

# Rights, Respect, Responsibility

A K-12 SEXUALITY EDUCATION CURRICULUM

## **Teacher's Guide**

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## About Advocates for Youth

Advocates for Youth partners with youth leaders, adult allies, and youth-serving organizations to advocate for policies and champion programs that recognize young people's rights to honest sexual health information; accessible, confidential, and affordable sexual health services; and the resources and opportunities necessary to create sexual health equity for all youth.

Our Vision: **Rights, Respect, Responsibility**

Advocates for Youth envisions a society that views sexuality as normal and healthy and treats young people as a valuable resource.

The core values of Rights. Respect. Responsibility. (3Rs) animate this vision:

**RIGHTS:** Youth have the inalienable right to honest sexual health information; confidential, consensual sexual health services; and equitable opportunities to reach their full potential.

**RESPECT:** Youth deserve respect. Valuing young people means authentically involving them in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs and policies that affect their health and well-being.

**RESPONSIBILITY:** Society has the responsibility to provide young people with all of the tools they need to safeguard their sexual health, and young people have the responsibility to protect themselves.

## About the Authors

Author **Elizabeth Schroeder, EdD, MSW**, is an award-winning educator, trainer, and author in the areas of sexuality education pedagogy, LGBTQ issues, working with adolescent boys, and using technology and social media to teach young people about sexuality. She has provided consultation to and direct education and training for schools, parent groups, and youth-serving organizations in countries around the world for more than 20 years, most recently creating the first-ever online sexuality education course for UNFPA and UNESCO to train teachers in East and Southern Africa.

Dr. Schroeder is the former executive director of Answer, a national sexuality education organization serving young people and the adults who teach them. She was previously the associate vice president of education and training at Planned Parenthood of New York City and the manager of education and special projects at Planned Parenthood Federation of America. She was part of

the core team that developed the National Sexuality Education Standards: Core Content and Skills K-12 (2011) and National Teacher Preparation Standards for Sexuality Education, (Journal of School Health, 2014). The co-founding editor of the American Journal of Sexuality Education, Dr. Schroeder has authored or edited numerous publications, including the four-part book series, *Sexuality Education: Past, Present and Future* with Dr. Judy Kuriansky and *Sexuality Education: Theory and Practice* with Dr. Clint Bruess. She is a frequently sought-out spokesperson and blogger in the news media on issues relating to sexual health education and youth development, including CNN, HuffPo Live, and various NPR affiliates. Dr. Schroeder, whose website is [www.drschroe.com](http://www.drschroe.com), holds a Doctorate of Education in Human Sexuality Education from Widener University and an MSW from NYU.

Author **Eva S. Goldfarb, PhD**, Professor of Public Health at Montclair State University, is a nationally recognized expert in the field of sexuality education. For the past twenty-five years, Dr. Goldfarb has developed and led sexuality education and sexual health programs with youth, parents, educators, and other professionals and has trained teachers across the country. She has also presented at conferences worldwide in the area of sexuality education and sexual health. Dr. Goldfarb has published widely including her co-authorship, as a member of the national advisory board that developed the *National Sexuality Education Standards: Core Content and Skills K-12 (2011)* and *National Teacher Preparation Standards for Sexuality Education (Journal of School Health, 2014)*.

In addition to having published numerous peer-reviewed articles in the area of sexuality education, pedagogy, and evaluation, Goldfarb is co-author with Dr. Elizabeth Casparian, of the groundbreaking curricula *Our Whole Lives: Sexuality Education: Grades 10-12* and *Our Whole Lives: Sexuality Education: Grades 4-6*; is co-author and co-editor of *Filling the Gaps: Hard-To-Teach Topics in Human Sexuality*; and co-author with Dr. Elizabeth Schroeder, of *Making Smarter Choices About Sex*, a curriculum for middle-school adolescents, as well as *Being Out, Staying Safe*, the first HIV/STD prevention curriculum specifically geared for lesbian, gay, and bisexual teens. Her work has been featured in *Sexuality and Our Faith*, on *MTV.com*, in *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, *Self*, *Family Circle*, and *The New York Times*.

Dr. Goldfarb holds a PhD in Human Sexuality Education from the University of Pennsylvania, a Masters Degree in Communications from the Annenberg School for Communication at the

University of Pennsylvania, and a Doctor of Humane Letters (honorary) from the Starr King School for the Ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Association. She completed her post-doctoral fellowship at The HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies at Columbia University and the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

Author **Nora Gelperin, MEd**, is the Director of Sexuality Education and Training at Advocates for Youth. Nora is one of the national technical assistance providers on the Working to Institutionalize Sex Ed (WISE) initiative and has been a member of the Future of Sex Education (FoSE) initiative and was part of the core team that developed the National Sexuality Education Standards: Core Content and Skills K-12 (2011) and National Teacher Preparation Standards for Sexuality Education, (*Journal of School Health*, 2014). She has more than twenty years of experience providing sexuality education to youth and professional development to school health and education professionals. Prior to joining Advocates, she was the Director of Training at Answer, where she founded the Training Institute in Sexual Health Education (TISHE) and Answer's online professional development workshops. She was a community educator with Planned Parenthood of the Great Northwest and Planned Parenthood of Greater Northern New Jersey. Nora holds a Masters in School Health Education from Temple University, was awarded a Mary Lee Tatum Award from Planned Parenthood Leaders in Education (APPLE), and has been named a 2014 Fellow of the American School Health Association.

## About Youth Reviewers

Advocates for Youth gratefully acknowledges the feedback from our youth activists which improved and refined this curriculum. The youth reviewers were:

Thea Eigo, *Young Women of Color Leadership Council*

Eshani Dixit, *Young Women of Color Leadership Council*

Patty Fernandez Piñeros, *Young Women of Color Leadership Council*

Marcella Morales Lugo, *Young Women of Color Leadership Council*

Adrian Nava, *Youth Resource*

Sean Sylve, *Louisiana Youth for Truth*

## 3Rs Dedication

This curriculum is dedicated to the memory of our dear colleague Barbara Huberman, Advocates' Director of Education and Outreach from 1994 to 2014.

Barbara had a tremendous influence on our collective work here at Advocates for Youth. It was she who coined the term Rights. Respect. Responsibility. to reflect findings from her decade-long efforts coordinating the European Study Tour. Hundreds of youth-serving professionals participated, traveling to the Netherlands, France, and Germany in an effort to better understand the values, attitudes, policies, and programs that helped young people in northern Europe have much better sexual health outcomes than their peers in the United States. It is through this work that Barb helped Advocates to shape the values that underpin our mission to this day.

We honor Barb's vision and leadership by creating the Rights, Respect, Responsibility, K-12 Sexuality Education Curriculum and ensuring it is free for all to access so that money will no longer stand as a barrier to young people receiving the high quality sexuality education to which they have a right.

