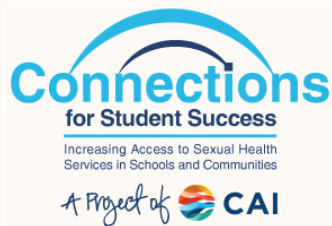


# COMMUNICATING ABOUT ADOLESCENT SEXUAL HEALTH: MESSAGING THAT MOVES



August 10th, 2017

*As an expert in efforts to improve students' sexual health, you see your work in a different light than many of the people whose support you need to sustain your 1308 program strategies and activities.*

The associations you have with your work, the emotions you associate with it, and the stories you tell are different than those of the school and community leaders who make decisions about funding, partnerships, and the longevity of programs.

Smart messaging can help those audiences steer away from their hesitations, fears, and misunderstandings and move toward a commitment to a supportive school environment with robust sexual health education and services. Use these tips and sample messages to shape how you communicate about your work to improve students' sexual health.

---

## Table of Contents

### *Messaging Strategies:*

**Order Matters: Lead with Values | 3**

**Talking about problems | 4**

**Focus on Solutions | 5**

**Use only constructive messages | 6**

**Using data | 6**

**Calls to action | 7**

**Messengers | 7**

**Know your audience | 8**

**Words to use / words to lose | 9**

**Message Models | 10**

### *Storytelling Strategies:*

**Storytelling Strategy | 13**

**Story Design | 14**

**Sample Stories | 16**

## Order Matters: Lead with Values

What matters is what people hear – not what you say. Talking about the sexual health of young people can evoke fear, concern, discomfort, and defensiveness — emotions that prevent people from hearing and comprehending anything further. Before “jumping into the deep end” with messages and statistics about the problem, let your audience “ease their toes” into the subject with messages that elicit agreement and an openness to hear more.

Open the conversation by speaking to the values many of us share – values that clarify why this topic is important. Use messages about values before you bring up details about sexual health programs, data about problems, or asks for people to do something.

### These values can include:

- Connectedness, inclusion, belonging, and community
- Communication, respect, and understanding
- Opportunities to learn, prepare for adulthood, and contribute
- Confidence and self-awareness
- Health and wellbeing
- Safety and protection
- Prevention



### Sample messages:

- Schools are at their best when they provide all students opportunities to grow and prepare for adulthood.
- We believe that academic achievement is only possible when students feel alert and ready to learn.
- Our school community is built on the idea that all students should feel that they are valued and that they belong here.

## Describe problems briefly, and as the result of school- and community- wide circumstances

Too much focus on the problem is overwhelming, and decreases motivation to act. Even worse, messages about problems related to student's sexual health can evoke feelings of fear and powerlessness, which prevent people from feeling empathy or seeing the big picture.

Messages about problems can also activate people's assumptions of bad-behaving and out-of-control adolescents, and focus attention on individual behaviors. To keep people feeling motivated and capable of action, be brief when describing problems, and focus on the environment in which young people exist – environments where they can or cannot access information, resources, and skills. Once you discuss the problem, pivot quickly to solutions and the positive changes you want to create.



### Samples messages include:

- Students say they are not learning what matters most to them – how to be healthy and navigate relationships with all the people in their lives.
- Students say they are getting sick but do not know how to access the treatment they need to get better.
- Teachers are reporting that they feel they lack training to respond when students harass each other, say hateful things, and disrupt classes.

## Attribute problems to something being left out of current practice

School staff already have too much on their plates. So too often, helpful ideas are dismissed as another thing that nobody has time for. To prevent this way of thinking, describe problems as the result of something being left out of current efforts instead of something new that needs to be added. Furthermore, show comparisons between schools and communities, and describe how others are acting to solve the problem.



### Sample messages include:

- Many students in our district are taught about sexual health, but our school is leaving the topic out of our health lessons.
- Some students don't have a doctor they trust, yet we omit training on our health referral system from our regular staff development days.
- The majority of districts in our state equip teachers to intervene when they hear hate speech or see harassment, but our district has not included that topic in our professional development.

## Focus on Solutions

Spend most of your time communicating about what is possible. Messages about solutions are inspiring and uplifting — unlike messages about problems. Paint a picture of the world you want to create, and offer a roadmap to get there.



