

Sex Talk

Relationships

Editor's note

When AIDS educator Debby Minielly talked with teens about relationships, she found an incredible amount of resentment among students over the way the sexes treat each other. Both sexes talked about the need for respect—though young women expressed this need to a much greater degree than young men.

With Valentine's Day just around the corner, educators have a prime opportunity to talk about the importance of respect and understanding in relationships—sexual or otherwise. This issue of Sex Talk looks at relationships and at some of the tools educators can use to promote discussion among youth.



Romance

A GOOD WAY TO FOCUS ON HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Frilly valentines aren't the exclusive preserve of romantic young women, says sexual health educator Lee Fawcett.

"I know that guys long for and appreciate romance, too—it just comes in a different form with them," she says.

Fawcett says romance is a good way to focus on healthy relationships. Talking with youth about romance can help young people become more sensitive to each other's needs.

Romance requires you to pay attention to what the other person is like, what their interests are, and what's important to them, says Fawcett. Valentine's Day can be used as a way of opening a discussion about respecting and thinking about another person's needs.

There's no use giving a girlfriend a pair of lacy underwear if she's the kind of person who will be left cold by that kind of gift. Paying attention to the other person leads you to a better understanding of what is important and appealing to them, says Fawcett.

That's a useful tool to learn early in life.

If a girl really doesn't like having to meet her boyfriend after work and go to his place for dinner with his family, but she does it willingly because she sees it is very meaningful to him, that's very romantic.

Romance requires intimacy, says Fawcett, but it doesn't have to be connected with sex. Increasing the degree of intimacy can be done in many ways.

It's easy for young women to under-estimate guys' feelings because they can't easily talk about their need for romance, even to their girlfriends. But the needs are there. "Lots of guys love a note scribbled to them and slipped into their locker," Fawcett says.

The problem with the stereotypical romantic tokens such as flowers and jewelry is that they leave no room for the unexpected, or for imagination. A good part of romance is tied to spontaneous or

unexpected acts. "That's why Valentine's Day is such a downer for so many people," says Fawcett. "It's a kind of lose-lose situation for everyone. People feel they have to conform to the traditions."

It's helpful for educators to challenge media messages, to talk with kids about how to show their desire in ways that enhance the relationship, says Fawcett. "We talk about plumbing in sex education, but we don't spend much time on what are appropriate and inappropriate ways to show our desire." Consequently, some of us never learn.

You need to consider whose interests the romantic action is in, says Fawcett. It's heading in the right direction if the motivation is to strengthen the relationship or to give the other person a wonderful feeling.

If people do it just to get what they want—for girls to hear 'I love you' or get some attention or some commitment, and for guys to get further sexually—then it is not sincere and it won't add to the relationship.

"It's good to ask kids to think about their motivation," says Fawcett.

When it comes to romance, drinking often enters the scene because it makes girls feel less worried and guys more able to acknowledge and express their feelings. But that's very limiting to a romantic relationship, says Fawcett. It sets up a pattern where the only way you can feel intimacy is after drinking.

It is good to talk with teens about this. Sometimes teens get sick of hearing about unsafe sex and non-consensual sex, but this is another hook, another way of challenging them to think. "Romance is seen as fluff but it's not," says Fawcett. "It's a big part of everyone's life."

Class Discussions Help Narrow the Gender Gap

respect a big issue for girls

Young women have a lot of resentment these days about the lack of respect they feel they get from young men.

But they don't appear to be willing to leave a relationship in which they are treated without respect.

Sometimes it's not so easy to get a group of teens of both genders to talk openly about their feelings about relationships. But Sharon Richard, a sexual health educator, used a device that works well: She presented the teens with a statement or question and asked how many people agreed with it, and how many disagreed. Then they defended their differing positions.

At times the discussion got stormy, but it raised important issues.

For example, when she asked, Would a girl stay in a relationship where she was being abused?

Almost everyone, both guys and girls, agreed that she would.

Then when students were asked, Would a guy stay in a relationship where he was being abused? Again, the overwhelming majority of both genders agreed that he would not.

When the educators asked why, they were told that a relationship means more to a girl, and that the guy more than likely has another couple of girls waiting in the wings.

Other statements drew out the message

that guys, too, feel some resentment over relationships, particularly when they feel that girls are only interested in older guys with more money and fast cars.

The technique of getting students to agree or disagree with prepared statements can be effectively used in the classroom, Richard says. Students can raise their hands to show which way they feel, or they can move to different sides of the room to show their differing views.

This generates discussion, she says, although some groups are rather quiet in their opinions and other groups inclined to be boisterous.

The unfortunate idea that it's okay if the girl isn't sexually satisfied in a relationship but the guy needs sexual satisfaction seems to be widespread, says Richard.

"When girls come into our clinic for birth control, I ask them if they are enjoying sex and having orgasms; there's a general acceptance that the guy is having orgasms and it's okay if the girl isn't."

