

The aim of this project is not to cover all health related topics, nor address the specific needs of every adolescent, but rather to address health topics that are major causes of morbidity and mortality in young adults, statewide health concerns, and those topics most frequently asked about by pre-adolescent students. (This is often the hardest group to engage in meaningful dialogue regarding these topical areas. It is also a group for whom support, guidance and accurate information is critical.) The purpose of *Healthy Reading: Grades 5-8* is to stimulate thinking and dialogue among students, parents, teachers, community members and other support services personnel, in order to support the healthy development of Alaska's youth.



**Many of the topics covered in this kit are sensitive in nature. Although we don't believe that any of the issues addressed within these pieces of literature are inappropriate, some may be too advanced for younger students. The selection and assignment of these books are determinations you, as the classroom teacher, will need to make.**

**Please pre-read all books before you assign them to your students.** If you feel that additional community health agency materials would be helpful additions to the reading or unit of study, seek these materials out ahead of time, for your review. It is our advice that you also check with your building/district administration to determine your local policies surrounding sensitive health topics. Communicating with parents and guardians is also advisable (see our Sample Letters to Parents section of this kit for further information.) Many of our students already deal with sensitive issues. If we are aware of these concerns, we are better able to address issues as they may arise in the classroom.

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## *Controversial and Sensitive Topics*

### **Why teach about controversial or sensitive issues?**

Students can learn an important range of skills, such as accepting other points of view, arguing a case, dealing with conflict and distinguishing between fact and opinion. Students can also clarify their emotions and values and learn to think for themselves.

Some teachers are nervous about approaching sensitive issues within a classroom setting. They fear that a student may ask a question that they don't know the answer to or may be uncomfortable answering. They fear an angry parent may contact them about a health unit they are teaching. They fear a student will ask a "sensitive" question outside of the scope of the unit.

## **So how do you get “prepared” to teach health-related issues?**

***Know your content & define your resources*** - You may not be the expert on all areas, so it is important to identify the “experts” around you, both within your district or school and in your community. Make sure you are familiar with your district curriculum as well as the district resources available. If you are utilizing a literature approach, make sure you are familiar with the books or pieces of literature.

***Know your comfort level*** - Prepare yourself for answering questions in a classroom setting. How will you handle extreme or offensive opinions or questions? How will you handle debates? Identify your personal areas of discomfort – develop automatic responses to student questions that respect your personal boundaries. Be aware of the need to manage your own opinions and personal beliefs within the context of your teaching practices.

***Know your state, district and school policies*** - Be sure you are aware if your district has specific rules regarding parental notification, permission/opt-out for health related discussions. Check to see if your principal wishes to be contacted prior to certain units of instruction. Make sure you understand your responsibilities as a mandated reporter of child abuse and neglect and how this will affect your response to student disclosures.

***Know your referral systems and supports*** - Know whether your school has a counselor available to assist your efforts. Know what other community mental health services may be available for referral and support.

***Know when to introduce topics*** - Developing trust takes time. Conversations around sensitive topical areas may best be accomplished when sufficient time has passed and relationships are beginning to form.

## **So what are the steps that need to be taken to be prepared to facilitate discussions on sensitive topics?**

Involve teachers, parents, and administrators so there are no surprises. Establish classroom guidelines/rules for students, such as:

- Treat each other with courtesy and respect
- Listen carefully
- Allow others to speak without interruption
- Be supportive of others – no name-calling or put-downs
- No question is stupid or wrong

- Students have the right to pass during any discussion that involves personal opinion, feelings or experiences

Teachers should establish their guidelines/ground rules for facilitating discussions, such as:

- Notify students of their responsibility to report any disclosures related to child abuse/neglect (AS 47.17.020) or instances where the physical safety of the student or safety of others is in question.
- Avoid telling students what to do, but instead ask questions. Help students discover for themselves.
- Avoid judging students' attitudes.
- Put together a "question box" for sensitive questions that students may feel uncomfortable voicing publicly.
- Be aware of the Alaska state law related to formal and/or informal surveys inquiring into personal or private family affairs of students (AS 14.03.110)

Think about how you will respond to student questions and concerns, taking into consideration:

- What is the student really asking?
- Why is the student asking the question?
- What does the student already know?
- How much information does the student need?

Think about how you will handle potential student disclosure

- Listen carefully; ask clarifying questions
- Praise the student for telling about concerns
- Validate student's perceptions
- Refer to the student's family if appropriate

### **What are helpful hints for answering those tough-to-answer questions?**

Answer every question as best as you can

- Admit when you don't know something
- Provide factual information and correct misinformation

Give affirmations

- "Thanks for asking..."
- "That is a good question, can you tell me more about what you'd like to know?"

Listen to their concerns & consider every question to be a valid question

- "Sounds like you have a real concern, can you tell me more about what's on your mind?"

Respond in third person

- “What might a person do if they needed help?”

Address feelings that may arise from questions

- “I’m a bit uncomfortable with this discussion about \_\_\_\_”
- “We all are embarrassed sometimes, but it is important to talk about \_\_\_\_”

Identify the value/belief component of questions

- “This question relates to personal decisions and will vary from person to person, so I can’t give you a definite answer. It’s best for you to get all the information so you can talk with your \_\_ (family, clergy, health providers, friends, etc.)”

### **Helpful hints for using Healthy Reading materials**

Don’t feel you have to be an expert on the actual health topics covered by the books - such as cutting, depression, teenage sex, drug & alcohol addiction etc. – focus on the content connections to your class:

- Discuss the traits of the characters in the book that help them through rough times.
- Discuss the challenges that the main characters in the book face.
- Identify what protective factors (positive influences) the main characters have.
- Identify what risk factors (negative influences) the main characters have.
- Identify the main people or resources in the story that help buffer various challenging situations.
- Discuss other possible healthy solutions for situations faced in the story.
- Hypothesize other ways the story could have ended.

### **Other places you can go for further information and health resources**

- ❖ Positive Youth Development - [Hhttp://smhp.psych.ucla.edu](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu)H
- ❖ Social Development Model – [Hhttp://staff.washington.edu/sdrg](http://staff.washington.edu/sdrg)H
- ❖ Protective/Risk Factors - Hawkins and Catalano - [Hhttp://www.preview.channing-bete.com/CTC/5558OJ\\_RandP.pdf](http://www.preview.channing-bete.com/CTC/5558OJ_RandP.pdf)H
- ❖ Asset Development - [Hhttp://www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org)H
- ❖ Brain Development - [Hhttp://www.brainconnection.com](http://www.brainconnection.com)H
- ❖ Resiliency - [Hhttp://www.wested.org](http://www.wested.org)H

**The Alaska Association of School Boards has provided the following questions that you may wish to consider when looking at sensitive topics:**

- Is the issue related to the course of study and does it provide opportunities for critical thinking, developing tolerance, and understanding conflicting points of view?
- Does the issue have a meaningful relationship to matters of concern to the students?
- Is the available information about the issue sufficient to allow alternative points of view to be discussed and evaluated on a factual basis?
- Are all sides of the issue given a proper hearing using established facts as primary evidence?
- Does the teacher use his/her position to forward his/her own religious, political, economic or social bias? The teacher may express a personal opinion if he/she identifies it as such and does not express the opinion for the purpose of persuading students to his/her point of view.
- Does the issue have points of view that can be understood and defined by the students?
- Does the discussion reflect adversely upon persons because of their race, sex, color, creed, national origin, ancestry, handicap or occupation?
- Does the oral or written material violate state or federal law?
- Is discussion of the issue instigated by the students or by the established curriculum, or a source outside of the school?

