

A Healthy Look at Sexuality

Lesson Four

Abstinence

(Adapted from 9/10 F.L.A.S.H., Lesson 2A, www.kingcounty.gov/health/FLASH; and Safer Choices, Level 1, Classes 2 and 3.)

LESSON 4: ABSTINENCE

Time needed

One class period

Student learning objectives

1. Describe abstinence in the context of sexual behavior.
2. Identify at least three positive reasons a person might have for choosing abstinence and three reasons that choosing abstinence could be challenging.
3. Identify four factors that are necessary to make abstinence work and four factors that could make it fail.
4. Practice and apply communication skills necessary to make abstinence work.

Agenda

1. Introduction and Overview
2. Sex is...
3. Definition of Abstinence
4. Why People Abstain from Sex
5. Challenges to Remaining Abstinent
6. Communicating Your Decision
7. Closure
8. Homework

Materials needed

1. Newsprint (2)
2. Appropriate Markers
3. Lined Paper (1 per student)
4. Pencils or Pens of Same Color
5. Handout: *Expressing Limits Cards* (optional) (1 set per student)
6. Homework: *Expressing Limits* (1 per student)
7. Index cards of the Same Size, Shape, and Color
8. Anonymous Question Bag or Box

Preparation

1. Write the following prompts on 2 newsprints and post on the wall:
 - **Why people choose to have sex:**
 - **Why people choose to abstain from sex:**
2. Print 1 copy per student of the following (located under Worksheets and Printouts at the end of the lesson):
 - **Handout: *Expressing Limits Cards*** and
 - **Homework: *Expressing Limits***

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Instructions

1. Introduction and Overview

- a. Go over homework from the previous lesson. Allow everyone a chance to share their homework and the results that they got. However, make sure that they understand that this part is optional and if they are doing their homework with a family member, they must have their permission to share also.
- b. Explain that we have discussed what a healthy relationship looks like and also learned some communication skills in the last two lessons. Now we are going to talk about abstinence.
- c. Explain what abstinence means:

“Abstinence” means choosing not to do something. For instance, you would be choosing abstinence, or “choosing to abstain,” if you decided to try doing without chocolate for a month. People sometimes decide to abstain from all kinds of things: chocolate, cigarettes, sex, TV, alcohol, meat, and so forth.

When people decide to abstain from something, it may be a temporary or longer-term decision. They might decide they will abstain from cigarettes forever. Of course, they may still change their minds at some point, but for now, they are very sure it is a permanent choice. Other times, people will decide to abstain temporarily. A person can choose to abstain at any point in their life, even if they haven’t abstained in the past.

- d. Explain that just as people have sex for a million different reasons, people also decide to abstain from sex for different reasons. We will explore those reasons today.

NOTE TO TEACHER: This lesson asks the question why people have sex and why people choose to abstain; not teens specifically, but people in general. Why expand students’ thinking beyond teens? If sexual abstinence is cast as a behavior for young people, then by extension, sex must be the behavior for adults. That makes it developmentally essential for teens to have sex, in order to prove adulthood. Whereas, if abstinence is cast as a legitimate choice to make at any age, it becomes less an onerous vestige of childhood and more a personal, empowering choice...and hence more doable for teens.

2. Sex Is...

- a. Explain that everyone will be doing an individual journal exercise and that you expect everyone to write, but that while people will be invited to share what they've written, they do not have to. It will be entirely up to them.
- b. Write the following writing prompts on the whiteboard or newsprint:

**“I believe sex is...wrong / dangerous / risky / stupid...
when / if / as long as / for...”**

**“I believe sex is...great / healthy / safe / fine...
when / if / as long as / for...”**

- c. Model the activity by following prompts on the board or newsprint but not using the word sex. (This is because it is important that participants develop their own thoughts and not feel that they have to say what the instructor wants to hear.) For instance, the instructor can write:

**“I believe traveling by car is...risky...
when a person doesn't have a driver's license/there is bad weather/a person isn't wearing a seatbelt/the car isn't working properly/a person is participating in a car race.”**

**“I believe traveling by car is...great...
when a person wears a seatbelt/the car is working properly/a person isn't participating in a car race.”**

- d. Offer students an opportunity to share what they wrote.
- e. Explain that the reason why you started with a personal writing activity rather than a discussion was to give everyone a chance to collect their thoughts without any peer pressure and without feeling they need to say what you want them to hear either. Sexual decisions are very personal and nobody should make them under pressure from someone else, ever.

