FYSB Family & Youth Services Bureau

Building Trust: How to Use Non-stigmatizing Language with Adolescents in Pregnancy Prevention Programs

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TIPS FOR USING NON-STIGMATIZING LANGUAGE IN APP PROGRAMMING

- Use person-first language and avoid labels.
- Recognize the way society has historically perpetuated stereotypes and avoid using them.
- Be mindful of assumptions.
- Train staff in the use of inclusive language.
- Review your curriculum for stigmatizing language and activities.
- Focus on empowerment, not shame.
- Normalize conversations about sexual health.
- Be inclusive of all gender identities and sexual orientations.
- Support teens who are pregnant and parenting.
- Get input from youth about the language and messages you use in your program.

OVERVIEW

In Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention (APP) programs, the language and terminology you use can either make youth feel valued and supported or it can stigmatize and marginalize them, affecting their self-esteem and motivation to participate in programming. Language choices are especially important when it comes to discussing sensitive topics such as sexual behavior, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Stigma: A set of negative and unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something

This tip sheet provides practical guidance on using affirming, non-stigmatizing language when working with adolescents in APP programs and other Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs.

BACKGROUND

Historically, certain demographic groups have faced stigma and discrimination in sexual health education. For example, women and girls have been held to stricter standards than men and boys regarding sexual behavior. Society has historically valued "purity" among young, unmarried women, and those who strayed from those expectations were often stigmatized or deemed promiscuous. Young men, however, were not held to the same expectations and, in some cases, were praised for similar behaviors (Fasula et al., 2007).

Young women who became pregnant outside of marriage were often shamed into giving birth in maternity homes and giving up their children (Brook Adams, 2016). Certain racial and ethnic groups have faced additional stigmatization. For example, young Black women have been stereotyped as "hypersexual" or irresponsible (Anderson et al., 2018), which contributes to objectification and jeopardizes their well-being (Bernard et al., 2015; Bond et al., 2021). There is also concern some sexual health education programs could shame certain cultures that value having children at earlier ages. In these instances, participants may feel like they are being shamed for their cultural values (Hohman-Billmeier et al., 2016).

These experiences may have long-lasting effects on youth, leading them to feel shame but also causing mistrust and detachment from sexual health education programming. For teens who have already experienced a pregnancy or contracted an STI, language that reinforces negative stereotypes or places blame can be particularly harmful.

In recent years, there has been a shift toward more positive approaches to adolescent sexual health education and terminology. This includes recognizing the diverse experiences and needs of youth, addressing the broader social determinants of health, and promoting PYD.

Some sexual education curricula or materials may inadvertently include stigmatizing language. Consider, for example:

- Materials that depict virgins as beautiful flowers and those who have had sex as having had their petals plucked away, signifying that they have been "used" or have nothing left to give to a future spouse. These activities, like those that equate someone who had sex with used chewing gum, can make adolescents who have already had sex see themselves as being permanently "damaged" or "lesser than" adolescents who have not had sex.

- Example scenarios illustrating pressure from a partner to have sex that reinforce gender stereotypes, with boys pressuring and girls needing to resist.

- Messages that focus on potential negative emotional consequences of having sex before marriage such as "feeling empty," "feeling used," and "feeling regret/guilt." These messages could potentially have effects on adolescents' mental health or contribute to a negative relationship with sex in later life.

- Messages that may imply that a victim of sexual assault is at fault or could have avoided the abuse by behaving differently or looking different.

TIPS FOR USING NON-STIGMATIZING LANGUAGE IN APP PROGRAMMING

The following tips will help you use affirming language and build trust among adolescents in your program.

1. **Use person-first language and avoid labels:** Focus on the person, not on their background. For example, instead of saying "teen moms" or "at-risk youth," use terms like "teenagers who are parents" or "youth facing challenges."