### Sample messages include:

- We have sample lessons that teachers can use to teach students to take care of their bodies — lessons teachers and administrators in other schools have said led to increased attendance.
- We have a plan to train teachers about health referrals and ensure every student feels like they have an adult at school they can trust.
- We can start a student club that can lead activities to make this school safer and more connected — activities that can also free up time that teachers currently spend responding to harassment in their classrooms.

## Define your work in ways that show its value to an entire school community

People have many misconceptions about sexual health and school climate programs. They often have a limited understanding of what these programs offer, and whom they are for. As part of your communications, clarify what these programs are and why they add value for all students.



### Samples messages include:

- Lessons about sexual health teach all students how to develop respectful and healthy relationships, resist peer pressure, and make informed decisions about their health.
- Access to sexual health services means students can see a medical professional they trust to talk about their growing bodies.
- Gay-Straight Alliances are student-led clubs that support students, build community, and create safer, more respectful school cultures for everyone in our community.

## Use only constructive messages

When the human brain considers a negative statement, it first considers the statement as if it was true. In the process, it elicits the same associations, imagery, and emotional impulses as if you were saying the statement were indeed true. In other words, if you say, “this does not teach kids how to have sex,” people hear, “this teaches kids how to have sex” and experience all of the negative emotions they associate with that statement. Instead of trying to define your work by what it is not, focus on what it is and your aspirations for the world you are working to create.



### Sample messages include:

- Lessons about sexual health teach the facts and skills students need to navigate relationships and peer pressure, while encouraging them to talk to their parents or caregivers about what their family believes is best.
- Sexual health services connect students to medical professionals that can provide advice to keep students healthy and ready to learn.
- Access to sexual health services provides students an opportunity to learn how to communicate with medical professionals, navigate health care, and protect their own health.
- Gay-Straight Alliances focus their energy on creating an environment where everyone can feel valued, respected, and able to thrive.

## Use one compelling fact to reinforce your message

Data and statistics activate the logical centers of the brain — and shut off valuable emotional impulses that shape people's perceptions and decisions about an issue. If you use data before someone has emotionally connected with your message, they'll stick with their existing perceptions and either dismiss or explain away the data. Instead, first speak to someone's feelings and then use data to encourage the logical side of the brain to give its stamp of approval to what you've been saying.



### When using data:

- Stick to one or two memorable and compelling facts.
- Use numbers that are easy to visualize. For example, “\$300 for every student” is more impactful than “\$3.7 million,” which is impossible to picture. Likewise, “more people than an NFL stadium” is more impactful than “81,000 people.”
- Create comparisons that show how your school or community compares to others. Instead of saying that your school has had nineteen homophobic bullying incidents this year, say that your school has had more homophobic bullying incidents than 70% of other schools in your district.

## Always include a call to action

No matter the context in which you are communicating, always encourage people to take an easy next step. Give people a way to act on what they are hearing, and deepen their commitment to your work.



### Calls to action could include:

- Sign up to receive a newsletter (either from your office or a partnering organization)
- Look at specific lesson plans
- Give a safe schools badge to a friend
- Come to a meeting or an event
- Put up a poster
- Review your school's protocols for sexual health referrals
- Put out an anonymous question box for your students

## Use messengers who have moral authority

The person delivering a message is often more impactful than the message itself. People trust and listen to spokespeople who are perceived to share similar values, or who are respected and honored because of the role they play in a community. These messengers can open the door for people to truly listen to the need to improve students sexual health, and can disarm the fear and defensiveness that some people may feel about the subject. Consider cultivating messengers who are faith leaders, school nurses, or — if it feels appropriate for your community — school police. Be careful when using public health professionals as primary spokespeople. Families and school staff often see public health professionals as having a different set of values and motivations.

## Tailor your message for your audience

There is a communications maxim that says, “If you try to speak to everyone, you end up speaking to no one.” Families, school staff, and public health professionals all speak very different languages and have different motivations. Tailor your approach depending on your audience.



