

Everyone Is an Exception: Assumptions to Avoid in the Sex Education Classroom

Excerpted and Adapted from Mary M. Krueger, PhD, 1993.

(Because much of what Teen Talk does focuses on sexual health, it is important to reflect on the beliefs and assumptions about sex education. In this article the statistics are American and speaks more to their reality, nonetheless much of the information is applicable to the general Canadian landscape.)

Sex education is more effective when educators respect individuality and interact with youth in ways that make them feel unique and special. The following are some of the most common (and dangerous) assumptions that teachers of sex education hold about youth and suggestions about how to avoid them. If educators refrain from making these assumptions, youth feel that their individuality is being honoured and will be more willing to participate in activities.

Assumptions to Avoid

All youth come from traditional nuclear families.

This misconception is especially relevant to the sex education classroom, with its frequent references to and encouragement of family communication about sexuality. Educators who automatically refer to youths' families with such phrases as "mom and dad" deny the experience of many youth, as well as the realities of today.

Families do not consist solely of nuclear groupings of heterosexual married couples and their biological children. Youths' families may comprise such aggregations as single parents with children; married parents with children from the current and previous marriages; single or married parents with foster or adopted children; or cohabiting heterosexual or same-sex couples with biological, adopted or foster children.

All youth are heterosexual.

Ten percent of youth are not heterosexual (Martin, 1982). It is common, yet potentially alienating to LGBT2SQ+ youth, to make unthinking references to

male's "girlfriends" or female's "boyfriends." Such practices send a clear message to gay youth that their sexual orientation is, at best, to be hidden and, at worst, abnormal and shameful.

In addition to promoting inclusive language with regard to sexual orientation, the field of sex education has an ethical obligation to condemn homophobic harassment and intimidation of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. As one of society's most potent agents of socialization, schools are duty-bound to take a stand against hatred and ignorance and to allow all students to learn in a safe and nurturing environment. The denial of such an environment has contributed to a suicide rate for gay and lesbian teenagers that is two to six times higher than that of heterosexual teens (Contemporary Sexuality, 1989).

Gay and lesbian teens are also more likely than their heterosexual peers to drop out of school, become runaways, and abuse alcohol and other drugs (Pender, 1990). Such self-destructive behaviour is often the result of feeling overwhelmed by the challenge of learning to like oneself in a hostile world. Much of the self-doubt and inner turmoil that often diminish the quality of life can be averted by early and consistent messages of acceptance from adult authority figures. Educators are in a position to take significant steps toward that end.

All youth are sexually involved.

Many youth are not sexually involved. In certain age groups and in many parts of the country, youth who are not sexually involved are in the majority. However, they (like us) have been profoundly influenced by television, films, and the press, all of which send the message that "everyone" is having sex.

Because adolescence is a stage of life that so strongly emphasizes conformity, young people may respond to these societal pressures by feeling that virginity is something to be hidden: a source of embarrassment. In an environment that bombards teens at every turn with incentives to become involved with sex, the decision to resist when one wants above all else to "fit in" is difficult indeed.

In sessions that address sexual behaviour, educators may unwittingly reflect this "of-course-all-teenagers-are-having-sex" mind set by, for example, phrasing references in the second person ("when you have sex, you need to be

responsible”).

Training oneself to speak almost exclusively in the third person when presenting lessons will allow students who choose abstinence to feel supported, normal and comfortable with their decision (and respected for their courage in resisting peer pressure and acting in accordance with their own values).

No youth are sexually involved.

Because youth may be becoming involved in sexual behaviour with partners, they need the skills to clarify their decisions and to protect their health. Surveys of American (and Canadian) teenagers have found that average age of first intercourse is 16. More than half of high school students have had intercourse at least once, and many participate in intercourse on a regular basis (Bigler, 1989).

Educators best serve the needs of sexually involved youth by helping them to clarify their decisions and improve their decision making skills, rather than making decisions for them; by educating them regarding the risks of early sexual activity, without excluding the positive aspects of human sexual expression; and by expressing concern for their students’ welfare, rather than standing in judgment of their behaviour.

All sexual involvements are consensual.

It is estimated that 27% of girls and 16% of boys are sexually abused before they reach age 18 (Calderone and Johnson, 1985). Among adolescents, sexual abuse is the most common form of child abuse (Eckenrode et al., 1988). In addition, 50% of all rape victims are between the ages of 10 and 19, with half of that number under the age of 16 (Greydanus and Shearin, 1990). Indeed, young people are being sexually exploited with frightening regularity.

Perhaps the best service an educator can provide youth who have been sexually victimized is to be approachable, and certainly a sex education class offers a natural venue for students to approach a caring adult with questions and concerns. Among adolescents who have been sexually abused, 27% disclose the fact on their own initiative - a figure that tells us that few adults are diligently looking for indicators of abuse or assertively seeking information from survivors (Warshaw, 1988). By remembering that some

youth's sexual experience is, in fact, rape experience, education can help by connection youth with support services.

Youth who are "sexually active" are having intercourse.

A large number of young people are participating in sexual behaviours other than penis/vagina intercourse. The most common expression of sexuality among teens is masturbation (Sladkin, 1985). Thus, discussions of sexual behaviour that focus only on the risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infection (STI) transmission exclude those students who are "sexually active" but not involved in behaviour that puts them at risk.

Other non intercourse behaviours, such as oral sex, partner masturbation, variations of "petting," and even activities such as kissing and hugging are part of the sexual repertoire of most adolescents. Ninety-seven percent of teenagers have kissed someone by the time they are 15; by age 13, 25% of girls have had their breasts touched by a partner. At least 40% of teens participate in partner masturbation (Coles and Stokes, 1985). Overall, 69% of young people who are sexually involved with a partner include oral sex in their behaviour (Newcomer and Udry, 1985).

When adults deny the full range of human sexual expression and regard only intercourse as "sex," youth are denied an important education opportunity. Many young people believe that there is no acceptable form of sexual behaviour other than intercourse (Sladkin, 1985). Operating under that assumption, youth may put themselves at risk for unwanted pregnancy or STIs by engaging in intercourse when less risky sexual behaviour would have been equally fulfilling. Educators who help young people learn that intercourse is not required to enjoy one's sexuality not only broaden their youth's horizons, but also impart knowledge that may help lower rates of adolescent pregnancy and STI by lowering the rate of adolescent intercourse.

As educators dealing with topics of an especially personal and sensitive nature, let us remember that, in one way or another, each youth is an exception. Let us celebrate and respect the uniqueness of our youth because, when we do, we earn for ourselves the right to expect the same kind of treatment in return.

(Source: FLEducator, fall 1993.)