2. **Recognize the way society has historically perpetuated stereotypes and avoid using them:** Be wary of terms that generalize groups of people. Labels such as "promiscuous" carry negative connotations and can not only stigmatize youth in your programs but can also reinforce societal biases, particularly against marginalized groups. Instead, focus on describing protective behaviors without making judgments about character.

3. **Be mindful of assumptions**: Avoid making assumptions about a young person's sexual history, sexual orientation, gender identity, racial identity, or cultural background. If you make assumptions, you risk alienating youth who do not identify according to your assumptions or who do not fit the dominant norms. Use open-ended questions and inclusive language to create a space where all teens feel welcome to share their identities and experiences. It's best to refer to specific body parts when talking about human anatomy, sexual behavior, or contraception rather than using the terms "male" or "female." For example, rather than saying "male condom," you can say "external condom" to emphasize how the condom is used. When talking about intercourse involving the penis, rather than saying "the man puts his penis in...," you can say "a person with a penis puts the penis in..."

4. **Train staff in the use of inclusive language**: To prepare for your training, check out the resources provided in this tip sheet and explore others on *The Exchange*. Consider collaborating with other organizations that can share knowledge and resources with your staff about inclusive language. To help staff discover their own unconscious biases and develop an understanding about stereotypes relating to specific groups of people, consider having them take a free "Implicit Association Test" offered by Project Implicit ⬈. Take one yourself! To see the menu of tests without registering, you can log in as a guest. After signing on as a guest, read the page entitled "Preliminary Information" and click "I wish to proceed." Then choose a test and follow the instructions. Becoming aware of your own biases is the first step toward addressing them!

5. **Review your curriculum for stigmatizing language and activities**: Before implementing your curriculum, carefully review it to be sure the examples are inclusive of all members of your student population and look for elements that may stigmatize and marginalize gender-nonconforming and LGBTQ+ youth or youth of color, Indigenous youth, or other marginalized groups. Use the Pre-Implementation Checklist in the Creating Inclusive Spaces facilitator guide. If you find problematic content, you can omit or revise curriculum components that contain stigmatizing or marginalizing messaging, after discussing any proposed modifications with your Federal Project Officer. The Family and Youth Services Bureau's Making Adaptions Tip Sheet provides guidelines on making adaptations.

6. **Focus on empowerment, not shame**: Frame discussions around what teens can do to protect their health, rather than mistakes you think they may have made in the past. For example, rather than saying "here are ways to avoid getting pregnant again," you might say, "here are ways you can protect your health and future." The Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework is an evidence-based approach that focuses on building skills and strengths rather than focusing on deficits.

7. **Normalize conversations about sexual health**: Treat discussions about sex, pregnancy, and STIs as a normal part of health education, rather than something taboo or shameful. Use accurate scientific terminology to describe anatomy (e.g., penis, vulva, vagina). By normalizing these conversations and making discussion of reproductive anatomy no different from discussions about other parts of the body, you reduce embarrassment and encourage open conversations.

8. **Be inclusive of all gender identities and sexual orientations:** Don't assume that all students are heterosexual or cisgender or that they conform to a particular gender identity because of the way they look. Instead, respect students' pronouns when referring to them in class. If you do not know a student's pronouns, the safest approach is to use a gender-neutral pronoun such as "they." When creating examples or scenarios to use in class, use a broad range of examples with regard to gender identity and sexual orientation as well as gender-neutral examples.

9. **Support teens who are pregnant and parenting:** Ensure that language about pregnancy prevention does not marginalize or shame teens who are already parents. Use language that supports their efforts to achieve their goals, such as continuing their education and raising their children. Avoid implying that their situation is the result of poor choices or a lack of responsibility.

10. **Get input from youth about the language and messages you use in your program:** Consider creating a youth advisory board or another type of youth–adult partnership to obtain feedback on your materials and messaging to ensure that it resonates with youth's lived experiences. This participatory approach will make your program more inclusive and accepted, and it can empower the youth who are involved and enhance their leadership skills.