### When communicating to school staff:

- Reference their identity as a school professional. Most people entered educational careers because of their values and hopes for young people and future generations. Use statement such as, “As educators, we care about our students and their futures.”
- Use messages that connect your work to students’ desire to learn, show up at school, and get good grades.
- Remember that one barrier is often an assumption that sexual health topics are controversial. As much as you can, reference other neighboring schools and communities that have included such topics without such a controversy. One useful fact with impact is that [a 2016 national poll from the University of Michigan](#) found that more parents say sexual education should definitely be taught than parents who say the same for basic first aid or CPR.
- Use messages about prevention. It is easier for school staff to prevent crises of violence and sexual abuse on campus than it is to react to them once they happen.



### When communicating to families:

- Remember that a potential barrier is feeling like they are losing control over how they raise their children. Avoid messages that reinforce this idea. Instead, remind them that they are the primary teachers for their children and what happens at school complements their role at home.
- Focus on having trained adults and teachers provide students with facts and information.
- Avoid educational jargon such as “evidence-based” and “curriculum.” These can sound like bureaucratic terms and evoke a sense that a politician in some far away place has more influence over their child’s education than they do. See more about this in the handout about terminology.



## WORDS TO USE / WORDS TO LOSE

Single words can make a big difference in how people hear and react to what you are saying. Many times, experts have a specific understanding of a phrase that elicits entirely different associations among people who are not as well-versed in the topic. Consider the following language suggestions as a way to be more intentional and thoughtful about how you discuss your work.

SAY THIS	INSTEAD OF THIS	WHY?
Lessons that teach students to understand their bodies and the risks and responsibilities associated with relationships and sexuality	Comprehensive Sexual Education, Sex Ed	Everyone has an image of what they think sexual education is, but few have the same idea that you – as an expert – do. What they picture in their mind might cause barriers for their support.  Instead of assuming your audience is on the same page, speak to the outcomes and goals of such lessons. It is better to use more words that provide context and meaning than depend on shorter phrases that lack clarity.
Proven effective	Evidence-based	When talking to people who are not school-staff, the phrase “evidence-based” lacks meaning. Polls with parents and guardians show that the phrase is misunderstood, and elicits associations with crime and disease.
Students, Young people	Children, kids	You want your audience to think of students as mature and ready to learn – ideas that are elicited by the word “students.” “Children” and “kids” often elicit a picture of unruly and silly youth.
Informed / Uninformed decisions	Good / Bad decisions	Keep the focus on the environment in which students are in, and the access (or lack of access) to information – rather than the morality of individuals.
School lessons are designed to complement what parents teach students at home	Some parents don't teach their children	Parents and guardians want to feel validated and in control of their children's upbringing. Messaging should remind them of this instead of suggesting schools are a replacement for parents who do not actively talk with their children about sexual health.
Lessons	Curricula	Polling suggests that parents associate “curricula” with big government bureaucracy and a loss of control, while the term “lessons” is associated with local educators deciding what is best for their classroom.
Harsh school policies that exclude students from school, isolate them from community, and overly rely on police and prisons.	School push-out, school to prison pipeline	While these phrases mean something to experts, they are confusing for others who have not studied school discipline. Polls show that these phrases can often be interpreted as referring to individual students and their behaviors, rather than school policies. Instead of relying on these short phrases, use more words to add clarity and meaning.

# MESSAGE MODELS

Message models make it easy to describe your work in ways that build support. They clarify how to use different messages, and the order in which they should go. Use the following templates to put together a message that either: moves people to action; overcomes hesitations; or corrects myths and misunderstandings.

## *Moving people to action: The VPSA (Value-Problem-Solution-Action) Model*

OUTLINE	SENTENCE STARTERS	EXAMPLE
Start with: a statement about your <b>values</b> and why you do what you do. Connect with your audience's core ideas of what is right in the world.	<p>We believe that_____.</p> <p>Our school should be a place that_____.</p> <p>Our community cares about_____.</p>	Our school should be a place that fosters connection, community, and a sense of belonging.
Then: quickly describe the <b>problem</b> , and why it interferes with realizing the values you care about.	<p>However, _____.</p> <p>Yet, when we talk to students, we heard that _____.</p> <p>Recently, we learned that_____.</p>	However, when we talk to students, we hear that many feel unsafe, isolated, and excluded when at school.
Then: focus attention on a <b>solution</b> , and how that solution can restore the value you initially referenced.	<p>We have a plan to _____.</p> <p>Other schools have solved this by _____.</p> <p>We can change this by _____.</p>	Other schools in our community have solved this by starting student clubs that support students and build community.
Finally: call your audiences to <b>action</b> with a specific task they can do.	<p>That is why we are asking you to _____.</p> <p>You can make this happen by _____.</p> <p>You can join us by _____.</p>	That is why we are asking you to come to a community meeting next Tuesday to learn more about Gay Straight Alliances and how they can foster a safer, more connected school for everyone in our community.

