

BEYOND THE BIRDS AND THE BEES: Supporting Sexual Education in BC

Resource Document

This document highlights the information shared in the webinar series with accompanying activities, helpful links and resources.

The Students Commission of Canada & Healthy Schools BC

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Creating a Safer Space.....	5
<i>What is a Safer Space in a Classroom?.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>How to Build a Safer Space.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Activities: How to Build a Safer Space.....</i>	<i>6</i>
Snowball Activity	6
Step into the Circle	7
<i>How to Make Information Not Seem Scary.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Adult Allyship.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Inclusive Language</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Responding to the Unexpected</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Tips for Handling Difficult Situations.....</i>	<i>11</i>
Consent	13
<i>Understanding Consent.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Creating a Consent Culture and Bodily Autonomy.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Activity: To discuss consent</i>	<i>15</i>
Will, Won't, Want Activity	15
<i>The Nuances of Consent</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Navigating Rejection</i>	<i>19</i>
Healthy Relationships	21
<i>The Four Pillars</i>	<i>21</i>
Respect	21

Listening.....	22
<i>Activity: Healthy Relationships.....</i>	<i>22</i>
OARS.....	22
Understanding.....	23
Communication.....	23
<i>Activity: Navigating Boundaries.....</i>	<i>23</i>
Red Flag Green Flag.....	23
<i>Addressing Difficult Topics: Abusive Relationships and Gender-Based Violence.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Abusive Relationships.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Gender-Based Violence (GBV).....</i>	<i>27</i>
Healthy Sexual Decision: Supporting Safer Sex.....	28
<i>Making decisions with a partner: Helping students have conversations with their partner lessens the risk.....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Making decisions in the context of the law: informing students about legal limitations lessens the risk.....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Making decisions about contraception: Giving students information about contraceptives and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Making decisions about pornography consumption: Helping students be reflective and intentional about their porn consumption lessens the risk.....</i>	<i>30</i>

Beyond the Birds and the Bees: Supporting Sexual Education in BC

Introduction

Before getting into the content of this webinar, it is important to acknowledge the Indigenous Peoples of all the lands that we are on. While readers are accessing this document from different places in the country, it is important to take a moment to recognize the importance of the land, which we each call home in Kanata. We do this to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility in improving relationships between nations and to improve our own understanding of local Indigenous peoples and their cultures. From coast to coast to coast, we acknowledge the ancestral and unceded territory of all the Inuit, Métis, and First Nations people that call this nation home.

This webinar includes a series of videos on various key topics covered in the curriculum and the Supporting Student Health Guides which include creating a safer space in the classroom, consent, healthy relationships, safe sex, and body image. It was designed to support teachers in enriching their understanding of British Columbia's updated Physical and Health Education curriculum for secondary students and to provide teaching tools to assist with the delivery of what can be sensitive and sometimes uncomfortable content to teach.

This webinar was designed in partnership with youth, as youth voice was gathered through multiple consultations and will be included throughout the series.

Creating a Safer Space

What is a Safer Space in a Classroom?

According to the research, a safer space is an environment where a student's abilities, experiences, and perspectives are heard, explored, and celebrated. Through crafting a safer space, students are set up to excel in their learning and growth and to feel comfortable and engaged.

How to Build a Safer Space

While it can be difficult to adapt our language and perspective, it is essential to create a welcoming, safe(r), and inclusive environment for the youth entering the classroom. But how can this be done? Safer spaces are intentionally crafted using a variety of safer space building factors. While it may depend on the group you are working with, here are some strategies that may help:

- Before each lesson, you may consider putting up the agenda for the class. This can help students know what the class will be centered around and may prompt them to consider the preparations they need for the lesson.
- Creating group guidelines together is a great way to establish expectations and define what helps make a space safe(r) for youth. This also helps with sharing power between youth and adults, as youth have the opportunity to share their voice on what goes into the guidelines.
- If space permits, you can think about arranging desks or tables in a circle. This strategy helps to diffuse the power from the front of the classroom and can be especially helpful when discussing more challenging or vulnerable topics.
- Some information in the Supporting Student Health Guides and curriculum may be triggering for students or educators. Providing advanced notice of sensitive subjects (such as gender-based violence) can allow students the chance to consider extra needs they may have. Depending on your comfort level, being mindful of students' behaviour during the lesson and creating safety plans for students who may need to excuse themselves can validate any feelings of fear individuals may have going into the lesson.
- If it is feasible, try to plan your lessons before a break in the school day (recess or lunch) and not a major school break (winter, spring, summer) so students can speak to you in private or follow up with a school counselor or other professional if needed. As educators, remember our responsibilities around student disclosures.

- Using a trauma-informed approach in your lessons can reduce a lot of risk associated with discussing difficult health topics. This link provides [helpful information for a trauma-informed approach](#).

Activities: How to Build a Safer Space

You can also use activities like the Snowball Activity or Step into the Circle to build vulnerability and connection within the classroom.

