

CHAPTER 8: SEXUAL DECISION MAKING

Adolescents are beginning to explore their sexuality at the same time they are being bombarded with a jumble of confusing messages about sex. Mainstream movies, television, and music (not to mention the pornography industry) make sex seem highly desirable but ignore its consequences, and peers typically perpetuate a wide range of misinformation as they brag, exaggerate, and tease each other. Both create psychological pressure to have sex. On the other end of the spectrum, parents and other adults, including teachers, often communicate vague or dire warnings that aim to cast sex as unappealing, dangerous, or sinful, but all too often give biased or incomplete information, which fails to prepare young people for the joys and heartbreak, responsibilities and risks, that they will inevitably experience when they do have sex.

The fact is that most teens do not feel ready or want to have sex until later in adolescence, but they may find it difficult to communicate their wishes or feel good about a decision to abstain. In between abstaining and having intercourse are a range of behaviors in which they will likely be engaging. As educators, our role is to help adolescents understand their options, including but not limited to abstinence, and how they can communicate their wishes to a partner.

Most young people have no models of positive, healthy sexual relationships in which partners talk about sex together and make decisions that allow both to safeguard their health. In addition to providing those models, educators can validate abstaining from intercourse as a positive choice and give adolescents skills to implement the decision if they choose it. However, to be effective in protecting the health of all adolescents, these lessons must not be “abstinence-only.” To withhold information in the era of AIDS is irresponsible.

Teaching Tips

- Do not preach or moralize. Provide clear, accurate, balanced messages. Your task is to provide information to young people, who are learning to be independent and mature, and help them learn how to draw conclusions and make decisions.
- Be aware that some adolescents in your class are likely to have already had sex and some may have been sexually abused or raped. Validate the option of deciding not to have sex again until later.

Content Considerations

- Recognize and affirm adolescent sexuality. It is developmentally appropriate and natural for adolescents to have sexual feelings and desires.
- Be conscious that you are not only helping young people make decisions about their sexuality today but also preparing them for the time when they will engage in shared sexual behavior.
- Discuss the range of behaviors that constitute sex and clarify the meaning of sexual abstinence, which many define as not having penetrative vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse, whereas others define it as no sexual touching whatsoever.
- Talk about the reasons that adolescents decide to have or not to have intercourse and alternative ways to express love, affection, and sexual feelings.
- Teach decision-making skills; skills for setting limits, responding to pressure, and avoiding risky situations; and mutual respect for other people’s decisions and rights, especially those of one’s partner.

- Cover both abstaining from sex and using condoms to prevent pregnancy and HIV/STIs. Even if students are choosing to abstain, for most it will be a temporary choice. Educate for the future as well as for today.
- Discuss societal, family, and individual views about abstinence and sexual activity, including how these views differ based on gender. Discuss the double standard that exists in many societies, which supports and promotes early male sexual activity while punishing and shaming young women for the same behavior.
- Examine the gender dimensions of messages about sexual behavior, pressure to have sex, and the consequences of sex. Do not assume that it is always the boy who pressures the girl. Boys may believe that they should want sex even when they do not. Ask students to envision a society in which the gender roles are equal, and discuss what would be different.
- Discuss situations in which partners have different opinions about whether or not to have sex, focusing on what both people should do, not only the one who does not want to have sex. Relate this situation to the qualities of a healthy relationship and make sure that participants understand that it is never right to pressure someone to have sex or engage in particular behaviors against his or her will.
- Depending on how romantic and sexual situations develop where you live, you may need to substantially change the situations presented in these lesson plans to suit your circumstances. For example, in some places the greatest pressure to have sex occurs after engagement or marriage. You can also use examples of other situations in which young people experience pressure or difficulty asserting what they want, such as refusing a date or a proposed marriage partner.

SELECTED LESSON PLAN 8.1: THERESA AND SAM: A TRUE STORY

SOURCE

“Theresa and Sam: A True Story” by Monica Rodriguez, *Filling the Gaps: Hard to Teach Topics in Sexuality Education*, Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), New York, 1998. Reprinted with permission of SIECUS. 130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350. New York, NY 10036. www.siecus.org

Suitable for ages 12 to 18

Summary

This lesson provides an engaging and realistic way to explore issues young couples face when deciding to abstain from sexual intercourse. The lesson revolves around a story of an adolescent couple who have decided not to have intercourse because the boy wants to wait until marriage, but now the girl is questioning their decision. The lesson doesn't preach, but enables adolescents to think for themselves about reasons to postpone intercourse, how to handle situations in which the partners have differing opinions, and respect for the other person's decision. By having the male character want to abstain and the female character want to have intercourse, the lesson refreshingly challenges traditional gender roles, which helps reassure boys who postpone sex. Through role playing, participants develop strategies for avoiding peer pressure and sticking to a decision to abstain over the long term.

