a helpful way, while also teaching about privacy and appropriate boundaries.

Strategies:

- Validate personal questions, just like you would other types of student questions. Be cautious about inadvertently embarrassing or shaming students for asking personal questions.
- Use personal questions as an opportunity to model and teach about healthy boundaries.
- Do not share information about your sexual experiences or history. Sometimes teachers want to share this information to set a positive example or to share a cautionary story. Even though the intent is good, it is still inappropriate to share with students. It is also less helpful to students than one might hope.
- When you decline to answer a question about yourself, follow these steps: (1) affirm that students are often curious about the adults in their lives; (2) reframe the question, so that it is general, not personal; and (3) answer with factual information and/or the values question protocol.
- When students ask a written questions about themselves or someone else, paraphrase the question to use the third person. Answer the question about people in general, not this specific person.
- When students ask questions out loud about themselves or someone else, remind the class about respecting people’s privacy, and answer the question about people in general, not this specific person.

Technique Questions

Technique questions are about how to perform a sexual act. They are often worded as “How do you...”, “How does a person...” or “What’s the best way to...”

Clearly, giving guidance about sexual performance is inappropriate. Yet there are helpful, age-appropriate ways to respond to these questions. Most questions that appear to be about technique (to adults) are just a student’s way of getting more information about a topic. The intent of the question is usually “What is...?”

Even during those times when a sexual technique question is being asked, there is usually a general factual question embedded in it that can be answered instead.

Strategies:

- Validate questions worded in this way, just as you would all other types of student questions.
- Reframe technique questions as factual questions. Answer the factual aspect of the question.
- If you think the question is really asking for information on how to perform sexual acts, let the class know that teachers, school nurses, etc., don’t give sex advice. Instead, use the student’s question as an opportunity to give accurate information about the topic in general.
- Your answer might include the values question protocol.

Slang in Questions

Student questions often contain slang. Most often, students use slang because it is the terminology they are most familiar with, or because they have a question about the meaning of the term. Sometimes, it is also an attempt to unnerve the teacher.

Slang terms range from widely used, common terms to words that some may find inappropriate or off-putting. When students use slang it is an opportunity to teach the class the medical or standard term. It is also an opportunity to maintain a respectful environment and diffuse the need to test or shock the teacher.

Strategies:

- Validate questions with slang, just as you would all other types of student questions.
- When reading a written question aloud, read the question verbatim. Identify the slang as such, in a non-judgmental way, and translate it into medical/standard language. Let the class know we'll all be using the medical/standard term in class.
- Assume good intent on the part of your students. Students typically use the language they have been exposed to, including by family members. Don't denigrate students for using slang; simply instruct the class to use the medical/standard term in health class.
- Handle slang as a learning opportunity, in your regular calm and respectful manner. This greatly reduces students' need to test or shock you.
- Your answer might include the values question protocol.
- Let your administrator know, in advance, how you handle slang in your classroom.
- Slurs fall into a different category than slang. If students use a slur in sexual health class (e.g. for women, people who are gay, etc.), use the following steps: (1) validate the question by saying you're glad this important topic came up; (2) identify the term as an offensive word; (3) let the class know we won't be using this word in school, ever, because it is hurtful. Proceed as though no harm was intended will help the speaker save face and more readily adopt more respectful language.

FLASH Value Question Protocol

Student questions may be directly about a value, such as “When is a good age to have sex?” They may also simply contain a topic about which people hold strong values, such as “Is it legal to get an abortion if you are raped?” When student questions contain value-laden topics, teachers have a responsibility to answer them in a way that respects the diversity of beliefs that students and their families hold on these topics.

The only exception is when the value is shared by a vast majority of our society (95% or more). We call these values “universal,” and some examples include, “It is never OK to force someone to have sex,” and “Sex between adults and children is wrong.”

When value questions contain non-universal values, the FLASH Value Question Protocol provides the structure for handling these questions in a respectful and inclusive manner.

1. Validate the student for asking the question.
Some examples include: “That’s a really important question.” “A lot of people have that question.” “I am so glad this question came up.” “What a thoughtful question.”
2. Identify the question as a belief or value question.
“This is not a question that there is just one answer to. People have a lot of different beliefs about this topic.”
3. Answer the factual part of the question.
“Yes. It is legal in the U.S. to get an abortion, regardless of whether someone has been raped or not.”
4. Describe the range of beliefs.
“Abortion is a topic that people have a lot of different beliefs about. Some people think that abortion is never OK, under any circumstances. Some people think that abortion can be a responsible decision if a woman is not ready to be pregnant. Some people believe that abortion is OK under certain circumstances, like if a woman was raped or if she is using drugs. What are some things you have heard that people believe about when it is or is not OK to have an abortion?”
5. State your belief only if it is a universal value.
“A woman should only try to end her pregnancy with the help of a doctor.”
6. Refer the student to family, clergy or other trusted adults.
“Since people have such different beliefs about this topic, I would suggest you talk to your family, or another adult you trust, to find out what they think.”