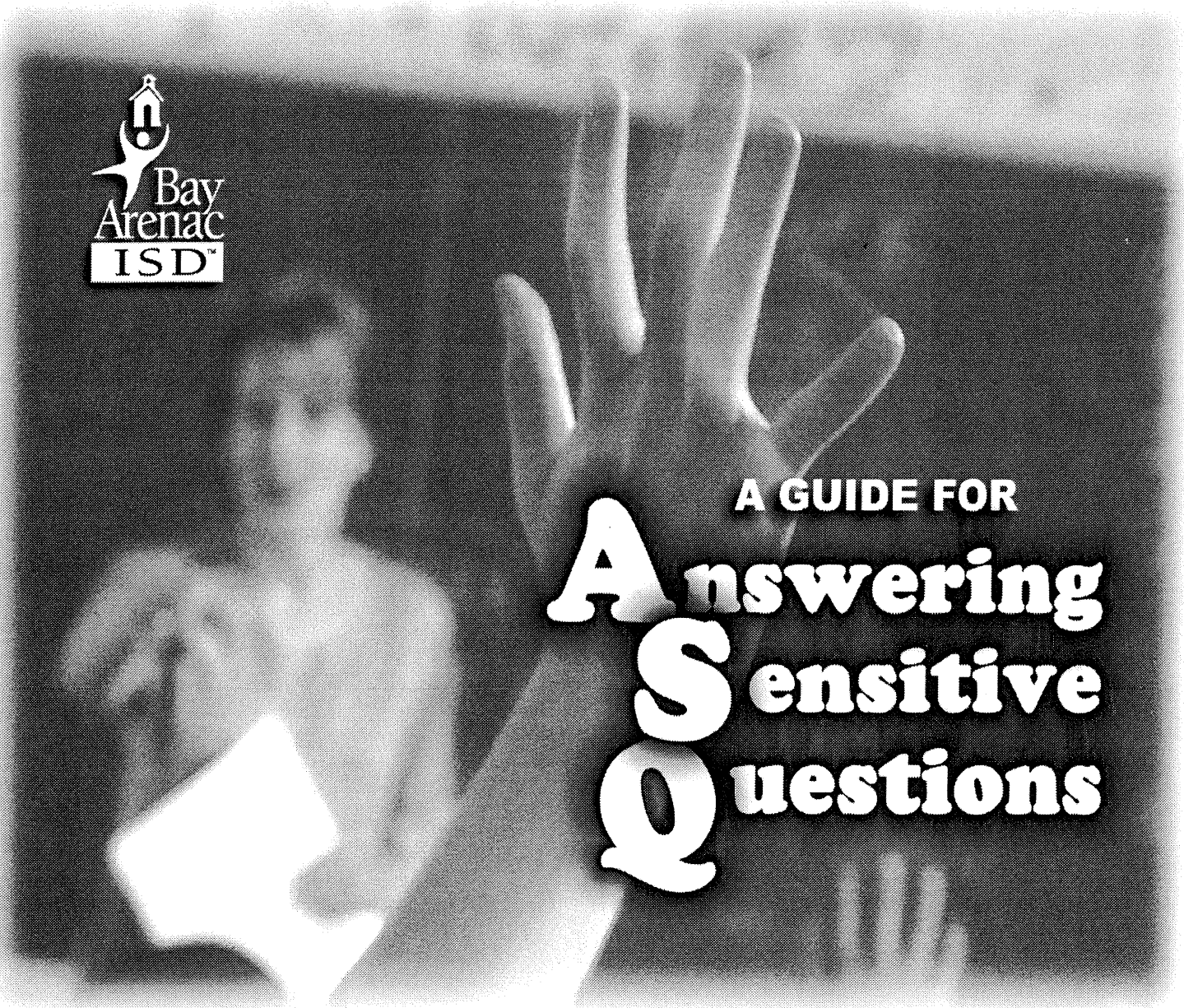


*A guide for educators  
who deal with sensitive questions in school settings.*

A black and white photograph of a hand raised in a classroom setting, with a blurred background of a student and a chalkboard.