Snowball Activity

Purpose

This activity allows participants the opportunity to be vulnerable anonymously. It opens the floor to honesty and important discussions.

Materials

- Scrap paper pieces
- Pens

Instructions

Choose a question or prompt (e.g. “What are you most nervous for?”; “What was the most challenging thing you learned today?”). Have the participants write their answer on a piece of paper. Crumple the paper and then throw it onto the floor into the middle of the room. You then have 2 options:

1. Have a snowball fight! Tell people they have 30 seconds to treat the papers like snowballs and have a snowball fight. Play music, amp them up, make teams if you want, and then at the end of the 30 seconds, people read whatever paper is in their hand.
2. Once everyone throws their paper in the middle, have everyone pick up the paper and read what other people have written.

You can give space for people to reflect on what they've heard or ask if they've noticed any patterns in people's responses. This is a time to be judgment-free as people are dabbling in vulnerability, so remind folks of their 4 Pillars.

Step into the Circle

Purpose

This activity encourages vulnerability as folks can share parts of their lives and experiences with one another. As we learn about each other's backgrounds and perspectives, we build our understanding and create deeper bonds and connections.

Materials

- Just the questions listed here.

Instructions

This quick activity shows us what we have in common with others in this group. Ask people to “step into the circle” if they identify with a statement and to step out if they don't. No explanation is needed either way.

In-person, you can form a circle with the group and literally step in and out of the circle. After each question, each person steps back into the full circle.

On Zoom, you can ask people to use emojis or the chat ('yes', 'me') to show they identify with the questions. Pick a few questions from the first two sets of questions and then pick one question from the last set.

To begin... (pick a few)

1. *Step into the circle... if you sing in the shower.*

2. *Step into the circle... if you've ever traveled (inside or outside the country).*

3. *Step into the circle... if you have a hobby.*

4. *Step into the circle... if you prefer tea over coffee.*

5. *Step into the circle... if you have a hidden talent.*

6. *Step into the circle... if you like cilantro.*

7. *Step into the circle... if you recently binge-watched a TV show.*

8. *Step into the circle... if you use one or more TV/movie streaming services.*

9. *Step into the circle... if you watched the news or read a news article this week.*

10. *Step into the circle... if you have a controversial food opinion or preference.*

11. Step into the circle... if you have a middle name.

12. Step into the circle... if you collect something.

13. Step into the circle... if you play a musical instrument.

14. Step into the circle... if you play sports.

15. Step into the circle... if you have a pet.

16. Step into the circle...if you believe in aliens.

A bit more personal... (pick 1-2)

1. Step into the circle... if you've ever had your heart broken.

2. Step into the circle... if you've ever been in love.

3. Step into the circle... if you have someone you call when you're feeling down.

4. Step into the circle... if you have felt joy in the last month.

5. Step into the circle... if you sometimes feel sad.

6. Step into the circle... if you feel welcomed in your community.

7. Step into the circle... if you feel like you know what you want in/from your life.

To end with... (pick just one)

1. Step into the circle... if you think you want to leave the world a better place for the people who come after you.

2. Step into the circle... if you believe in something beyond/outside the material world.

3. Step into the circle... if you have found your purpose in life.

How to Make Information Not Seem Scary

There is a fine line between informing students about potential dangers and scaring them. While it is important to provide students with educational information, this is best done through an approach that avoids instilling fear. It can be challenging to find this balance when discussing sensitive topics in the Supporting Student Health Guides such as the legalities surrounding the age of consent in Canada, grooming, sextortion, and STIs (sexually transmitted infections).

For example, graphic images are often used as a scare tactic for STI prevention. This can be both unnecessary and potentially traumatic for some people.

An approach that could be tried when discussing safety online could be saying something like “Most of the people on the internet are not bad people. But just as there are dangerous people in the real world, there are also dangerous people online.” It is important to not exaggerate to scare students. Remind students that they will continue to have difficult and important decisions to make about how they use the internet, because they will have more and more access to the internet as they grow up.

Adult Allyship

An adult ally helps youth amplify their voice through meaningful engagement. With the support of an adult ally, young people can be meaningfully involved in every stage of an initiative. Being an ally to young people involves a combination of positive attitude, skill and awareness to help in advocating for a youth leadership and empowerment agenda.

A genuine youth-adult partnership involves shared decision-making power where youth feel empowered and involved. Youth-adult partnerships are strong and trusting relationships that help youth to be understood (i.e., their needs and their interests), which in turn, helps to implement effective strategies adapted to the unique needs of the youth they are working alongside.