Dear Educator:

Advocates for Youth envisions a society in which all young people are valued, respected, and treated with dignity; sexuality is accepted as a healthy part of being human; and youth sexual development is recognized as normal. In such a world, all youth and young adults would be celebrated for who they are and provided with the economic, educational, and social opportunities to reach their full potential. Society would recognize young people's rights to honest sexual health education and provide confidential and affordable access to culturally appropriate, youth-friendly sexual health education and services, so that all young people would have the opportunity to lead sexually healthy lives and to become sexually healthy adults.

Quality education about sex, sexuality, and relationships is a vital step toward realizing this vision.

Thirty years of public health research shows us that comprehensive sex education provides young people with the essential information and skills they need to reduce their risk for unwanted pregnancy and STDs, including HIV. When done well, it can also help young people navigate puberty, understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, assist them to develop a healthy body image, promote good communication and decision-making skills, and teach them to navigate the health care system.

Quality sexuality education goes beyond the prevention of unwanted pregnancy and disease to something much more lofty—it can provide a life-long foundation for sexual health.

Sexuality education can help shift a culture of fear, shame, and denial and in its stead begin to create one in which sexuality is accepted as a normal, natural, healthy part of being alive, of being human; one in which young people are valued and celebrated for who they are, no matter their sexual orientation or gender identity or expression; and one in which sexual development is recognized as an important aspect of childhood and adolescence, and education about sexuality is valued over the promotion of ignorance.

***Rights, Respect, Responsibility: A K-12 Sexuality Education Curriculum*** unites decades of research and lessons learned with a clear vision for the future of sexuality education.

More than 20 years ago, Advocates for Youth first sought to provide schools and communities with a curriculum for teaching students about growth and development, sexual and reproductive health, and healthy relationships. Life Planning Education and When I'm Grown, Advocates' groundbreaking curricula first introduced in 1994, gave educators tools to lay the groundwork for good sexual health throughout students' lifetimes.

Over the next two decades, the climate around sexuality education in the United States altered. Even as more and more research emerged affirming the effectiveness of programs which teach young people about abstinence as well as contraception and condoms, abstinence-only programs began to dominate the sexuality education landscape, with more than \$1 billion in funds allocated for these ineffective and often fear- and shame-based programs. Meanwhile, even effective, medically accurate programs tended to focus on disease and pregnancy prevention rather than preparing young people with all the information they need about growth and development, sex and sexuality, and healthy relationships. And too often, programs were not culturally relevant or neglected the needs of LGBT youth.

In 2012, the Future of Sex Education Initiative, of which Advocates for Youth is a founding member, along with Answer and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), created the *National Sexuality Education Standards: Core Content*

*and Skills, K-12*. The goal of the National Sexuality Education Standards is to provide clear, consistent, and straightforward guidance on the *essential minimum, core content* for sexuality education that is developmentally and age-appropriate for students in grades K-12. As school districts around the nation began adopting the standards, it became clear that there was a need for a curriculum available to help schools meet the standards.

Advocates for Youth undertook a new curriculum: one that takes the easy-to-use and thoughtful approach of its popular Life Planning Education curriculum, pairs it with updated information and adherence to the National Sexuality Education Standards, to create 80 new lesson plans.

The new ***Rights, Respect, Responsibility*** continues the tradition of evidence-informed, easily-adaptable lesson plans, tailored for a new generation. It builds on 30 years of research into effective sexuality education programs, while respecting young people's right to the information they need to protect their health and make responsible decisions. It follows the National Sexuality Education Standards for what students should learn and be able to do at each grade level, and it is inclusive of learners of all genders and sexual orientations

This volume of ***Rights, Respect, Responsibility*** is intended for use with students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. Its lessons are age-appropriate, beginning with basic lessons about friendship and safety, and introducing more complex concepts as students age.

We hope that using ***Rights, Respect, Responsibility*** will be an informative and fulfilling experience for both you and your students.

Sincerely,

Debra Hauser, MPH  
President, Advocates for Youth

## Values and Assumptions

Rather than attempting to be “values-free,” **Rights, Respect, Responsibility** consciously embraces a set of values that are widely accepted in our society. It is important for teachers and health professionals to be aware of the curriculum’s point of view in order to be able to communicate its underlying values not only to students, but also to parents, media, current and potential funders, and other interested individuals.

The following values should be stressed implicitly and, when appropriate, explicitly whenever possible:

- Parents/caregivers are the primary sexuality educators of their children. School districts and community-based organizations should function as partners with parents/caregivers in providing sexuality education. Together, these institutions have the responsibility to provide young people with honest, age-appropriate sexuality education.
- Sexuality is a natural and healthy part of being human.
- At every stage of their development, children have the right to age-appropriate information about health, sexuality, and relationships.
- Every person has dignity and worth and deserves respect. Diversity in gender, identity, race, religion, culture, and sexual orientation should be celebrated.
- It is wrong to use psychological pressure, fear, or physical force to make people do things without their consent.
- People are responsible for their own behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors.
- Cisgender boys and men are often demonized or simply ignored when it comes to sexuality education. But boys aren’t the bad guys. **In fact, no one is.** Normalizing *everyone’s* right and ability to make positive choices about sexuality, sex, and relationships, regardless of what their peers are doing – regardless of their gender or the gender of their partners – can send a powerful message to all students.
- Open communication is an important part of maintaining healthy relationships.
- It is good for young people to be able to talk openly and comfortably about sexuality issues with their parents/caregivers, peers, trusted adults and, in the future, romantic partners.
- Relationships should never be coercive or exploitative, but instead should be based on mutual respect.
- It is normal to have sexual feelings; however, feelings should not always be acted upon.
- Until a teen is old enough to act responsibly and protect themselves and their partners, it is healthiest to seek ways other than vaginal, oral, or anal sexual intercourse to express their romantic and sexual feelings.
- Young people have the responsibility to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted disease by abstaining from risky behavior or using effective contraception and/or condoms.

*Will Power/Wont Power. A Sexuality Program for Girls Ages 12-14, New York, NY: Girls’ Inc., 1988. Page partly reprinted with permission.*

### STUDENT BILL OF RIGHTS

Students have the right to:

- Ask any questions they have about issues such as puberty, sex, reproduction, and relationships
- Receive complete, age-appropriate, and medically accurate information about their bodies
- Explore issues that interest them related to their sexual development
- Develop the skills necessary to form healthy friendships, and later healthy romantic partnerships as they grow
- Have support from caring adults who respect, affirm, and celebrate them for who they are.



