

The *FLASH* Curriculum Guide to Answering Students' Questions

*This guide can also be found in the “Important Reading for Teachers” section of the 2nd edition of **High School FLASH**.*

The surest way to meet students where they are developmentally is to make time for them to ask questions and to honor them with answers.

In this section, we will discuss the place of values in the classroom and offer:

- a model for addressing value-laden questions, the “**FLASH Value Question Protocol**.”
- strategies for addressing other questions students ask, including:
 - questions containing **slang or hurtful language**.
 - **personal** questions.
 - questions where **you aren't sure what's being asked**.
 - questions for which **you don't know an answer**.
 - questions about **sexual technique**.

The Place of Values in the Classroom

It's neither possible nor desirable to provide value-free education. Every moment you spend in the classroom you are communicating some of what you believe about sexuality.

When you do or *don't* respond to students' jokes and innuendos, you communicate values. When you do or *don't* treat a colleague or student with respect, you communicate values. When you talk about your students' families, when you talk about your family, when you intervene in sexual bullying, you communicate values. Even the ways in which you walk, talk, dress, and sit communicate what it means to you to be the gender you are.

FLASH is not value-free. But those of us who work in public schools need to distinguish between two different *types* of values. They need to be handled differently.

There are some that are relatively **UNIVERSAL**. These are values shared by 95% of families we serve. They are values we aren't only *permitted* to express; they are ones we are obligated to reinforce.

There are others that are **NOT UNIVERSAL**. These need to be answered with care to avoid hurting or offending a child and their family.

Relatively **UNIVERSAL** values include such things as:

- Forcing someone to have sex with you is wrong.
- Knowingly spreading disease is wrong.
- Taking care of your reproductive health is important.
- Sex between children and adults is wrong.
- Adultery is wrong.

Values that are **NOT UNIVERSAL** - those without consensus in North America – are ones where a teacher should NEVER teach or express a particular belief. But that doesn't mean we should avoid them altogether. The teacher's role is to provide information on these matters and to facilitate respectful discussion about them.

Examples of **NON-UNIVERSAL** issues where there is a wide range of values in the community include:

- Abortion
- Birth control
- Masturbation
- Same-sex relationships
- Sex outside of marriage
- Cohabitation
- At what age & under what circumstances it's ok to start having sex

NOTE: Parents and guardians, unlike teachers, should feel free to ask their children about their feelings and beliefs and to share their own with their children. In fact, this sort of dialogue within families is very important. Children absolutely need a chance - at home - to explore feelings and beliefs with adults they love, just as they need a chance to learn factual information and to have universal, community values reinforced at school. Employees of public schools and other public agencies, unlike family members, have an ethical obligation not to share our personal beliefs in these non-universal arenas; and not to side with one family or one religious perspective or one child over another.

However, as we said above, just because it's inappropriate in a public school setting to teach *particular* values on controversial issues, that does not mean one can't teach *about* the issues. It just means that it must be done with respect for the diversity of opinion within the community. For example, a teacher may discuss abortion - what it is, where abortions are performed, the fact that it is legal in the United States - but it is not appropriate to share your beliefs about whether or not abortion is the right choice under particular circumstances or ever. (Note: Some school districts have policies about discussing abortion or other controversial topics in the classroom, so it is best to check with your school district first.)

When answering a question about an issue where there is diversity of opinion, we would urge you to follow the Values Question Protocol that follows.

FLASH Values Question Protocol

1. Listen to the question or read it aloud.
2. Legitimize the question.
3. Identify it as a belief question.
4. Answer the factual part, if there is one.
5. Help the class describe the community's range of beliefs.
6. Refer to family, clergy, and other trusted adults.
7. Check to see if you answered the question.
8. Leave the door open.

Example:

Q: "What do you believe about masturbation?"

A: "That's an interesting question; a lot of kids wonder about masturbation. The thing is it's a value question, not a fact question like most of the ones you've been asking me. It's one where every culture and every family believes something different. I can tell you what masturbation is. It's when a person strokes or touches their genitals for pleasure. What kinds of beliefs have you heard about masturbation? Some people believe ... [pause] Uh, huh, and some people believe ... [pause, listen, nod] Some people believe ... [pause]. So the point is, there are lots of different perspectives about masturbation. What I want is for everybody to have a conversation this week with an adult you trust: your parent or guardian, a grandparent or aunt or uncle, maybe a friend of the family or your best friend's mom. If you belong to a church, synagogue, mosque or temple, see if they have a belief about it. If you wrote the question, think about whether that answer helped. If not, feel free to drop another one in the envelope."