Some strategies for promoting an adult-youth partnership include:

- Asking questions of youth before making plans. You can work to gauge where a class is at and revise a lesson as necessary (e.g. defining gender, sex, sexual orientation, stigma, body image).
- Checking your own negative assumptions about youth or the topics you are covering can help provide a non-judgemental space where youth can feel comfortable asking questions that they may have.
- If an idea from a youth cannot or will not happen, you can let them know right away so that they do not feel ignored later on.
- Involving youth in plans and decision-making can allow youth to feel heard and seen and as though their opinions matter, which can lead to better overall engagement.
- Try adding engaging elements to your lessons, such as games, guest speakers, jigsaws, films, cartoons, music, discussions, debates, web-based lessons, graphic organizers, etc. In fact, try anything that will allow the students to become active participants, rather than passive observers.

Inclusive Language

In order to build inclusivity within the classroom, it is important to recognize relationships outside of the heteronormative lens. The heteronormative ideology refers to the idea that there are only two genders, and they are each associated with roles that match their assigned sex at birth. It also refers to heterosexual relationships as the “norm” and what we are supposed to desire. However, we know that many individuals identify outside the gender and sexuality binary (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, non-binary, transgender, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, Two Spirit, etc...).

Inclusive language can feel daunting at first and requires commitment and time. Making small changes one at the time can quickly make a difference. Furthermore, there are many resources available to help you navigate more inclusive languages. Here are some tips for framing things in a more inclusive lens:

Tip	Do's	Don'ts
Use gender neutral language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Folks”, “y’all”, “people” • “Female identifying”, “male identifying” • “Person with a penis”, “person with a vagina” • “Partner” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Guys”, “girls” • “Male”, “female” • “Girlfriend”, “boyfriend”
Don't assume someone's pronouns or misgender.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unless a student has told you their pronouns, use “they/them” • If someone has expressed their preferred pronouns, follow that 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Force people to say their pronouns
Use diverse examples.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a variety of relationship types (man-man, woman-woman, woman-nonbinary, etc.) • Try using gender-neutral names (e.g. Charlie, Cameron, Arlo, Riley, Parker, Morgan) • Use gender neutral pronouns (i.e. they/them) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always use gendered examples (e.g. Sofia and Mark, Lauren and Benjamin) • Use she/her and he/him pronouns

It's okay to make a mistake! How to apologize for misgendering someone:

- "I'm sorry, I meant [correct name/pronoun]"
- Keep your apology brief so it doesn't become about you and your mistake

How to correct misgendering when you see or hear it:

- "I noticed you used she to refer to that person. Just to let you know, they use they/them pronouns"
- Model to others that a correction can be done in a friendly way, and is important for respecting and including gender non-conforming individuals

Responding to the Unexpected

Students may sometimes ask unexpected questions or disclose sensitive information when introduced to sensitive topics in the classroom. Here are a few tips for responding to difficult questions or situations:

- If you receive a difficult question, you can ensure that you have understood the question and the student has understood the answer by saying: "What I hear is that you're curious about ___", answering the question, and then asking "Did that answer your question?". This open communication allows the chance to see if the student has been satisfied.
- If students still have questions or if you don't feel comfortable answering a specific question in the moment, you can let the students know they are good questions and that you will find good answers. Seek support and answer the question(s) during your next lesson.
- Provide the class with an anonymous question box and ask them to write questions or one thing they learned that day without writing their names. Since everyone is writing something, students can feel safer asking questions. If possible, keep the question box available so that students can ask any questions that arise later. Remember that you can always revisit a topic at a later date if you find a better way to answer a question.

It is okay to not know an answer to something! In fact, it is an opportunity that you can take with your class to find an answer that is credible and reliable together.

Tips for Handling Difficult Situations

If a student discusses a relationship issue in their own life, it's important to show that you believe them and not minimize their concerns. It is also important not to jump to

conclusions, as the other person in the relationship may have a very different perspective. This is especially important if both people involved are students whom you may interact with.

You can provide students with specific instructions for accessing resources and support. For example, contact local health authorities to get current phone numbers and websites for resources, or show students how to get to the closest resources on foot, by bus, and so on.

While students may want to discuss more ordinary relationship problems, if a student tells you about a relationship issue that seems abusive, be aware of your responsibilities around disclosure. It is important to remember your duties as an educator. The Child, Family and Community Service Act (CFCSA) requires that anyone who has reason to believe that a child or youth has been or is likely to be abused or neglected must report the suspected abuse or neglect to a child welfare worker.

Consent

As educators, it is essential to recognize the importance of consent in the variety of relationships that we have with others. The goal is for discussions of consent to be regular and for all people to get used to asking for consent and to be comfortable both saying no and accepting no as an answer.

Understanding Consent

When initiating discussions on consent, it can be helpful to begin with boundaries. Each person has the right to their own boundaries and defining what those are, and we all have a responsibility to respect them. While issues of consent definitely exist in sexual relationships, consent issues also exist throughout life and make for very interesting discussions with students.

To facilitate conversations about consent, we can refer to five key elements that must be present for any interaction to be consensual. These elements can be easily remembered by using the acronym "FRIES". "FRIES" stands for:

F – Freely Given. Decisions about any activity should be made without pressure, force, intimidation, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

R – Reversible. Even if you have agreed to do something, you can change your mind, even during sex. Consent is ongoing and not a one-time thing.

