

Values and Anonymous Questions

Questions which have a value component must be answered with care. In some cases, expressing your own personal values is inappropriate and could compromise your ability to work effectively with students of diverse backgrounds. Other times it may be perfectly appropriate for you to express your values, when they are commonly accepted by nearly 100% of the community. **COMMONLY ACCEPTED** (a.k.a. “universal”) values are appropriate and important for schools to teach.

Examples of **COMMONLY ACCEPTED** values:

- Forcing someone to have sex with you is wrong.
- Knowingly spreading disease is wrong.
- It's safest and healthiest for school-age kids not to have sex (this is NOT controversial, what IS controversial is when it's time to have sex).
- Taking care of your reproductive health is important.
- Sex between children and adults is wrong.

There are many issues, however, on which there is no consensus & community members hold **DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES** (a.k.a. “controversial”). These are issues about which the teacher should NOT teach or express a particular belief. Providing balanced information or facilitating respectful discussion about the issues is fine.

Examples of issues with **DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES** in the community:

- Abortion
- Birth control
- Masturbation
- Gender Roles
- Homosexuality
- Sex outside of marriage
- Cohabitation
- What age/under what circumstances it's acceptable to start having sex

Parents, unlike teachers, should feel free to ask your child about her/his beliefs and to share yours. 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 have a responsibility to encourage children to talk with their families about their personal values.

However, just because it's inappropriate in a public school setting to teach particular values on controversial issues 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 your community. For example, you can discuss abortion—what it is, the fact that it is legal in

this country, where abortions are performed, etc., but it is not appropriate to share your beliefs about whether or not abortion is a correct choice.

Therefore, when answering a value question you should follow the following F.L.A.S.H. values question protocol:

Values Question Protocol:

- 1. Read the question (verbatim, if you can) or listen to it carefully.**
- 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 for more questions.**

SAMPLE Q: I masturbate. Is that ok?

SAMPLE A: That's a great question, a lot of kids wonder about masturbation. Masturbation is when a person strokes or touches their genitals for pleasure. People have really different beliefs about masturbation. Some families believe it's ok, as long as you're in a private place. Other families believe it's never ok. You need to check with your families, or another trusted adult to find out how they feel about it. If that's not what you meant, feel free to leave another question in the box or you can talk to me after class.

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

Values Question Protocol in more detail:

1. 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

(Adapted from 9/10 F.L.A.S.H., Values Questions and Protocol, and How to Use F.L.A.S.H., www.kingcounty.gov/health/FLASH)

to promote respect in return. If the language is too crude to repeat, even with a red face and an explanation ("Someone used slang, but let me read it for you as they wrote it before I translate it."), then don't read it directly. But when you paraphrase it, make sure you are clear enough that the author of the question will recognize it as his or hers.

2. Legitimize the question:

"I am glad someone asked this one."

"That's an interesting question."

"People ask me this one every year."

"This one is really thoughtful (compassionate, imaginative, respectful)."

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

3. 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 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.

4. Answer the factual part, if there is one:

Thus, for instance, if the question is about the rightness or wrongness of masturbation, you need to make sure that your class understands that, values notwithstanding, no physical harm results from masturbating:

"Before we get to differing beliefs about masturbation, let me just make sure you know that it doesn't harm the body physically."

Even questions that are fact questions on their face 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 couple's communicating about birth control."

5. Help the class describe the community's range of beliefs, not their own.

On sensitive issues such as sex and religion, it may not be fair or appropriate to

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ask individual students their own beliefs. But it can be appropriate to generalize: "Tell me some of the things you've heard that people believe about that."

Prompt the group with a stem sentence:

"Some people believe ____?"

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

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 it is not okay for people to masturbate." and "Some people believe it is okay to masturbate.") In any case, your role is two-fold: (1) to make sure that every belief gets expressed, or paraphrased, respectfully, hopefully just as the person who believed it might express it and (2) to make sure that a complete range of beliefs gets expressed, even if you have to supplement the few values the group can think of:

"Some people believe that masturbation is a healthy way to act on sexual feelings or to relieve tension. Some people believe it is not appropriate because sexual activity should only happen between a husband and wife. Some people believe it is a good way to learn about your body and be able to tell your future partner what feels good to you. Some people believe it is okay for young children to masturbate but not okay after someone reaches puberty...."

Keep in mind that it may create an unsafe environment for some students if the group is given the opportunity to brainstorm all the possible values held on certain issues (including racist, sexist, and homophobic values). Remind students of the group agreements (created in Lesson One), and exercise thoughtful judgment when choosing whether to open up a brainstorm or just briefly describe the range of values yourself.

6. 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, aunt, uncle, 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 with some other adult you love and whose opinions matter to you. That could be your babysitter, your best friend's parent, a counselor, or whoever 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 have only been newly in a new foster home and don't yet have that kind of relationship with their new "parents." Also, notice that we

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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.

7. 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?"

8. Leave the door open.

"If that isn't what you really wanted to know, you can drop another question in the bag/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."

Using Anonymous Question Bags or Boxes

- Introduce them in lesson #1.
- Read the questions in advance to give yourself time to consider how you want to answer them.
- Anticipate five types of questions:
 1. requests for information
 2. "am I normal" questions
 3. permission-seeking questions
 4. shock questions
 5. value questions (discussed above)

1. Requests for Information¹

If you know the answer, fine. If not, it's okay to say "I don't know", and then refer the student to the appropriate source. Is the question, although informational, one which you consider inappropriate for classroom discussion? Problems can be avoided if you have established in the context of the class ground rules, an agreement such as: "All questions are valid. However, I will have to make the final decision about the appropriateness of each question for class discussion. If you turn in a question which I choose not to answer, it is not because it is a bad question. I may feel that it is not of interest to all students or that I am not prepared to lead a class discussion around that issue. Please see me at the end

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of class if this happens so that I can try to answer your question privately."

2. "Am I Normal" Questions²

These questions generally focus on adolescent concerns about their bodies and the emotional and physical changes they are experiencing. Validate their concern, e.g., "Many young people worry that..." and provide information about what they can expect to happen during the adolescent years. Refer them to parents, clergy, family physician, community resources, school counselor for further discussion, if appropriate.

3. Permission-seeking Questions³

These come in two common forms, and may seek your permission to participate in a particular behavior, e.g.: "Is it normal...?" or "Did you...when you were growing up?" Avoid the use of the word "normal" when answering questions. Normal for some is morally unsanctionable for others. Present what is known medically, legally, etc. (the facts) and discuss the moral, religious and emotional implications, making sure all points of view are covered. Refer students to parents and clergy for discussion of moral/religious questions. Establish in the content of class ground rules an agreement related to discussion of personal behavior, such as: "No discussion of personal behavior during class." If and when you get a question about your personal behavior, you can remind students of this ground rule and redirect the discussion to one of the pros and cons (religious, moral, medical, emotional, legal, interpersonal, etc.) of the particular behavior in question. Again, refer student to parents and clergy for further discussion of moral/ religious questions.

4. Shock Questions⁴

Again, remind students of the class ground rule related to appropriate questions for classroom discussion. Sometimes the shock comes not from the content of the question, but the vocabulary utilized. You can reword the question to defuse it, especially if you have previously established in the context of class ground rules, a rule related to vocabulary, such as: "In this class I will be trying to balance two conflicting goals: I want to communicate with you. Sometimes you may not know the correct word for something you have a question about. Use whatever word you know to ask that question and I will answer using the correct (acceptable) word."

² ibid

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

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