

Checking in with your Values & Assumptionsⁱ

Excerpted from *Beyond the Basics: A Resource for Educators on Sexuality and Sexual Health*

Before facilitating discussions on sexuality and sexual health, it is helpful to reflect on your own values and to check in with your own assumptions about who is in your group, the families that students come from, and how students feel about themselves and relate to their own sexuality. Checking in with your own assumptions allows you to be more responsive to the discussions and dynamics of your classroom as they happen, rather than assume and anticipate what will happen.

What does it mean to 'check in' with your assumptions?

Everyone has assumptions. It is not negative or positive to have assumptions; however, assumptions can cause negative, harmful impacts to those around you if left unchecked. To check in with your assumptions is a process of self-examination. It involves recognizing that while something may be the 'norm' or true for you, it may not be the case for everyone else. It is also a process of making space between the assumptions you hold and how you choose to (or not to) express them. While the space is made, it becomes easier to reframe an assumed 'fact' that is rooted in your experience into a respectful/appropriate discussion.

Check in with your assumptions...

About Families

- Some youth live with their family, others live with their guardians, or in a foster home or shelter.
- Some youth have one parent/guardian, some have two, some have more.
- Some families have parents who identify as 2STLGBQ+.
- Some youth come from a divorced family and may or may not have one or more step families.
- Some youth have parents.
- Some youth are not biologically related to either parent.

- Some youth are a result of assisted reproduction technologies.
- Some youth come from a loving family; some do not.
- Some youth come from an emotionally, physically, or sexually abusive home.
- Some youth have diverse cultural and religious beliefs, which aren't necessarily apparent.
- Some youth have little or no personal freedom
- Some youth have little or no supervision at home.
- Some youth are unable to discuss sexuality and sexual health with their families.
- Some youth openly discuss sexuality and sexual health with their families.

About Bodies

- Some youth have little or no idea about how the body works, including sexual functioning.
- Genitals are diverse and most do not look like those depicted in textbooks and diagrams.
- Some youth have ambiguous genitals; some are intersex.
- Some penises are circumcised; some are not. Some vulvas have been cut; some have not (it may have included the labia and/or the clitoris).
- Genitals do not indicate what someone's gender identity is; someone's gender identity does not dictate what genitals they may have.
- Some youth who appear very large or small are entirely comfortable with their bodies.
- Some youth have visible disabilities; some have invisible disabilities.

About Gender and Gender Identity

- Some youth are questioning their gender and this may not be physically apparent.
- Some youth will identify with a gender other than the sex they were assigned at birth.
- Many youth will identify as women/girls and men/boys; some youth will not. Gender is an internal sense and is not binary (e.g., trans, androgynous, gender fluid, and an endless amount more).
- Assigned sex is not the same as gender identity.

- Some people might use different words for their bodies that more comfortably reflect their gender identity.
- We cannot make assumptions about a student's gender identity based on the way they look, dress, act, or by their name.
- Some youth have rigid ideas about gender regarding roles, norms, rights, responsibilities, and potential aspirations.

About Sexual Orientation

- Some youth identify as straight, or heterosexual. Some youth identify as lesbian, gay, and/or bisexual; some as queer; some as Two-Spirit; some as pansexual; some as asexual; and some may be questioning their sexual orientation. Sometimes these identities get shorthand as 2STLGBQ+ and queer.
- Some 2STLGBQ+ youth do not reveal their sexual orientation to others, including family and friends.
- We cannot make assumptions about a youth's sexual orientation based on the way they look, dress, or act.
- Youth who are 'out' or who are perceived to be 2STLGBQ+ may not feel or be safe in their school. We cannot assume whether a student is 'out' by the way they look, dress, or act.
- Sexual orientation, like gender identity, is an identity that must be self-defined and self-disclosed.
- You cannot assume a youth's sexual orientation.

About Sexual Activity

- Some youth are sexually active; some are not. Some youth who are not currently sexually active have been sexually active in the past.
- Sexually active describes a wide variety of experiences. It includes masturbation and goes beyond vaginal, oral, and/or anal sex.
- Some youth may have experienced pregnancy and you cannot tell this only based on who decided to parent.
- Some youth have experienced non-consensual sexual activity (e.g., sexual abuse, sexual assault, and sexual coercion).
- There are limitless ways that survivors react to, cope, and deal with experiences of sexual violence.