I – Informed. Consent includes honesty and laying out the different aspects of the activity.

E – Enthusiastic. Consent should be enthusiastic and stated using a verbal "yes"; your partner shouldn't look or sound unhappy about doing something.

S – Specific. Your partner agreeing to do one thing does not mean they have consented to other things; you need to check with your partner before going further.

Here is [a great video by NYU entitled Let's Talk About Consent](#) that touches on some of these aspects.

When having these conversations, it is important for young people to understand that asking for consent is a crucial component of showing respect for their partners as well as themselves. It may be helpful to discuss how clear and direct communication is an essential component for positive relationships and leads to trust building, developing

healthy and strong boundaries, and fostering respect. It may also be helpful to discuss different situations where consent could be present and make sure to emphasize that it is necessary in both sexual and non-sexual encounters.

Framing consent as an active process can help establish that consent is not a single instance, but rather a process that requires regular and consistent communication and checking in with yourself and your partner(s) to make sure that everyone involved feels comfortable and safe.

Some strategies that you can use to teach consent:

- **Initiate the conversation:** Begin by asking students what they know about consent and what it means to them.
- **Provide a clear definition:** Consent is an agreement to engage in an activity and occurs when you ask, or give, permission to do something. Consent is used and should be used within daily life interactions and/or activities – such as asking for food or drink, taking a picture and posting it on social media, physical touching, or participating in an activity.
- **Use real-life scenarios:** Use scenarios that illustrate the importance of communication, respect, and boundaries. You can encourage students to share their own examples and discuss them in small groups.
- **Role-playing exercises:** You can have students role-play the scenarios they come up with to practice their communication skills.
- **Emphasize respect throughout:** Continue to mention the importance of respecting another person’s boundaries and maintaining our own boundaries. Try the “practice saying no” activity.

Creating a Consent Culture and Bodily Autonomy

As mentioned in the Supporting Student Health Guides, it is important to consider how you can create a space where you model the language and attitude of consent and build a culture of consent. But what is consent culture?

Consent culture prioritizes respect and communication in all interactions, including romantic and sexual relationships. Normalizing conversations in your class about respecting the bodily autonomy of other people can help build a culture of consent within your classroom. A great example of being a leader in consent culture is when students ask to use the washroom. While it can be potentially disruptive for students to be moving around during classes, denying a student the ability to go to the washroom or meeting other bodily needs does not advocate for bodily autonomy. When you trust

students and give them the freedom to meet their needs, you also expect that students will make good choices and not abuse this right.

Some strategies to help teach bodily autonomy:

- Discuss what bodily autonomy means: Allow students the chance to say what bodily autonomy means to them, and then provide a definition. “Bodily autonomy is the right to make decisions regarding your own body without influence or coercion from other people.
- Emphasize consent and boundaries: Reiterate the importance of knowing your boundaries in physical and non-physical scenarios. You can use the Will, Won’t, Want activity in this discussion, found in the supplementary PDF guide.
- Encourage self-advocacy: Allow students the ability to practice saying no and emphasize the importance of staying true to yourself and what you’re comfortable with.
- Provide real-life examples: Provide situations outside of sex where students practice saying no, advocating for themselves, and establishing boundaries. Everyday situations like respecting if a friend doesn’t want to share food, or doesn’t want their picture taken are good examples.

Activity: To discuss consent

Will, Won’t, Want Activity

Purpose

- To understand that everyone has different desires and boundaries
- To recognize how decisions, based on desires and boundaries, can result in behaviour
- To apply mindfulness and exploration of desire and boundary setting specifically to dating relationships as a case study.

Materials

- Will, Won’t, Want sheets
- Pencils, pens

Instructions

Hand out Will, Won’t, Want sheets to everyone. Ask the group to name a relationship behavior (e.g., hanging out with friends, going on a date, going to an event, having a meal

with someone) or use the Relationship Behaviours list to name a relationship behaviour. Have the participants list what they are willing to do (permeable boundary), what they won't do (i.e., solid boundary), and what they want to do (area of exploration). Let the group know they do not have to share their will, won't, want answers, but that there will be a more general reflection afterwards.

If participants are having a hard time coming up with what they will, won't or want to do, use the relationship behaviours list prompts.

Example: Going to a dance

Will: What am I willing to do? In what conditions?	Won't: What am I not willing to do?	Want: What do I want to do?
Invite someone I have a crush on to dance with me (only for a fast dance or in a group)	Dance a slow dance with someone	Dance with my group of friends Fast dances with individuals Hang out at a table and chat with friends

Invite everyone to reflect on their will, won't, want list. Ask the group to individually think about how it feels when they identify something they will, won't and want to do.

How does it feel in your body to be certain about:

- Something you want to do?
- Something you do not want to do?
- Something you are willing to try?