3. Definition of Abstinence

- a. Acknowledge that different people have different definitions of abstinence. Ask participants what these different definitions could be.
- b. Is abstinence 100% in preventing sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV and pregnancy? Depending on how a person defines abstinence will depend on if this can be true. It is possible to spread STIs and HIV through oral and anal sex (Chlamydia, genital warts, gonorrhea, hepatitis B, herpes, and syphilis). Other STIs, like herpes and genital warts can

(Adapted from 9/10 F.L.A.S.H., Lesson 2A, www.kingcounty.gov/health/FLASH; and Safer Choices, Level 1, Classes 2 and 3.)

also be spread through genital contact or rubbing. Pregnancy is also possible if semen is ejaculated on or near a female's genitals.

- c. Different people have different definitions of abstinence. Some people define abstinence as not engaging in any sexual behavior, including masturbation. Some define it as avoiding sexual behavior involving touching of the genitals or genital contact between two people. Others include or do not include oral sex (mouth and genital contact), anal sex (penis and anus contact) or vaginal sex (penis and vagina contact).
- d. Explain that in this class, abstinence will mean: **voluntarily not having oral, anal, or vaginal sex**. Abstinence from all three forms of sex is the safest way to avoid pregnancy and STIs.

4. Why People Abstain from Sex

- a. Divide students into small groups to brainstorm in their groups on the newsprint. Write the following two prompts on newsprint:

Why people choose to have sex:

Why people choose to abstain from sex:

- b. Ask each group to brainstorm reasons people have sex or do not have sex. Explain that not everyone in their group needs to agree that these are good reasons, just any reasons. They should consider people of any age, married or not, males' reasons and females' reasons, etc.

Make sure they include reasons why a married person might want to or not want to have sex tonight (or this month) just as they include reasons a single person might have or not have sex. Some people also decide they will not have sex until they are married or until they have gone out with someone for at least six months and both have been tested for STIs. Some people, often for religious reasons, even decide to abstain from sex for their whole lives; they decide they want to become a Catholic priest, for instance, or a nun.

- c. Possible answers for why people choose to abstain from sex:

Personal beliefs and values

Religious beliefs and values

To protect their health

To prevent negative consequences

(Adapted from 9/10 F.L.A.S.H., Lesson 2A, www.kingcounty.gov/health/FLASH; and Safer Choices, Level 1, Classes 2 and 3.)

Not interested

Haven't found the "right" partner

Not in love

In recovery and not wanting to jeopardize sobriety

To avoid pregnancy

To avoid STIs and HIV

Don't want to jeopardize future goals

Not ready

**Focus is on something else right now
(school, hobbies, sports, friends)**

**Under stress and prefer not to have stressed, disappointing sex
(from new job, a test coming up)**

**Don't want to sacrifice relationship with parents
(if parents disapprove of them having sex)**

**Encourages people to build deeper relationships (in other ways than
sex) and learn other ways to express love and sexual feelings**

d. Possible reasons why people choose to have sex:

Peer pressure

Fear of rejection (or violence) from their partner if they say "no"

Being made fun of, teased or rejected by friends for not having sex

**Hoping it will prove they aren't gay or lesbian or thinking that
heterosexual sex will somehow change their sexual orientation**

Wanting sexual pleasure or orgasm

**Wanting to have intimacy with their partner,
show their partner that they care**

Wanting to feel "like a man" or "like a woman"

(Adapted from 9/10 F.L.A.S.H., Lesson 2A, www.kingcounty.gov/health/FLASH; and Safer Choices, Level 1, Classes 2 and 3.)

and thinking it will fix that

Wanting to feel like an adult and thinking it will fix that

Wanting a baby

Wanting to have fun

Wanting to feel “normal”

Believing that they *should* have sex, that they owe it to the other person (we’re married and/or they spent money on me)

Feeling embarrassed or not confident to express their choices/values/beliefs

Feeling curious about sex

Feeling lonely and thinking it will fix that

- e. Summarize what the students report. Mention that while there may be many possible reasons for having sex, choosing to have sex for healthy & positive reasons is more likely to result in a healthy and positive experience.

