

# U Choose to Know

## Are you a trauma-informed sex educator?



As a teacher, you undoubtedly strive to be inclusive of all your students, including those who have experienced trauma. You are also probably aware that sex education requires navigating many sensitive topics that can trigger or re-traumatize students. In this digest, we'll summarize what students who have experienced trauma need from you and share some ways you can put this knowledge to work in your classroom.

### Students who have experienced trauma need...

- ... to feel physically and emotionally **safe** in your classroom. They need to know that they will be treated with respect and that you “have their back” if a situation arises.
- ... to know that they can **trust** you, that you won't judge them, and that you will be **transparent** with them about what to expect.
- ... **peer support**; this helps with healing and skill-building.
- ... a **collaborative** approach to sex education, to help them exercise some power to direct their education.
- ... your help to use their **voice** and make **choices** as much as possible when it comes to the way that topics are discussed or activities are processed.
- ... you to keep in mind the **cultural, historical, and gender** issues that can impact the likelihood that someone has experienced trauma, and their response to it. Some examples of groups that may be at higher risk include people who are: LGBTQ, of color, living in poverty, living with disabilities, or part of the juvenile justice or child welfare system.

**Putting these principles into practice will help you provide more effective sex education to all your students. Here are some ways to do this:**

#### Set the tone when starting sex education.

- » Make sure to create separate group agreements at the start of sex education and talk about what the unit will entail. Describe the specific topics you will cover and the types of activities in which they will be expected to participate.

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- » Let them know you are a mandatory reporter and that you will help them if they choose to share information with you.
- » Change seating arrangements if needed. If you are aware that a particular student may have experienced trauma, try to arrange clear and easy access out of the room. Consider placing someone who you know is kind and supportive near someone who might need support.
- » Introduce an anonymous question box and explain how you will use it. Even in classrooms where it seems that people are willing to ask questions, encourage everyone to submit something anonymously every class, even if it's just a note saying "hello." This helps ensure that students who have experienced trauma have ample and predictable opportunities to feel heard.
- » Acknowledge that trauma is a part of life for some students and tell them that they can still have a positive future, especially if they use the information and skill-building opportunities that sex education can provide.

### Use a trauma-informed approach throughout sex education.

- » Have predictable ways of opening and closing your sessions, and check in periodically to gauge how students are feeling.
- » Make sure they know that they have the right to pass on an activity. (You will need to have an alternate plan for students who opt out of an activity.)
- » Respond to their questions respectfully. Remember that questions that seem intended to shock or get a laugh may have a "real" question underneath, so try your best to uncover the real question and answer it.
- » Ask students what they know about a topic before you lecture on it. They may surprise you!
- » Ask for group input on answering questions and encourage students to defend multiple viewpoints. This helps build a culture of peer support.
- » Have a plan for promptly shutting down comments or behavior that is inappropriate. Never ignore an insult.
- » Watch your language when it comes to talking about choices. Some students may not have a choice about sexual activity—or even whether or not they are a parent. Avoid phrases like "when you CHOOSE to have sex," and avoid describing teen parenthood as a hopeless situation.
- » Think about what you will say or do if there is a disclosure or reaction in a group setting. Make a note to yourself for quick reference in case you are caught off guard.

This content was adapted from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) [resource on trauma-informed approaches](#) and [Cardea's 2016 Guide to Trauma-Informed Sex Education](#). Be sure to check out these resources for more information.

You can also access the free, on-demand *Teacher's Guide to Sex Ed* online course on [Blackboard](#) and click on the U Choose logo to get started.



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