## Rationale for this Curriculum

While many sexuality education materials have addressed the needs of adolescents, Advocates for Youth realized that such education must begin much earlier. Learning about good communication, safety in relationships, and growth and development lays a foundation that can support healthy relationships and healthy behaviors throughout a person's lifetime. This K-12 curriculum, therefore, is a collection of lesson plans on a wide range of topics including: self-understanding, family, growth and development, friendship, sexuality, life skills, and health promotion.

### EVIDENCE UNDERLYING THIS CURRICULUM (EVIDENCE-INFORMED)

**Rights, Respect, Responsibility** is a curriculum fully aligned with the National Sexuality Education Standards. The curriculum seeks to address both the functional knowledge related to sexuality and the specific skills necessary to adopt healthy behaviors. **Rights, Respect, Responsibility** reflects the tenets of social learning theory, social cognitive theory, and the social ecological model of prevention. From social learning theory, which recognizes that “learning occurs not merely within the learner but also in a particular social context,” there are several key concepts addressed within **Rights, Respect, Responsibility**, including:

**Personalization.** The ability of students to perceive the core content and skills as relevant to their lives increases the likelihood that they will both learn and retain them. Ensuring that students see themselves represented in the materials and learning activities used can assist in furthering personalization.

**Susceptibility.** It is widely understood that many young people do not perceive that they are susceptible to the risks of certain behaviors, including sexual activity. Learning activities should encourage students to assess the relative risks of various behaviors, without exaggeration, to highlight their susceptibility to the potential negative outcomes of those behaviors.

**Self-Efficacy.** Even if students believe they are susceptible, they may not believe they can do anything to reduce their level of risk. Helping students overcome misinformation and develop confidence by practicing skills necessary to manage risk are key to a successful sexuality education curriculum.

**Social Norms.** Given that middle and high school students are highly influenced by their peers,

the perception of what other students are, or are not, doing influences their behavior. Debunking perceptions and highlighting positive behaviors among teens (i.e., the majority of teens are abstinent in middle school and early high school and when they first engage in sexual intercourse many use condoms) can further the adoption of health-positive behaviors.

**Skills.** Mastery of functional knowledge is necessary but not sufficient to influence behaviors. Skill development is critical to a student's ability to apply core content to their lives.

In addition to social learning theory, social cognitive theory (SCT) is reflected throughout the National **Rights, Respect, Responsibility**. Like social learning theory, SCT emphasizes self-efficacy, but adds in the motivation of the learners and an emphasis on the affective or emotional learning domain, an invaluable component of learning about human sexuality.

Finally, the social ecological model of prevention also informed the development of this curriculum. This model focuses on individual, interpersonal, community, and society influences and the role of these influences on people over time. Developmentally, the core content and skills for kindergarten and early elementary focus on the individual student and their immediate surroundings (e.g., their family). At the middle and high school levels, core content and skills focus on the expanding world of students that includes their friends and other peers, the media, society, and cultural influences.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Doug Kirby, the premier researcher on elements of sexuality education that were effective to create desired outcomes, created a list of characteristics of effective programs published in 2007 and reprinted here.

- Focuses on specific behavioral outcomes.
- Addresses individual values and group norms that support health-enhancing behaviors.
- Focuses on increasing personal perceptions of risk and harmfulness of engaging in specific health risk behaviors, as well as reinforcing protective factors.
- Addresses social pressures and influences.
- Builds personal and social competence.

- Provides functional knowledge that is basic, accurate, and directly contributes to health-promoting decisions and behaviors.
- Uses strategies designed to personalize information and engage students.
- Provides age- and developmentally appropriate information, learning strategies, teaching methods, and materials.
- Incorporates learning strategies, teaching methods, and materials that are culturally inclusive. Provides adequate time for instruction and learning.
- Provides opportunities to reinforce skills and positive health behaviors.
- Provides opportunities to make connections with other influential persons.
- Includes teacher information and plan for professional development and training to enhance effectiveness of instruction and student learning.<sup>1</sup>

**Learn more about sexuality education:** [Sexuality Education: Building an evidence- and rights-based approach to healthy decision-making](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Kirby, D., Rollieri, L. A., Wilson, M. M. Tools to Assess Characteristics of Effective Sex and STD/HIV Education Programs (TAC). 2007.

## How To Use This Curriculum

*Rights, Respect, Responsibility* was designed for use as a sequential curriculum, or in parts, according to the needs of the educator. While the curriculum can be used in its entirety (and when presented this way meets the National Sexuality Education Standards), we recognize that very few schools have sufficient time allotted to sexuality education to be able to use every lesson. Educators may decide when a lesson or series of lessons might fit into their pre-existing curriculum. Educators may use one grade level, one topic strand, or an individual lesson to supplement their existing materials, as needed.

Using the indicators from the National Sexuality Education Standards, we have provided a recommended sequence for implementing *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* in the Lesson Plan section of the 3Rs website.

### CURRICULUM FORMAT OVERVIEW

Lessons are 40 minutes in K-5 and 50 minutes in Grades 6-12. There are family homework activities for each lesson in Grades K-9 to facilitate a way for students and their parents/care-givers to have important conversations together. Please also refer to the more extensive information in other sections of this document including:

- ▶ Using Ground Rules with this Curriculum
- ▶ Classroom Management: Answering Students' Questions
- ▶ Special Issues Related to Self-Disclosure
- ▶ A Note on Gender, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation

### LANGUAGE USED FOR THIS CURRICULUM

**Trusted adults:** Within this curriculum, we use the phrasing “parent or caregiver” to acknowledge the variety of family formations. We also use “trusted adult,” to refer to a parent, coach, faith leader, teacher, or other adult who may not be an immediate family member but is someone a young person knows and can trust who may be able to respond appropriately, as well.

**Gender Identity:** Advocates for Youth strongly believes in the rights of transgender youth and the importance of intentional and authentic inclusion of transgender issues. In younger grades, where students may not yet be familiar with gender issues or equipped to process them, this curriculum uses gender binary terms. However, as students age, the curriculum introduces gender neutral names and a wide range of identities, and in addition, is careful to note that biological sex characteristics are separate from gender identity.

- ▶ [Learn more about gender identity and how gender lessons are incorporated into this curriculum on page 25.](#)

### FOSTERING RESPECT IN YOUR CLASSROOM

*Rights, Respect, Responsibility* is designed to involve young people in discussing personal, sometimes sensitive, topics. To do this effectively, it is important to create and maintain a safe, respectful environment in which participants can share freely. You can create and maintain a safe, respectful environment by introducing and reinforcing ground rules. Engage all participants in creating, understanding, agreeing to, and respecting the ground rules. Post the ground rules on a wall for every session. Remind students, when necessary, that everyone has agreed to abide by the ground rules.