Guidelines for Answering Questions about Sexualityⁱⁱ

Adapted from *Our Whole Lives: Lifespan Sexuality Education*

When answering anonymous questions about sexuality, keep in mind the development/maturity level, cultural background, and other visible or invisible diversity characteristics of the group. Also, do your best to identify the kind of question that is being asked and formulate your answer accordingly.

Information Questions

- Be honest. If you don't know the answer, say so; find the answer and report it at the next session. It's also okay to acknowledge when a question is a bit awkward. Come across as a real human being.
- Answer questions age-appropriately for pre-adolescent children. Give simple, fairly concrete answers. Don't give too much unnecessary information. Avoid jargon, use plain language.
- If you aren't sure what a youth is asking, you might ask, "What have you already heard about that?" or "Are you asking...?"
- Pre- and early adolescents ask a lot of "What happens" questions; for example, "What happens when you get your period?" Be sure to address both the physical changes as well as the emotional changes.
- After answering a question, ask, "Does that answer your question?" or "Was there more you wanted to know?"

"Am I Normal?" Questions

- These questions are typically disguised, so be on the lookout for them. Sometimes they are posed as general information questions or as "I have a friend who..." questions.
- Answer in a reassuring and comforting tone. Be sure to discuss the range of normal and individual differences.
- Never imply in a group setting that you've guessed that you're answering an "Am I normal?" question.

Value-Laden Questions

- Do not impose your own personal values on the group or be judgmental.
- Adhere to values of respect, responsibility, and inclusion.
- When controversial issues come up, always discuss the range of values. If participants voice only one point of view, it's your role to bring up other points of view (including those that may be counter to your own point of view).
- When a value-laden question refers to something "my parents told me," be sensitive to those beliefs and be careful not to criticize them, even if they are disrespectful. However, go on to depersonalize and say, "While that is a commonly held value, there are a range of values on that topic. For example, others believe that..."
- Encourage youth to discuss values with important people in their lives such as family, teachers, and peers.

Shock-Value Questions

- The point of a shock-value question is to shock you, knock you off balance, or embarrass you. The goal is not to get a real answer to a question. So, you must become 'unshockable.' If you are unshockable, the questioner will eventually stop the behaviour because it is unsatisfying. Your ability to be unshockable will increase with experience.
- Feel free to identify shock-value questions for what they are without missing a beat...and then move on.
- Remember, shocking questions are not always shock-value questions. What young people genuinely want to know about can sometimes be shocking to adults. Questions about explicit sexual behaviour can fall into this category and they deserve an honest answer. For example, "What is a blowjob?" can be answered with, "When someone puts their mouth on a penis to feel good."

Questions about Explicit Sexual Behaviour

- Answer explicit questions in a simple, honest, and sexuality-positive manner. The goal is to be straightforward and clear without being overly descriptive or provocative.

- Describe sexual behaviours in the context of respect, responsibility, and inclusion.
- Avoid using language that conveys the idea that sex = sexual intercourse.

General Guidelines

- Be accepting of questions. Convey the idea that all questions are okay to ask in whatever language youth already know. They may use slang or colloquial language because they do not know the scientific words. If they use slang you don't recognize, ask to be educated. Even if the question is anonymous, you can ask the group what the words mean. Use scientific language linked to the slang words in your answer. For example, "Flicking the bean is another way to say masturbation."
- Be aware that nonverbal communication can speak volumes; it can indicate delight and acceptance or distaste and disagreement. So, watch what you say nonverbally—work to avoid nonverbal cues such as wrinkled brows or frowns that can indicate judgment, disapproval, etc.
- Turn 'feeling' or opinion questions back to the group so that they can discuss their own ideas.
- Use the third person (people, folks, etc.) rather than the pronoun 'you' when answering very personal questions (from the question box) in a group setting.
- Use inclusive language, e.g., speak in gender neutral and sexual orientation neutral terms as much as possible. Use terms like partner, person, or someone rather than girlfriend, boyfriend, man, woman, etc. Don't give answers that are sexist and heterosexist.
- Keep the question box alive. Don't forget about it, because it's an excellent tool for making sure you address what youth really want to know.
- Don't forget the 'music.' The emotional content of your answer is as important as the informational content.

ⁱZook, M., Chabot, F., Neron, B., & Chan, K. B. K. (2017). *Beyond the basics: A resource for educators on sexuality and sexual health*. Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights.

ⁱⁱWilson, P.M. (2014). *Our Whole Lives. Sexuality Education for Grades 7-9*. Second Edition.