5. Challenges to Remaining Abstinent

- a. Looking at the newsprint list participants already created on why people decide to abstain from sex and ask participants to come up with how remaining abstinent could be challenging. Some reasons could include:

Peer pressure (“everybody’s doing it”)

Fear of rejection—or violence—from their partner if they say “no”

**Being made fun of, teased or rejected by friends for not having sex
Hoping it will prove they aren’t gay or lesbian or thinking that heterosexual sex will somehow change their sexual orientation**

Wanting sexual pleasure or orgasm

**Wanting to have intimacy with their partner,
show their partner that they care**

**Wanting to feel “like a man” or “like a woman”
and thinking it will fix that**

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Wanting to feel like an adult and thinking it will fix that

Wanting a baby

Wanting to have fun

Wanting to feel “normal”

Believing that they *should* have sex, that they owe it to the other person (we’re married and/or he spent money on me)

Feeling embarrassed or not confident to express their choices/values/beliefs

Feeling curious about sex

Feeling lonely and thinking it will fix that

6. Communicating Your Decision

- a. Distribute index cards and pencils.
- b. Ask each person to print on their card what a person might say to a partner if they had decided to abstain.

For example: “I’m waiting ‘til I’m married.” or “I don’t have sex without condoms. Since we don’t have one, I don’t want to make love with you.” or “I never have sex if I’ve been drinking. Sorry.”

Very Important: Encourage participants to use assertive communication skills and not passive or aggressive ones.

- c. **Alternately**, you can also choose to make use of the **Expressing Limits Cards** provided in this lesson or make up a set of index cards yourself, conduct the exercise, and then ask for suggestions for ways youth would say things differently from how you wrote them...to correct for your next class.
- d. Collect the cards. Ask people to sit or stand in a circle. Shuffle the cards and redistribute them.
- e. Ask people simultaneously to read a card aloud and pass it to the right and read the next and pass it. Explain that the purpose of this exercise is so that they can practice verbalizing personal boundaries, even if nobody can hear them since everyone’s talking at once.

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You could also have people stand in 2 circles, an inner one and an outer one, make sure they are facing each other, and practice saying the cards to one another directly then switching partners and cards by moving in opposite directions and so on, down the line. Again remind participants to use an assertive tone, not a passive or aggressive one.

- f. Debrief the activity.

7. Closure

- a. Remind students that abstinence can be a positive choice at any point in a person's life, both for young people and adults. Or that it can show maturity, self-confidence and power over their life in not compromising beliefs and values that they may have for making certain sexual choices.
- b. Reinforce sexual decision-making as a matter of personal rights and power: each person can decide when and with whom they want to be sexual, and when and with whom they want to practice abstinence. Reinforce sexual decision-making as a matter of personal rights and power. Each person can:

Decide when and with whom they want to be sexual, when and with whom they want to practice abstinence.

Choose abstinence until their bodies are mature (a girl's cervix is most vulnerable and doesn't finish maturing until age 20.)

Choose abstinence even if they've had sex before.

Choose abstinence on and off, throughout their lives, as circumstances change (when they get a new job and know they'll be stressed for awhile, for example.)

- c. Pass anonymous question bag or box around.
- d. Answer anonymous questions.

8. Homework

- a. Ask students to complete the **Homework: *Expressing Limits***.

Worksheets and Printouts

(Adapted from 9/10 F.L.A.S.H., Lesson 2A, www.kingcounty.gov/health/FLASH; and Safer Choices, Level 1, Classes 2 and 3.)