**A GUIDE FOR  
Answering  
Sensitive  
Questions**

**B**ecause school classrooms are the center of learning, it is not uncommon for students to ask questions that may warrant careful, thoughtfully-crafted responses by educators. This guide will inform educators and school committees about the issues surrounding “sensitive questions in the classroom” and offer suggestions for creating safe, healthy, learning environments.

## Creating a Climate for Inquiry

When responding to student questions, one cannot underestimate the importance of the teacher's verbal and nonverbal cues for establishing classroom climate. These qualities can make a difference in setting the tone for healthy classroom discussions:

- warmth (facial expression, voice tone, body stance, words chosen to encourage student questions)
- reassurance that all questions have value
- a classroom environment that minimizes ridicule
- openness to *find answers* without being expected to *know all the answers*

## Ground Rules for Classroom Discussions

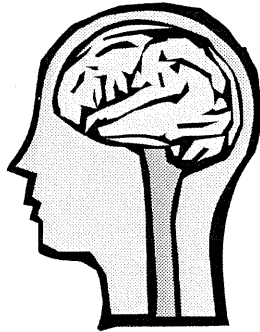
- ✓ Avoid put downs; there is no such thing as a “dumb” question.
- ✓ Use respectful language.
- ✓ Respect each other's feelings and values.
- ✓ Refrain from asking personal questions.
- ✓ Ensure everyone the right to pass.
- ✓ Explain an educator's obligation to report suspected child abuse.

## What Kind of Questions Do Kids Ask?

When responding to sensitive questions, it often helps to mentally “sort” questions into fact and value questions. Not all questions fall neatly into one category or the other.

Before you answer, ask...

- Is there a state-level or district policy to guide or limit your answer? The Michigan School Code addresses HIV prevention education (section 1169) and sexuality education (section 1507). Local districts may have additional guidelines as well. If you are unsure of your district's guidelines, consult your district's Sexuality Education Supervisor.
- Is it grade-level or developmentally appropriate? What if it isn't?
- What is the purpose of the question? Does the question seek information or permission? Does it seek reassurance? Is it intended to “shock” the class or the teacher?



## When School Policy Prohibits Discussion of a Topic

Be honest. Tell the student when school rules prohibit the topic from being discussed at school.

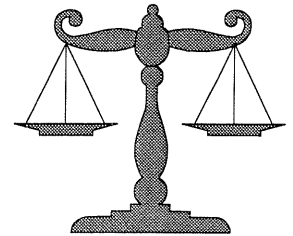
Explain that most parents want to talk about certain issues with their children and suggest they talk with a parent or other trusted adult at home.

Provide parents with a resource packet so they can respond to their child's questions at home.



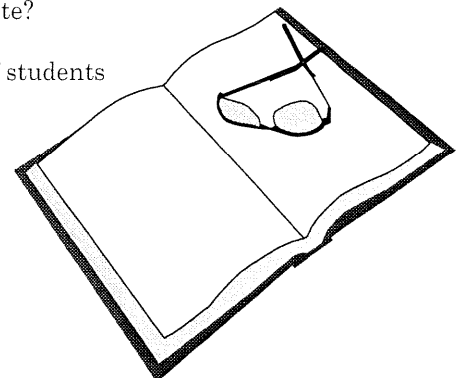
## Responding to Questions Related to Values

It's not possible, or desirable, to provide value-free education. Questions with a value component must be answered with care because expressing your own personal value might hurt or offend a child or their family. **Universal values** are those shared by a majority of the community. Teachers are comfortable expressing and are obligated to teach these values. Examples include opposition to forced sex, knowingly passing a disease, committing murder, or child abuse. Other **values** are not universal within the community. Examples include beliefs about abortion, birth control, homosexuality, etc. While it's inappropriate to teach specific values about a controversial issue, it shouldn't circumvent teaching about the context of the controversy. For value-laden questions, be sure to encourage students to ask their parents the same question so that families have input into the issue being discussed.