Where do you feel that in your body? Is it a calming, excited, nervous, or uncomfortable feeling? Pay attention to these feelings to help you identify your boundaries. Invite participants to share some of their reflections.

Facilitator tip: In a dating relationship, this activity can be used to explore the overlap of both people's wills and wants.

Relationship Behaviour	Prompts
Go on a date	Go to a public place Go alone Go to the person's house/be in their room Go somewhere we have to talk (a coffee shop or restaurant) Go somewhere we can't talk (a movie) Have our parents drive us
Go to a dance	Invite someone I like Slow dance with someone Fast dance with someone Dance Dance with my friends Hang out and talk
Be with someone (dating exclusively)	Hold hands Show affection publicly Show affection privately Share my relationship on social media Tell my parents Tell my friends Introduce them to my parents
Crush on someone	Tell them I like them Sit next to them in class Eat with them at lunch Hang out with them after school Tell my friends Text them or contact them on social media

The Nuances of Consent

When discussing consent, it is also important to acknowledge the roles that power and coercion play. Students may be involved in situations where consent cannot be given. Outlining that consent can only be established in a relationship that is equal and free from coercive acts and power imbalances can highlight how consent is more than “no means no”. Power imbalances can be subtle and are not always obvious. Offering some real-world examples of different power imbalances (such as student-teacher, student-coach, student-tutor, employee-supervisor) can allow students the opportunity to make connections within their own lives.

Some commonly used forms of coercion include:

- Pressuring: repeatedly asking someone until they say yes.
- Threatening: “I will break up with you if you don’t have sex with me.”
- Intimidating: Smashing something when someone says “no”.
- Blackmailing: “If you don’t have sex with me I’ll share those pictures you sent me.”
- Guilt-tripping: “If you really loved me you would have sex with me.”

How do we know if we are communicating properly? Here are some things you can do to practice continuing the conversation of consent:

Action	What does this mean?
Honour your boundaries.	Trust your gut. If you feel uncomfortable or don’t want to do something, you have the right to tell your partner(s) and have them respond with compassion.
Always err on the side of caution.	Check-in and communicate with your partner(s). Only proceed if everyone involved is engaged and enthusiastic.
Communicate your interests.	Communicate how you’re feeling and pay attention to yours and your partner(s)’ verbal and non-verbal cues.
Assess your ability to give consent.	Make sure you and your partner(s) are not incapacitated to the point they cannot give consent. Make sure that a relationship of power is not present.

Action	What does this mean?
Have verbal consent.	Before engaging in sexual activity, ask for consent.
Don't make assumptions.	Don't try to read your partner(s)' mind. Ask for clarity if you need to.
Create space for your partner(s).	Giving your partner(s) space allows them the opportunity to communicate their likes, wants, and needs.
Check in with yourself and your partner(s).	As things change or escalate check-in using continued verbal consent.

Navigating Rejection

As we begin to have discussions about consent, we can also begin to recognize that asking for and giving consent can be a difficult and uncomfortable thing to do. Emphasizing to students that it can be hard to put yourself out there and risk rejection can validate any feelings of fear they may have and normalize discomfort as a learning tool. However, consent is still a necessary part of building healthy and positive relationships in everyone's life.

It can be helpful to outline that when anyone is asking for consent, they are being vulnerable and oftentimes going outside of their comfort zone. Not receiving consent can sometimes make people feel bad (e.g. being rejected), particularly when there is positive intent behind a request. We can help students develop the skills they need to navigate these difficult moments and the feelings that accompany them by emphasizing the importance of empathy and understanding and resilience.

You can remind students that when someone communicates their boundaries, we must respect them. Even though it is not always easy to hear “no”, it is essential to respond in a respectful and supportive manner. To make it easier for students, you can break down their response into three parts:

1. Acknowledge your feelings and the other person's feelings.
2. Accept their decision and adjust expectations.
3. Take care of yourself by finding support from friends or family.

How do you know if consent is present? Here is a quick tool you can use to practice navigating responses with students:

Your partner's action:	Your action:	Things you can say to display empathy and understanding (let students provide examples!):
If your partner says no...	You do not have consent. Respect their no and do not try to guilt or convince them to say yes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Thank you for communicating that to me and being honest.” • “I totally understand. Thanks for letting me know!” • “I respect you letting me know what you are and aren’t comfortable with.”
If your partner seems unsure...	Play it safe. Do not continue without a check-in. Ask them what they would like to do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Are you okay with ___?” • “You don’t need to do anything you’re uncomfortable with, I will respect you regardless.”
If your partner says yes...	You can continue. Remember to check-in throughout to ensure that everyone is enjoying themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I appreciate you letting me know you’re comfortable with this, let me know if you change your mind at any point.”

Do people always just say “no”? Here are some other ways individuals may say or show they do not want to participate:

The ways we can say no:	The ways we can show no:
I’m not sure.	Pushing you away.
I don’t feel well.	Not moving.
I think we should stop.	Turning away.
I’m tired.	Crying.
That hurts.	Silence.

