

MAINE FAMILY PLANNING TIP SHEET

Creating a Safe Learning Environment



When teaching sexuality education, setting a safe learning environment is the first step in ensuring students will be engaged and ready to learn. Comfort and inclusivity for all students, regardless of their personal experiences or beliefs, will allow them to focus on the content of the lessons and respect differences among each other.

Group Agreements As an educator, it's important to establish general rules of conduct for your group or classroom. Students are more likely to follow these agreements when they have a hand in creating them. Group agreements help each person feel valued and models collaboration, while establishing a clear understanding of expectations.

Tips for setting group agreements:

- ✓ Start with a list of what you consider the bare essentials.
- 🗣️ Work with your students to create a set of agreements expressed in *their* language.
- 🔦 Make sure your group agreements are visible to everyone. This document is ever changing, and should be adjusted as issues of concern arise.
- 🧠 Consider using visuals to represent the agreements so all types of learners feel included.
- 💡 Need some help? Check out our list of sample group agreements and add your own!

If you already have classroom or group agreements in place...

Take a moment to revisit them before starting the sexual health lesson

Review or redefine them as they relate to discussing sexual health

Add new agreements that you think will be important throughout the lesson

● ● ● Being LGBTQ Inclusive ● ● ●

Notice assumptions. Gender Identity and sexual orientation are not always obvious based on name or appearance. Being aware of our assumptions can keep us from using pronouns for someone whose identity we don't know.

Use examples that include a range of identities and orientations or exclude gendered language all together. Try using "partner" instead of gendered words like "boyfriend" or "girlfriend. This allows for everyone to feel equally represented!

Get down to science. Talking about bodies doesn't have to be gendered. Language like "boys and girls" or "men and women" isn't always necessary. When talking about anatomy, try using terms like "penis owner" or "person assigned female at birth".

● ● ● Being Trauma Informed ● ● ●

Consider the language, images, or models you use. Folks entering your space have had many experiences prior to your class. How might your sexual health content trigger a past traumatic event for someone and what can you do to avoid this?

Take note of behaviors. Trauma may show up in a variety of ways including acting out, withdrawing from the group, changes in mood, depression, loss of interest, or difficulty focusing.

Check in privately if someone is always passing or not participating in group discussions or activities. They may have concerns problems that require additional support.

Establish the go-to people in your school or organization, such as the school counselor, nurse, or other staff. Share their names with the group, as well as local organizations or hotlines that student can access or share with someone else.

● ● ● Disclosure Policy ● ● ●

Tell your participants if you are bound by law to report any disclosures of harm to oneself or others. While you want youth in your group to be open and participate freely, they should know it's your job to make sure they are safe.

Be ready to involve others when a serious situation is presented that involves safety, the law, or child welfare.

Get informed of your school or organization's mandated reporting/disclosure policy prior to any lessons. What steps will you take and who else needs to be involved if a report needs to be made?



Need Help Getting Started? Try These Group Agreements!

✓ It's OK to Feel Embarrassed

We don't tend to talk about these topics, so it's normal to feel embarrassed. Just because we feel embarrassed doesn't mean we should stop talking, but it's good to recognize any feelings of discomfort.

✓ One Person Speaks at a Time

Practicing good listening skills is important! Jot down your own thoughts to share rather than interrupting others. Everyone should have a chance to be equally heard during discussions.

✓ Laughing is OK (unless it gets in the way)

It's common to laugh or think something is funny when we are embarrassed or feeling awkward. However, it is not okay to laugh at someone, embarrass someone, or distract others from learning.

✓ Respect Each Other's Ideas and Opinions

Each person is different. Our bodies are different; our family values are different. We may not agree with each other and that's okay. Remember it's important to listen to others and respect these differences.

✓ Use Correct Terms

We may not know the correct names for everything, but we will do our best to use these terms once we learn them. Everyone should feel equally safe and comfortable, and agreeing to use the same language when possible helps!

✓ Questions are Welcome and OK

You can ask your questions in class or through the anonymous question box! If you have a question, probably others in the class do too.

✓ No Personal Stories

This means not asking personal questions of a peer or the teacher. If you have a personal story or someone else's story that you think is important to share, you could say, "I've heard that..." or "I know someone who..." instead of saying ME, I or an individual's name.

✓ It's OK to Pass!

Everyone has their own perspective and comfort level. You may have past experiences that make you sensitive, defensive, or even triggered by certain topics. If you are ever uncomfortable with an activity or discussion, or simply would rather not take part, you can pass or sit that one out.