

PART III

Sexual Health

Framing Inclusive Abstinence Messages with LGBTQ Youth

Recently, many school districts have moved toward abstinence only or abstinence-based sexual health education curricula. Unfortunately, very limited research data is available on abstinence education, in general, and there is none on the effectiveness of abstinence messages for LGBTQ adolescents. Nonetheless, as a school professional, your conversations with LGBTQ youth should include abstinence messages, as well as messages about barrier protection.

Unfortunately, abstinence has largely been a prevention message framed with a distinct sexual prejudice: Sexual activity is allowed following a marriage between a man and a woman. Currently, same-sex marriage is not available for most Americans. Thus, abstinence messages for self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth who are currently or plan to be sexually active need to be reformulated for these populations and communicated in a more inclusive manner. These messages become especially important because LGBTQ youth may be feeling pressure to become sexually active based on the norms of the peer group within the school or community.

Here are possible examples of reframing abstinence messages for LGBTQ youth.

Abstinence Is a Thoughtful Choice Reflecting Personal Values

- Each person decides when and with whom he or she wants to be sexual and when and with whom he or she wants to practice abstinence.
- Decisions are based on personal values about relationships, religion, life goals, family, health, skills and talents, safety, and more.
- Thoughtful decisions are made with a clear mind—free of effects from drugs, alcohol, or external pressure.

Abstinence Is an Equal Opportunity for Everyone

- It's not about whether you are straight (heterosexual) or gay, lesbian, or bisexual.
- Abstinence is an equal opportunity behavior. Anyone, at anytime, can make a conscious choice or a spur of the moment decision not to have sex. That decision is yours—and only yours. It's your right to make the decision every time, throughout your whole life.

Abstinence Is a Lifelong Option Related to Sexual Behavior for All Individuals

- “Hormones,” urges, strong sexual feelings start during puberty and last for decades. These experiences are not unique to adolescents; adults in their twenties, thirties, and forties can continue to have these strong feelings.
- Everyone has times—a day, a month, a year (or more)—when they plan to not have sex or just don’t feel like it. They are practicing abstinence.

Abstinence Is an Expression of Personal Power and Self-Confidence

- When people feel good about themselves, they make decisions differently than when they feel down on themselves.
- Making decisions that are sometimes complex and challenging can make people stronger.
- Caring about yourself is something other people notice; it encourages them to treat you with dignity and respect.

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