TRANSFORMING THE LANGUAGE

In the table below, look at each statement. Consider how you might change it to be less stigmatizing and more affirming. Then, hover over the statement to see an alternative, more positive statement and an explanation of why the statement is more helpful.

STIGMATIZING STATEMENTS AND REFRAMED, AFFIRMING STATEMENTS
Balancing parenting and education can be challenging, but with the right support, teens who are parents can still achieve their goals and build successful futures.
💡 *This reframes the narrative from one of likely failure to one that acknowledges challenges while emphasizing youth's potential.*
Having a child is a large financial commitment. Making informed decisions about sex and contraception can help teens stay on the path to achieving their goals.
💡 *Instead of framing pregnancy as a path to poverty, this focuses on empowering teens to make choices that align with their goals.*
Balancing school and parenting can be challenging, but many teen parents find creative ways to continue their education.
💡 *This takes a negative generalization and changes it to one that emphasizes success while acknowledging challenges.*
No matter your sexual orientation, it's important to understand sexual health and make informed choices that are right for you.
💡 *This reframes the stigmatizing message, which minimizes the sexual health concerns of LGBTQIA2S+ youth to one that ensures LGBTQIA2S+ youth feel their health is equally important.*

STIGMATIZING STATEMENTS AND REFRAMED, AFFIRMING STATEMENTS

Everyone, regardless of gender identity, should have the knowledge and resources to make informed decisions about their sexual health.

💡 *Instead of perpetuating traditional gender roles and placing an unequal burden on girls, this message emphasizes equality. It is also inclusive of non-binary or transgender teens.*

Abstinence from vaginal, anal, and oral intercourse is the only 100% effective way to prevent HIV, other STDs, and pregnancy.

💡 *This statement focuses on facts, rather than implying that adolescents who have already engaged in sexually activity are irresponsible.*

Every teen deserves access to information and resources that can help them make informed decisions about their health and future.

💡 *The affirming message does not stigmatize youth from a particular community but instead focuses on equity.*

There are many of different cultural values about when to start a family. It's important to find a path that matches your own values and goals for your future.

💡 *Rather than dismissing another culture's values and implying that some cultures are inferior, the affirming message respects cultural diversity and encourages teens to consider their individual goals in their decision-making.*

CONCLUSION

Using affirming and non-stigmatizing language in APP and PYD programs is essential for fostering trust, respect, open communication and engagement among youth. The tips provided here are a starting point for rethinking how language can shape the experiences of the youth you serve.

RESOURCES

Resources on *The Exchange*

- Building On Strengths: The Role of Positive Youth Development in Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Programming (infographic)
- Creating Equitable Spaces: A Facilitator's Guide to Sexual and Reproductive Health Education for Youth with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities (Facilitator guide)
- Creating Safe and Inclusive Spaces for LGBTQ+ Youth (webinar)
- Creating Inclusive Spaces: A Facilitator's Guide to Equity and Inclusion in the Classroom (facilitator guide)
- Empower First, Educate Next: Adopting an Empowerment Framework in Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (webinar)
- Less Stigma, More Inclusion – Shifting the narrative to support expectant and parenting youth in APP programming (presentation at the 2023 Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Annual Conference)
- LGBTQIA2S+ Youth of Color Speak Out: Tips for Inclusive Reproductive Health Programming for Youth-Serving Providers. (video and discussion guide tool)
- Healthy Families: Tips for Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Youth (resource guide)
- Youth Voices: Helping Facilitators of APP Programming Create Safe Spaces for Young People (video)

Other Resources

- American Psychological Association: Inclusive Language Guide 🔗
- American Psychological Association: Bias-Free Language 🔗
- ETR: Taking the Stigma Out of Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenthood: What Schools Can Do 🔗
- CDC: Ways to Stop HIV Stigma and Discrimination
- CDC: Creating Safe Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth
- Healthy Teen Network: Gender, Sexuality, & Inclusive Sex Education 🔗
- Gender Spectrum: Resources & FAQ 🔗

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