

ANSWERING THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

These are some of the questions asked to us by teachers who were, or were potentially going to, teach the revised Human Development and Sexual Health Curriculum. We have answered these questions here but are always available to answer questions via email or phone.

How to create the environment –making it serious and not silly. How do you deal with rude and/or silly questions?

At SHORE Centre, we do not think that sex education has to be overly serious. Of course, you want to be able to teach effectively without interruptions, but often with this topic, students feel awkward and giggle without intending to or their natural reaction when they are uncomfortable is to laugh – this also happens to adults. You can acknowledge that this is an okay reaction and that as long as the class can “get their giggles out” and move on, it is okay to have a giggle reaction to the topic. If you begin the class with a comfortable and relaxed demeanor, students will pick up on that and follow suit. See below: How to make students feel comfortable.

Often students are asking rude or silly questions for shock factor. However, sometimes they are just using the language they feel comfortable with, or know, as many students may not have been taught proper words for body parts or sexual behaviour. Either way, if a student asks a question that sounds rude – try to get to the root of their question in a way that gives them a real answer and shows that you are going to answer in a factual manner.

Example: “How do you make bitches give blow jobs?” Of course this is not appropriate language and can make the rest of the class feel uncomfortable. If this happens, you can model more respectful language not by correcting, but by simply responding:

“Thanks for your question. Oral sex is something we can definitely discuss. Often people use slang words, but oral sex refers to any genital to mouth contact. One thing that is important to remember is that any STI you can get through vaginal and anal sex, you can also get through oral sex. This means that using condoms or dental dams while

performing or receiving oral sex will help prevent the spread of STIs. Now I want to address the second part of your question. Consent is a very important part of any discussion around sexual health. We are all in charge of our own bodies and can always say no or decide not to do something with another person, whether that's borrowing a pencil, hugging, or any kind of sexual activity. It is wrong to force or pressure anyone to do anything they don't want to do. We all want to be with a partner who is excited to be with us – not someone who feels like they are being forced or pressured to be with us. That's why consent is so important. You should always be asking people before touching them, and again asking and checking in with them each time you decide to do anything intimate together." You could also show the Tea Consent Video.

How do I make my students feel comfortable?

The number one way to help students feel comfortable is to be comfortable yourself. If you're not there yet – try and fake it. We know this can be difficult, but making sure your facial expressions are relaxed and you aren't blushing is important. Practise this with your friends, family, anyone who will listen! Practise using words like vulva, vagina, penis, testicles, gonads etc. without stumbling or giggling. These words are accurate and scientific.

You can start the conversation with students by saying "Today we are learning about how to keep our bodies healthy. All of this information is important to know so that you can grow into young adults who understand how their bodies work. I understand that this might feel awkward right now as you are going through many of these changes. It is okay to feel uncomfortable. I feel comfortable teaching you this because I know how important it is and I want you to learn it. I hope you know that you can ask trusted adults in your life any questions you are wondering about and that all questions are good questions."

It is also important to teach sexual health the same way you teach other subjects – a bit at a time, throughout the school year. By teaching the entire curriculum in one or two classes you create an atmosphere which is uncomfortable and anxiety ridden because there is a sense that this topic is different than the rest. Teach in your usual classroom and teach all genders together. This normalizes the subject instead of othering it.

How to create boundaries?

Discussing with the class beforehand that everyone will have different experiences and questions, that all questions are good ones and that no one will be laughed at, or made fun of, for asking a question, is one way to establish boundaries. Before beginning the sexual health curriculum, or at the beginning of the year, you can create ground rules with the class that you can always refer back to. If these are ground rules for every subject, not just sexual health, it can help normalize sexual health.

It is important that students aren't sharing experiences that are too personal that will violate their privacy or their family/friends/loved ones privacy. Make sure that students know ahead of time that if they want to ask a question they can, but they should not include any details (e.g. names, locations or other identifying features).

By establishing these ground rules or boundaries you can ensure that students know you will not be sharing any personal stories about yourself, nor expecting them to share their own personal experiences. This will be useful later on if a student asks a personal question about your own life, as you can refer back to this agreement. You can also have a discussion about physical boundaries and work this conversation into consent, "Each of us has our own body and we are in charge of who touches us or gets into our personal space. It is important that we are always asking before we touch people or their belongings, every day as well as in the context of sexual activity."

How to start sex education in relation to informing parents? Some parents are upset/angry about it or want to pull their child out of class.

Many parents are upset and angry about the updated sexual health curriculum because they have misinformation from the media or other people. SHORE Centre works with, and educates, many parents within the community and has found that calmly and patiently answering parent's questions and listening to their concerns is often all it takes to create understanding of the importance of the sexual health curriculum.

Explaining exactly what is in the curriculum, and why (e.g. we begin teaching puberty in grade 4 because young people in Canada are starting puberty at younger ages and we

want to ensure they know what puberty is before they begin it), can go a long way in setting a parent's mind at ease. Answer parents questions as you would with other subjects. Teachers are supported in teaching this material as it is in the curriculum, supported by the school board, was extensively researched and is information students have the right to know.

