



Advocates
For Youth

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Strategies for Organizational Success

Hot Potatoes: Keeping Cool in the Midst of Controversy

Introduction

As teen pregnancy prevention program planners, administrators, and advocates, you often find yourself in the midst of conflict and controversy. The issues are serious – teen sexual risk-taking, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV – and can trigger deeply-held values that cause intense disagreement. Moreover, controversy can push buttons, sometimes leading advocates to say or do things they wouldn't normally consider saying or doing.

Wisdom, preparation, and practice can help handle difficult situations appropriately. Being thoughtful and intentional can enable you to respond effectively to challenging questions and situations. This document offers a number of suggestions and provides commonly-asked questions to help prepare for the 'hot potatoes' of controversy.

1. Anticipate When You Are Likely to Face Controversy

You can expect controversy in settings where opposing viewpoints are encouraged. At such times, you need to keep cool and stay focused on the issue. This is especially important in public settings such as:

- ✓ School board meetings
- ✓ Radio talk shows
- ✓ Public hearings
- ✓ Parent information nights at schools
- ✓ Point/counterpoint debates on television or on Web sites
- ✓ Web blogs and chat rooms
- ✓ E-mail correspondence – *Never* assume that an e-mail will be seen only by the recipient! Once it is sent, you have *no* control over how many times it will be forwarded and shared!

2. Prepare to Answer Pointed Questions in Public Settings.

Effective public speakers know that you must prepare both for your own presentation and also for questions from the audience. When in situations where you are likely to be asked questions in public, follow the Rule of Four S's. Keep your answers Simple, Short, Serious, and Straightforward.

This four-sentence process can help. Let's say, for example, that a teacher is being questioned by a student's parent about the school's sex education program.

- ✓ **Sentence One:** We begin with a statement that identifies the questioner's concerns or feelings. For example, we might say: "I know you care deeply about your child's education."
- ✓ **Sentences Two and Three:** This is the heart of our response. Respond in one of three ways:

- **Present your argument** and offer evidence to support your position. For example, “We also care about your child’s education and that of all the children. That is why we have chosen to use a curriculum that provides factual, medically accurate information and that has been proven effective in helping teens reduce sexual risk-taking.”
 - **Challenge the credibility of the question or charge** by asking for the questioner’s evidence. For example, let’s say the parent says that she recently read that teaching teens about contraception encourages them to become sexually active. You say, “I’m sorry, but that is different from the research of many reputable organizations, like the National Institutes of Health and the World Health Organization. Where did you read it?”
 - **Refute the question or charge** and then offer other information or facts. For example, “I have to respectfully disagree. The research is clear that condoms are effective in preventing pregnancy when they are used correctly and consistently.”
- ✓ **Sentence Four:** Close by taking the conversation back to the big picture. For example, “Thank you for your question as it serves to remind us that young people need to hear *both* to postpone sexual involvement *and also* to use protection against pregnancy and disease when they become sexually active.”

3. Prepare to Respond to Questions from the Press

Press interviews require brief, yet affective, responses. For most interviews, you need to respond to a question or concern within a short time frame. Preparing ‘sound bytes’ in advance will help you to use the little time available to maximum effect. Sound bytes – also known as ‘talking points’ – are the critical messages to convey.

Use your talking points to guide the conversation. Rather than simply responding to an interviewer’s set of questions, use your talking points to frame or reframe the discussion. As a guideline, a sound byte should consist of three critical talking points that we can deliver in a few sentences.

Spend some time developing these messages before you need them – especially on controversial issues such as condom effectiveness, sex education, access to family planning services, emergency contraception, sexual orientation, gender identity, values, and of course, science-based approaches and programs. This four-step process can help you deliver sound bytes effectively during a press interview.

- ✓ **Step One:** Acknowledge the interviewer’s question. “That’s a good question” or “Thank you for bringing up ____ (this subject).”
- ✓ **Step Two:** State your position using our sound byte or talking points. For example, “But did you know...? (Insert your three critical points.)
- ✓ **Step Three:** The interviewer might respond with: “But you didn’t answer my question.” Sidestep the question and return to your main point by saying: “While it’s an interesting question, the important thing to remember is ...?(We use our talking points again.)
- ✓ **Step Four:** If the interviewer responds with something like, “You still didn’t answer my question,” respond with “I heard your question; but I want the listeners (audience) to know ... (Use your major point again here.)

There may be times when you choose to answer an interviewer’s question directly. But, remember to be cautious, brief, positive, and direct. You don’t want to get drawn into affirming and/or validating the opposition. For example, if the interviewer has read a recent article suggesting that condoms are ineffective:

- **DON’T Say:** “Yes, condoms do fail sometimes, but they are effective when used properly and consistently.”
- **DO say:** “Condoms are highly effective against HIV and some other STIs when used correctly and consistently.”

