

# DISCUSSING SEXUALITY IN THE CLASSROOM

## PRACTICAL TIPS FOR TEACHERS

Teachers can play an important role in students' healthy relational and sexual development. You can pay attention to this subject with specifically designed lessons. But it's even more important to address relational and sexual development within the general curriculum, whenever the topic comes up in class. Talk amongst students about sex or current events can be used as a starting point to engage in conversation with the students.

### CREATING A SAFE ATMOSPHERE

When discussing relationships and sexuality with students, a safe atmosphere in the classroom is essential. Establishing clear rules helps. Often mentioned are the so-called [PICCASOLL-agreements](#): privacy, I, culture, choose, active, sexuality, orientation, listening, laughing. In short, these agreements are about respecting each other, and giving students the freedom to choose what they will/won't talk about.

### BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP OF TRUST WITH STUDENTS

A relationship of trust increases the sense of safety, and ensures that students will adhere to the previously established rules.

- ✓ Adapt to the students' experiences.
- ✓ Adapt to their level of development.<sup>1</sup>
- ✓ Take the students seriously.
- ✓ Utilize humor.
- ✓ Stimulate active participation.
- ✓ Pay attention to body language.
- ✓ Be aware of nonverbal cues in students.
- ✓ Be a role model as a teacher.

### KNOW YOURSELF AS A TEACHER

Be conscious of your personal norms and values, and the ways these influence how you discuss relationships and sexuality. By discussing sexuality in a calm and positive manner, you can show students that sexual development is a normal and important topic that's open for conversation.

- ✓ Make sure your personal norms and values don't take center stage, and always focus on the students' relational and sexual development.

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<sup>1</sup> See Matrix in [standards in sexuality education](#)

## DIVERSITY

Diversity includes cultural and religious diversity, gender diversity (LGBT), and differences between men and women.

### TEACHING CULTURALLY AND/OR RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE GROUPS

- ✓ Pay heed to cultural and religious diversity concerning relationships and sexuality.
- ✓ Be aware of differences in relational and sexual norms, even within a specific cultural minority.
- ✓ Pay attention to both differences and similarities in norms and values.
- ✓ Strive to increase mutual understanding of, and respect for, each other's views.
- ✓ Study views on relationships and sexuality from different cultures and religions.

### DISCUSSING GENDER DIVERSITY IN CLASS

- ✓ Attention to LGBT issues often lies in the details.
- ✓ Discuss LGBT issues as part of the standard curriculum.
- ✓ Create recognition by connecting the topic to current events and students' personal experiences.
- ✓ Give students space to ventilate opinions and prejudices.
- ✓ Be prepared for strong reactions.

### TAKING INTO ACCOUNT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

- ✓ Girls often feel more of a need to talk about personal topics, and discuss these more easily than boys.
- ✓ Boys mostly want practical and technical information, while girls want more social-emotional information.
- ✓ Relevant topics for both girls and boys are: peer pressure, setting boundaries, alcohol and sex, porn versus reality.
- ✓ Peer pressure mostly influences boys. Emphasize that it's okay to set your own boundaries: "Friends don't have to do everything the same way. Real friends also accept each other's differences."

SAFEGUARDING YOUNG  
PEOPLE IN CARE



## DEALING WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Talking about relationships and sexuality can cause quite a stir in the classroom. On this page, you will find tips for common incidents. With all of these incidents, it's important to find the right balance between focusing on the individual, and focusing on the group. In any situation, the goal is to ensure the safety of all students.

### PROVOCATIVE STATEMENTS FROM STUDENTS

- ✓ Intervene immediately. Ignoring this behavior can create an unsafe atmosphere, and have an escalating effect.
- ✓ Ask open questions without implicit judgment, such as: 'Can you explain what makes you...?', or: 'I hear you say that..., can you give me an example of that?'
- ✓ Emphasize that there's no single right sexual or relational norm or truth, but that this differs per person.
- ✓ Teach the students respect for other people's views, even if they don't agree with them.
- ✓ Involve the rest of the students in the conversation. Ask them to respond to the normative behavior of their classmate. For example: 'What do you think of this statement/behavior?', 'Do you agree with this?', 'Who would like to respond?', or: 'What would you like to ask or tell him/her?'

### A STUDENT WALKING OUT OF CLASS

- ✓ Ask another student to follow them, or give the respective student some space.
- ✓ Always ask the student to come back after class.
- ✓ Only let the student return to class if and when their emotions have subsided. If a student returns to class still in an emotional state, this can have a disruptive effect. It may be preferable for the student to stay absent for the remainder of class and discuss matters further in a private setting.
- ✓ Follow up on the situation in class, without discussing the student's personal situation. Try to prevent speculation amongst fellow students about what's going on.
- ✓ Emphasize once more that students can always come to you, their mentor, or their counselor if they want to discuss personal matters.

### PERSONAL REVELATIONS DURING CLASS

- ✓ Pay attention to the student's story in a positive and respectful manner.
- ✓ Thank the student for sharing their story.
- ✓ Emphasize towards the other students that the shared information shall 'stay in the classroom'.
- ✓ Refer to group rules concerning privacy.
- ✓ Put the student's experience in a broader context.

### SIGNALLING NEGATIVE SEXUAL EXPERIENCES

- ✓ Potential signals are: withdrawn behavior, emotional reactions, strong reaction to a personal story told by a fellow student or to personal revelation made in class.
- ✓ These signals can be discussed in class, but make sure the boundaries of the respective student(s) are respected at all times, and never force answers.
- ✓ Speak in general terms.
- ✓ Call attention to different types of help available inside and outside of the school.
- ✓ Do not provide help yourself. If necessary, refer student to the school counselor.

*The practical tips for teachers in this document are a summary of a Dutch document on this topic by Walpot & Boendermaker (2018). The tips are based on an analysis of Dutch educational materials on teaching about relationships and sexuality. These include documents for (future) teachers and teacher manuals of programs on this theme.*