ABOUT

Learning how to make decisions is a skill individuals often learn by trial and error in life; some people excel, and others are consistently challenged by the task. Sexual decision-making can be even more challenging for young people while they are dealing with fluctuating hormones, peer pressures, the desire to fit in, and all of the social, emotional, and physical changes that happen during adolescence. As educators, its important to remember that teaching sexual decision-making is a critical part of sex ed, as we know that many young people report that sex "just happened," or that they "just wanted to get it over with." Supporting young people in developing the skill of making choices about sexual behaviors that are aligned with their values and will enhance their health outcomes is just one piece of the puzzle when it comes to sexuality education.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Teaching sexual decision-making is supporting and empowering students to make informed decisions about their sexual behaviors that are aligned with their community and personal values in order to enhance the health outcomes that they value and prioritize. While it might be easier, and sometimes done subconsciously, to emphasize our own values judgments in our classrooms, it is important for young people to analyze their own values in order to make the decisions that work for them. As educators, we must be conscious of any preconceived notions, biases, or personal values that may, subconsciously or not, be infused into our teaching. We encourage educators to examine and evaluate their own ways of thinking and knowing when it comes to teaching sexual decision-making prior to engaging in these lessons. Some ways of doing this are to attend conferences, participate in SARs (Sexual Attitude Reassessment), engage with literature, and continue your professional development throughout your career. Some resources for professional development are included at the end of this toolkit.

There are several decision-making models in the field. You may have heard of DOGMA, DECIDE, or the 5-step model (more info below). These models come from a mix of public health, school health education, and the social sciences. Regardless of which decision-making model is used, all of these models support students in building their sexual decision-making skills. When choosing a model to use in your classroom, think about your students' developmental stages, common group norms, and what strengths they already have as assets. In addition, offering two or three models for young people to choose from will allow them the autonomy to learn in a way that works best for them.

In this toolkit, you will find links to decision-making models commonly used in sexuality and health education. In addition, you will find links to lesson plans and other resources to guide you in your teaching of decision-making. As your students are developing their overall decision-making skills, it is important to integrate concepts of sexual decison-making into your lessons.

There are several factors that might influence a young person (and adults!) when making decisions related to their sexual behaviors, these include, cultural and group norms, values and religious beliefs, family, peers, and partners, history of abuse and sexual trauma, and substance use (alcohol and other drugs). Engaging young people in thoughtful dialogue, encouraging discussions with trusted adults, and dispelling myths and disinformation about internal and external influences will empower the young people you work with to make informed decisions. In addition, teaching young people how to critically think about media and popular culture will support them in analyzing their external influences (see our Digital and Media Literacy Toolkit).

Finally, it is important to remember that mistakes and decisions that lead to negative (or unfavorable) outcomes are part of life, maturing, and developing into adulthood. We also know that adolescents often make decisions on impulse (check out the articles on brain development at the end of this toolkit). As humans, we have all made decisions that didn't align with our values or resulted in something we weren't happy with.

Sometimes people make decisions even when they know the outcome won't be what they want. Rather than using shame or fear when we teach our young people how to make sexual decisions, lean into a "growth mindset" framework (see resources at the end of this toolkit). Support them in not only learning how to make decisions around sexual behaviors, but how to grow and learn when they make "bad" choices, errors in judgment, or just do the "wrong" thing anyway. Connecting with young people in this shame-free, growth mindset way will build relationships and support you, the educator, in being the trusted adult they come to when they need further resources and guidance.

DECISION-MAKING MODELS

D-O-G-M-A Model   (From 3Rs, 3rs.org)

D Determine what the situation is.
O Brainstorm your options.
G Gather Information about and weigh the pros and cons of each option.
M Make a decision.
A Act on your decision.

D-E-C-I-D-E Model   (Adapted from Project School Wellness)

Define the decision to be made.
Explore your options.
Consider the outcomes.
Identify your values.
Decide and act.
Evaluate and reflect.

5 Steps Model   (Adapted from RMC Health)

1. Identify the decision that needs to be made and who can support you.

2. List possible choices and predict possible outcomes.

3. Make the decision.

4. Follow through: make a plan, communicate your choice, connect with people who can support you.

5. Reflect on the outcome of the decision. Possible reflection questions include:

    How did this decision make me feel?

    Why did I make this decision?

    What might happen next?

    Did this decision affect others?

    Did this decision align with my personal values and goals?

    Would I make this decision again?

    What do I want to remember the next time I make a decision?