You will eventually tailor your use of the protocol, only using every step the first time that, for example, masturbation comes up. For now, you should practice the protocol step by step until it becomes a natural part of your teaching.

Read the question:

Read it verbatim, if you can. Use your judgment, of course, but even reading aloud relatively crude language - as long as you do it with a serious tone and facial expression - conveys your respect for the child who asked the question. It is likely to promote respect in return. Sometimes students need, for social status' sake or out of embarrassment, to ask in ways that seem intended to challenge us even though the underlying question is completely legitimate and they have a serious need for an answer. Even when they don't, someone else in the class may. And if not, your taking the question seriously will still set a vitally important tone. More about questions containing slang on page 22.

Legitimize the question:

"I am glad someone asked this one." Or "That's an interesting question." Or "People ask me this one every year." Or "This one is really compassionate/imaginative/respectful."

This will encourage your students to keep asking even as it discourages snide remarks about whoever asked that particular question.

Identify it as a belief question:

"Most of the questions you've been asking have been 'fact questions' where I could look up an answer that all the experts agree upon. This one is more of a 'value question' where every person, every family, every religion or culture has a different belief."

Teaching your students to distinguish facts from opinions (and from feelings) is at least as important as any content you will convey.

Answer the factual part, if there is one:

"Before we get to differing beliefs about masturbation, let me just make sure you know it doesn't cause people to go blind or mentally ill or to grow hair on their palms or anything like that." Even if the question is about the rightness or wrongness of masturbation, you need to make sure that your class understands what it is and that - values notwithstanding - no physical harm results from masturbating.

Some questions that are apparently fact questions may need a discussion of the underlying values, but always start by answering them:

"Can you get birth control without your boyfriend or husband knowing? Yes, legally in our state, you can. Now let's talk about the different beliefs people might have about couples' communicating about birth control."

Help the class describe the community's range of beliefs:

"Tell me some of the things you've heard that people believe about that."

"Some people believe ___?"

"Um, hmm, and some people believe ___?"

On sensitive issues such as sex and religion, it can be really unfair to ask individual students their own beliefs. In terms of religion, in Washington State, it also illegal. But it is very appropriate to ask them to think about what they have heard.

In a class that is used to thinking about the range of community values, you will be able to draw a full assortment of answers from the students. In other groups, especially younger ones, you may draw only a dichotomy (*"Some people believe masturbation is wrong."* and *"Some people believe it is right."*) In any case, your role is two-fold:

1. to make sure that every belief gets expressed - or paraphrased - respectfully, hopefully just the way the person who believed it might express it, and
2. to make sure that a complete a range of beliefs gets expressed, even if you have to supplement the few values the group can think of:

"That's right, some people believe that masturbation is wrong under any circumstances or that it's a sin. And some believe it's right, as long as it's done in private. Some people believe it's OK for little kids to masturbate but that after a certain age, children should be taught not to. Others believe there's no age limit and that elderly folks in nursing homes should be given private time in case they want to do it. Some people think masturbating

is fine for people who are single but that once you are in a relationship it's better to stop. But then some couples give each other privacy so their partner can masturbate."

Refer to family, clergy and other trusted adults:

"Because people have such different beliefs about this, I really want to encourage you to talk with your families - your parent or guardian, grandparent, stepparent, mom's or dad's partner - or with somebody at your community of worship, if you attend a church or synagogue or temple or mosque - or with some other adult you love and whose opinions matter to you. That could be your your best friend's parent, a counselor, or whomever will listen to your opinions and honestly share theirs. Have a conversation within the next week if you can."

Notice that this encouragement didn't assume that every child has a parent they can talk with. Some may be newly in a foster home and don't yet have that kind of relationship with their new "parents." Also, notice that we shouldn't assume that every child goes to church.

