

Recognizing and Responding to Difficult Questions

Content Questions

Based on fact or essential new knowledge, the student would have little or no basis for figuring these out on his/her own.

Example: “Do females have a urethra like males do?”

Suggested Response: If the material has been covered, defer to another student, e.g., “Does anyone recall...?” Otherwise, just answer it.

Questions Requiring Critical Thinking

Students have the information to answer these questions, but need guidance in assembling their knowledge.

Example: “How many times a year does a female ovulate?”

Response: Walk the student through their existing knowledge, e.g., “Does anyone remember what happens approximately 14 days after a female ovulates?” (Her period begins.) “How often does a female have her period?” (Once a month.) “So how many times does a woman ovulate in twelve months or one year?” (12 times)

Encourage critical thinking in the classroom by moving beyond questions which require a yes/no answer or simple factual response.

- “Describe how you could...”
- “What would be several different ways to...?”
- “Name one strength and one weakness of...”
- “In your own life, what are some ways you could...”

Questions not Authorized For Instruction

The governing board has not authorized these topics to be included in the curriculum; in-class or out-of-class instruction is not authorized, either from the classroom teacher or the counselor or the school nurse.

Example: “How does a lesbian have sexual intercourse?”

Response: “That’s a fair question, but it’s not part of this curriculum. I suggest you ask your mom (or dad), or a respected older adult in your family, or doctor, youth pastor (etc.); or you could call the Teen Hotline (provide telephone number) and discuss it with them.”

Research Questions

Students may make statements which are not consistent with established facts, or which demonstrate a lack of understanding about science.

Example 1: “I heard that waiting to have sex until you are in your twenties actually causes cancer.”

Response 1: “I’d need to see that source (can you bring it in?). That is inconsistent with all the published studies I’ve ever seen on cancer, or delaying intercourse.”

Example 2: “Can you prove that sex education doesn’t just cause more sex?”

Response 2: “Science documents observable phenomena. All I can say is that, in the many professional, peer-reviewed research articles on the impact of sexual health education, instruction has not been found to cause earlier initiation of sex or more sexual activity in teens.”

Questions Which Reflect Religious Beliefs

Students may interject their own religious beliefs or teachings into a question or statement. It is appropriate to acknowledge the diversity of beliefs, including the role that religion plays in people’s lives; however, it is not appropriate to establish/advocate religious beliefs in the public school classroom. Rather, reflect on these comments from a public health perspective.

Example 1: “Is it a sin to have sexual intercourse before marriage.”

Response: “A number of people have strong beliefs about this topic. *From a public health perspective*, what would be the outcome of people not having intercourse until they were in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship?”

Example 2: “Is it a sin to masturbate?”

Response: “A number of people may have strong religious beliefs on this topic. From a public health perspective, we know that masturbating (rubbing or massaging genitals for sexual stimulation) is a fairly common practice, and causes no physical harm unless done excessively.

Personal Questions

Asking personal questions is a violation of “ground rules” in most classrooms. Use the **FS-FO-FY** response (see below).

Example: “Did you have sexual intercourse when you were a teenager?”

Response: When I was younger, **For Some** it was time to explore their sexuality and be sexually active; but **For Others**, it was their choice not to have sexual relations until they were married; the question is, what’s best **For You** now and in the

**Seeking
Permission**

Students may mask seeking permission to engage in a risky behavior within a biomedical question. The teacher will need to answer *two questions*.

Example: “Is it okay to have oral sex to protect your virginity?”

Response: “From a sex education standpoint, it is still sexual intercourse when a person’s mouth comes in contact with another person’s genitals; *and if you’re asking for my permission to do this, the answer is no!*”

Cry For Help

A student may mask a cry for help or assistance within a seemingly biomedical question. The biomedical question should be answered publicly. *However, the implied request for help requires a confidential one-to-one response.*

Example: “Is it safe for a girl to have sex with an older man as long as he’s sterile?”

Response: “Just because a man says he is sterile does not mean that he is free from HIV or other STDs, or that he actually is sterile.” (IMPORTANT NOTE: The teacher should later take the student aside and inquire whether the question was adequately answered. The teacher may inquire if anything else needs to be discussed. Because teachers are obligated to *help their students get help* if it appears that the student is being harmed by someone, the teacher may choose to file a report of suspected child abuse with local law enforcement or social services.)