

Establish a Positive Climate

Communicating with parents

Parents are essential partners in health education. Throughout this guide, the terms family and parent refer to all primary caregivers, whether they be single parents, foster or adoptive parents, guardians or grandparents. Because so much of health and life skills learning occurs naturally in the home, parents often have a special interest in the topics and activities that are introduced, discussed and explored in the classroom health program.

Classroom teachers can enhance partnerships with parents by dealing proactively with potential issues and concerns. Parents who are fully informed about health education are typically supportive. Look for opportunities to keep parents informed such as showing them resources and materials or inviting them to participate in an evening presentation that includes taking part in some of the actual classroom activities.

The reality is, in some families, adults make unhealthy choices. Children may see the adults in their lives abuse alcohol and drugs, smoke cigarettes or make unhealthy food choices. Teachers need to be sensitive to these issues and tailor health messages to encourage positive health choices without criticizing those who make other choices. Teachers can also help students understand that some habits, such as smoking, are difficult to change. Students need to learn the life skill of communicating concern without judging or criticizing.

Share the curriculum

At the beginning of the school year, provide parents and students an outline of the health and life skills program and a timeline for the concepts students will be exploring. Explain key instructional strategies, and outline how student learning will be assessed and reported. Encourage parents to have regular discussions with their children about what they are learning in their health classes.

Provide opportunities to participate

Invite parents to join the class on field trips, serve as guest speakers or attend classroom or school-wide events. Throughout the school year, target several activities to include parents. Schools could also offer parent education programs focusing on topics that parallel those in the classroom curriculum. Use the *Home, School and Community Connections*, contained in selected illustrative examples in this guide, to enhance parent involvement and create community support.

Newsletters

Keep lines of communication open by sending home ongoing information via a weekly or monthly classroom newsletter. Include articles about health and life skills learning activities, and clearly outline the goals and benefits of such activities. When possible, have students write the articles, reflecting on what they learned from the activities and why these concepts are important. Use the newsletter to encourage parents to contact you with questions, concerns or suggestions.

Another effective strategy for involving parents is to produce special publications, such as a one-page fact sheet or calendar of activities, that suggest ways families can support and model the health skills their children are learning. Many of these suggestions are listed in the *Home, School and Community Connections* sections within selected illustrative examples of this guide.

Homework

When sending assignments home as homework, be sure to include the objectives of the assignment and provide clear directions. When students receive homework that involves their families, both students and schools benefit from the ideas and experiences parents contribute. For example, students could interview family members on certain attitudes, experiences or practices. Parents could help their children compile lists of safe behaviours they see at home or in the community, or brainstorm volunteer opportunities in their neighbourhoods. Completing engaging assignments at home is a meaningful way to involve parents in their children's learning, and an opportunity for family and community resources to enrich students' learning.

When sending home assignments, consider cultural differences and issues that may be sensitive for families. Family beliefs, practices, priorities and communicating styles may differ from those taught in school.

Report progress

As part of the reporting process, provide opportunities for students to talk about their learning and progress in relation to the health and life skills program. Send home self-evaluation checklists throughout the year and include a place for parent signature and comments. Use sentence starters, such as "Today I learned that ..." as a starting point for students to share their learning with parents. Include samples of student work from the health program in each term's portfolio.

Be a resource

The health education teacher can also serve as a resource to families. Parents may want to use classroom materials in their own discussions at home or they may ask for additional information on topics related to the Health and Life Skills Program of Studies.

Building healthy school cultures

Creating an effective health and life skills program at the classroom level requires the commitment, support and involvement of the whole school community. There are numerous ways to make health and life skills a positive, dynamic part of school culture, including:

- service learning projects
- extracurricular activities that promote healthy lifestyles
- health-focused special events
- displays that reinforce concepts in the health and life skills program
- newsletter articles that promote healthy living and decision making
- targeted co-curricular activities.

School staff need to work together to ensure that school philosophy, policies and practices support healthy living. All school staff need to model and practise healthy behaviour.

Enhancing classroom climates

Establishing a climate of collaboration and cooperation is essential in the health and life skills classroom. Besides making learning more effective, instructional methods based on cooperation help students develop positive social attitudes.

Classroom rules

It is important to make classroom rules and expectations explicit. At the beginning of the year, discuss class rules with students and post rules in a visible spot in the classroom. Keep language positive and the messages clear. Behavioural guidelines can be general and all encompassing or detailed and specific. Whichever the form, it's essential that the framework be adaptable to the changing needs of the class.

A Student Code of Conduct or a Bill of Rights could outline behavioural expectations and contribute to a positive classroom climate. Some teachers work with their students to develop T-charts of what key behaviours, such as effort and cooperation, look like, sound like and feel like.