## Growth and Development

Human development is a lifelong process of physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional growth and change. In the early stages of life—from babyhood to childhood, childhood to adolescence, and adolescence to adulthood—enormous changes take place. Throughout the process, each person develops attitudes and values that guide choices, relationships, and understanding.

Sexual development is also a lifelong process. Infants, children, teens, and adults are sexual beings. Just as it is important to enhance a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, so it is important to lay foundations for a child's sexual growth. Adults have a responsibility to help young people understand and accept their evolving sexuality.

Each stage of development encompasses specific markers. Developmental guidelines apply to most children in the age groups specified. However, each child is an individual and may reach these stages of development earlier or later than other children the same age. When concerns arise about a specific child's development, parents or other caregivers should consult a doctor or other child development professional.

[Visit Advocates for Youth's website for a series of factsheets on each age group.](#)

## Students' Right to Learn About Sexuality in the United States

Young people have the right to learn about sex and sexuality. At the same time, however, educators need to follow applicable laws and policies. Sexuality education content, coursework, and delivery should always follow state laws and district, local, and school-wide policies. Before planning to use this curriculum, it's important to research existing policies and procedures that govern sexuality education content and requirements. Some states have health education standards with which educators must align their curricula, while other states leave curricular decisions up to each school district. It is particularly

important to have clarification from your supervisor or building principal about any lessons or activities about which you have questions.

The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) compiles state regulations on its website, [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org). You may also be able to find the regulations by looking at your state's education department or state government website. Your school board or school superintendent should also be aware of these policies.

## Using Ground Rules with this Curriculum

Establishing ground rules, which are shared guidelines about how everyone – teachers and students – will interact during lessons, is an important step in creating a sense of trust, support, and safety among students and teachers. Ground rules help to increase comfort and facilitate learning for everyone in the classroom. This is especially important because the lessons in this curriculum often include discussion of personal topics, such as values and sexuality.

Ground rules, and the methods by which they are created and introduced, will vary at different grade levels. In the earliest grades, existing classroom rules may be used for this purpose. While such guidelines are often posted in the classroom throughout the year, it can be helpful to give a gentle reminder to students about these rules before a lesson or unit on sexuality. Alternatively, the teacher may ask students if they can think of any rules they would like to have for working together in a group. Their suggestions may include not interrupting, raising hands to talk, etc. Some additional ones may include:

- Everyone has the right not to answer questions they feel are too personal, including the teacher. It is OK to say “I’d rather not do this activity” or “I don’t want to answer that question.”
- It is okay to disagree with another person, but do not make fun or call people names just because you disagree with them.
- It is okay to ask any question, no matter how silly it may seem; chances are someone else wants to know the same thing you do.
- It is okay if some of the things we talk about seem silly, or if the information is brand new. We will be talking about some very interesting things and you will probably like learning about these things. If you don’t like a subject, just sit quietly until we change to a new subject.
- It is important to be open and honest in group discussions, but there should be no discussion of your own or other people’s personal business.
- It is OK to discuss general situations, but without naming names or being specific.
- It is OK to feel embarrassed or uncomfortable; even adults can feel uncomfortable when they talk about sensitive topics like values or sexuality.

Although they cover similar topics, ground rules for grades 5-8, may appear this way:

- *Right to Pass*—Each person shares to the level of his/her own comfort. No one should ever feel pressured to contribute if they do not wish to.
- *Respect differences*—Allow one another to have different viewpoints. Group members may disagree, but they should not judge one another for their beliefs.
- *One person speaks at a time*—Allow one another to be heard.
- *No put downs*—No name calling or insulting one another. Protect one another’s right to hold different views.
- *Use “I” statements*—Avoid broad statements. Speak for yourself.
- *There is no such thing as a dumb question*—All questions are good to ask.
- *Appropriate sharing outside of class*—Telling other people about what you learn here is good, but we should not discuss anything personal that someone in the class may have shared. That’s disrespectful, and unfair to that person. Instead, you can simply say, “I know someone who…” if you want to share a good point someone made.

Guidelines at the 9-12 grade level will likely address the same issues plus a few additional ones for this age group, and may be worded differently. For example:

- Right to pass if you don’t want to share or participate.
- Speak for yourself, not for others, by using “I” statements.
- Don’t use put-downs or negative statements about classmates and educators.
- Be aware of your assumptions and how they might impact your learning.
- One person speaks at a time.
- Minimize side conversations.
- Keep electronic devices turned off and away during class or follow school district policy.
- Questions are welcome. There is no such thing as a stupid question.
- Don’t share personal stories or use people’s names when talking with people outside this classroom about what is discussed here.



## A NOTE ON CONFIDENTIALITY

Most lists of group agreements or ground rules include a rule related to confidentiality, which has often been described as “what is said in this room stays in this room.” This is not an effective description of confidentiality for a classroom for a few reasons. First, it can raise anxiety among parents and other adults in the community who may be concerned that the teacher is trying to keep whatever is discussed about sexuality secret from them. Second, it is inaccurate. As teachers and other youth-serving professionals know well, there are situations under which confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, or must be broken. As mandated reporters, teachers are required to report situations in which a student is at risk to hurt themselves or others. Telling students that the discussions will be confidential, therefore, becomes problematic if their confidentiality must be broken. Finally, true confidentiality is impossible to enforce. Believing that what is shared will be kept confidential may lead a student to share something deeply personal that may likely get “leaked” by someone in the class. Thus, while it is important to include “confidentiality” in the ground rules, an effective way a teacher can include this is to write it up on the list and say, *“To keep something confidential means that it’s kept private or secret. I certainly don’t want you to keep the information we talk about here private from anyone. In fact, the more you talk with your friends about it, the better! What is important, however, is that we all agree not to share anything personal that someone in the class may have shared. That’s disrespectful, and unfair to that person. Instead, you can simply say, ‘I know someone who...’ if you want to share a good point someone made. Also, you may know already that there are some things that I, as a teacher, cannot keep private. If a student were to come to me and say that someone is hurting them, or that they were thinking of hurting themselves or someone else, I’d have to tell someone about it, so that this student could get some help.”*

## OPTIONS FOR ESTABLISHING GROUND RULES

At the middle and high school levels, it can be useful to involve students directly in the creation of shared ground rules, thereby increasing their sense of ownership and “buy-in” of the rules. The teacher may start this process by asking students, *“What might make it difficult for us to feel comfortable as we talk about sexuality?”* After a list of barriers is generated (possible responses might include embarrassment, being made fun of, not knowing

what to say, not wanting other people to know what we talk about, etc.), the teacher can then write “Ground Rules” on newsprint or the board and then ask, *“What are some rules we can establish in our class that will help us to feel more comfortable to learn about this topic and that will help ensure that no one feels put down or disrespected?”*

The teacher may then invite students to generate a list of agreements about how the class will operate and how students and the teacher will interact. The teacher should list these ground rules on newsprint and hang the list on a wall where it can remain, so that students and the teacher can refer to them at any time. The ground rules should be established through agreement by the group and may vary. The teacher should write down students’ ideas and then suggest some important basic rules from the lists above that students do not include.

