

Sexual Health Facilitators' Guide to Responding to Youth's Questions About Sex

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Facilitators of sexual health education programs may face a dilemma when they aren't sure about how to respond to a youth's question. This may be because they don't know the answer, aren't sure whether they should answer a question about their own personal experience, or are being asked for their opinion. Facilitators can use the steps below to craft a response that is factual, honest, and non-judgmental.



Step 1: Decide what type of question is being asked.

Questions aren't always what they seem on the surface. Use [active](#) and [empathic listening](#) and, if needed, don't hesitate to ask clarifying questions to gain a better understanding of what the young person is actually asking about.

- ▶ **For values-based questions**, decide if it is a [universal or personal value](#). Universal values are those held by the vast majority of people and are often backed by a law or policy (e.g., no one should force another person to have sex), whereas personal values can be more controversial (e.g., teens should not be having sex).
- ▶ For questions about your **personal experiences**, take a step back to think about how sharing might help or hinder the learning space. You may not feel comfortable sharing your own experiences and should feel empowered to say that something is private or personal. This can even model healthy boundaries. You may find it useful to call out not wanting to share your own experience in that moment, but say that you've heard a variety of experiences from friends. Even if you feel comfortable sharing, you should think carefully about how, why, or what you're sharing. For example, sharing too much about your personal life or history can take the focus away from the youth and their experience or thought process. Sharing might also sway the young person toward a decision that does not reflect what they really wanted. Or, depending on what you share, youth may believe that you are casting judgment on them if they have had a different experience.
- ▶ For questions that appear to be for **shock value** only, decide if you will respond as if the question was genuine, or if you will skip the question entirely. It's OK to say that you think a question was asked as a joke, but invite the person to restate their question if it was genuine. Another way to respond if you want to redirect the conversation while still responding is to rephrase a shock value (or personal) question in a serious way and ask if the young person has follow-up questions. For example, a student could ask, "Why is a condom needed if I can just pull out?" You can respond by reframing their question: "So you're wondering how effective pulling out, or the withdrawal method, is. Many people have difficulty knowing or controlling when they ejaculate and it can be hard to pull out in time. Additionally, there may be sperm in drops of pre-ejaculatory fluid, or 'pre-cum,' which is released from the urethra when the penis is aroused. Also, withdrawal doesn't protect you against STIs. So, if you're going to have sex, the best way to prevent STIs is by using a condom and the best way to prevent pregnancy is to correctly and consistently use condoms or to use another type of contraception, like the ring, pill, or IUD. Would it be helpful to talk more about how to correctly use a condom?"

In these shaded text boxes, we'll apply each step to an example. In a classroom, a youth asks the following question to the facilitator:

"How old were you when you first had sex?"

Step 1: Decide what type of question is being asked.

At face value, this might feel like an intrusive or "shock value" question. Below the surface, the young person might actually be asking if it is acceptable for them to be having sex at their age, or they might be curious if you (or others) would judge them if they engage in sexual activities earlier or later than the age you name.



Step 2: Decide when you will answer the question.

Sometimes, the question pertains to a topic that you will be introducing in a future lesson; in this situation, you may want to delay answering so that the group can stay focused on the current topic. When this happens, you can say, “Thank you for this great question! We’re going to be talking about [topic] next week. Can I hold this question until then?”

Other times, you may need to research an answer or think about the best way to answer a question appropriately. In the moment, you can say something like, “I don’t know. I’m writing down your question so I can learn more about this and will answer in our next lesson.” You can write questions down on a landing page, then search for the response later within the El Camino curriculum materials or a reputable source like [Amaze](#), [Planned Parenthood](#), [Bedsider](#), [TeensHealth](#), or the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#). Take the time you need to find the answer, but make sure to follow up with youth during the next class.

Step 2: Decide when you will answer the question.

“How old were you when you first had sex?”