Whatever strategy is used for developing classroom guidelines, the key to success is giving students opportunities to discuss and reflect on what they need to do, why they need to do it and what the potential consequences of their behaviour, both positive and negative, will be. Classroom expectations are reinforced when they are clearly and positively communicated to parents through class newsletters and other communication vehicles.

Fostering self-worth

The right to privacy

In the health and life skills classroom, particularly during discussion, it is essential to respect each student's right to privacy. Establish routines that allow students to "pass" when they do not wish to give information or opinions on any topic they find personally embarrassing or that, for whatever reason, they do not wish to discuss with others. Teachers also have the right to decline to share personal information or opinions.

The Health and Life Skills K–9 Program of Studies provides a foundation and framework for helping students develop a positive sense of self. Self-esteem is not taught as a separate topic nor is it effective to do so. Instead, skills and concepts that enhance feelings of self-worth and personal capacity are introduced and reinforced throughout the curriculum across grade levels.

Learning outcomes in this curriculum help students recognize and appreciate uniqueness in themselves and others. Outcomes also encourage students to develop strategies for improving personal competence by learning how to resolve conflict, negotiate, mediate, refuse unhealthy requests, express feelings appropriately and recognize personal skills. Students also identify role models, and serve as mentors and role models to others. Setting short- and long-term goals, building personal portfolios and participating in service learning activities help students clarify personal missions and make a commitment to healthy lifestyle choices.

Handling controversial issues

Discussing and exploring sensitive and controversial issues are integral parts of the Health and Life Skills Program of Studies. Almost any topic can become controversial. Teachers must rely on their sense of responsibility and professionalism to create constructive learning experiences.

Alberta Learning guidelines for controversial issues¹

Controversial issues are those topics that are publicly sensitive and upon which there is no consensus of values or beliefs. They include topics on which reasonable people may sincerely disagree. Opportunities to deal with these issues are an integral part of student education in Alberta.

Studying controversial issues helps prepare students for responsible participation in a democratic and pluralistic society. Such study helps students develop the ability to think clearly, reason logically and open-mindedly, respectfully examine different points of view and make sound judgements.

Teachers, students and others participating in studies or discussions of controversial issues should exercise sensitivity to ensure no one is ridiculed, embarrassed or intimidated for his or her position.

When discussing controversial issues:

- present alternative points of view, unless that information is restricted by federal or provincial law
- consider the maturity, capabilities and educational needs of students
- consider the requirements of provincially prescribed and approved courses, programs of study and education programs
- consider the neighbourhood and community in which the school is located, as well as provincial, national and international contexts.

Teachers should use controversial issues to promote critical inquiry rather than advocacy, and to teach students *how* to think rather than *what* to think.

Schools play a supportive role to parents in the areas of values and moral development, and should handle parental decisions about controversial issues with respect and sensitivity.

Sharing personal information

Dealing with controversial and sensitive issues encourages students to examine their own beliefs and experiences. Inherent in asking students to share personal information in the health and life skills classroom is the issue of confidentiality. Consider the following two examples.

- During a brainstorming session, one student states that his wish for the new year is that his parents not get a divorce. Should this list be posted in the classroom where visiting parents, school staff and students might read it?
- Students draw and label pictures of their families in a kindergarten health activity. These drawings contain a great deal of personal information. Should they be displayed on a bulletin board for visitors?

Teachers need to act with sensitivity and discretion when handling individual student information that is sensitive or could cause embarrassment or distress to the student or family. They need to anticipate where a discussion is going in order to protect individual students from revealing inappropriate personal information.

Be considerate of student privacy and share information about your students on a need-to-know basis. Be aware of how the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FOIPP) affects policy and practice in your school.

Involving community partners

Reporting child abuse

Issues of personal safety are integrated throughout the health and life skills program and they can generate important discussion. If a child discloses information about an abusive situation, teachers are legally and ethically obligated to break confidentiality and report the situation directly to the local office of Alberta Children's Services. Reports can also be made to the Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-387-5437.

Human sexuality instruction

The human sexuality component of the Health and Life Skills Program of Studies begins in Grade 4 and continues through to Grade 9 under the first General Outcome: Wellness Choices. Parents need to be advised of their right to exempt their children from this course component prior to the start of human sexuality instruction. A sample letter is included as *Teacher planning tool 1: Sample letter to inform parents of human sexuality instruction* on page 1 of Appendix A.

Teachers must provide alternative learning experiences for students exempted from human sexuality instruction. These could include joining another class for an appropriate learning activity or completing an alternate project in the library or computer lab.

By definition, a comprehensive school health approach involves schools and communities collaborating to enhance the well-being of students.

Share responsibility

Shared responsibility and teamwork is key to a successful comprehensive school health approach. Homes, schools and communities need to work together to provide students, families and communities with programs, services and resources that promote healthy living and decision making.