Depending on time availability, other options for establishing ground rules are for the teacher to present a pre-written list and ask for student feedback, as well as for additional suggestions. The teacher may also wish to make a game out of the presentation of ground rules by introducing them Pictionary style (using diagrams to represent the ground rules and have students guess what they are) or through acting them out or having students act them out as in the game Charades, and having other students guess.

In some classes, once a list has been established, the teacher may ask every student to agree verbally to the ground rules and/or to sign the ground rules or a contract, as a way of sharing authorship and responsibility for enforcing the rules.

It is possible that the class will already have ground rules in place before the implementation of this curriculum. If so, it may be useful for the teacher to remind students of the ground rules at the start of the first session. It might also be useful to explain to students that since the topic of sexuality can be particularly sensitive or difficult to discuss for some people, there may be additional ground rules the class would like to include for the duration of this program.

Once agreed-upon ground rules are established, they can be revisited at any time and revised to meet the needs of the class. Additionally, it is important that students feel empowered not only to follow the ground rules themselves but to monitor one another’s adherence to them and to ensure that they are being followed.

# Classroom Management: Answering Students' Questions

**Rights, Respect, Responsibility** encourages students to ask questions, whether in class during specific activities, or through the use of an anonymous question box. As the teacher, it is important to provide clear, accurate answers to these questions, in a non-judgmental manner. It is also important to know which questions you should not answer and how best to respond when those questions come up.

## HOW QUESTIONS ARE ASKED

There are different ways that students may ask questions in the classroom. How questions are asked often depends on the procedures put in place by the teacher and may include:

- During class with other students present
- One-on-one to the teacher outside of a regular lesson
- Anonymously on an index card or through an anonymous questions box.

While many of the lessons in **Rights, Respect, Responsibility** build in time for students to ask questions, some teachers like to provide additional opportunities for students to ask questions that may arise outside of a particular lesson and/or that they may want to ask anonymously because of fear or embarrassment. For many teachers, preparing a lesson plan and leading activities is the easy part of the job. It is those spontaneous comments or questions from students that can cause the most anxiety.

## TYPES OF QUESTIONS:

Before answering any question, it is important for the teacher to try to ascertain, as well as possible, what information the student seeks and/or the purpose of the question. Sometimes students ask forthright questions; at other times, questions appear a bit murky and the real “question behind a question” may not be apparent. Below are several types of questions and challenges, and some suggestions for responding to them effectively.

### 1. Knowledge or Skills Questions

Usually, these questions are very straightforward and have specific, factual answers. *How does a baby get out? What is the most common STD? How does a condom work? What does ‘oral sex’ mean? Can you get an STD from a toilet seat? What are the side effects of contraception?* Knowledge or skills questions often appear to be the easiest to answer, since they ask for concrete information rather than about feelings, attitudes,

or behaviors. Yet, students still need guidance along with the facts. These questions offer opportunities to reinforce program values and to provide guidance for positive, healthy behaviors. Sometimes, however, a question will challenge the limits of the teacher’s own knowledge or it will be unclear whether it’s appropriate to answer given the parameters of the district curriculum and/or policy governing certain content.

Keep in mind:

- It’s okay not to know something, and to be honest about it.
- Any moment can be an *educational opportunity* to model that no one should be embarrassed at not knowing everything.
- Ask the class if anyone knows more.
- If the question contains slang that you don’t know, ask to be educated (this will help build rapport between you and the students).
- Promise to get the answer (And follow through!).
- When a topic is difficult to explain, check in to be sure the class understood your answer.

### 2. Values Questions

Some teachers worry about responding to questions about their personal values about issues such as sexual behavior, abortion, and sexual orientation (*Do you think it’s wrong to...?*). Some schools do not allow teachers to answer such questions; teachers are to refer students to parents/care givers and/or faith leaders for guidance. When allowed, however, teachers should facilitate a discussion that encourages students to explore their own and others’ attitudes and feelings on these issues without the teacher sharing their own values. Teachers can then refer students to parents/care givers and faith leaders, if the students require more input. When discussing values related to sexuality, the goals of the teacher are to: 1) increase awareness among participants of their personal values; 2) promote the value of respect for differing opinions; 3) model and teach how to engage in respectful discussion; and 4) promote universal values (e.g. human dignity, respect for self and others, honesty, fairness).



Tips:

- Do not impose your personal values.
- Explore a range of values. (For example, “Some people believe this about abortion while other people believe this about abortion. You should figure out what you believe by talking with trusted adults in your life.”)
- Use the “reporter technique.” Give the facts, “report” examples of views on both sides of the issue. (Then turn it to the group for discussion.)
- When a strong opinion is stated, ask for responses from the group.
- If the group seems to be discussing one point of view, make sure other possibilities are explored. Ask the group if there are alternative points of view, or state them yourself.
- Be careful about putting people on the spot for their personal opinions. It might be less threatening to ask “Why might some people choose to...?” rather than “What do you believe...?”
- Encourage discussing such matters with the moral authorities in the learners’ lives: parents/care givers, faith leaders, other trusted adults.
- Know your “hot buttons” ahead of time. When those topics arise, breathe!

### 3. Am I Normal questions

Young people, especially pre-teens, need and seek a great deal of reassurance that their bodies, feelings, and behaviors are normal. (*What is the average age that a girl’s breasts start to show? All my friends’ voices have changed, when will mine change?*) Many of these questions seeking reassurance begin with “I have a friend who...” or “I heard about someone who...” These questions usually end with “Are they normal?” The proper response is to calmly normalize the issue in question while providing information, or, when appropriate (for example, in response to a question such as “if a 17 year old girl still hasn’t gotten her period, is that okay?”) calmly suggest a student may want to seek input from a medical or other professional.

Tips:

- Remind the group that human beings are each unique and that individual variation

is definitely normal – in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

- Suggest a range of differences on the specific issue raised.
- Point out, when appropriate, that a student might talk with a parent/care giver, health care provider, or other trusted adult about specific concerns.

### 4. Personal and Permission- or Advice-Seeking Questions

Sometimes teachers are asked to disclose their experiences (*Have you ever...?*); or something about their personal identities or lives (*Are you straight? Do you have kids?*). They may be asked to give advice (*What do you think I should do?*); or permission (*Is it okay for a 16 year-old to...?*). The teacher’s responses to these questions have implications about their role in the lives of their students. The teacher should carefully deliberate beforehand how they will approach requests to share personal information or advice. In the moment, they should take extreme care, erring on the side of non-disclosure.