\*Adapted from the Opportunity Agenda: <https://opportunityagenda.org>

## Overcoming hesitations: The message wheel model

OUTLINE	SENTENCE STARTERS	EXAMPLE
<p>Start with: an introduction to the problem that references your <b>values and aspirations</b>.</p>	<p>We all want _____, but currently _____.</p> <p>Our community cares about _____, but _____.</p>	<p>We all want our students to achieve, but currently many students are coming to school sick, distracted, and not ready to learn.</p>
<p>Then: <b>prevent a hesitation</b> by refuting it before your audience even has time to consider it.</p>	<p>This even _____.</p> <p>If we solve this we can also _____.</p>	<p>This even decreases the time teachers have to teach, because they then have to spend time worrying about attendance or figuring out what is happening with individual students. <i>(This overcomes a hesitation about not having enough time to do anything.)</i></p>
<p>Then: include a <b>solution and a call to action</b>.</p>	<p>We can solve this by _____, and you make this possible by _____.</p> <p>Other schools have solved this with _____ You can be a part of the change by _____.</p>	<p>Other schools have solved this by creating a system of health referrals so that students can access medical professionals they trust. You can make this possible at our school by asking the principal to put together a health referral work group.</p>
<p>Finally: <b>end with a vision</b> of what is possible if people respond to your call to action.</p>	<p>Together, we can _____.</p> <p>With your involvement, we will _____.</p>	<p>Together, we can make sure all of our students are able to come to school ready to learn and able to contribute to our vibrant community.</p>

\*Adapted from LightBox Collaborative: <http://www.slideshare.net/LBCollab/message-wheel>

## Correcting misinformation: the mythbusting model

OUTLINE	SENTENCE STARTERS	EXAMPLE
Start with: a <b>statement about values</b> that emotionally connects with your audience.	Our school cares about _____. We want our students to _____. We believe that _____.	We believe that our school is at its best when we provide all students opportunities to grow and prepare for adulthood.
Then: state <b>the fact</b> .	That is why _____. We've learned that _____.	That is why we need to teach students lessons that help them understand their bodies and the risks and responsibilities associated with relationships and sexuality.
Then: <b>add more details</b> to the fact.	This is especially true for _____. More specifically, _____.	More specifically, we need to offer lessons that teach the facts about sexually transmitted diseases and how our students can protect their health and their futures.
Then: <b>warn your audience</b> about the myth, and why it is misleading.	You might be misled by _____. You should be on the lookout for _____.	You might be misled by people who think these lessons teach the mechanics of sex, but you can see from these lesson plans that is not the case.
Then: explain <b>why they may be misled</b> .	You might not have seen _____. This is misleading because _____.	This is misleading because people find examples on the internet, but these are not the lessons in our planned materials.
Finally: <b>repeat the fact</b> .	If there is one thing to remember, it is that _____. Just keep in mind that _____.	If there is one thing to remember, it is that our school's actual lessons are available for your review, and teach only the facts about how to protect your health.

# STORYTELLING STRATEGY

*“When we read nonfiction, we read with our shields up. We are critical and skeptical. But when we are absorbed in a story, we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally, and this seems to leave us defenseless.”*

—Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*

People interact with stories entirely differently than they do with facts, statistics, and information. The human brain is wired to treat logical information with critical doubt, and people readily dismiss such information when it does not already fit with the way they see the world. (You've probably heard someone react to a report by saying it doesn't reflect their school or their community.)

Stories, however, can create new perceptions and change people's ideas. The human brain is wired to listen to stories as if they were happening in real life, and people react to stories with empathy and openness. Stories are what people remember, and what they repeat to each other in hallways, meetings, and at dining room tables. At the end of the day, people can dismiss someone's report, but they cannot dismiss someone's story.