Healthy Relationships

The Four Pillars

The Students Commission of Canada has four core values called the Four Pillars. We use them to create a safe space for staff, partners, and the young people we work with. The Four Pillars are:

Respect: We start with respect for the gift and strength that each person carries within: for young people, their idealism and their capacity to improve the world.

Listen: With respect as our foundation, we learn to listen. We listen not just with our ears, but with our heads, hearts and all of our senses. We listen actively, intensely, not just to words, but to silences, to deeds, to experiences.

Understand: To understand is to go beyond listening, to process what we have heard from others, to reflect upon the new knowledge and gifts given to us.

Communicate: The beginning of action, this is when the obstacles fall away. We create plans with others and implement them to make a positive difference in our world.

This webpage from [Ophea discusses adapting The Four Pillars to a classroom setting](#), if you wish to take a deeper dive into incorporating them into developing group guidelines and creating a safe(r) space for your students to feel comfortable discussing the topics mentioned in the webinar series.

We can also think about these pillars as building blocks of a healthy relationship.

Respect

The Supporting Student Health Guides states that healthy relationships should be based on respect. This remains true whether those relationships are romantic or not. Not everyone in a classroom needs to be friends or like each other, but everyone needs to be respectful.

To begin having students reflect on what respect can look like in their lives both inside and outside the classroom, you may wish to try having students brainstorm on what respect [means to them] and how people show respect and disrespect. Then, to get students thinking about how respect is foundational to a healthy relationship, you could try to connect the previous conversation with how it feels to be respected or

disrespected and how respect is paramount in a healthy relationship, romantic or otherwise.

Listening

In a healthy relationship, it is also crucial for all parties to practice active listening. This means listening with the intention of better understanding the perspective of another person rather than listening to formulate a response.

One tool that we recommend for helping students to learn how to be an active listener is the OARS technique. OARS is an acronym to help students remember techniques they can use for active listening. It stands for Open questions, Affirming, Reflecting, and Summarizing. We have included a discussion activity that can be used to help students practice and reflect on these concepts.

Activity: Healthy Relationships

OARS

Purpose

This is an acronym to help us remember techniques for active listening. It stands for Open questions, Affirming, Reflecting, and Summarizing.

- Open Questions: Questions that cannot be answered with a yes/no can help us get more information from a person.
- Affirming: A supportive response.
- Reflecting: Repeating back what the other person has said.
- Summarizing: Putting together a few things the other person has said.

Discussion

- What are some examples of open questions that we can ask to get more information from a person? (e.g., What do you mean? Can you tell me more about that?)
- Can you think of any affirming comments or gestures that you already use to show people you're listening? (e.g., Yes, Mmhmm, nodding)
- What do you think the difference between reflecting and summarizing is?
- Can you think of any examples to show the difference?

Understanding

When active listening is established, people can begin to work toward understanding one another. Understanding helps create the conditions for a healthy relationship. When people understand who others are, and who they are, they can begin to see each other as equals, value their differences, and build upon their similarities and common goals. There is understanding created around the problems each person faces, and the aspirations that they have.

Communication

To introduce students to the importance of respectful communication in healthy relationships, you may wish to show students the difference between how a message written in text is received and how the same message is received when read aloud, particularly if there are things like sarcasm or humour in the intended message. You could then have students brainstorm the differences between good and bad communication and when different methods of communication are appropriate or inappropriate.

It is also important to recognize that there can be a wide range of different cultural norms regarding communication styles within relationships. Elements of good communication can include: ensuring clarity, honesty, asking questions to understand, providing someone the chance to respond, and being an active listener. On the other hand, poor communication may include: vagueness, dishonesty, and not listening to others. For example, listening to respond rather than listening to understand.

Activity: Navigating Boundaries

Red Flag Green Flag

Purpose

- To understand that behaviour in relationships can fall anywhere on a continuum of healthy and unhealthy relationships
- To understand the continuum of relationship violence and healthy relationships
- To understand how certain behaviours that may not seem harmful are part of a broader pattern towards violence

Materials

- Red and Green flag cards (for small groups, bring a copy for each group)

- Flip chart paper
- Markers (Red and Green)
- Red flag, green flag statements:
 - *Calling and texting you all the time*
 - *Even when you disagree, you know this person has your back!*
 - *Your relationship helps you to be the best version of yourself*
 - *Someone (friend or partner) tells you to change your outfit*
 - *After a fight, you both acknowledge you could have behaved differently*
 - *Someone disagrees with you, but you still feel respected by them*
 - *You are dating, but you don't spend all your time together because you both have lots of friends and lots of interests*
 - *They want to spend all their time with only you*
 - *Your best friend doesn't like the person you are dating, or the person you are dating doesn't like your best friend*
 - *They get jealous when you talk to other people*
 - *They want to know all of your social media passwords*
 - *Your partner doesn't want you to be friends with someone*

Instructions

Place Red and Green flag cards around the room. Using dotmocracy, ask participants to choose whether the behaviour is a red flag (i.e., they have concern that the behaviour is unhealthy/violent) or a green flag (i.e., the behaviour is indicative of a healthy relationship) and mark the card with corresponding red or green dots. Each person in the group gets one dot per statement.