This reinforces the stereotype that the guy is in the relationship for sex and the girl is in it for love.

Richard would like to see male physical education teachers put a lot of emphasis on male responsibility for birth control.

One way teachers can encourage male

students to have a better understanding of their birth control responsibility is to take them on a tour of a birth control clinic. To arrange such a tour, call 519-376-9420 or 1-800-263-3456.

Girls, on the other hand, seem to accept that they're the ones who do all the worrying in a relationship.

"Sometimes I feel sad that some of these kids are taking on so much at such an early age," Richard observes. "The girls who pay a great deal of attention to an early relationship tend to miss out on a lot because their life revolves around the boyfriend and the relationship. If you're worried about becoming pregnant at age 15, you don't have the time and energy and attention to participate in activities at school that could help you later on."

There's no use trying to discourage the relationship, but such girls can be encouraged to join in school activities such as sports or yearbook committee or clubs of various sorts, which can enlarge their circle of acquaintances and give them a broader range of interests.

TIPS FOR DISCUSSING SEXUAL EXPRESSION IN RELATIONSHIPS

- ✍ Consider using the relationship quiz enclosed in this issue as a springboard for discussions.
- ✍ Keep in mind the individual natures of the teens you are talking with. For example, a very assertive young woman with a healthy upbringing on sexual and relationship issues might not understand why all girls wouldn't just walk away if a guy pressures them about unwelcome sex. But a girl with a different history will have a different belief about it and different conduct.
- ✍ If you are in a trusting one-on-one situation with a teen who has experienced sexual abuse and you think it may be affecting their ability to make healthy decisions about sexual and relationship matters, it may help to ask directly if they think the early abuse might be related to the present abusive relationship.
- ✍ Also in a one-on-one situation, consider role-playing. For instance, you can play the role of a boyfriend who refuses to wear a condom, and the teen can try to think of the words, tone and body language she can use to tell him she wants to use a condom.
- ✍ Discuss what kind of commitment they choose to make together in a relationship. Even though the stereotype is that guys will end a relationship if they don't get the level of sex they want, some girls say it's not difficult to negotiate together about postponing intercourse and still maintain a strong relationship.
- ✍ Remember that research shows that in grades 9 and 10, girls generally suffer a plummeting of their self-esteem. That makes them especially vulnerable to being treated badly for the status of having a boyfriend. Remember to keep giving them strokes to help them to think better of themselves. Remind them that intercourse is not a given in a relationship, that it is possible to say no or to say yes, and that they can choose what kind and what level of intimacy they want.
- ✍ You could point out that saying no to sex now doesn't mean saying no forever. Postponing sex is always an option, and later sex is a healthy option.
- ✍ If sex is a part of the teen's relationship, don't assume that it's safe sex. It's always worth talking about choices for sexual expression without the risk of pregnancy or AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases.
- ✍ Consider taking your students on a tour of a birth control clinic.

Sexual Harassment a Serious Issue at Local High School

“The Joke’s Over” say the posters on the walls of John Diefenbaker Secondary School. They give notice that harassment will not be tolerated at this Hanover high school. A committee has been working since February 1997 to ensure the message reaches all who pass through those halls.

Linda White, a committee member, stated that the impetus for this move-ment resulted after a large scale survey of JDSS students reported frequent incidents of sexual harassment. At the same time the survey was being tallied, former JDSS

input is received. A final draft will appear in the 1998-99 student handbook.

The committee came to realize that the issue of harassment was not going to go away overnight. Personal inter-actions involve long-standing behaviours and habits, ones that people pick up from their environment and rarely question once they become established. It will take much more exposure to and examination of the issue to convince some that behaviours must change, even if opinions do not.

Planning continues, with a scheme to involve drama students in a presentation to the student body.

No one claims that opinions on

this contentious issue will eventually be unanimous, but the desired end result is a consistency of behaviour. People who work, learn and visit at

“...[It was] very hard growing up in an atmosphere of hatred and ignorance, especially at my high school...”

students who were gay, lesbian or bisexual wrote letters to staff detailing the homophobic abuses they had endured. “...rumours and accusations made me afraid. I was afraid to hug my female friends. I was afraid to stop pretending I had a boyfriend I was in love with, and worst of all I was afraid of being myself.”

It quickly became obvious that harassment of any kind—racial, ethno-cultural, sexual or other—must be discouraged if the people in the school were to feel safe and ready to learn. A two-pronged approach was devised: education plus implementation of policy.

The staff had many questions: What exactly is harassment? At what point does friendly bantering become harassment? What are the consequences for victims? for bystanders? for perpetrators? What are the legal ramifications?

The first draft of the harassment policy is published in the student handbook for 1997-98 and is reprinted in this issue of Sex Talk.