Tips:

- It is usually preferable to *not* answer personal questions.
  - You *always have the right* to not answer a personal question.
  - Never discuss personal sexual behavior.
  - If you make the exception and share personal information, it should always be done for a specific, positive reason—to demonstrate empathy, to model appropriate sharing, etc.
  - You should never share personal information to meet your own needs (Just to get your students to like you or laugh at your jokes, etc.).
  - Consider setting a ground-rule ahead of time—in which you announce that you won’t answer personal questions (just as we’ll respect anyone’s right not to share personal information).
  - When asked to “grant permission” or share advice, generalize the issue: explore a range of options; discuss pros/cons; share a variety of viewpoints.
- For more in-depth information and guidance on teacher self-disclosure, see *How to Handle Student Disclosures*.

## 5. “The Heart” and other Complicated Questions

How do you know when you’re in love? Why are guys always grabbing themselves? Should everyone report it if they’re raped? Some questions are asked as “factual,” but there just isn’t a straightforward answer. A helpful approach here is to facilitate a discussion rather than give an answer.

Tips:

Bounce the question back: “What do you all think?” If only one or two students give a response, check in to see if there are other thoughts on the matter.

- Explore various possibilities: “What do you think would happen if...?” “How might a person feel if their partner...?”
- If you conjecture, give a few possibilities and qualify them as your educated guesses. (For example, in response to a question of how you know when you’re in love you might say, “That is a tough question and it might be different for different people. Some of the things that come to mind that I think might be important are that when you think about this person it makes you happy; that you miss this person when you’re apart; that you like them and like being with them; that it is important to you that your friends and/or family like them; that you are happy for them when they achieve something or do something special, even if you don’t achieve that same thing. What are some other possible signs that you might be in love that other people can think of?” Then take other responses from students.)
- Check in to see if there are other thoughts on the matter.
- Check in to see if the questioner feels the question was answered adequately. When questions do not have straightforward answers or may have more than one possible response, it is useful, when a student asks a question publicly, to ask them if your answer addressed their question appropriately. If the question is asked anonymously, you can finish your response by saying “I’m not sure if I’ve interpreted the question correctly or if I’ve given a sufficient answer. If I haven’t I hope the person who asked the question will ask it again and maybe give me some more information so I can give them a better answer.”

## 6. Shock-value questions

Teachers usually recognize questions instantly that are asked in order to shock or entertain. Nevertheless, anyone can be caught off guard, particularly if a question touches on a personally sensitive issue. In this situation, the teacher may decide to raise the issue of the question having been asked in order to shock or get a reaction as a way to lessen the impact. To defuse shock-value questions and to retain credibility with the students, the teacher might decide to give a calm, factual answer after they have pointed out that the basic intent of the question was simply to shock or upset others. It is also really important to keep in mind, however, that not all *shocking* questions are asked for *shock value*. In other words, even though the question may be shocking to the teacher, it may be an honest question. If so, it deserves a calm, honest answer

Tips:

- If you’re “unshockable,” any purposeful behavior on the part of the questioner will become unsatisfying.
- Option one: answer the question at face value, as if it were sincerely asked.
- Option two: Say, “Here’s a question dealing with xx, but I’m not sure the person really wants an answer—it may be just for a laugh. For now, I’m going to move on. If I’ve misunderstood your question, feel free to see me afterward and I’ll be happy to answer it.”

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

### Comfort

Most educators *will* be embarrassed by a question or student’s comment at one time or another. Of course, being calm and matter-of-fact is the overall goal: This helps normalize talking about sexuality, and helps “reduce” the natural discomfort of learners (discomfort which can distract from the learning process). A moment in which the educator is clearly embarrassed, however, is an opportunity for them to model, “What should we do when we’re embarrassed by the topic?” (The answer: Keep discussing anyway!)

Tips:

In the moment:

- Breathe. Literally. Breathing helps relax us.
- If you can remain outwardly calm, do so. Try

not to send the message that the question warrants embarrassment.

- Stall for time, so you can gain composure: nod your head, use a “stock phrase” (*You know, I’m really glad this question came up*).
- If it’s too late (your face is flushed, your voice shakes, you’ve begun laughing), acknowledge it. It immediately puts you *with* the students that may be laughing at you. (Note: If you do acknowledge being embarrassed, if appropriate be sure to underscore that the question is valid, and an important one to ask.)
- Then, answer the question if it’s appropriate.

## Crisis, Legal Matters, and Student Disclosure

All teachers need to be aware that statistically, at least one or more of their students is a survivor of sexual abuse or assault. This is of particular relevance for teachers of **Rights. Respect. Responsibility** or other programs about human sexuality and relationships. The personal content matter, along with a welcoming environment, and a deliberately designed process that encourages students to ask questions and share their thoughts and feelings, increase the likelihood that a student might disclose their abuse either to the teacher in private, or in front of the whole class. Because of this likelihood, teachers of this curriculum need to be prepared to respond appropriately, in the best interests of the student who discloses, as well as the rest of the class.

1. When addressing sensitive topics, ask the school counselor or another teacher to sit in the back of the room.
2. If students disclose certain information, tell the school counselor immediately.
3. As noted in the National Teacher Preparation Standards in Sexuality Education, be sure to adhere to state, federal, and district policies that pertain to confidentiality and reporting these types of disclosures.

## Some Additional General Guidelines

1. **Pay attention to the way you answer a question beyond just your words.** Think about your body language, tone of voice, level of calm, etc. In addition to imparting information and skills, the teacher’s job is also to

- Normalize and de-mystify
- Reduce discomfort
- Affirm learners

This means that the emotional content of your answer is as important as the informational content. *How you say* something is as important as *what you say*. Work to avoid nonverbal cues such as wrinkled brows or frowns that may imply judgment, disapproval, etc.

2. **Convey gratitude for the questions and comments that arise.** Use the exercise to underscore the idea that discussing these topics is a good thing.

3. **Use third person** (a person’s... someone who..., two people...) rather than the pronoun “you” when answering very personalized questions in a group setting.

4. **Use gender-neutral and orientation-neutral language** when describing behavior, people, and relationships.

5. **Provide facts.** Do your best to answer the question that was asked. Then, even if the question does not necessarily ask for a specific fact, do not miss an opportunity to remind students how diseases are spread, or that it is always okay to say “no” or choose to wait or stop with regard to any sexual behaviors.

6. **Be Truthful.** Never lie or tell half-truths. You can choose not to respond to a question, but if you are going to answer, give them the complete and truthful response. Young people especially can see through a lie and if you get caught in a lie, you will lose your credibility. It is even better to say, “I will lose my job if I answer that question,” or “unfortunately, I’m not allowed to answer that question,” than to lie about it.