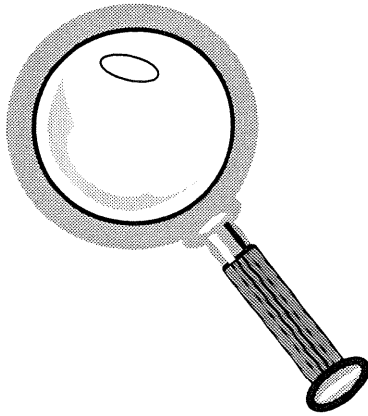
## Criteria for Evaluating Responses to Factual Questions

- Was the answer clear and concise?
- Was the answer accurate?
- Was the answer grade/age and school appropriate?
- Is it respectful of students and families?
- If needed, did the answer provide guidance for obtaining additional information?



## Finding Meaning Behind the Questions Students Ask

There are many reasons why students ask questions. It is helpful to understand the reason why a question is asked before offering a response. Using the topic of HIV, notice how the form of the question changes based on the type of response being sought:



**Information-Seeking/General Curiosity** — Straightforward, factual questions, looking for information or clarification.

- Examples:
- *What is AIDS?*
  - *Why do gay men get AIDS?*
  - *Why does God let babies die?*

**“Am-I-Normal” or Anxiety About One’s Own Welfare** — An information question, but asked to seek reassurance.

- Examples:
- *Can I get HIV?*
  - *I have an aunt who has HIV; can she pass it on to her baby?*

**Anxiety or Concern for Others** —Worry for those they love.

- Examples:
- *Will my mother get HIV?*
  - *Do all grown-ups know how not to get HIV?*

**Permission – Solution Seeking/Advice** —A value question is asked, but the goal is to gain information to make a decision.

- Examples:
- *If I wear a condom, am I protected from getting HIV?*
  - *Should I get tested for HIV?*
  - *If I want birth control, do I need to have my parent’s permission?*

**Personal Belief/Values** —A question is asked to explore a psychological issue. The key is to turn it into an information question.

- Examples:
- *Is it okay for unmarried teenagers to have sex?*
  - *Do you think people with HIV have sinned?*

**Shock/Personal Information** —Tests leader’s ability to think on his/her feet while responding to underlying concern. Many times the shock comes from the slang vocabulary used as opposed to the question asked.

- Examples:
- *Do you have AIDS?*
  - *Have you ever had unprotected sex?*
  - *What is a “rubber?”*

## Ten Steps for Answering Student Questions

When a student asks a question, no matter what the topic, it’s helpful to keep the following steps in mind when formulating a response:

**1. Recognize the value of the question.**

- Thank you for asking that.*
- That’s an interesting question.*
- I’m glad you asked that question.*
- Many people have wondered about that.*

**2. Determine what is already known about the topic.**

- What have you heard about that?*
- What can you tell me about that?*
- Do you already know anything about that?*

**3. Consider what type of question is being asked.**

- Is it a fact question?*
- Is it a value question?*

**4. Rephrase the question using the student’s words as much as possible.**

- Let me see if I understand the question....*
- When you asked..., did you mean...?*

**5. Clarify terms, as needed.**

- You asked what a ... is. That is another word for....*
- When you say..., do you mean...?*

**6. Give a brief, concise, age-appropriate answer.**

- That word means...*

**7. Too little information is usually better than too much.**

- Some people think...*
- Other people think...*
- ... is when ... happens.*

**8. Ask if you answered the question.**

- Was that what you wanted to know?*
- Did that answer your question?*
- Is there anything else you’d like to ask?*

**9. If not, always refer them back to their parents and other credible sources of information, including:**

- Their parents or other trusted adults*
- A reputable web site. Some suggestions include:*
  - *Advocates for Youth ([www.advocatesforyouth.org](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org))*
  - *National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy ([www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org))*
  - *The Network for National Family Life Education ([www.sexetc.org](http://www.sexetc.org))*
  - *Campaign for Our Children, Inc. ([www.cfoc.org](http://www.cfoc.org))*
- A doctor, the health department, or an agency*

**10. Open the door for future questions.**

- I’m glad you were able to talk to me about ....*
- I’m here if you have more questions.*
- If you have more questions later, just let me know.*
- That was an interesting question. I hope we can talk again sometime.*

## Remember...

**Confidentiality** – When students share information outside of class, ask them to focus on the topics discussed not the person who spoke.