The policy continues to evolve as

“It is so often safer to say nothing at all, to remain anonymous and fade into those green tiled hallways. I have memories of sitting in the cafeteria trying not to notice a group of students hurling french fries and insults at a fellow student. ‘Fag,’ they hissed with so much venom you had to wonder what capital crime this student had committed.

His crime was his walk, his course interests, and his confidence. As a student, it was always difficult to decide whether I wanted to involve myself. If I said anything, would they know? These memories remain as bitter remnants of what I knew high school to be. I never took drama, but I was still an actor.”

John Diefenbaker must be treated with respect—a modest goal, but many obstacles must be overcome before it can be achieved. Further information on the harassment initiative can be obtained from JDSS at 519-364-3770.

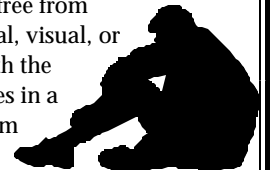
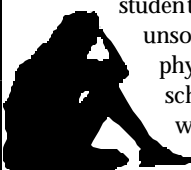
HARASSMENT POLICY

Definition: Harassment refers to a single or ongoing communication or expression in any form (e.g., verbal or physical abuse, jokes, slurs, symbols, graffiti, etc.) of negative attitudes, beliefs or actions towards an individual or group with the intention of disparaging (demeaning, degrading, offending) that individual or group.


- a) Racial harassment is based on colour or race
- b) Ethno-cultural harassment is based on a person’s ancestry, place of origin, citizenship, creed or faith (religion)
- c) Sexual harassment is based on gender or sexual orientation
- d) Other harassment includes family status, intellectual and/or physical exceptionalities

In a school setting, harassment occurs when an individual is receiving unwanted communications or actions which affect that individual’s ability to learn and/or work. Harassment is a coercive, negative expression of power or control.

Policy: It shall be the policy of JDSS to provide and maintain an environment in which students, employees, volunteers and visitors shall be free from unsolicited and unwelcomed harassment of a verbal, visual, or physical nature and that all people associated with the school system will conduct themselves at all times in a way that ensures an educational system free from harassment.



Promoting Sexual Health for Youth



What's New
in Resources?

The videos mentioned here can be borrowed for brief periods by calling the Owen Sound office of the Health Unit at 376-9420 or 1-800-263-3456.

VIDEOS

“Refusal Skills for Healthy Living” — Canadian Learning Company, Ages 9-14, 15 Minutes.

This video provides techniques to help viewers resist peer pressure and make positive, safe and healthy decisions about sex as well as drugs and crime.

“Red Flags: Avoiding Abusive Relationships” — McIntyre Media, Ages 13-Adult, 21 Minutes.

Everyone deserves to be treated with respect and to feel safe on a date. This program covers issues like manipulative and controlling behaviours, lying, physical abuse and sexual pressure.

“Weighing the Risk” — Health Canada, 1996, Older Teens and Adults, 23 Minutes. Discussion Guide Included.

The rate of HIV infection in Canadian women is constantly rising. In a frank and humorous manner, this program deals with topics such as the importance of communication between partners. While celebrating the positive experience of female sexuality, the video also encourages awareness of unsafe sexual practices and ways to decrease risk of HIV infection.

BOOK REPORT

“It’s Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex & Sexual Health” — by Robie H. Harris. Illustrated by Michael Emberley. Candlewick Press.

A family-friendly guide to everything you ever wanted to know about sex and sexuality. The book is suitable for preteens, teens, parents and teachers.



NEW PUBLIC HEALTH WEB SITE

www.srhip.on.ca/bgoshu

Check out the new Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit Web site. Includes over 150 public health fact

local health statistics, upcoming events and courses, and a whole lot more. Bookmark us!

PAMPHLET INSERT

USEFUL PHONE NUMBERS FOR YOUTH

Sexual Health Clinics

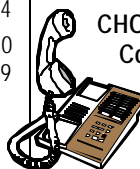
Owen Sound.....376-9420
(toll free)..... 1-800-263-3456
Walkerton.....881-1920
(toll free)..... 1-800-821-7714
Port Elgin.....797-2010
(toll free)..... 1-800-230-7719
There is also a school clinic at JDSS.

Crisis Intervention

Ask for Crisis Team.....519-376-2121

Sexual Assault Centre

24-Hour Hotline1-800-720-7411



CHOICES - Drug & Alcohol Counselling for Youth

1-800-265-3133 or 519-
371-5487

Kids Help Phone

Sex Talk is produced by the Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit. Please photocopy, reprint and distribute this newsletter.

The publication is revised and adapted from the City of Toronto Department of Public Health's Sex Talk.

To contribute ideas, comments or materials, please call Sue Askin, Sexual Health Program Manager, at 519-376-9420 (1-800-263-3456) or fax 519-376-7782.



Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit
Prevention is the Intention