The best way to explain the curriculum is that it is age-appropriate and aimed at ensuring all children are healthy and safe. Teaching young people that their bodies belong to them and about what is going to happen to their bodies has all been shown in extensive research to protect children and keep them healthy.

It is not a requirement to send a letter home to parents/guardians telling them when sexual health is going to be taught. Each school, teacher and Principal will have their own thoughts on this, however it is part of the curriculum and parents can access the information on the School Board website if they choose to or ask you about it. Again by sending a letter home you are telling students and parents/guardians that this subject is different from the rest, creating discomfort and anxiety, and if it is being taught throughout the year, as it was intended, a letter home would not make sense.

If you would like to send a letter home, SHORE Centre has drafted letters for each grade and they can be found on our website. You could send the letter home at the beginning of the year and explain that sexual health will be taught throughout the year – not in one or two classes – and encourage parents/guardians to speak with you about their questions and concerns. Some schools have a presentation for parents/guardians after school about the sexual health curriculum so that they can ask questions and get factual information. If you would like SHORE Centre to help with this presentation please contact education@shorecentre.ca.

A letter home can have positive side effects as it gives parents/guardians the reminder to be asking their children what they are learning at school and gives them the opportunity to teach sexual health at home where they can include their values and beliefs which are not taught at the school.

What do you say if you don't know the answer to a question?

It is inevitable that a student will ask a question that you either 1) don't know the answer to or 2) you are unable to answer, often because it is beyond the curriculum for the grade. If this happens, a good response is "Thanks for asking – that is a great question. I want to give you the most accurate information and right now I am not 100% sure of the answer. That is something I will look into for our next class." If you say you will bring the answer to the next class make sure that you do! If you are unable to answer you can tell the class, "Thanks for asking – that is a great question. That is something you will learn a lot more about in later grades. If you have questions about this now who are some trusted adults in your life that you could ask?" Some questions you may be able to give a very brief answer to but then let them know they will learn more details in later grades.

How do you deal with young girls asking where to get birth control?

People may ask about birth control for many reasons and people use birth control for many reasons, not just to avoid pregnancy. You can answer that people use birth control to manage heavy periods and cramps, improve acne, to lesson symptoms associated with other ailments such as endometriosis and to reduce the risk of getting pregnant when having vaginal sex. If a person would like to use birth control that is a choice they can make, many forms of birth control require a prescription. Birth control is taught in the curriculum in grade 7 and 8.

Let students know it may be a good idea to talk to parents/guardians about birth control or a healthcare provider such as a family doctor or public health nurse. Public Health prescribes birth control for people 24 years and younger and you do not need your health card or parents/guardians permission to use their services. If you have reason to suspect sexual abuse, reporting as mandated will need to occur.

Questions regarding circumcision. Is it good? Bad? What if someone is being bullied for being, or not being, circumcised?

This is a common question because students are wondering if their bodies are “normal”. It is important not to fall on either side of this debate as both are common in Canada and you do not want to make any of your students feel bad. A good answer might be “In Canada, approximately 40% of people are circumcised and approximately 60% are not. It is healthy and safe to be either circumcised or not. The penis functions in the same way whether or not someone is circumcised. People choose to have babies circumcised for a variety of religious, cultural or social reasons. There is no evidence that suggests people with penises must be circumcised or that it is healthier or safer in any way medically speaking. If a person does have a foreskin, it is important to slide back the foreskin to clean underneath it, preventing a build-up of material that can cause infection.”

What to tell other students about a child’s gender when I have a trans child in my classroom? Primary grades.

In a mixed gender classroom, it should not matter to any student what gender the other students in the class are. There is no situation where such personal and specific information is needed. The only time this becomes an issue is when discrimination and bullying occurs. In that case, general education on what it means to be trans can be helpful for the students.

If this type of education is happening to prevent bullying, it is important to check in with the trans student first to see where their comfort level is. They likely to not want to be singled out even further, and there is a chance their parents/guardians are not aware of the bullying.

Gender is part of the sexual health curriculum and students often have questions about gender, and about being trans specifically, as they often hear and see things in the media. Often young students are very interested and understanding of gender. There are books on SHORE Centre’s Sexual Health Booklist about gender and being trans that can be useful when teaching gender or answering questions.

To answer the original question you could say, “We are all born in different bodies and the body parts we have are no one’s business but our own. It is common for people to grow up in a body that they feel doesn’t fit with who they truly are. When this happens, it is important that we respect a person’s gender is what they say it is because we are all experts in who we are!”

What is Ontario’s policy regarding students who identify as trans and bathroom use?

The Waterloo Region District School Board released a policy on [Accommodation of Persons who Identify as Transgender](#) in 2017 which outlines all the ways staff, students and any other people associated with the school board are to be treated. It is important to read for all people working within the school board. This resource outlines many different terms and identities so that employees can better understand their students, as well as outlines the privacy and accommodation measures that need to be put in place.