---

## Stories:

- Are about a specific person
- Take place in a period of time
- Show cause and effect: how one thing leads to another

## You can use stories to:

- Illustrate the problem or the benefits of a proposed solution
- Motivate people to get involved
- Overcome hesitations
- Inspire people to feel capable of creating change

## You can collect stories by:

- Regularly asking educators, students, and school staff
- Offering an anonymous collection box
- Asking at meetings and workshops
- Compiling all stories in a shared spreadsheet

## You can tell stories:

- In regular emails and newsletters
- At meetings and workshops
- In reports and memos
- In interviews to reporters

## Ideas for stories you can tell:

- Someone who became a champion for your work
- Someone who thought they couldn't create change but did
- Someone whose life was improved by your work
- Someone whose life would have benefited if your work was expanded

## STORY DESIGN (Page 1 of 2)

Most stories -- from the ones we tell our friends at the dinner table to the ones produced by Hollywood -- all follow a similar structure. Use this template to easily craft stories that will develop new support for your work.

STORY ELEMENT	TIPS	EXAMPLE
Start with: a <b>protagonist</b> , a single person who your audience can relate to. Describe who they are in ways that reflect your audience.	Stories often have a young person as a protagonist, but protagonists are best when they reflect the audience - such as other educators or school staff. Try to tell stories about students through the lens of an adult - unless the student themselves is telling their own story.	Stephen has been a history teacher in our district for five years. He's sponsored a few clubs and especially likes the time he gets with students during lunch or after-school club meetings.
Then: put the protagonist on a <b>journey</b> . Describe their aspirations.	Use aspirations that are shared by your audience so they can see themselves in the journey.	Recently, Stephen has been spending a lot of class time responding to bullying and harassment. It started to get in the way of his teaching, and he wanted to learn how he can help address such harassment at a school-wide level.
Then: Add <b>barriers</b> that get in the way of the protagonist reaching their goal. Describe how they overcame those barriers.	Position you and your work as a way to overcome barriers. Barriers create conflict in the story, which makes it interesting.	He started with some online research and found that students clubs were a great way to create an environment where all students feel respected and that they belong. He looked for such a club at his school, but realized that there wasn't one. He then talked with some of his students, and a couple of them said they were trying to start a Gender and Sexuality Alliance but couldn't find a sponsor. At first, Stephen didn't think he was the right fit for such a club - he identifies as heterosexual and didn't have a lot of experience with issues of gender and sexuality. But Stephen came to our office to talk about such clubs and learn about how they work in schools in our district. We put him in touch with other sponsors, and he learned that many sponsors were new to the topic but got involved as a way to decrease harassment in their schools.

## STORY DESIGN (Page 2 of 2)

---

STORY ELEMENT	TIPS	EXAMPLE
Then: Create a <b>resolution</b> that ends the action of the story. Perhaps the protagonist reaches their goal, perhaps they do not. What did they learn?	This is a great place to insert a compelling message.	Stephen has now been a GSA sponsor for four months and is loving it. He guided students in the club to start a poster campaign and fundraise for an anti-violence project. Now they are working with our principal to try a restorative justice pilot, where perpetrators of harassment get a chance to understand and reflect on their actions.
Finally: <b>expand the lens</b> . What is the bigger picture and lesson your audience needs to understand?	Include a call to action.	Anyone can get involved with a Gay Straight Alliance. The student-led clubs have been proven to improve feelings of connectedness, belonging, and safety for everyone in a school community. Join our upcoming webinar to learn more about becoming a sponsor of a GSA in your school.

---

## SAMPLE STORIES

*\*based on stories and interviews with 1308 funded partners*



### Sexual health lessons can engage students in school and learning

Linda has been a 10th grade teacher in our district for nearly a decade. She became an educator because she cares deeply about preparing young people to live vibrant lives and contribute to their community. In the past couple of years, she's noticed that many of her students started regularly skipping school. Linda was determined to find a way to increase attendance.

She started by asking some students why they skipped school, but most students just shrugged off her question. Then she decided to think like a scientist and see if she could find any trends about when her students came to school and when they did not. To her surprise, she saw that attendance rates were highest on Fridays. She shared this at a recent staff meeting, and we realized that Fridays were the day that 10th and 11 graders discussed sexual health topics in their science classes.

