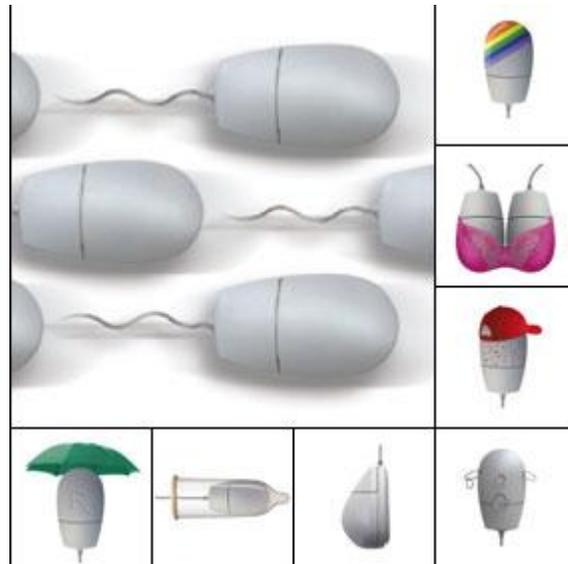


# Communicating with Parents and Community about Your School Sexual Health Program

## A School Leaders' Guide



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## 1. Introduction

We are pleased to offer this guide to school and community communications on sexual health programs. We hope that this guide will be a resource for school-based and community educators who are concerned about promoting effective and comprehensive sexual health programs in their schools.

Ongoing and broadly based communication is the best way to increase parent, community, and professional awareness, support and involvement in your school's sexual health program. Such involvement is very important to the success of the program.

As well, having a significant number of people informed about your school program will help to prevent any small group of people to unduly influence the goals and nature of the program. Regular surveys, ongoing communications and general openness as well as direct communication will ensure that your program is supported as well as responsive to parent, community and student needs.

This guide begins with a brief discussion about sexual health, working with adults and basic principles of effective communications. Subsequently, there is a series of practical suggestions on how to let people know about your program through meetings, workshops, school-based media, community-based media and written reports.

Much of this guide has been adapted from a publication on health promoting schools published by the Child Health Development Foundation of South Australia and similar publications from Canadian sources. We gratefully acknowledge their willingness to adapt or reprint their materials here.

We are also grateful for the support provided by the Foundation for the Promotion of Sexual and Reproductive Health (FPSRH) that is administered by the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada.

## 2. Some Things to Think about First

Before jumping into this manual, consider these three important issues:

1. Sexual health is a topic that needs to be considered carefully. Your readiness, your school's readiness and the readiness and values of the parents and community all need to be taken into account.
2. Adults learn differently than children. So meetings, information and educational activities for parents need to be structured and planned accordingly.
3. Basic communications strategies need to be reviewed and implemented if the communication plan is to be successful.

### 2.1 Discussing Sexual Health

The following general pointers are adapted with permission from Let's Talk About Sex...But How?, published by Health Canada.

It is not always easy to broach the subject of sex with students or adults. It is a sensitive issue that touches on our privacy and our vulnerability. Here are a few suggestions to help facilitators, presenters or teachers feel more comfortable discussing sexual health with young people or adults.

The teacher/facilitator should assess their readiness:

They should develop a healthy attitude towards their sexuality. We are all sexual beings;

Be able to assess their values and reactions toward different subjects on sexuality (the teacher can expect to answer questions on contraception, relationships, etc.);

Have a sound basic knowledge of sexuality so that the class may be taught clearly and coherently.

The teacher/facilitator should be mindful of their explicit and implicit attitudes:

Have great respect and concern for others, regardless of their age;

Be able to create an atmosphere of trust that will allow all individuals in the group to be themselves;

Be sensitive towards the attitudes, values and feelings of others;

Be capable of respecting the values of people from other cultural communities;

Be able to communicate efficiently and with warmth, verbally as well as non-verbally;

Be able to respect the group's or the clientele's limits as well as its characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, or any other trait that distinguishes the group from the teacher);

Be able to create a relationship of trust and openness with others while maintaining a professional attitude.

Be capable of discretion when individuals decide to confide in you;

Be able to collaborate with colleagues and show availability (i.e., students will want to talk to a teacher with whom he/she feels comfortable, not necessarily the sexual education teacher).

### A Few Tips on How to Improve Discussions and Communication

#### *Be sincere:*

A sincere attitude will make any communication easier. The teacher/facilitator should be able to express his/her reservations about certain topics.

#### *Express discomfort:*

The teacher/facilitator should not be afraid to express any discomfort. Expressing it will create a more relaxed atmosphere.

