

Guidelines for Answering Questions About Sexuality

When answering questions about sexuality, keep in mind the age, maturity level, gender, cultural background, and other visible and invisible diversity characteristics of the questioner and the group. In addition, do your best to identify the kind of question that is being asked and formulate your answer accordingly.

“INFORMATION” QUESTIONS

1. Answer information questions age-appropriately. Pre and early adolescents need simpler, more concrete answers.
2. Don't give too much, unnecessary information. Try to give simple answers that avoid technical jargon.
3. If you aren't sure what the young person is really asking, you might ask, “What have you already heard about that?”; “Are you asking...?”; “Let me see if I understand exactly what you are asking about.”
4. After answering the question, you might ask, “Does that answer your question?”; “Tell me what you think I just said.” or, “What are the key points I just made?”
5. Be honest. If you don't know the answer or don't have a good answer, say so. Tell the group you will find the answer and get back to them or provide resources so they can find the answer.

“AM I NORMAL?” QUESTIONS

1. Try to recognize these questions. Sometimes they are disguised as general information questions or “I have a friend who...” questions.
2. Use a reassuring and comforting tone.
3. Discuss the range of normal and individual differences.
4. In a group/classroom context never imply that you think you are answering an “am I normal” question.
5. In an individual context, after answering the question, you might ask, “Do you know anyone for whom this is an issue/problem/question?”

“VALUE-LADEN” QUESTIONS

1. Be sure to reinforce universal values (those things more than 90% of society agree with, i.e., exploitation is wrong, responsibility is good, etc.).
2. Discuss the range of values in society regarding the issue including your religion's point of view when appropriate.

3. When participants ask informational questions about value-laden issues, it is appropriate to discuss the value components. However, it is best to answer with the factual parts first and then deal with the values portion.
4. Encourage young people to discuss values with their parents including their faith's perspective.

“PERMISSION-SEEKING” QUESTIONS

1. Try to recognize these questions. They are often disguised as “am I normal” or “personal” questions.
2. The point of a permission-seeking question is usually to validate or get permission for behavior or experimentation not to get information.
3. Address the factual information, the values-components and the psychological/emotional components.
4. Ask the individual how he/she feels about the issue raised in the answer.
5. Remind everyone that each person has to live his/her own decisions/behaviors.

“SHOCK VALUE” QUESTIONS

1. The point of the shock value question is to shock you, knock you off balance, embarrass you, etc.; the point is NOT to elicit information.
2. Therefore, try not to let shock value questions shock you; that simply reinforces participants desire to embarrass you.
3. However, SHOCKING questions are not necessarily for “shock value.” Shocking questions may well be “information” or “am I normal” questions and should be answered accordingly.
4. Answer shock questions as if they were informational questions. Replace slang with medically accurate terms. Explain any factual part of the question. By answering the question as if it were serious (even if it is not) you will shock the inquirer and show the rest of the group that you are serious about being a resource for difficult information.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

1. It is useful to establish IN ADVANCE a set of ground rules related to questions about sexuality.
2. Whenever appropriate, validate the question (“That’s a really good question, I’m glad you asked.” Or “Lots of people are curious about that.”). Never laugh at, make light of or make jokes about a question.
3. Allow youth to ask questions in their own language. They may use slang or colloquial language because they do not know the scientific words. If they use slang, make sure that check out the meaning. When you answer the question, use scientific language that is age appropriate but link it back to the slang (For example, “‘A boner’ or erection occurs when...”).
4. Be aware of your own nonverbal communication. It can communicate discomfort, distaste or disagreement, etc.

5. Try to answer questions in a non-judgmental way, just because a child is asking about sexual behavior, does not mean the child is engaging in it.
6. It is OK to let individuals and groups know that a question is a bit embarrassing or hard to answer. Tell them that you need a little time to think about the best way to answer it and that you will get back to them. Then do so.
7. Respect and preserve trust and confidence. HOWEVER, remember that there are times when you must, by law, violate confidentiality (for example, sexual or physical abuse). Ideally, young people should know the limits of your ability to keep things confidential BEFORE they being talking with/questioning you. If a confidence is shared with you that you are not able to keep, it is imperative that you explain/talk about this with the young person before you break the confidence.