**Right to Pass** – Any question is okay to ask, except those that ask about the teacher's or other students' personal lives. Tell students that you may choose not to answer a question in class. Your choice is not because it is a bad question, but because you're not ready to answer it for one or more of the following reasons:

- You may think it is not of interest to all students.
- You're not prepared to lead a class discussion around the issue.
- The topic may be covered later in the unit.
- It is beyond what is approved in the curricula.

**Language** – The goal is to help students gain knowledge and practice skills that maintain safe and healthy lifestyles. If a student does not know the correct terminology for something about which they have a question, they should use whatever word they know. The teacher will always answer using the correct terms in his or her response.

### Give Yourself Permission Not to Be Perfect!

- It's okay to say "I don't know," or to refer students to another source.
- Don't be afraid to correct an answer. Be honest and revise as soon as possible.
- If you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed, tell the class. Your feelings and reactions are normal.

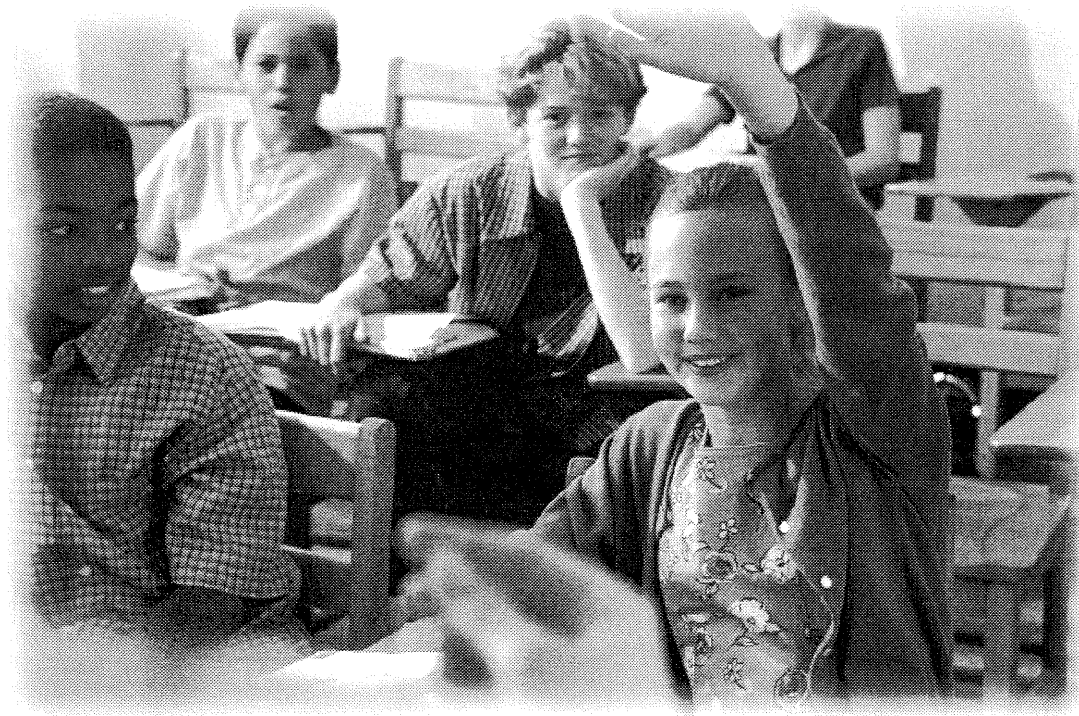
## Using a Question Box: A Strategy

A question box allows teachers to screen questions, research answers or think through a response. It also allows questions to be asked anonymously to minimize embarrassment and maximize privacy. The labeled box has an opening in the top and is placed within easy access in the classroom, along with writing paper and a pencil next to it. Another classroom method for using a question box encourages every student to write either a question or make a comment about the current topic. This process prevents students with questions from being singled out, while encouraging individual comments.

Teachers should incorporate the question box into regular classroom activities to normalize the process and encourage students to participate. Teachers should encourage students to ask their parents the same question and gain their input, too.

- ✓ *Check the box frequently.*
- ✓ *Organize questions by themes to minimize research time.*
- ✓ *Minimize the time between questions asked and responses given.*

It's okay to say you don't know. This could be an excellent learning opportunity for students as well as teachers.



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