#### *Know how to listen:*

Listening is an essential part of authentic and efficient communication. The teacher/facilitator must impart his/her knowledge while being attentive to students' questions, lack of understanding, concerns, worries and thoughts.

#### *Have an open mind:*

The teacher/facilitator must show an open attitude so that the students feel comfortable expressing themselves freely. The teacher/facilitator should, for example, accept to hear students' opinions, value the students and be aware that their opinions can change over time.

#### *Be flexible:*

The teacher/facilitator should be flexible and try to respond to concerns and needs that may arise during the workshop, even if doing so does not perfectly correspond to the suggested content.

#### *Respect privacy:*

The teacher/facilitator must specify that he/she intends to discuss facts and opinions, not his/her own sexual experiences or those of any student.

#### *Remain calm:*

The teacher/facilitator must calmly listen to students' opinions, even if he/she does not agree with their statements.

#### *Ask for the students' opinions:*

The teacher/facilitator should ask the students to express their opinions – not ask for confessions.

#### *Answer questions:*

It is preferable that the teachers/facilitators answer questions as they arise. If he or she is unable to answer a question, it is better to look it up than give out the wrong information.

*Practice talking about sexuality:*

It may be useful for the teacher/facilitator to practice speaking about sexuality with people close to him/her before presenting a workshop in front of a class.

Try to avoid making the following mistakes:

Openly criticizing students' opinions. This attitude may lead the student(s) to become aggressive and will shut down any further communication;

Lecturing. For example: "In my day we would not have thought/done those kinds of things!";

Laughing at an opinion or comment, even if it is naïve or amusing.

**Set the ground rules for the Discussion**

Before the session, the teacher/facilitator should set some ground rules for youth or adult discussions about sexual health. These ground rules should include ways to:

1. Ensure respectful discussion and privacy
2. Depersonalize and normalize discussions
3. Encourage participants to use correct terms and words
4. Provide information to participants about available services or help if they wish to seek referrals after the session.
5. Respond appropriately if there is a disclosure that requires action
6. Provide take-away and web-based materials for participants to read at their convenience
7. Enable participants to ask questions anonymously or away from the other participants

Here are some sets of ground rules collected from several sources:

Discussion Rules

- No put downs
- No personal questions
- It's okay to pass
- All questions are good questions
- Use correct terms
- Listen when others are speaking
- Classroom discussions are confidential
- Speak for yourself

Adapted from Safer Choices, ETR Associates, 1998 by [www.teachingsexualhealth.ca](http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca)

- Respect the person who has the floor
- What we share in this group will remain confidential
- We will be as open and honest as possible, but we won't discuss personal issues
- We can disagree with another point of view or behaviour non-judgmentally
- We will be sensitive to diversity, and be careful about making careless remarks
- It is always okay to say I'd rather not do this activity or answer that question
- It is okay to ask a question anonymously using the question box
- It is okay to feel uncomfortable

Adapted from Life Planning Education. Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth, ©1995.by-  
[www.teachingsexualhealth.ca](http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca)

### Create a Way that youth or adults can ask questions discretely or anonymously

Use a question box in your classroom or presentations, or make yourself available for individual questions from participants in an area away from the others.

### Optional Opening Activity

This five-minute exercise may allow the teacher/facilitator and the participants to feel more at ease talking about sexuality. The teacher/facilitator begins by explaining that it is perfectly normal to feel embarrassed when it comes to the subject of sex. In order to transmit the content more easily, the teacher/facilitator initiates a discussion based on the following questions:

- Why do we feel uncomfortable on the subject of sex?
- Why is it so embarrassing to talk about sexuality?
- What makes you laugh?

The teacher/facilitator concludes by explaining that most of the embarrassment may be attributed to the fact that sexuality remains a taboo and private subject. It is also rarely discussed among families and inside classrooms, so we are not used to talking about it openly.

Allow the youth or adults to express themselves, showing openness to everyone's comments and thoughts. Answer questions only if need be.

### Tips for dealing with difficult group members

Don't be too quick to label people in a group as "difficult". Sometimes another viewpoint is a very good starting point for discussions.

The attitude, style and behaviour of the facilitator can do a lot to minimize difficult behaviour in the group. Following the tips for being a good facilitator will help.

Use creative ways of splitting up participants into groups. This helps to increase energy levels, and is more likely to split up any negative participants so they have the chance to work with more positive group members.

When a group has set up their own ground rules of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, participants can feel that they “own” the rules and are more likely to obey them.

