

Responding to Student Questions / Question Box

Human Development and Sexual Health - Grades 4-12

Responding to Student Questions

Making time for and responding to student questions is an important part of sexual health education. Asking questions helps students clarify and confirm the information being presented. Encourage your students to ask questions during class and to use the Question Box.

When you respond to a student's question:

- reinforce the ground rules (*Refer to document: Ground Rules*)
- give affirmation to the student who asked the question
- defer the answer to the next class if you need time to get more information—you don't need to have all the answers right away

If you have to defer, make sure you tell the student you have to get more information and you'll get back to them.

- Make sure your response is age-appropriate and relevant to the curriculum.
- Give an evidence-based answer.

Student questions about sexual health can usually be grouped into 4 broad, overlapping categories:

- Requests for Information
- "Am I Normal?"
- Permission-Seeking
- Shock

Requests for Information

These questions are usually fairly simple and students are just looking for facts. If you know the answer, give the information within curriculum guidelines. If you don't know the answer, it's okay to say, "I don't know". You can either refer the student to an appropriate source or find out the answer through reputable sources of information.

“Am I Normal?” Questions

These questions usually focus on concerns about emotional and physical changes students may be going through.

- Validate their concern (e.g., “Many people worry that …”) and give information about what they can expect to happen during this time in their life.
- Refer them to a parent, caregiver, health care provider, nurse, clergy or religious mentor, community resources, school resource teacher or counsellor, if appropriate.

Permission Seeking Questions

These questions come in two common forms, both seeking permission to participate in a particular behaviour (e.g., “Is it normal to …?” or “Did you… when you were growing up?”).

- Normal for some might not be normal for others (think of values and morals). Present the facts such as what is known medically, any legal issues, and risk factors and consequences. Always give positive reinforcement that looking for more information and talking about issues is an important way for youth to learn about making healthy decisions. Be cautious of using the word ‘normal’.
- Establish ground rules related to discussion of personal behaviour, such as: “We’re not going to talk about personal behaviour during class”. If you get a question about personal behaviour, remind students of this ground rule.
- Refer them to a parent, caregiver, health care provider, nurse, clergy or religious mentor, community resources, school resource teacher or counsellor, if appropriate.

Shock Questions

These questions may be due to embarrassment about the topic, an underlying concern or simply to divert attention from the topic.

- Assume positive intent—what feels like a ‘silly’ question to you is most likely a real request for information, using the only language the student knows. Answer the question matter-of-factly, to reinforce the message that you are a safe person for your students to bring their questions to.
- Remind students of the ground rules related to appropriate questions for classroom discussion.
- Re-word the vocabulary or slang to focus on the question. For example, if a student asks, “Should your balls hurt for days after being hit?” you could

say, “Balls is a slang word for testicles. Testicles are very sensitive and do hurt when hit. If your testicles are sore for more than a day, you should see your doctor to rule out any problems.”

- Try to address the underlying concern or use a segment of the question for discussion. For example, “It sounds like you are asking a question about respect in a relationship”.
- If you are uncomfortable with the question, defer it until you have time to think about how to address or reword it.

Question Box

The Question Box is a tool that enhances learning by allowing students to ask questions anonymously. Using a Question Box gives you time to review the questions to make sure that you’re comfortable answering them appropriately for the grade level you’re teaching, and that you know the answers.

To use a Question Box effectively, consider these tips:

- Have every student write a question on identical slips of paper.
- If someone doesn’t have anything to ask, they can write a comment about the lesson or just write “No Question” on their slip of paper.
- Collect the questions at the end of each lesson.
- Read through them after class and prepare to answer them during the next lesson.
- You can use multiple options for students to ask questions, such as: an electronic form (e.g., Google Form), email, or chat (e.g. Google Hangout). These options can help students feel more comfortable and allow for anonymity if preferred.
- Introduce a question box at the start of the lesson for ongoing questions, even during breaks or after class.
- Remind students they can also ask trusted adults or email you directly.

When answering questions:

- Group similar questions together.
- Read the question to the class. Paraphrasing to maintain anonymity is fine.
- If personal questions are asked, there is no need to read the question out loud or answer it. Say something like “There are two questions here about my personal sexual experience. I want to remind everyone of the ground rules we made on the first day about not discussing our personal

experiences. I expect you all to follow that rule when submitting questions as well.”

- Define words, including slang and continue on using the correct terminology. For example, if a student’s question is “What is a homo?” you could say, “A homo or homosexual is a hurtful slang word used to put down people who have sexual or romantic attraction to people of the same sex.”
- Answer the question clearly, objectively, factually and appropriately for each grade level.
- Assume all questions, even shock ones, are real questions. After all, they came from somewhere. It’s likely a genuine request for information, no matter how shocking it may be!
- Don’t give more information than what was asked for or assume more than what the question asked.