Identify needs and issues

Identifying local needs and issues is key to the success of an effective health and life skills program. Many specific outcomes in the health program of studies give examples of potential contexts for exploring and discussing the outcomes. Teachers need to identify the contexts most relevant to students and their communities.

Identify resources

Identifying community resources for enhancing health and life skills instruction is key to the success of the comprehensive school health approach. There are many local agencies and resource people who can provide information, training and materials for the health and life skills program. For example, local Lions Clubs may sponsor Lions Quest training, school police resource officers are often consulted on specific issues, and local services clubs may help identify local service

Inviting the community into the classroom

needs. Schools need to compile up-to-date information on community agencies and available resources. It's important to connect with local health authorities and locate regional directories of community services.

The local media can also provide a window into the community. Teachers can use news articles, editorials, feature stories and video clips to bring local issues and perspectives into the health and life skills classroom.

Students need to build healthy relationships with the community. When planning the health and life skills program for the year, look for opportunities to benefit from the many community resource people in your area. This could include parents, other school staff, social agency representatives or community members who have relevant information and experiences to share with students. These resource people can inject new ideas and opinions into the classroom. Whether a single guest or an expert panel, new faces and new perspectives can help students and teachers consider information and issues from different angles.

Community guests can:

- discuss how community organizations encourage people to make healthy choices
- share information that relates to building positive relationships and making healthy choices
- talk to students about why they have chosen to be involved with their organizations or professions
- work with students to plan an activity that focuses on aspects of positive behaviours and healthy relationships
- share personal experience on a particular health issue
- share volunteer experiences
- promote service learning opportunities.

Preparing for guest speakers enhances the experience for students, teachers and guests. Before the visit, make a telephone call to outline the focus of the unit currently under study and share strategies for interacting with students. When possible, follow up the telephone conversation by putting in writing the specific goals of the session, the time and date, and any other relevant information. Make sure guests understand that parents have the right to exempt their children from human sexuality instruction so if this is to be part of the presentation, parents must be informed prior to the session. A checklist for hosting a community resource person is included in *Teacher planning tool 2: Hosting a community resource person checklist* on page 2 of Appendix A.

Offer guests the following tips for interacting effectively with students.

- Personalize the information so students understand how it relates to their lives.
- Question students to find out what they know and believe about the topic.
- Use visual aids and actual items or samples to better explain concepts.
- Use vocabulary and concepts that are age-appropriate.
- Vary the pace.
- Maintain eye contact while talking.
- Move around the classroom.

Encourage speakers to use a variety of instructional strategies, including question-and-answer sessions or activities in which students can participate. Encourage visitors to include an informal discussion session as part of their presentation. This gives students opportunities to ask questions and participate in activities, such as examining information the guest might bring in. Some students might want to share stories or knowledge related to the topic under discussion. A tip sheet for guest speakers is included in *Teacher planning tool 3: Tips for community resource people* on page 3 of Appendix A.

Set the stage

Prepare students for a guest by brainstorming a list of questions the day before the session. Record the questions on chart paper and post for the guest to see. Not only does this activity create anticipation and background information, it generates thoughtful questions and makes the best use of limited class time. Posting the questions allows the speaker to see the range of interests and address them in a natural sequence. An added bonus is that individual students who are reluctant to ask questions in a large group can participate in the brainstorming session and have their questions and concerns addressed anonymously.

If necessary, review listening behaviours, expected etiquette and ground rules for asking questions. Encourage students to listen to others so comments or questions are not repeated, and to keep their hands down until the speaker invites questions. Discuss the importance of staying on topic and taking turns.

Introductions and thank-yous

On the day of the visit, encourage students to wear name tags so the guest can address students by name. Have a student introduce and thank the speaker. Follow up with thank-you letters, including students' comments on how they benefited from the visit. Thank-you letters give students an opportunity to reflect on the issue or topic presented, and also give guests useful feedback.

Look for other connections

Community resource people may interact with students in other ways. They may participate in telephone or e-mail interviews or meet with groups of students researching a particular issue.

Taking the classroom into the community

A comprehensive school health approach encourages students and teachers to look beyond the classroom walls. Working with community service agencies or organizations on specific tasks or projects can help students develop a sense of community and purpose, and a real understanding of local needs and issues. Students may address specific outcomes of the curriculum by going into the community to gather information or provide a service. For example, they could participate in spring clean up activities or in a buddy reading program with a neighbouring preschool. Older students could help organize and promote a blood donor clinic or serve lunch at a seniors' centre. For more ideas on service learning, see pages 94–100 of the *Instructional Strategies* chapter in this guide.

Endnotes

1. Adapted from Alberta Learning, *Guide to Education: ECS to Grade 12* (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Learning, 2002), p. 76.

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