Facilitator questions:

- Which statements did you find to be the most strong red/green flags? Why?
- Which statements are the most controversial (i.e., have both red and green dots)? Why?
- Are there some contexts/situations where the behaviour could be unhealthy or healthy?
- Which statements did everyone agree on? Why?
- What are other red and green flags that you would add?

Addressing Difficult Topics: Abusive Relationships and Gender-Based Violence

When addressing difficult topics like abusive relationships and gender-based violence with students, it can be helpful to keep in mind the perspectives and experiences of youth and center these in your discussions.

Approximately one in every four students will experience a traumatic event before the age of 16. This means each classroom could have multiple youth experiencing various traumas. To create a trauma-sensitive safe space for students, it is important to incorporate [a trauma-informed approach](#) in the classroom. For more resources access [Teaching and Self-Care Resources](#).

Trauma informed teaching tips for the classroom:

1. **Recognize the signs of trauma.** Signs of trauma in the classroom may include:
 - a. difficulty focusing
 - b. struggling with creating and maintaining friendships
 - c. excessive absences
 - d. changes in their school performance,
 - e. withdrawing from activities
2. **Provide consistency and structure.**
 - a. Structured daily schedules/providing an overview each day:
 - b. Self-regulation, mindfulness and breathing exercises can be helpful to incorporate in the classroom so students develop these skills and can use them as tools on their own if needed
3. **Utilize social-emotional learning**
 - a. Social-emotional learning helps students develop skills in critical areas:
 - i. Self-awareness
 - ii. Self-control
 - iii. Social awareness
 - iv. Interpersonal skills
 - b. Assigning responsibilities and tasks to each student builds a sense of self-worth.
 - c. Starting the day with an affirmation can set the tone for a positive learning environment as it encourages positive self-talk and promotes a growth mindset.
 - d. Teaching [mindfulness activities](#) such as [breathing](#) can be done in conjunction with “brain breaks” in between lessons.

- e. Journal exercises help students identify and express their feelings or opinions, and group discussions can promote healthy and respectful disagreements.

Abusive Relationships

Open communication is crucial in a healthy relationship. Although every relationship is unique, some other general attributes of a healthy relationship may include: being able to be vulnerable and feel safe with someone, trust, independence, strong support networks, honesty, and respecting boundaries.

Some healthy relationships may have characteristics that could seem unhealthy to those outside the relationship. For instance, very close friends might share jokes about each other as a part of their friendship. As long as this relationship is still grounded in respect, and everyone is happy, it can still be a healthy relationship.

While all relationships will have some disagreements and more difficult times, healthy relationships generally produce mostly positive energy and happiness. Abusive relationships, in contrast, can feel draining and produce anxiety, shame, guilt, depression, and fear.

In abusive relationships, people often abuse others in an effort to gain and maintain power and control over another person. There are several different kinds of abuse: cultural, financial, physical, psychological, sexual, verbal, and emotional. In young people, abuse can present itself in many different ways. There is no one universal way that abuse looks in relationships.

If you're looking for a place to start discussing abusive relationships with students, which can be an especially difficult topic, something you can try is having students brainstorm attributes that would be found in a healthy relationship and attributes that would be found in an abusive relationship. Additionally, if students are comfortable, have them give examples of what different kinds of abuse can look like. This allows students to begin thinking critically about how these topics may apply to their own lives and relationships.

In abusive relationships, people often abuse others in an effort to gain and maintain power and control over another person. There are several different kinds of abuse: cultural, financial, physical, psychological, sexual, verbal, and emotional. In young people, this abuse can present in many different ways. There is no one universal way that abuse looks in relationships, so it is important to recognize the different types and emphasize that none of these ways of control is okay.

The BC Government has created a pamphlet called [Help Starts Here - Sexual Assault](#) with additional information about some tips for supporting students and responding to disclosures of sexual assault.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence can be defined as the use and abuse of control over another person that is perpetrated against someone based on their gender identity, gender expression, or perceived gender. This violence can be physical or emotional forms of abuse, and in young people may look like: hitting, stalking, sexual assault, name-calling or put-downs, control, and manipulation. The curriculum emphasizes that abusers often try to isolate and emotionally control their victims and attempt to destroy their victim's self-esteem. People who experience gender-based violence need support and to understand that they do not deserve what is happening to them. It is important that youth, who may be bystanders to this type of violence understand this.

People of all types of identities and backgrounds can be abused. However women, girls, Two Spirit, trans, and non-binary people face the highest risk of experiencing gender-based violence. Some groups of people face disproportionate impacts of gender-based violence due to additional barriers and discrimination they face in society including: Indigenous people, LGBTQ2S+ people, people living with disabilities, racialized people, and other diverse groups.