What if the family is likely to convey values that the child will feel hurt by (a teen who has come out to you as gay, for instance, but whose family is strongly opposed to homosexuality)? Still, knowing one's family's beliefs is developmentally important for young people. But help them think of other trusted adults, as well.

Check to see if you answered the question:

"Is that what you were asking?"

"Do you all think that was what the person who wrote this question was asking?"

Leave the door open:

"If that isn't what you really wanted to know, you can drop another question in the box; or come talk with me in private. You can also get a friend to ask it aloud for you or to explain to me what you meant. Just keep asking until I understand and tell you what you need to know."

Other Types of Questions

Most questions your class asks will not be value-laden. New teachers are often relieved to discover that *most* questions asked in a sexual health unit, like most in other units, are straightforward fact questions: ones for which you have an answer.

But there are some other types of questions that can be a little more challenging. We examine these in the pages that follow. Rather than a formal protocol, like the one we offered for value-laden questions, we'll offer strategies. Your professional judgment will determine which you use in response to a particular question.

The Slang or Hurtful Language Question

There are three very different kinds of slang questions:

1. Some contain euphemisms, baby talk, or non-medical, common synonyms for things: *"What does popping the cherry mean?"*
2. Others are crude but not unkind: *"Does it hurt you if you jack off a lot?"*

3. Still others contain derogatory language, stereotypes or disrespectful assumptions: *“Why are men such a-holes?”*

You will handle each of these differently. Trust your professional judgment and personal comfort as guides. Strategies include:

- Read the question verbatim. There are multiple advantages of reading the question verbatim, if at all possible. You avoid confusing the author of the question. You communicate your respect for the students and your trust in their sincerity and maturity. Even if you really do think the question was asked to push your buttons, reading it verbatim and treating it seriously communicates that you’re relatively unflappable and it diffuses the need to test.
- If it makes you too uncomfortable to read it verbatim, own your discomfort: “I’m not comfortable reading this one as it’s written. But it’s a legitimate question; let me paraphrase it.” Reword the question, making sure it’s still identifiable to its author.
- Identify the slang as such. Do that in a nonjudgmental sort of way, unless it’s demeaning slang.
- If it is demeaning slang, say so. Identify it as a put down (derogatory, offensive, mean, disrespectful, a stereotype) “whether it was meant to be or not.”
- Translate it into medical/standard (or, in the case of demeaning slang, “more respectful/sensitive”) language. Write the medical/standard/respectful/sensitive term on the board: “‘Balls’ is slang for ‘testicles’ - let me spell that for you.”
- Answer the question.

The Personal Question

Some questions are **personal about the asker**: *“I was abused by my uncle. He said he’d get me in trouble if I told anyone. What should I do?”* Strategies include:

- Never read these verbatim. If you do, people will turn and look around to see who asked the question.
- Paraphrase it. Generalize and omit identifying information: “Someone asked what a person should do if a relative abused them and said they’d get in trouble if they told anyone.”
- Remove the stigma by describing experiences like abuse as “common.”
- Answer the general question.

Some questions are **personal about you**, the teacher: *“Do you have children?” “Do you use birth control?”* Strategies include:

- Use your professional judgment about boundaries. General advice: If the question is about your identity and family constellation, you may choose to share. If it is about your sexual behavior, it is never OK to share. If it is about your health or health behavior, use your judgment.
- Err on the side of boundaries. Talk about and model boundaries. Identify it as personal, without judging the student for asking. Own your feelings: “That’s a personal question and I’m not comfortable sharing such personal stuff with you guys. You are my students. I care about you but you’re not my close friends.”
- Answer in a general way: “Maybe the person is really trying to figure out how common it is to use birth control. So I looked it up last night. According to the U.S. government, nearly all women (over 99%) between age 15 and 44 who have ever had sexual intercourse have used at least one form of birth control.”ⁱ

Some questions are **personal about someone else** (a classmate, another teacher): *“Is Mr. Smith gay?” “Has Lucy Parker went threw puberty?”* Strategies include:

- Never read these verbatim. That would violate someone’s privacy.
- Generalize: “Someone asked how you know if someone is gay.” or “Someone asked how you know if someone else has gone through puberty.”
- Remind people about protecting others’ privacy.
- Ask *“I’m curious about what difference it would make? Why would it matter?”*
- Answer the general question.