Handout: Expressing Limits Cards

I need to stay clean and sober and I just can't get involved with anyone right now.	My religion teaches that sex outside marriage is wrong. Period.
My mom would be really hurt if she found out. It's not worth the risk to me.	I'm really into this new project right now. I don't have the energy for a heavy relationship.
I was scared when we didn't use protection last time. I'm just not going to do that again. Sorry.	I don't need to prove anything to you, I just don't want to have sex, OK?
I never have sex if I've been drinking. Sorry.	I'm waiting until I am married.
I've had a really stressful day and I just don't want to have bad or disappointing sex with you. I'd rather wait.	I'm HIV positive and I don't want to risk giving it to anyone.

We can wait 'til after your appointment at the clinic. I'd rather not risk it.	I want the first time to be really special. Not hurried or in a crummy place like this.
I'm not interested in that kind of relationship with you. I'm just not in love with you.	I'm not in the mood for it right now. I'd rather wait until I know it will be good sex
I don't want to get emotionally involved with anyone right now.	I want to spend more time with you, just hanging out, getting to know you before we jump into sex.
Let's just hold each other, OK?	I'd rather give our relationship more time. Can we just go to a movie instead?
It doesn't make a difference if you call me names, it won't change the fact that I'm just not ready and I'm telling you "no".	There are other things in my life that are more important right now. I am just not interested in sex. Maybe sometime down the line.

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Handout: Expressing Limit Cards continued...

I think there are other ways we could have more fun at this point in our lives.	For now, I get more excited about joking around and hanging out with you...I'm not in the same place as you, I don't want to have sex yet.
I'm feeling a little down and lonely and if we had sex, it might be for the wrong reason. I want to think more about the decision.	I have a crush on someone else. I'm sorry, but I'd really like to be friends.
I don't have sex without condoms. Since we don't have one, I don't want to make love with you.	I had weird experience in the past, I'm not ready to deal with this kind of thing again.
I'm not thinking very clearly at the moment, maybe another time, but not now.	We need to talk about this decision more, when we're both not so excited. We'll think better that way. Let's go get something to eat.
We haven't gotten our HIV test results back yet, so I'd like to wait.	

I've been hurt before and my heart needs to heal from that first. In the meantime, I'd love to get to know you better.	I'm taking antibiotics for Chlamydia right now. The doctor said we need to wait 'til I'm done with my treatment. And besides, you need to get tested too.
You turn me on, too. But I need for you to slow down. Let's talk about it again in a few months.	Why do you keep pushing me? Stop it.
I like kissing and touching. I just don't want more than that.	I don't care if you're on the pill. I don't feel safe without condoms.
I don't care if you've got condoms. I would want to also use the pill or the patch or something.	You aren't listening to me. I said I want to stop now.
Maybe you didn't understand. I said I wasn't going to make love with you.	Please stop asking. I just don't know you that well yet.

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Homework: Expressing Limits

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

Directions: Pick one of the following two scenarios and fill in the “You” using assertive communication.

Scenario 1: Your best friend’s partner just broke up with your best friend. Now they seem interested in going out with you. You like this person but you really don’t want to go out because you are going out with someone else and don’t want to mess it up.

Your Friend’s Partner: I haven’t seen you around. Do you want to go out some night?

You: _____

Your Friend’s Partner: I just want to talk to you.

You: _____

Your Friend’s Partner: Maybe we could go to the movies this weekend.

You: _____

Your Friend’s Partner: I know we would have a good time together.

You: _____

Your Friend’s Partner: I’ll give you a call this weekend anyway. Maybe we could get together and do something else.

You: _____

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Homework: Expressing Limits continued...

Scenario 2: You are at a party with someone you have gone out with a few times. You really like this person. The party is at a friend's house whose parents are gone. A lot of kids are drinking alcohol and some couples are leaving (probably to have sex). You feel uncomfortable drinking alcohol or having sex and you don't want to leave the party.

Your Partner: Let's get out of here so we can be alone. It's too crowded.

You: _____

Your Partner: I just want to be alone with you. This is our chance.

You: _____

Your Partner: C'mon, I really want us to be alone.

You: _____

Your Partner: I've been looking forward to this night with you. Let's make it special.

You: _____