Teaching Notes

- The role-playing activity in step 5 could also be used to practice saying no to any activity that one finds unappealing, such as going out, meeting alone, kissing, and so on.

Adapting the Lesson

- Read over the story and make changes so that the adolescents in your group will be able to identify with it. In some places, it may be more appropriate for the characters to be somewhat older or for the couple to be engaged to marry.
- If you cannot make copies of the story for all the participants, have one person read the story aloud. You may want to have the story read twice to make sure that participants remember the details. Write the questions on the board or on large paper before the session begins.
- Read over the scenario and the lines used in Love in the Afternoon Role Play and adapt them to make sure they are typical and appropriate to your context.

THERESA AND SAM: A TRUE STORY

By Monica Rodriguez

RATIONALE

This activity provides an opportunity for participants to discuss making choices and sticking with them, and to practice the skills needed for abstinence or avoiding unwanted sexual behavior.

AUDIENCE

Senior high school

TIME

One class period

GOALS

To help participants:

- Explore some of the reasons why a person might decide to abstain
- List practical actions that young people can take to postpone sexual involvement
- Practice the skills necessary to negotiate abstinence and avoid unwanted sexual behavior

MATERIALS

- *Theresa and Sam Worksheet*
- *Love in the Afternoon Role Play*

PROCEDURE

- 1 Introduce this activity by explaining to participants that they will discuss some of the reasons why people choose not to engage in sexual intercourse, think of things that a person can do to make sure they stick to their decision, and practice saying no in role-play situations where one partner is pressuring the other.
- 2 Distribute copies of the *Theresa and Sam Worksheet* to participants. Have one participant read the story aloud while the rest follow. Instruct participants to pay particular attention to the reasons why Theresa and Sam choose not to have intercourse, the reasons why they think they might have intercourse, and what each of them can do to make sure they don't have intercourse.

- 3 After reading the story, allow time for participants to answer the questions on the worksheet. Have participants share their answers and discuss responses as needed. Write participants' responses to worksheet questions 3 and 5 on the board. Encourage participants to think of more things a person can say or do to delay intercourse.
- 4 Explain that they will role-play for the rest of the session on how to respond to pressure to have intercourse.
- 5 Divide participants into pairs and distribute copies of the *Love in the Afternoon Role Play*. Explain that Partner #1 will say the line and that Partner #2 will respond by saying no in a creative and respectful way. Both words and body language should clearly convey the message. Instruct participants to alternate between Partner #1 (saying the line) and Partner #2 (responding to the line). Move from pair to pair to facilitate the role-plays as needed.
- 6 Process using the following questions:
 - How convincing were the responses? What would you say or do differently to make sure that you were understood?
 - How would you feel saying things to a partner in real life?
 - What suggestions would you give to someone who was trying to stand by their decision not to have intercourse?

THERESA AND SAM WORKSHEET

Directions: After reading Theresa and Sam's story, answer the following questions.

Theresa and Sam are juniors who have been dating for just over six months. They spend a lot of their free time together and think they have a special relationship. They are best friends. They trust each other. They tell each other everything.

When they first started dating, Theresa and Sam decided that they were not ready to have intercourse. They talked about the fact that Sam was taught he should wait until he was married to have intercourse. He loves Theresa a lot, and he worries that their relationship would change if they have intercourse. Theresa knows and respects Sam's feelings.

While Theresa and Sam haven't actually had intercourse, they have kissed and touched each other a lot and have come pretty close to "going all the way." Lately, Theresa has felt a little bit jealous of her friends because some of them say they've had intercourse. She worries that she is "falling behind" and that she will always be a virgin. Theresa has started putting some pressure on Sam to have intercourse.

Theresa and Sam are both feeling confused and have decided that they need to talk. Sam thought

Theresa understood his feelings and isn't sure why she is starting to pressure him. Theresa respects Sam's feelings and doesn't want to push him into doing something he doesn't want to do. But she feels that as long as they're in love they shouldn't have to wait until marriage. They are arguing a lot more. They are also starting to spend less time with each other and more time with other people.