4. Anticipate “Hot Potato” Questions and Practice Handling them in Advance

You’ve heard it many times: “Practice makes perfect.” Here are some practical suggestions to help practice the ‘hot potato’ questions.

- ✓ Rehearse with a videotape so that you can critique and improve responses, gestures, and body language.
- ✓ Practice answering questions clearly and with confidence. You need to back up every answer with evidence.
- ✓ Practice “dissecting” a question into several parts. You can choose which part to answer first before answering the other parts of the question.
- ✓ Practice a team approach – calling upon the help of staff, friends, or colleagues. They can:
 - Hurl “softball” and “hardball” questions in rehearsal;
 - Critique your rehearsal video;
 - Analyze complex questions with us;
 - Help research the answers and find the evidence you might need;
 - Provide support when the going gets tough; and
 - Brainstorm responses to some of the most difficult questions you expect.

“Hot Potato” Questions – 25 Examples

Below are 25 “hot potato” questions that you might face during a school board meeting or in another public forum. It’s unlikely that you will be asked these questions exactly as they appear here. But you can expect variations of them. By brainstorming responses to these questions in advance, you will be better prepared to handle them when they arise.

1. We’ve tried to raise our children to have good moral values and to remain abstinent until marriage. Does this program teach children that it is wrong to have sex before marriage? If not, why not?
2. Our church has this great program that encourages kids to wait until marriage. Does your program encourage kids to sign a contract that they’ll wait until marriage?
3. What will you teach kids about condoms? They fail 40% of the time with teenagers. How can you, in good conscience, push condoms on our children when AIDS is out there?
4. I want all the parents here tonight to stand up if they believe in our children and want the schools to support family values by teaching our children abstinence-until-marriage. (People stand up and clap.) This should be a local decision. Can’t you see this is what our community wants and supports?
5. I hear this program talks about touching below the waist and having sex. It also talks about the fact that sex should be reserved for the special few people in our lives. Why doesn’t it teach abstinence until marriage and encourage teens to have one faithful partner for life?
6. I hear the new curriculum will teach 8th graders how to use condoms. Why don’t we just tell these kids that condoms fail and that they should say no to sex?
7. What’s going to be taught about birth control? Shouldn’t we be teaching children that abstinence until marriage is the only perfect way to avoid pregnancy and AIDS? We started teaching teens about contraception in the 1970s, you see where it got us!
8. I’m concerned that you are only talking about sexual intercourse. I hear my son talking about how many girls are going down on boys – what is the school doing about that?
9. I’ve heard that teachers put up posters with filthy words and have the students brainstorm other filthy words that they know. I resent my child being exposed to such trash. I want them to have respect for sex. What does this have to do with sex education?

10. I want to know if you are teaching that homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle.
11. My daughter is just not ready for all this. I resent her learning this information in school when she should learn it at home. And don't tell me that I can send her to the library because that embarrasses her. Why don't we just leave all this to the parents and the church where it belongs?
12. I've heard of this really good program that teaches children real values instead of safe sex. Why aren't you using this curriculum? Over 2,000 schools in the country are using it.
13. Why are you not open to abstinence programs? Our church will bring in a national speaker here to tell the school board how successful it is, if you will only let us.
14. I hear that teaching children about contraception causes them to have abortions. Will there be any discussion of abortion? Will the school nurse make any referrals for abortion if a student is pregnant?
15. AIDS is God's punishment for wicked behavior. Are you going to teach that homosexual behavior is a sin?
16. This is a conservative community. Why can't we just teach abstinence - at least until our kids are in high school?
17. Will the boys and girls be separated for sex education?
18. (Student) Why can't you just tell the truth about everything? Why does sex have to be such a touchy subject with adults? We learn complete information in English and math - why shouldn't we learn everything about sex? We see it all in movies anyway.
19. I'd like to know who is going to teach the program. I don't want the coaches or male teachers teaching my daughters.
20. When we tell kids to abstain and then tell them about condoms, we are giving them a mixed message. No wonder they are all having sex.
21. When is the school going to wake up? We need sex education and we need school clinics that make condoms and contraception available to anyone who needs them. When are we going to take teen pregnancy and AIDS seriously? How many kids are going to have to die?
22. I want to know if you are going to teach about homosexuality. If you are, you should know that it is illegal and sinful. Why are we teaching immoral behavior instead of the basics?
23. Are you going to teach about oral and anal sex? Kids need to know that some sexual behaviors are more risky than others.
24. These people don't know what they are talking about. I graduated from this high school two years ago and everyone was having sex. They should put condoms on the school lunch trays!
25. What are you doing for gay students? How does this curriculum meet their needs? So far, all you are talking about is marriage – not everybody is going to get married.

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