Answering Sensitive Questions: Creating a Safe Space for Youth

Expanding Our Experience and Expertise: Implementing Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Programs
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This session’s objectives:

By the end of this session, participants will:

• Learn guidelines for answering sensitive questions related to sexuality;
• Practice answering young people’s questions about sensitive sexuality topics with their colleagues;
• Share challenging scenarios with colleagues and create strategies to address these scenarios; and
• Understand how the ability to answer sensitive questions creates a safe space for youth and creates a more effective facilitator
Who’s in the room?

- Direct service providers
- Managers/Administrators
- Others?
Types of Questions

1. Requests for Information
2. “Am I Normal?”
3. “Permission-seeking”
4. Shock Questions
5. Personal Beliefs
Requests for Information

• If you know the answer, great. If not, it’s okay to say “I don’t know”.

• Answer in an age-appropriate manner
  – Don’t give complicated answers; avoid technical jargon

• If the question contains values component, make sure various points of view are presented

• Refer to group agreements if inappropriate or problematic question
“Am I Normal?” Questions

• Validate their concerns
  – “Many young people worry that…”
  – “I get that question a lot”

• Refer to other resources as appropriate
  – Parents, clergy, family physician, school counselor, etc.
Permission-Seeking Questions

• “Is it normal to…”
  – Avoid use of the word “normal”
  – Stick to the facts
• “Did you…when you were my age?”
  – Redirect to group agreements
  – Establish boundaries related to answering personal questions
• Enforce universal values
  – Exploitation is wrong, responsibility is good, everyone deserves to be safe and respected, etc.
Shock Questions

• Reword question using medically accurate language
  – Establish ground rule about using proper vocabulary

• Refer to group agreements if inappropriate or problematic question
Personal Questions

• Establish boundaries ahead of time
  – Depending on scenario, it can be okay to answer
• If you do respond, present your view as one of many
• Share to build group cohesion or demonstrate empathy – never to meet your own needs or win favor with youth
• DON’T share information about personal sexual practices or behaviors
Practice!

• Pair with one other person
• Take turns playing the role of the facilitator and the role of the young person
  – DO: practice as though you are actually answering the question
  – DON’T: paraphrase “Well, I’d probably say something like…”
• Continue until both people have played both roles
Debrief

• Is the answer factually correct?
• Was anything left out?
• Would this answer be acceptable to the parents in your community? Why or why not?
General tips

• Buy yourself time
  – “That’s a great question.”
  – “Thanks for asking that.”
  – “A lot of people ask me that question.”

• Include many points of view in your answer
  – “For some…for others…for you”

• Use an anonymous question box

• Caution using the words “choose to have sex”
  – 7% of females report that their first sexual intercourse was non-voluntary, especially with older partner
General tips continued

• STOP, DROP and ROLL
  – Stop talking and think about the question you’ve been asked
  – Drop your opinions and personal judgments, values, etc.
  – Roll the question into a discussion topic for the group
    • “That’s a great question, I’d like to hear what you think…”
    • “Has anyone else been thinking about this and, if so, what are your thoughts?”

• Check for understanding
  – “Does that answer your question?”
General tips continued

• Be aware of your non-verbal communication
  – Body language can communicate distaste or disagreement

• If youth only consider one point of view, facilitator can introduce other ideas

• DO: laugh, turn red, stutter
  – It’s okay to have a reaction to questions, especially those intended to shock
  – You’re human! 😊
General tips continued

• “What happens…?” questions
  – Typically asked by younger adolescents
  – Consider physical and emotional consequences of these scenarios
Youth won’t remember every fact you communicate, but…

– They will remember if they felt comfortable, validated or reassured

– Convey positive sexual health attitudes through your words, tone of voice and facial expressions
Resources

Thank you!

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