



U Choose to Know

June 2018

Send Shame Walking! Applying a Sex Positive Lens to Health Class Facilitation

Sex positivity is the idea that all sex (as long as it's healthy and consensual) is a good and normal thing. Sex positivity means teaching sex education without shaming students or stigmatizing them.

Shame is associated with an [increased risk of substance abuse, eating disorders](#), contracting STIs and HIV, and [lowering rates of their treatment](#). Shame can also prevent sexual assault survivors from [reporting those crimes](#). For all of these reasons, a sex positive approach to teaching sexuality is important.

Sex positivity is not:

- About encouraging youth to have sex: The core of sex positivity is informed consent and agency of one's own sexuality. For some folks that could mean having a lot of sex, for some it might be not having sex at all.
- Pro-pornography: Rather, the sex-positivity movement promotes health discourse about the content of pornography and its [impact on a person's sexual health and relationships](#).

According to [ETR Associates](#), sex positivity is:

- an understanding of sexuality as a natural and healthy aspect of human life;
- knowledge of human sexuality and reproductive rights with which to make responsible choices;
- respectful communication and exchange of personal thoughts and feelings between partners; and
- practice of safe and mutually consensual sexual activity.



Let's Practice!

Question: I don't know how other people feel about this, but I don't like "that stuff," so does that mean I will never enjoy having sex?

- **What to avoid:** Shaming the student for engaging in sexual behavior or worrying about pleasure and being overly enthusiastic about sex positivity. It's important to meet students where they are at.
- **What to say:** "That's a great question! Everybody has different feelings about what they like and want. Sometimes we have an initial impression about a person and when you get to know them, they turn out to be an amazing person who helps you see the world differently. But, other times, they turn out to be just as you thought and you take a step back. The same thing goes for sex, your feelings might change over time."
- **Why it matters:** The root of this question is "am I normal?". Answering with a shaming tone will insinuate to this young person that they are not. They also may then tune out any health-related advice you give within your answer as well.

5 Tips to Apply a Sex Positive Lens in the Classroom:

1. Create a safe space: Making the classroom environment safe and comfortable is the first step to aiding students in safely processing information about sexuality and eventually expressing their own feelings. In the sexuality education curriculum, we do this by setting ground rules, such as including the right to pass, that there are no 'stupid' questions, and that 'put-downs' are not allowed.
2. Clarify your own values and provide factual information: We shouldn't mix our personal values with the factual information we provide. It is important to know and understand our own values so that we do not inadvertently share them when answering questions or teaching material. The goal of these classes is for young people to figure out their own values around sexuality, not to acquire yours.
3. Be aware of the messages you send: Be sure to check not just your verbal messages, but also your non-verbal messages (facial cues and body language). Even subtle non-verbal messages can make a young person feel judged. Be mindful of this especially when listening to and answering young people's questions.
4. Be inclusive of everyone's experience: Make sure you are including the LGBTQ population (*remember our digest on being inclusive?*) and addressing tough issues like sexual violence and abortion. These are all experiences that youth in your room may have had in their own lives or have questions about. It's important that they feel included and safe.
5. Don't forget pleasure: People have sex to feel good, either physically or as an expression of love, intimacy, and their sexuality. It's important for people young and old to understand that they are entitled to sexual pleasure. Their experiences will shape the way they will experience their sexuality in the future. This also helps them avoid situations where they may be coerced or abused sexually.

The bottom line is - avoid describing teen sexuality as problematic or shameful. No preaching, no moralizing, no shaming. Just the facts!



For more information,
visit uchoosebaltimore.com.

Let's Practice! *(continued)*

Question: If I am sexting, does that count as sex?

- **What to avoid:** Shaming the student for sexting.
- **What to say:** "The definition that people use for sex is far and wide. For some people sexting is sex, for others it's not, and what it means for you could be either/or, or somewhere in between. If you are planning to engage in sexting, be sure to consider the consequences." Then, ask the class what some of the consequences of sexting might be and expand on anything they miss.
- **Why it matters:** The root of this question is permission seeking and/or a values question. Remember, young people have a right to make sexual decisions. It is our job to help them understand the benefits and risks of their decisions.

Question: Can I get an STD on my hands from jerking my boyfriend off?

- **What to avoid:** Cringing or other facial cues or body language in reaction to the question. Shaming the student for engaging in sexual activity.
- **What to say:** "Yes, it is possible, but it is a low risk activity. Some STIs can be passed through skin-to-skin contact (like herpes, syphilis, and warts), but it is not very likely. It's important to know your partner's status before engaging in sexual intercourse and taking precautions like using a condom and washing your hands."
- **What it matters:** Young people have the right to accurate health information. This is a fact question. The student is not asking for your judgement of their activity (and of course you wouldn't answer if they were), they are asking about STI transmission.