7. **Don’t try to be cool.** No matter what you do or say, you will NEVER know what it is like to be a teenager today – trying to make them think you are cool, or that you ‘get’ them is likely to backfire. Acknowledge that you cannot possibly know what the pressures and issues are today and ask them to

help inform you. They will be more likely to respect the information you can provide, if you maintain some distance from them and don’t worry if they ‘like’ you or not.

8. **Keep a sense of humor and a little perspective.** Being able to laugh at yourself and with your students can go a long way to building trust and comfort. Also, keep in mind that if you are unhappy with the way you respond to a particular question, you can usually get a second chance. During the next lesson, you can always say “Yesterday, when I was responding to a question about \_\_\_\_\_ I don’t think I did a very good job in conveying some important information,” or “I forgot to include something really important,” or “I don’t think I did a very good job answering this yesterday and I think it is an important question, so I want to try to answer it a different way.” Students will not hold it against you for being imperfect. If anything, it will make you seem more human to them, only improving the relationship.

### ANONYMOUS QUESTIONS

If the teacher would like to provide additional opportunities for students to ask questions anonymously, there are a few options. One way is to periodically pass out index cards or paper and allow students time to write any questions they may have on a given topic that they may not want to ask aloud.

These questions will then be placed in an *Anonymous Questions Box*. An anonymous questions box can be part of a specific lesson, or placed in a spot in the classroom where students can have access to whenever they wish. Along with the information provided above for responding to student questions, some additional guidelines are useful when soliciting anonymous questions.

### GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS’ PERSONAL DISCLOSURE TO STUDENTS

Teachers disclose personal information about themselves every day, whether they are aware of it or not. Disclosure of some personal information (ethnicity, style preferences, regional accents, e.g.) people have no control over. Ultimately, though, everything teachers disclose, deliberate or not, affects how students learn. Disclosures of a personal nature over which teachers do have control, therefore, should only be made deliberately and after thorough consideration. In sexuality

education, teachers are often confronted with the decision about whether or not to disclose personal information about themselves to students. The decision one makes may ultimately depend on a number of factors, including:

- **The purpose of the disclosure** – It is critically important, when considering whether or not to share a piece of personal information, to ask yourself, “why would I want to do this?” Only valid educational rationales should be used to support the decision to disclose. The rationale for disclosing certain personal information with elementary and middle-school students is described below. With older students, sharing, for example, that you had a friend who died from HIV/AIDS may allow you to make the experience more real for students who see it as something that doesn’t happen to people they know, especially, if your friend breaks some stereotypes about people with HIV. It can also humanize the topic for students. Both of these results may help students to increase their understanding about HIV/AIDS, as well as increase their compassion.
- **The age of your students** – In younger grades, children tend to be very curious about their teachers’ private lives and, often, teachers find that sharing some personal information builds rapport and closeness with students, which can enhance comfort and learning. Information such as whether you are a parent, how many siblings you have, where you grew up, are pieces of information that, for the most part, are benign and yet can strengthen relationships between students and teachers. Even in middle school, students often remain interested in these types of details about teachers. From middle school and into high school, however, this information may not have the same educational impact. Once a teacher discloses one piece of personal information, students may seek additional information a teacher may not be ready to give putting them in an uncomfortable and awkward position of having to set what appear to be uneven boundaries, which can undermine, rather than increase, class cohesiveness.
- **The type of disclosure you are considering** [that you are the parent of young children, or that you are a fan of a particular baseball team vs. your sexual orientation or some personal sexual experience you have had (or not had)].
- **Policies or guidelines in your school or district** – Policies set forth by your school district regarding personal disclosure must be considered and take

precedence over a teacher’s inclination. If no such policy exists, ask your supervisor for guidance on how to manage this issue and/or recommend that such a policy be created for your district.

While some people believe that disclosing personal information will help to build a sense of trust with young people, others are able to make very strong connections with students without doing so – or, by maintaining very clear boundaries about what topics are and are not off limits. This approach can help keep the learning focused on the students and there is no risk of information being repeated out-of-context and/or misconstrued.

Every teacher must make the decision of whether to disclose personal information – and how much to disclose – for themselves. The following are some issues teachers may wish to consider when making these important decisions:

#### When you might choose to disclose:

- Only with a student or class with whom you have established a strong relationship in which there is a lot of trust.
- Only when it enhances students’ learning and the example makes a good educational point that is consistent with the goals of the lesson or the curriculum.

#### When NOT to disclose:

- For ego-enhancement, to get a laugh, or to make others like you.
- When it is about your personal sex life.
- When it is something that you would not want someone else sharing about themselves.
- When it could jeopardize the future education or safety of students.

#### ***Keep in mind that once a piece of information has been disclosed...***

- You can’t take it back.
- You have no control over what students will do with the information. Teens in particular are at a developmental level where they may use personal information inappropriately.
- It often carries more weight than general information. The nature of a teacher/ student relationship has an inherent power differential. Therefore, if a student asks you what type of condoms or other birth control you use and you share that information, the student is not making her or his own decision. Your brand/type will carry more weight for them just because they



know and trust you. **However, what is right for you is not necessarily right for your students or anyone else.**

- It creates pressure to disclose more and again. Once you disclose personal information, you send a signal to students that you are willing to share in that way. As a result students may come to expect it. For example, suppose you decide to share with high school students that you decided to wait to have sex until you were married (note you are disclosing a personal behavior decision, a sexual behavior experience, and a relationship status). In the next class, when discussing the impact of alcohol on sexual decision-making, a student may ask you if you ever had sex while drunk or if you ever consumed alcohol when you were a teen. If you decline to answer because it is a personal question you do not want to address, students may then think that, in fact, you did engage in those behaviors otherwise you would have shared the information. Once you disclose, you will find yourself having to defend your choice not to each subsequent time.

While establishing the right to pass for both students and teachers alike in the ground rules, and the caution against sharing personal information, teachers should establish for themselves their own guidelines for when, what, and under what conditions they will share personal information with students.

*(Adapted, in part, with permission from a lesson in Goldfarb, E. and Schroeder, E. (2004), Making SMART Choices about Sex: A Curriculum for Young People. Rochester, NY: Metrix Marketing.)*

#### **A NOTE ON GENDER, GENDER IDENTITY, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION**

**Rights. Respect. Responsibility** is designed to be inclusive of all genders, gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual orientations. To that end, the language used and examples provided within lessons recognize the spectrum of gender, gender identities and expressions, and sexual orientations. Teachers are strongly encouraged to model this inclusivity in their teaching. The information included here is intended to aid teachers in their efforts to support all students across these spectrums. Defining some key concepts is a useful place to start. There are many good sources for defining gender- and sexual orientation-related terms. The ones provided below are either directly quoted or adapted from various definitions in order to provide the clearest guidance for teachers using this curriculum.

