

Mara Yacobi's Checklist for Understanding Adolescent Sexuality in the School and Camp Setting

You don't have to be an expert to address adolescent sexuality. Certainly, not every adult—or even every parent—is. Even when you don't know the answer to a question, there may be staff who can support a child's question, concern, or curiosity. If you don't know the answer, find out more through books, the Internet, or contact an adolescent sexuality expert such as me! The bottom line is children may not always remember what you said, but they will remember the way you made them feel when they asked the question.

✓ **Sexuality should be recognized as a natural and positive aspect of our lives.**

When children ask questions like “Where do babies come from?” or “What is a period?” or “How do I ask a girl/boy out?” it's important to reinforce positive, healthy messages about sexuality. Teachers or camp counselors may or may not be able to provide the answer to these questions, but it's critical to avoid statements that might evoke feelings of shame or guilt. When adults model warmth and support, they are demonstrating for children how to behave in their interpersonal relationships.

✓ **It is important for teachers and counselors to challenge harmful or dangerous sexuality beliefs and practices.**

If staff find teens discussing pornographic/sexually explicit content, making statements like “That's so gay” or saying things like “She's so fat,” staff need to step in and clearly show that they do not condone these attitudes and also to offer a healthy perspective.

✓ **The language used in a school or camp environment should be welcoming.**

Stating that a school or camp welcomes everyone is often not enough. Research shows that transgender, gay, lesbian, and bisexual people often assume the word “everyone” does not include them. In school or camp policy guides and announcements, consider stating that “people of all genders” are welcome. Placing a sticker or poster in a high-traffic area is another great way to send the message that “diversity is welcome here.”

✓ **Teach children and teens that their bodies belong to them and what defines sexual harassment.**

Teachers and counselors have many opportunities to demonstrate that each child's body belongs to that child. Teachers may consistently remind their younger students that each child's body belongs to that child alone. The staff and other children should learn to respect the child's right to say “no” to being touched in any manner. Teens need to be reminded to respect one another's personal space and bodies. Any comments,

jokes about another person's body, or unwanted touching (such as intentionally brushing up against someone) is sexual harassment.

✓ **Respect everyone's self-identification and sexual orientation.**

Avoid making assumptions about how people want to be addressed with their given name, pronouns, and sexual orientation. Ask children not only which name they would like to be addressed by but also which pronoun he or she prefers. When interacting with colleagues, counselors, or children, it is important to be mindful that children and staff come from a variety of backgrounds; do not assume they will grow up to get married, have babies, or even be a "man" or a "woman."

✓ **Take time to review and challenge traditions, rituals, and gender-specific stereotypes.**

Camps, youth groups and schools often have the best intentions to implement policies that keep everyone safe and activities that promote friendships, bonding, and youth development. However, it's important to review such policies and "traditions" from year to year to ensure they do not feed into stereotypes based on how our culture expects "boys" and "girls" to behave, act, or value. Staff should be prepared to address gender-biased language and stereotypes, such as "he throws like a girl," "real men don't cry," "girls are on the pink team and boys are on the blue team." In addition, schools and camps should strive to create programs that value both genders in all facets of their programming—from sports and arts to evening activity and announcements.

Spending Time on Sexuality Issues: A Unique Opportunity for Schools, Youth Groups & Camps

Children are growing up in a sexually confusing world of mixed messages coupled with exposure to images in the media that they aren't developmentally ready to understand. At the same time, they are developing physically, emotionally, and socially. Certainly young people do not turn off their "sexuality" when they arrive at camp or school. Although there may be many topics that your camp or school may not be comfortable addressing, it's important to remember to address what you can to normalize the sexuality-based questions and behavior youth have.

Camps, youth groups and schools provide a wonderful environment for children to make friends and practice how to interact with one another in healthy ways. Guided discussion groups about defining consent are meaningful and educational. Games that enhance refusal skills (saying no) can be informative and fun. Spending time simply reviewing the qualities of healthy and unhealthy relationships are the types of conversations young people yearn to have with adults they admire. Even teaching boys and girls media literacy serves as powerful lesson for understanding why such a high

value is placed on certain things (handbags, body type, make-up, having a boyfriend/girlfriend) in the real world and how teens can slowly learn to let go of that type of thinking.

I encourage you to think about the developmental ages of the students you serve and find meaningful ways of modeling healthy, positive sexuality.

Recommended Books For Educators and Parents

From Diapers to Dating: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children, Debra W. Haffner

Beyond The Big Talk: A Parent's Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Teens, Debra W. Haffner

Sex & Sensibility: The Thinking Parent's Guide to Talking Sense About Sex, Deborah M. Roffman

So Sexy So Soon - The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids, Diane Levin and Jean Kilbourne

Sexuality: Your Sons and Daughters With Intellectual Disabilities, Karin Melberg Schwier and David Hingsburger

Why Do They Act That Way?: A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen, David Walsh

Does God Belong in The Bedroom, Rabbi M. Gold

Heavenly Sex: Sexuality in the Jewish Tradition, Dr. Ruth Westheimer and Jonathan Mark

About Mara Yacobi



Mara Yacobi is a leading speaker and specialist in youth development and relationships. Drawing on her skills as a Licensed Social Worker and Certified Sexuality Educator, Mara's mission is to empower young people with the knowledge and skills that are critical for health and developing positive relationships with peers.

As the founder of Ask Mara and JLoveandValues, she leads educational workshops and presents motivational speeches to thousands of students in middle schools, high schools, colleges, camps, youth groups, and agencies. In addition to being an independent consultant, Mara has held educational and clinical roles at Planned Parenthood and the Audrey Hepburn Children's House. Currently, she is a consulting Drug Prevention Specialist at CANDLE.

After graduation from Simmons College, Mara received a fellowship to work in Israel for Physicians for Human Rights. Mara has represented the State of New Jersey for the U.S. Department's Health and Human Services' Young Women's Health Summit, and in 2011, the *Jewish Week* named Mara Yacobi one of "36 under 36" Jewish professionals reshaping education. Mara received her Masters in Social Work from New York University, her B.A. from Simmons College; and she earned a certificate in Sexuality Education from Planned Parenthood University.