Sam is worried that he is losing Theresa. He decided to talk to one of his friends about it. His friend said, "I don't know why you're making such a big deal out of this. Intercourse is great! That's why everybody does it!" Sam doesn't really believe his friend, but sometimes he feels as if he's the only one who isn't doing it. He wishes he could talk to his Dad about it, but he doesn't know how. Sam is feeling pretty lost and doesn't know what to do.

Sam and Theresa are trying to work things out. They decide to go on a date to the movies. Later, they go back to Sam's home to talk. When they get there, they find out that Sam's Dad got called in to work and won't be back for a few hours. Sam and Theresa find themselves home alone.

1. Describe one reason that Sam might not want to have intercourse.

a. _____

2. What are some other reasons why a person might not want to have intercourse? _____

3. Describe two things Sam can say or do to make sure that he waits until he is ready to have intercourse.

a. _____

b. _____

4. Why should Theresa wait until Sam is ready? _____

5. What are two things Theresa can do to help herself wait until Sam is ready?

a. _____

b. _____

LOVE IN THE AFTERNOON ROLE PLAY

You and your partner are hanging out after school, watching TV. You decide to lie down on the couch together and you start to get close. This is exactly what happened the last time you went further than you wanted to sexually. You have decided that you don't want to go as far with your partner as you did before.

Person 1: I love you.

Person 2:

Person 1: Don't worry. It'll be okay.

Person 2:

Person 1: Just let me try this for a little bit.

Person 2:

Person 1: Whats the big deal? We've done this before.

Person 2:

Person 1: Well, I just don't want to stop. It's too much fun.

Person 2:

Person 1: Okay. I promise we'll stop after this.

Person 2:

Person 1: Other people have let me.

Person 2:

SELECTED LESSON PLAN 8.2: COMMUNICATING MESSAGES AND ASSUMPTIONS

SOURCE

“Linda and Larry: Communicating Messages and Assumptions,” by Jay Friedman and Nancy Abbey, *Filling the Gaps: Hard to Teach Topics in Sexuality Education*, Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), New York, 1998. Reprinted with permission of SIECUS. 130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350. New York, NY 10036. www.siecus.org

Suitable for ages 15 to 18

Summary

In this lesson, participants work in small groups to analyze the story of one couple who did not communicate clearly about sex. Some groups read the girl’s perspective and some groups read the boy’s, a clever technique for illustrating how subjective interpretations of indirect and non-verbal messages can be and how easily they can lead to misunderstandings and violence. The class regroups to analyze where the couple’s communication went wrong and identifies mixed messages, missed messages, the assumptions of each character, and how misunderstandings could have been avoided. The lesson addresses consent and emphasizes that coerced sexual activity constitutes sexual assault.

Teaching Notes

- Review the first step and adapt it to suit your situation. An alternative way to start the lesson would be to ask a question such as, “What are some ways that misunderstandings start between two people?”
- The third question on the two worksheets is not discussed in the lesson. If you want to discuss it, you can do so during step 3.
- Some additional questions that could be used for step 4 include: “What myths did they believe?” “How did drinking influence this situation?” “What should you do if you are in a sexual situation and the other person seems to be resisting or struggling?” “What should you do if the other person says no?”

Adapting the Lesson

- Read the two parts of the story – Larry’s worksheet and Linda’s worksheet – and make changes so that your participants will be able to relate to the story. Make sure you include confusing and indirect messages about expectations and desires.
- This lesson will work best if you can make one copy of the story for every two students, but if you cannot, you will need at least one copy per group.

LINDA AND LARRY: COMMUNICATING MESSAGES AND ASSUMPTIONS

By Jay Friedman and Nancy Abbey

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RATIONALE

Clear communication is a critical factor in making healthy decisions about sexuality and carrying them out. When we are misinterpreted, we are at risk. This activity is designed to help participants understand how good communication about sexual thoughts, needs, and feelings is necessary in relationships.

AUDIENCE

Senior high school

TIME

One class period

GOALS

To help participants to:

- Understand the importance of clear communication in a loving relationship
- Be able to determine that “no” means “no” and “yes” means “yes,” and to always make this assumption
- Develop awareness of how one’s actions may send messages that one may not intend to send
- Identify any form of forced or coerced sexual activity—male or female—as sexual assault

MATERIALS

- *Larry’s Story Worksheet* (enough for half of the class)
- *Linda’s Story Worksheet* (enough for half of the class)

PROCEDURE

1 Ask students if they’ve heard that in some cultures a guest is expected to belch after dinner to show appreciation of fine food. Many people in our culture would consider this an insult. Remind them that people of different cultures often think a behavior means something it’s not intended to convey. Explain that sometimes

there are real cultural differences between two people in a relationship. A lot of misunderstandings start when one person takes something the wrong way. It’s called poor communication. Tell students that today they will read a story about two poor communicators.

