U Choose to Know

How to Discuss Sex and Social Media

We know that youth spend a lot of time online engaging with social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. Although exposure to sex-related content is not always negative, social media may influence students' ideas about sexual practices and sexual behaviors by exposing them to sex-related content.

This digital world functions as a place where youth share and seek out sexual information, as well as a space where people model sex-related behaviors. Youth may learn what type of sexual behavior is common on social media and interpret how that behavior is perceived by their peers. For example, if a student sees a friend posting nude photos on Instagram and receiving positive feedback from it (in the form of likes and heart-eye emoji comments), that student may be inclined to engage in that same behavior to receive approval and acceptance even if that behavior goes against their values and beliefs.

So what can you do when the worlds of sex education and social media intertwine in your classroom? Here are a few tips for talking to students:

Explain to students that everything they see on social media is not reality. It really puts provocative behavior into question when young people can understand that some posts are just for "likes" or to gain a following.

Remind them to be careful when seeking out romantic or sexual partners online. Sometimes giving students real-world examples can make all the difference. Share a news story about someone local who met up with someone they didn't know online and reveal the outcome. Just assure them that you just want them to be safe and aware.

Emphasize the potential negative outcomes of sending nude photos. Young people may think it's cool and enticing to post pictures of themselves (or others) nude, in lingerie, or wearing very revealing attire. Consider teaching students about child pornography laws, with an emphasis that in some cases, it could include sending nude pictures of their own body. Also, it's important to note that what's posted online can follow people for years after it's posted and may have harming effects on that person's future.

Remind students to ask you or another trusting adult questions about sexual health information they receive online. Inform them that all information they may come across may not be medically accurate or from a reliable source. Consider carving out a small chunk of time at the end of class for students to share any sexual health-related information they've come across on social media. This also allows you a chance to be aware of what type of information students are learning and how it may affirm or conflict with the curriculum you teach.

Encourage students to think of their beliefs and values when viewing, engaging, and posting content on social media. Sometimes, asking oneself, "Will I be proud of myself after posting this, or will I regret this?" may guide decision-making in the direction that best fits the young person's beliefs and values.

Try not to label content as "good" or "bad" but encourage students to engage in healthy, safe, and mindful social media browsing. Teach students that it is critical to analyze what they see online and make a decision on what outcome that behavior will bring to their lives if they engage in it. Further, encourage them to take responsibility for any decision they make and use it as a learning lesson.

Encourage youth to think about how social media is influencing their opinions and behaviors around sex and sexuality. This could be explaining to your class, "If we all made choices based on what everyone around us is doing, are we really being the leader in our own lives?"

Keep in mind that steering youth away from social media and bashing its use are not the answer. However, giving your student's the tools they need to make smart and informed decisions related to social media and sex is important.