

How to Use Role Play

Teens may know the facts about teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and abuse, but unless they develop decision-making and communication skills for protecting themselves, they remain at high risk. Skill practice using role play is an important part of these lessons. If you ever have extra time in a lesson, role play is probably the best way to use it.

1. Benefits of Role Play

Role play helps young people:

- a. Act out a wide variety of feelings and ideas without fear of judgment or sanction from others. Since they are “only acting,” they can express and experience feelings and ideas that they often hide.
- b. Try out behaviors that may be reluctant to try in real life due to lack of confidence, peer pressure, etc.
- c. Practice making decisions and identifying forces that influence decision-making.
- d. Evaluate how they solve problems and deal with the consequences of their behaviors.
- e. Enlarge their problem-solving capability by generating alternatives.
- f. Develop understanding and empathy for people of different views by playing at being those people.
- g. Rehearse communication and assertiveness skills.

2. Before the Role Play

- a. Prepare yourself to lead the role play. Consider your goals and decide how to organize the role play to achieve those goals.
- b. Prepare materials you need for the strategy you plan to use. “Character cards” describing each character on a large index card are useful for getting started.
- c. Consider who needs to know what information about the role play. What does the audience need to know about the situation? The characters? What do the characters need to know about each other?

- d. If you have access to videotaping equipment, consider videotaping role plays. It is a big hit with many teens who like to see themselves “on TV.” They can examine their role-playing behaviors and get feedback from their peers. It is also a great way to build self-esteem.

3. Steps to Successful Role Play

- a. **Set ground rules.** Explain that role play is a great way to think about situations they may be in and practice handling tough problems. The success of the role play will depend on them—if they are silly, the role play will be useless. Below are three simple ground rules:
 - **People playing the role must try to be that person.**
 - **Say what comes to mind. Don’t think too much.**
 - **DO NOT laugh at or put down the role players. (Emphasize this rule.)**
- b. **Identify the players.** You may ask for volunteers to ask someone to take on a role beforehand. No one should be forced to role play, but often a little encouragement in advance works wonders.
- c. **Set the scene.** Describe the situation, make the conflict (issue) between the characters clear. Then, draw a verbal picture of the location: “It’s raining out. You are sitting in the living room in front of the TV. Your Mom’s upstairs and...”
- d. **Help each character get into role.** Ask one or two questions that will help each player begin to talk as the character and think about how that person is feeling. For example, “Derek, tell me about yourself.” “How do you get along with your parents?” “Now what’s the problem you’re having with your sister?” Don’t take long on this—a minute or two with each player.
- e. **Get them started.** Explain exactly where the situation is at this moment. “So, you’ve been discussing this issue and you’re both getting really angry.” “So...take it away!”
- f. **If necessary, keep the role play on track.** If the role play is going so badly that nothing is being accomplished, you might stop it and make a suggestion to the players or ask if someone else wants to try a role. (Be careful to protect the feelings of the actors.)
- g. **Stop the role play.** When the problem is resolved or when it seems a good time to discuss the scene, stop the role play. Remember, debriefing

and follow up discussion are a vital part of role play so be sure to allow sufficient time for this.

- h. Have the audience ask questions of the players while they remain in their roles.** Questions and comments from the audience will help everyone examine the behaviors and alternatives that might have been possible in the situation. The players respond as the character. Comments should focus on what the player did as the character *not* on how well they acted.
- i. Debrief the players.** Ask players how they felt as the character in the role play. What did they like or dislike about how they handled the problem? How is this situation similar to those they have to deal with?
- j. Discuss the role play.** The purpose of this discussion is to examine how the characters felt and behaved. It is not to evaluate the acting ability of the players. Discussion questions might include:

Do you have any feeling you'd like to express about any of the characters?

Is there anything any character could have done to improve the outcome of the situation?

How do you think _____ felt when _____ (such a think happened).

What do you admire about any of the characters?

Would this situation be difficult to solve in real life? Explain.

What did you learn from observing this role play?

4. Options for Structuring Role Plays

Role plays can be structured in a variety of ways, depending on the group's level of functioning and willingness to participate. Role plays in which teens make up what they will say in a certain situation are ideal because they are most similar to real life. However, many teens will not be able to improvise at first, or may need to work up to it. Below are a number of ways to structure role plays, listed from easiest to most difficult.

- a.** Give the teens a "pressure line" (e.g., "You would if you loved me...") and ask for a one-line response. Have a teen role play the response with you.

- b.** Create a dialogue with the group. Give them the first line and ask them to suggest how each person could respond in turn. Write the dialogue on the board or newsprint and ask a volunteer to act it out with you, or ask two of them to act it out.
- c.** Divide the group into pairs. Distribute a magazine picture of a couple to each pair and ask them to plan an imaginary dialogue the couple could have on a topic such as birth control. Ask each pair to stand one at a time, hold up their picture and say the dialogue to each other.
- d.** Write a script of a dialogue and have teens read and act out the dialogue.
- e.** Divide teens into small groups and give each group a card describing a problem situation. Each group discusses its problem and possible strategies to deal with it. Next tell the group to select one of the strategies and plan a role play to present to the entire group. Proceed as described under “Steps to Successful Role Play.”
- f.** Have role players act out a scenario without resolving the conflict. At the point of highest tension, stop the action by saying, “Freeze.” Ask the audience how they think each of the players is feeling. Ask for suggestions for resolving the conflict. Now have the role player complete the scene. Proceed as above.
- g.** Use doubles. Have a second teen stand behind each player and occasionally suggest an idea to the player. The player may choose to use or not to use the suggestion.
- e.** Reverse roles. At some point during a role play, have players switch roles, for example, have the “girl” become the “boy” and visa versa.