

Guidelines for Answering Sensitive Questions

As you review and prepare to answer youth questions about sensitive topics like sexual behavior and orientation, use the following guidelines to form answers that are accurate, appropriate and complete. Questions may be grouped into five broad categories, which of course, overlap:

1. Requests for Information

- a) If you know the answer, fine. If not, it's okay to say, "I don't know" and then refer the student to an appropriate source.
- b) Are there some value issues within the context of the question? If yes, make sure various points of view are presented.
- c) Is the question, although informational, one which you consider inappropriate for classroom discussion? Problems can be avoided if you have established group agreements in the context of the class, including an agreement such as: "All questions are valid. However, I will have to make the final decision about the appropriateness of each question for total class discussion. If you turn in a question anonymously which I choose not to answer, it is not because it is a bad question. I may feel that it is not of interest to all students or that I am not prepared to lead a class discussion around that issue. Please see me at the end of class if this ever happens so that I can try to answer your question privately."

2. "Am I Normal?" Questions

These questions generally focus on adolescent concerns about their bodies and the emotional and physical changes occurring in them.

- a) Validate their concerns, e.g., "Many young people worry that..." and provide information about what they can expect to happen during the adolescent years.
- b) Refer them to parents, clergy, family physician, community resources, or school counselor for further discussion, if appropriate.

3. Permission-Seeking Questions

These come in two common forms, and may be asking your permission to, or not to, participate in a particular behavior, e.g., "Is it normal to ...?" or "Did you ... when you were growing up?"

- a) Avoid the use of the word "normal" when answering questions. Normal for some is morally unacceptable for others. Present what is known medically, legally, etc. (the facts) and discuss the moral, religious and emotional implications, making sure all points of view are covered. Refer students to parents and clergy for discussion of moral/religious questions.



- b) Establish, in the context of class group agreements, an agreement related to discussion of personal behavior, such as: "No discussion of personal behavior during class." If and when you (the teacher) get a question about your personal behavior, you can remind students of this group agreement and redirect the discussion to one of the pros and cons (religious, moral, medical, emotional, legal, interpersonal, etc.) of the particular behavior in question. Again, refer students to parents and clergy for further discussion of moral/religious questions.

4. Shock Questions

- a) See 1.c: group agreement related to appropriate questions for classroom discussion.
- b) Sometimes the shock comes not from the content of the question, but the vocabulary used. You can reword the question to defuse it, especially if you have previously established a ground rule related to vocabulary, such as: "In this class I will be trying to balance two conflicting goals: I want to teach the proper vocabulary for body parts and functions, and I want to communicate with you. Sometimes you may not know the correct word for something you have a question about. Use whatever word you know to ask that question, and I will answer using the correct (acceptable) word."

5. Personal Beliefs

Teachers' opinions about how or whether to respond to these questions differ. Some feel it is important to respond, while others believe their role as teacher gives their response too much weight. If you share your opinion, emphasize that it is only one of many and recommend that students ask their parents about family values and beliefs. Avoid sharing information about personal sexual practices.