The Question You Don't Understand

Maybe the student’s handwriting is messy. Maybe their spelling or grammar is confusing. Maybe they used slang you don’t recognize or a pop culture reference you aren’t familiar with. Strategies:

- The most important thing, in order to not shut down students’ asking questions, is to own the responsibility for not understanding (as opposed to blaming the author of the question): *“I’m not sure what this person meant.”*
- Guess at the author’s intended question and answer it. You may need to answer more than one possible question.
- Ask if anyone in the class knows what the person might have meant.
- Invite the author to drop another question in the question box, rephrasing what she or he meant.

The Question for Which You Don't Know the Answer

Don’t panic. The fact that you don’t know gives you a valuable opportunity to model that even adults (teachers, doctors, journalists, etc.) don’t know all there is to know about human sexuality. It’s not a failure; it’s a chance to help *students* feel less ignorant for not knowing all there is to know about sex. Besides, it lets you teach the skill of finding answers ... a far more crucial learning than the answer itself. Strategies include:

- Admit you don’t know! Even compliment the asker on stumping the expert.
- Make an educated guess, but acknowledge that that’s what you are doing. For example, one of the authors was asked in a 5th grade class anonymous question box, *“How many people are polyorchid?”* She said, *“I’m not familiar with the word but let me think about it. ‘Poly’ means more than two of something. And ‘orchid’ means it has to do with testicles. So maybe the person is asking, ‘How many men have more than two testicles?’”*
- Look it up in front of them. If the teacher had a medical dictionary handy, they could have confirmed whether they were deducing correctly what *polyorchid* meant. And the class could have seen good modeling of looking up information in a reliable source.
- Promise to find out. Get back to them. Tell them how and where you found out. *“It is extremely rare. There have been fewer than 100 cases reported around the world.ⁱⁱ I found out by searching Google Scholar (where you find professional journals).”* But on the chance that the child who asked is polyorchid, I added, *“Of course most people have something unique about their bodies. Few people look exactly like the bodies I show diagrams of.”*
- Ask if anyone in the class knows the answer.

- Get a volunteer to research it and report back. Provide some guidance about where the volunteer might go for the answer (family doctor, librarian, particular – safe, reliable – websites). Consider offering extra credit.

The Sexual Technique Question

The purpose of the unit is not to teach people *how* to have sex. In a *college* class on human sexuality it might be appropriate to explain the how to. For example, if a student asked, “*How do girls masturbate?*” a college professor might talk about women using hands, toys, pillows, and/or fantasy. **That is not appropriate at this grade level.**

Strategies are pretty straightforward:

- Assume good intentions, not “testing.” Acknowledge that the person who asked the question may have been being playful, but don’t assume hostility on their part.
- Express boundaries.
- Answer the factual part of the question, not the “how to.”

“Well, I’m not here to teach people how any sexual behavior is done. But I can define it for you. Masturbation is a person rubbing his or her own genitals for comfort or pleasure. The genitals are the outside parts of the reproductive system - a boy’s or a man’s penis and scrotum, a girl’s or a woman’s labia and clitoris.”

Gaining Skills and Confidence in Answering Student Questions

Many educators view answering student questions as the cornerstone of sexual health education. Not only is it fundamental to student learning; it can build trust in your classroom, provide modeling of respectful communication, and address the confusing and sometimes dangerous misinformation that bombards young people in our culture. Skill and confidence come with practice, but training and technical assistance is available in King County, WA, and elsewhere.

Primarily, we recommend sexual health education training, which typically includes a component on answering questions. See page 10 for training opportunities, locally and nationwide. Additionally, in King County, WA, experienced sexual health educators from Public Health – Seattle & King County are available for classroom assistance, coaching, and phone consultation, in answering student questions. Go to: www.kingcounty.gov/health/flash and click on “Find Out About Training Here” on the left hand side of the screen.

With training and technical assistance, most educators find that their anxiety lessens, their skills improve rapidly, and answering student questions becomes a more enriching experience for them and their students.

ⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2010, August). *Use of Contraception in the United States: 1982-2008*. (Series 23, Number 29) Retrieved from www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_029.pdf

ⁱⁱ Chinthamani J, et al. (2009, October). Supernumerary Testis. *Radiology Case*, 3(11), 29-32.