**Biological Sex:** A person's combination of genitals, chromosomes and hormones, usually (but not necessarily accurately) categorized as "male" or "female" based on looking at an infant's genitals during an ultrasound or at birth. This categorization tends to assume that a person's gender identity will be congruent with the sex assignment. Everyone has a biological sex, which can also include "intersex" or someone who has chromosomes and body parts different from XY or XX chromosomes. This can also be termed as someone having a "difference in sexual development" (DSD). (Teaching Transgender Toolkit, Green and Maurer, 2015)

**Gender:** The set of meanings assigned by a culture or society to someone's perceived biological sex. Gender has three components; gender identity, physical markers, and gender expression. (Perry, J.R. & Green, E.R. (2014). Safe & Respected: Policy, Best Practices & Guidance for Serving Transgender & Gender Non-Conforming Children and Youth Involved in the Child Welfare, Detention, and Juvenile Justice Systems. New York City, NY: New York City's Administration for Children's Services.)

**Gender Identity:** A person's deep-seated, internal sense of who they are as a gendered being – specifically, the gender as which they identify. All people have a gender identity. An adjective used to describe a person whose gender identity is incongruent with (or does not "match") the biological sex they were assigned at birth is "transgender." An adjective used to describe a person whose gender identity is congruent (or "matches") the biological sex they were assigned at birth is "cisgender." Other gender identities may include non-binary, agender, bigender, genderfluid, and genderqueer. Lessons in **Rights. Respect. Responsibility** explore this concept throughout grade levels in ways that are age- and developmentally-appropriate. (Teaching Transgender Toolkit, Green and Maurer, 2015)

**Gender Expression:** A person's outward gender presentation, usually comprised of personal style, clothing, hairstyle, makeup, jewelry, vocal inflection, and body language. Gender expression is typically categorized as masculine, feminine, or androgynous, and there are many shades in between all of these. You will notice in **Rights. Respect. Responsibility** that the authors intentionally give examples of students who express their gender in a variety of ways. (Teaching Transgender Toolkit, Green and Maurer, 2015)

**Sexual Orientation:** The gender or genders of people one is attracted to sexually and/or romantically. Sexual orientation falls along a spectrum from being

attracted solely to people of one’s own gender (gay or lesbian), solely to people of a different gender (heterosexual or “straight”), as well as to people of numerous genders (bisexual, pansexual). Some people identify as “asexual,” which means they have feelings of romantic attraction for others without feelings of sexual attraction. Everyone has a sexual orientation. It is not necessary to engage in sexual behaviors to know what your sexual orientation is.

*Note: Language and definitions often evolve, so it is important to stay as up-to-date as possible. One of the best resources currently available is the Teaching Transgender Toolkit by Eli Green and Luca Maurer, [www.TeachingTransgender.com](http://www.TeachingTransgender.com), 2015.*

While biological sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation are related, they are independent of one another. Good resources for further information on these and related concepts include the Human Rights Campaign Foundation’s Welcoming Schools program: <http://www.welcomingschools.org/pages/a-few-definitions-for-educators-and-parents-guardians> and the Teaching Transgender Toolkit by Eli Green and Luca Maurer, [www.TeachingTransgender.com](http://www.TeachingTransgender.com), 2015.

#### **GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION: WHAT’S AGE-APPROPRIATE?**

**Rights, Respect, Responsibility** adheres to the concept of a gender spectrum, although in the earlier grades, gender binary language is used to accommodate the developmental levels of younger students. Even when there are transgender or gender non-conforming students in younger grades, they are more likely to identify with the gender binary at that age. Therefore, the terms “boys” and “girls” are used in the early grades, and this language evolves to be increasingly inclusive and non-binary at upper grade levels, along with lessons explicitly exploring the concepts of gender and gender expression.

Similarly, in early grades, relationships may be described using gender neutral language, such as “when two people are in love,” or “a couple...” or may discuss families with “two mommies” or “two daddies” while not explicitly discussing sexual orientation. This approach keeps the earlier grade lessons fully inclusive and supportive of all sexual orientations and relationships while remaining developmentally appropriate by not specifically discussing the more complex concept of sexual orientation. Later lessons, however, explicitly introduce and explore the concept of sexual orientation as falling along a spectrum. In middle school and high school lessons, the terms “partner”

and “same-sex relationships” are used deliberately and proactively both to avoid heteronormativity (the assumption that people and relationships are heterosexual unless proven otherwise) and to help students explore, at a developmentally appropriate level, the full range of sexual feelings and expressions both in and out of relationships.

#### **CREATING INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS**

Gender non-conforming students can be of any sexual orientation and are at particular risk for teasing, bullying, and/or social isolation. They are also often rendered invisible by a curriculum, and rarely see themselves or people like them in the lessons and teachers’ examples throughout the curriculum. Teachers are encouraged to work actively against stereotyped assumptions of how their students should behave based on gender. By offering students the widest possible opportunities for self-expression, teachers can help all students develop more complex and nuanced ways of understanding gender. Additional information and research related to the importance of expanding concepts of gender expression for all students is available from [Gender Spectrums](http://www.GenderSpectrums.com).

The lessons in this curriculum are specifically written to challenge the gender binary and to be inclusive, respectful, and supportive of all gender expressions. Great resources that offer additional ways for teachers to support this effort and model district policy is Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network’s (GLSEN) and The Teaching Transgender Toolkit available for purchase at [www.TeachingTransgender.com](http://www.TeachingTransgender.com).

#### **SEPARATING BY GENDER: PROS AND CONS**

In order to be inclusive of all genders and gender identities, with very few exceptions, noted below, we recommend against separating students by gender when creating smaller learning groups. Doing so excludes transgender and gender non-conforming students, who will be forced to choose a group that is not based on their gender. This can lead to unnecessary emotional distress.

Exceptions to this recommendation tend to occur during some of the fourth and fifth grade lessons on puberty. For lessons that delve into the physical and emotional changes of puberty, students at these grade levels may find it more comfortable to have a session with other students of their own gender in which they can ask personal and potentially embarrassing questions that they might not otherwise ask in a mixed gender setting. At the same time, however, it is still possible that there



are students in the class who are transgender or gender non-conforming, regardless of whether this has been shared with the teacher. If a teacher cannot for political or any other reasons keep mixed gender groups among younger students for these lessons, it is advised that they use gender-inclusive language like what is modeled in ***Rights, Respect, Responsibility*** whenever and wherever possible.