

Create a safe learning environment

It is important to develop an atmosphere of trust in the classroom if young people are to engage in honest discussion about reproductive and sexual health, relationships and personal safety. The aim is to develop a classroom climate where young people feel safe and supported, and are confident to participate in activities and discussion.

An appropriate environment can be developed by:

- Planning a program which moves from structured, “safe” activities to higher risk activities
- Establishing and maintaining consistent classroom rules
- Expecting and reinforcing positive behaviours
- Engaging students in establishing and maintaining a classroom environment free from bullying and harassment
- Using “open ended” approaches that encourage students to talk about the issues that are relevant to them
- Discourage confidential disclosures in the classroom environment but provide alternative avenues for disclosure
- Emphasising and building on students’ strengths and positive feelings, rather than arousing fear
- Encouraging students to develop their own useful strategies
- Modeling and reinforcing expected behaviours, for example, attentive listening, assertiveness and respect
- Affirming diversity in the responses of individual students and the class as a whole
- Challenging negative comments, attitudes and behaviour.

Discourage disclosures

It is important to actively discourage young peoples’ disclosure of any sensitive or personal information which they may later regret or which may compromise themselves or others. It is important that discussions remain general rather than personal as this enables everyone to discuss the issues more freely.

Encourage students to talk in general ways using the third person, such as:

- “I know someone who...”
- “What if someone...”
- “What if a family member did...”

If someone begins to disclose sensitive or personal information, use the strategy of protective interrupting where appropriate. This is done by:

- Acknowledging what the student has said and stopping them from disclosing any further
- Being supportive and indicating that they may want to tell you about it later
- Arranging to see the student as soon as possible in an appropriate place.

Group Agreement Activity

Legend: 📖 = Teaching notes

Method:

1. At the beginning of the session brainstorm how to create a safe and supportive learning environment.
2. Go through each idea and clarify with the group. Ensure the essential items (below) are included; suggest them if they were not offered by the group.
3. Write the list of ideas on the board and leave them up for the duration of the session.
4. Refer back to the Group Agreement throughout the session, if needed, to reinforce the behaviour everyone agreed upon at the beginning of the session.

Facilitator Notes:

📖 *It is advised to call it a group agreement as opposed to group rules because the term agreement is more positive and rules are something that are imposed and often set up to be broken.*

📖 *The following outline highlights the importance of developing group agreements:*

- Sets up a safe and supportive environment
- Increases comfort levels when dealing with potentially sensitive and challenging issues
- Helps to maximise learning and participation
- Develops mutual understanding of behaviour that is expected of themselves and others
- Establishes facilitator parameters
- Provides a strategy that enables inappropriate, sexist or racist language and behaviour to be dealt with immediately
- Fosters self-responsibility and collaboration with young people
- Group agreements should always be established when participants are involved in activities that may involve the sharing of a range of ideas, values and attitudes

📖 *What are the essential things that need to be included in a group agreement? What else could be included?*

Essential:

- Confidentiality (personal to global to ensure this)
- Respect each other's right to an opinion
- No put downs or aggression
- No genuine question is a silly question
- Right to pass
- One person speaks at a time
- Any question asked is not assumed to be about you
- Celebrate diversity
- Use language that is respectful and appropriate

Optional: Discuss with participants other things that could be included.