Linda wanted to dig deeper, so she invited her classes to fill out an anonymous survey asking why the students thought attendance was highest on Fridays. Many of her students responded that the conversations related to sexual health lessons felt relevant to their current lives and helped them deal with some of the challenges they struggle with.

Lessons about sexual health teach students how to develop respectful relationships, resist peer pressure, and make informed decisions about their health. Linda, like many other educators, realized that such conversations are meaningful to students, and offer opportunities to engage them in school and learning.

While some students in our district receive such lessons, many students are being left out of these important conversations. We are currently planning how we can expand these health lessons to every student, and would like your opinion about what is best for our school community. Please complete this quick online survey, so together, we can help ensure sure all of our students come to school ready to learn.



## SAMPLE STORIES



### The need for all students to have sexual health lessons from an early age

As a principal, Cynthia has always prided herself on her ability to connect with the students in her elementary school. She cares deeply about each and every one of them. She's been trained extensively in signs of child abuse, and is always on the lookout for students who might be at risk.

A few years ago, a second grader would come to school and tell her teachers that her uncle kept touching her purse. Her teachers didn't think much of it and neither did Cynthia. After a few months, the student started to isolate herself and withdraw from the other students in her classroom. Cynthia kept asking the student questions about her life at home, but never learned anything that indicated of any danger.

Toward the end of the year, Cynthia learned the police had arrested the student's uncle on charges of child sexual abuse. A social worker asked the student why she never told anyone about the abuse, and she replied that she had — she had been telling her teachers that her uncle kept touching her purse.

Cynthia realized that the students in her school never received any lessons about their bodies and their health. They never learned how to talk about their anatomy, or what was inappropriate. Now Cynthia makes sure every grade in her school gets factual lessons about their bodies, their health, and respectful relationships.

Many principals are like Cynthia. Instead of waiting until it is too late, you can be proactive and provide students the lessons they need to be able to identify and report abuse. We have lessons ready for your school; all you need to do is call us. Together, we can make sure all students have access to the information they need to protect themselves and their health.

## SAMPLE STORIES



### Charlotte's surprising journey with providing access to sexual health services

A few miles from here, Charlotte is a teacher at Roseburg High School. Like many teachers, every year she feels pressure to teach more content in less time, and she's always skeptical when she has to teach a new topic to her students. Two years ago, she was told by her principal to implement a monthly lesson about access to sexual health services – and she struggled to see why such lessons should be a priority.

At first, she thought her students would laugh about the topic, shrug their shoulders, or just ignore the lessons. So, Charlotte was surprised that, at the very first mention of the types of clinics students could access for free, her entire class perked up. Students asked questions, and a couple even hung around after to ask for more information about where and when they could visit the clinics.

Charlotte was also worried about the reaction of parents and guardians to the lessons. She got a few calls from parents – and they were all encouraging. She had wrongly assumed that the reaction would be negative, but parents were excited to know their children could access medical care through the clinics that partner with the school district. While many of the partnerships begin with sexual health services, the clinics that students can now access offer a full range of care – from annual physicals to dentists.

A few months after she began the lessons, she asked her students if anyone had visited a clinic. Many hands went up. One student said she got a cavity treated and no longer had tooth pain every day. Another student said he went with a friend who was worried that she was pregnant, and both got advice about how to better protect their health. She even witnessed one of her students tell another student in the hallway about how they should go to a clinic to get tested for an STD before they might spread a disease to someone else.

Now Charlotte looks forward to the time when she gets to teach about how to access sexual health services, and has even gotten involved expanding her school's partnerships with clinics across the city. She's found that access to sexual health services means students can connect with medical professionals who can help keep students healthy and ready to learn. Charlotte even teamed up with some clinics to print up business-card size maps of where clinics are located and the hours in which students can visit.

We know that academic achievement is only possible when students feel alert and ready to learn. Providing access to sexual health services – either through a school based health center or through partnerships with off-site clinics – gives students an opportunity to learn how to communicate with medical professionals, navigate health care, and protect their own health. Please contact our office this week to learn more about what options are available in your school, and how you can expand access to services for your school community.