Since this answer doesn’t require research and is general in nature, you will want to respond right away. The right response will also remind young people that you will not provide direct answers to personal questions and that you’ll likely reduce the number of future questions about your personal experience. However, it will also validate their desire to know. Their curiosity is not usually out of malice and is often about seeking affirmation, support, or something similar.

For example, you can say, “I get why you’re curious about it, but that’s very personal information that I would prefer not to share.”



Step 3: Decide if you will respond directly or turn the discussion over to the group.

For **fact-based questions** (e.g., “Can a girl get pregnant if she has sex during her period?” or “Will birth control protect against STIs?”), respond directly unless you have time to use the question as an opportunity to reinforce knowledge by asking the group.

As a reminder, responding *directly* doesn’t necessarily mean responding *immediately*, especially if you don’t know the answer to the question or want to keep the focus on your current discussion. You can have a direct response either as soon as the question is asked or wait until the next session to respond.

For questions about your **personal opinions** (e.g., “When is the right time to have sex?”), remind the group that you are not going to share your own opinions. Answer by reinforcing more universally held values (e.g., “People should only have sex when they and their partner feel ready”) or by turning it to the group, asking them to share what they know about the different values people hold. If you choose the latter option, remind the group that it’s important to develop their own values and make decisions for themselves, and that they should seek advice from trusted adults.

For questions about your **personal experience**, remember that you can share but that there are good reasons not to. You can always respond by saying that you won’t be sharing your personal experiences (if you have them, this is a great place to remind youth of any group agreements that speak to your role as a facilitator). If appropriate, you can then convert the question to a values-based question and turn it over to the group to explore the range of values people hold.

Step 3: Decide if you will respond directly or turn it to the group.

“How old were you when you first had sex?”

After telling the group that you won't respond to personal questions, you can say that many people wonder about the “right” age to have sex. This now becomes a question about personal values and allows you to ask clarifying questions to get to the root question.

To turn this question to the group, you can use any of the following:

- “When do you think teens your age believe is the right time to have sex?”
 - “What do others think?”
- “What do some people—like adults in your life, your friends, TV shows—have to say about having sex at your age? Why would they say that?”
- “Does what you hear about people your age having sex align with what you believe?”
- “Can you think of any reasons why someone might want to wait?”
- “Do you know what the average age at first sex is in this country? Do you know that it has actually increased over the last 20 years?”

At the end of the discussion, you can then say: “It’s important for everyone to decide for themselves what they believe is right.”

Conclusion

Remember, young people have many sources of information about sex and sexuality—whether from family, friends, or the media. As an *El Camino* facilitator, you can be a positive source of information by fostering learning environments that are safe, open, inclusive, and model boundaries. Answering difficult questions with thoughtfulness and comfort is a great way to shape healthy learning environments.

More About El Camino

Child Trends developed *El Camino*, a sexual health promotion program for Latino adolescents that encourages youth to set goals, make informed sexual and reproductive health choices that align with those goals, and have healthy relationships. The *El Camino* curriculum is freely available for download both in English and Spanish. Additional information about *El Camino*, as well as the curriculum itself, can be found at <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/el-camino-a-goal-setting-sexual-health-promotion-program>.

More About Child Trends and Healthy Teen Network Partnership

Child Trends and [Healthy Teen Network](#) have joined together to support professionals who wish to implement the *El Camino* curriculum. Child Trends developed [El Camino](#)—a sexual health promotion program for Latino adolescents that encourages youth to set goals, make informed sexual and reproductive health choices that align with those goals, and have healthy relationships—and has been evaluating the program with funding from the Office of Population Affairs from July 2020 through June 2024. Together, Child Trends and Healthy Teen Network are collaborating to update the curriculum and training materials. As the national training and technical assistance (TA) provider, Healthy Teen Network supports professionals to build their capacity to implement *El Camino* with quality and fidelity.

To request training or TA on *El Camino*, please [contact Healthy Teen Network by using the online request form](#).

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