For more information about gender-based violence, the Canadian Women's Foundation has developed a great resource on [The Facts about Gender-Based Violence](#).

Healthy Sexual Decision: Supporting Safer Sex

As adolescents navigate their sexuality and sexual decisions, it is important to recognize that their decisions can have an impact on other areas of their life beyond these immediate experiences. As educators, it is important to highlight how sexual decision making can be complex and discuss the different considerations with students and have the knowledge to be able to make informed and healthy decisions that align with their own values and goals. It is essential to consider that there will always be risks when engaging in sexual activity, but informing students on how to make decisions about their sexual safety lessens the risks.

Making decisions with a partner: Helping students have conversations with their partner lessens the risk

When discussing healthy decision making, it is important to remind students that sex, in all its varieties, should always be consensual for all parties involved. To know more about consent, see our modules on consent.

To begin the conversation on sexual decision making, it can be useful to let students know that while sex is often portrayed as a singular, physical act within the media, it can also be an experience that is complex and involves the body, the mind, and the heart. Informing students on the different types of intimacy that exist can be helpful to put this into perspective. As an exercise, you can work with your class to list out the different types of intimacy and what actions might go into each. Here is a table to prompt the conversation:

Type of Intimacy	What it involves
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holding hands • Hugging • Kissing • Cuddling
Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing your emotions • Being vulnerable • Sharing stories of your past
Intellectual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having curiosity about each other • Sharing your views and perspectives
Spiritual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing your religious beliefs and practices

Having a discussion on intimacy can help frame sex as an experience where partners share their bodies, thoughts, feelings, and desires with one another. It is important for students to know that they must understand and respect the partner dynamic when deciding to have sex. You can inform youth to create an open dialogue with their partner(s) and be open to hearing about different opinions and preferences. That being said, it is also okay to like and want different things. As long as there is respect and communication, students can ensure they are having fulfilling sexual experiences while prioritizing the wellbeing and autonomy of each person involved.

Making decisions in the context of the law: informing students about legal limitations lessens the risk

Having discussions about the legalities of sex with students can be an integral part of promoting safe and responsible sexual behaviour as well as prevent harm to individuals involved. Age difference is determined by birthday, month, and year. In Canada, the age of consent is 16, with exceptions for younger people if they are close in age to each other. So, if a 12-year-old is dating someone who is two years and one day older than them, it would be illegal for them to engage in sexual activity. For specific details, see the [Federal Department of Justice Canada guidelines on consent](#).

This would also be a good time to reinforce other relevant legal considerations, such as acts where sexual activity is exploitative or sexual activity under the influence of substances.

Making decisions about contraception: Giving students information about contraceptives and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

By discussing contraceptive methods with students, you can help to create a more comprehensive understanding of sex that includes how to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). When beginning the conversation on contraceptives, it can be good to emphasize that no single method is right for everyone and that every person's needs and preferences will vary. By helping students understand the pros and cons of different methods, you can give them the knowledge they need to make the best decision that works for them.

Oftentimes, there is a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding about contraception and what it accomplishes. Therefore, it is important to explain that while the use of contraceptives can significantly reduce the chances of unplanned pregnancies, the only method that is 100% effective against unplanned pregnancy and STIs is not having sex. However, it is also important not to scare students into abstinence. As an educator, you

have the power to inform them that sex is normal and can be enjoyable, as long as the proper precautions are taken for everyone's safety and best interest.

When discussing STIs, it is important to not induce fear. You can let students know that treating an STI can be as simple as treating an infection like strep throat and that as soon as they are sexually active, they should be getting regular testing for STIs and HIV. You can inform them on where to get tested, and what testing consists of. Building a comprehensive picture of the process can reduce a lot of the fear and/or anxiety associated with it. Ensure you tell students that both testing and results are completely anonymous and confidential, and that parents and guardians will not be given the information.

Making decisions about pornography consumption: Helping students be reflective and intentional about their porn consumption lessens the risk

Sexual health experts have stated that if parents and educators are not teaching students about sex and sexuality, then youth learn about these topics elsewhere such as the internet and pornography. We can inform students how to make think critically about the information that they find online and how to determine whether their sources are credible, reliable, and accurate.

It's important to discuss the underlying messages that can be found in pornography including violence, inequality between men and women and lack of consent. Within these discussions you can highlight to students that a lot of what can be found on the internet is photoshopped, unsafe, violent or completely fabricated. You may want to talk about the difference between reliable and unreliable websites so students are mindful of where they are getting their information from. Having these conversations with students are important as research shows that when students intentionally or unintentionally view particularly violent pornography at increasingly younger ages, it complicates their sexual landscape and normalizes teenage sexual aggression.

Hopefully you've gained some tools to have important discussions with students around the risks associated with engaging in sexual activity but also being able to make decisions about their sexual safety that lessens the risks.