2 Divide the class into groups of four to five people. Distribute *Larry’s Story Worksheet* to half of the group, and *Linda’s Story Worksheet* to the other half. Allow students time to read the story and answer the questions in the box. (This can be done individually, in pairs, or in small groups if students have trouble reading.) Clarify any questions they may have about the worksheets. Explain that they are to share their understanding of what happened in their group. Allow 10 to 15 minutes for discussion.

3 With students still in their small groups, read Linda’s story and have the groups with her story share their responses to the first two questions. Repeat with Larry’s story. Stress that neither Linda nor Larry communicated in a way that could overcome the myths and stereotypes they had about each other.

4 Provide categories students can use to analyze the confused messages between Linda and Larry. For example:

- *Mixed Messages*: A mixed message is one where words and actions seem to contradict each other; e.g., Linda’s dress seemed to indicate to Larry she wanted to have intercourse, but Linda just wanted to look attractive.
- *Missed Messages*: A missed message is one that is so vaguely stated that the other person doesn’t catch it; e.g., Larry thought he had let Linda know he had sex on his mind.

- *Assumptions:* People often believe or assume that something is true without confirmation; e.g., Linda expected a “perfect gentleman” to know she didn’t want to have intercourse. Larry assumed that a low-cut dress sent a message of receptivity to intercourse and that women resist intercourse but want to be talked into it.

Lead a discussion using the following questions:

- What mixed messages were sent by Larry or Linda?
- What are the missed messages?
- What are the assumptions made by Larry or Linda?
- What could Larry and/or Linda have done to avoid this outcome?

- 5 Suggest that students be alert in the next few days to assumptions and confusing messages in their interactions with friends and family. Remind students of the points they came up with at the end of the lesson. Reinforce the importance of taking “no”—even a weak “no”—as a “no” in a sexual situation.

LINDA'S STORY WORKSHEET

I'll never forget that night as long as I live. Larry and I had been dating for a while and he had acted like a perfect gentleman. Well, we had done our share of kissing, but he never gave me any reason not to trust him.

The night of the party I wore this gorgeous dress that I'd borrowed from my roommate. It was a little flashier than I normally wear but I thought it was very flattering. I really wanted to dance, but it had always been hard to talk Larry into it.

At the party, I had some beer—my cup always seemed to be full—and it made me really tired. Strangely, Larry wanted to dance, but I was so tipsy that I could barely hold on to him to keep from falling. Maybe I shouldn't have suggested that we both lie down together, but I needed to rest, and it felt weird to just go upstairs by myself and leave Larry all alone.

I was groggy and felt like I was falling in and out of sleep. The next thing I remember, Larry was all over me, forcing me to have intercourse with him. I didn't want to scream and make a fool of myself. Anyway, the party was loud and I doubt anyone would have heard me. At first, I tried to fight him off, but I was too wiped out to really do anything. Besides, it was fast and he said something about showing our love. I'm so confused. He seemed like such a nice guy, and now he's left a message on my machine about a party this weekend.

What's going on?

1. What did Linda want when she suggested they lie down together? _____

2. Why did she feel she would be safe with Larry? _____

3. Why is Linda confused now? _____

LARRY'S STORY WORKSHEET

I still don't understand what happened. Linda and I had been dating for a long time and, while we hadn't slept together yet, I told her I was attracted to her and gave her lots of signs that I eventually wanted to go to bed with her. We were supposed to go to a party, and when she showed up in this sexy, low-cut dress, I thought this was her way of saying she was ready.

At the party, we drank some beer, which made her sort of sleepy and sensual. While I don't normally dance, I was really feeling good that night. I was surprised, but loved the way she held her body close to mine when we danced. And then when she suggested that we find a place to lie down, what was I supposed to think? Of course, I thought she wanted some privacy to finally have a chance to make love.

Granted, she did grumble a bit when I started to undress her, but I figured she just wanted to be persuaded. Lots of girls feel a little funny about being forward and want the guy to get them off the hook.

I don't know. We had intercourse and it was fine—I even told her that it was the ultimate expression of our love. I took her home from the party and I thought everything was okay. But I haven't heard from her since, and she hasn't returned my call inviting her to this weekend's party.

What's going on?

1. What happened that led Larry to believe Linda wanted to have intercourse? _____

2. Why did Larry have intercourse with Linda even though she "grumbled"? _____

3. Why is he confused? _____