## 2.2 Adult Learning

Part of being an effective instructor involves understanding how adults learn best. Compared to children and teens, adults have special needs and requirements as learners. The field of adult learning was pioneered by Malcolm Knowles. He identified the following characteristics of adult learners:

- Adults are *autonomous* and *self-directed*. They need to be free to direct themselves. Their teachers must actively involve participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators for them. They must get participants' perspectives about what topics to cover and let them work on projects that reflect their interests. They should allow the participants to assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership. They have to act as facilitators, guiding participants to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts. They must show participants how the class will help them reach their goals.
- Adults have accumulated a foundation of *life experiences* and *knowledge* that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. Adults need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base. To help them do so, facilitators should draw out participants' experience and knowledge which is relevant to the topic. They must relate theories and concepts to the participants and recognize the value of experience in learning.
- Adults are *goal-oriented*. Upon enrolling in a course, they usually know what goal they want to attain. They, therefore, appreciate an educational program that is organized and has clearly defined elements. Instructors must show participants how this class will help them attain their goals. This classification of course objectives must be done early in the course.
- Adults are *relevancy-oriented*. They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities. Therefore, instructors must identify objectives for adult participants before the course begins. This also means that theories and concepts must be related to a setting familiar to participants. This need can be fulfilled by letting participants choose projects that reflect their own interests.
- Adults are *practical*, focusing on the aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake. Instructors must tell participants explicitly how the lesson will be useful to them on the job.
- As do all learners, adults need to be shown *respect*. Instructors must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to the classroom. These adults should be treated as equals and allowed to voice their opinions freely in class.

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### 2.3 Basic Advice on Communications

The following basic principles of effective communications should be respected when developing your communications plan. These include:

- Audience analysis  
The audience has to be fully analyzed in regard to its current practices, knowledge and attitude about the issues. The audience's current method for seeking and receiving information related to the issues needs to be identified and analyzed.
- Message Relevancy Analysis  
The relevancy to the immediate needs and wants of the target audiences has to be clearly understood and used in designing messages.
- Segmentation  
The audiences have to be segmented further and appropriate differentiation of the message or information has to reflect those segments.
- Repetition/Frequency  
The number of exposures to the message needs to be sufficient to break through the clutter of modern day life (estimated at 8-12 exposures as a minimum).
- Convenient media/channels  
Use of print and electronic media, or other channels such as workshops or conferences, should be chosen based on their convenience and use by the target audience.
- Spokesperson  
The spokesperson or group for the program, issue or project should be considered carefully. It may be more effective to have separate spokespeople for different aspects or functions of the program, project or issue.
- Symbols  
The symbols (colour, images, logos) for the issue, program or project have to be consistent with its goals and message.
- Language  
The language used to communicate with the audiences needs to be well suited to their experience, interests and capacity.
- Timing  
The timing of the messages and communications should be convenient to the audience.
- Two-way communications/feedback  
The communications strategy should include opportunities for members of the audience to provide spontaneous feedback as well as formal feedback through focus groups and surveys.

### 3. Using Meetings to Communicate

Meetings encourage participation and allow decisions to be made collaboratively. Hold meetings early in the process of developing or implementing a sexual health program in your school. This will help to develop a shared understanding among the whole school community by allowing concerns, impacts, and alternatives to be discussed. If meetings are only held later in the process, they are more likely to include protests, hostile questions and frustration. Once your sexual health program is established, you should periodically hold meetings with all stakeholders and parents to ensure that new members of the school community are informed as well.

#### 3.1 Different Types of Meetings

There are many types of meetings. Their purposes and nature should be understood from the time you begin to plan a meeting. Be careful not to mix up the purposes of these different types of meetings.

Description and Purpose:

These meetings usually include:

***Information nights/meetings***

Open information meetings are designed to share information and provide answers to all interested members and groups in the wider community. Negotiation and decision-making usually do not occur at these meetings.

These meetings are useful for spreading information.

- a presentation
- lots of time for questions

***Meetings to make decisions***

Decision-making meetings are designed to result in a decision after discussion and consideration of surrounding issues.

These meetings are also useful for gathering and spreading information.

- discussion of the issue upon which a decision is to be made
- input from people about the surrounding issues that would impact on the decision
- negotiation of differing viewpoints
- making a decision.

***Action/working meetings***

Action meetings are “doing” meetings. These meetings also involve decision-making.

These meetings are also useful for gathering and spreading information.

- action planning
- task allocation
- time allocation
- determining roles
- reporting on progress and achievements
- giving and using feedback
- decision-making
- negotiation
- discussion of issues.

### 3.2 Setting an Agenda

An agenda is a written plan or outline of what is to be covered at a meeting. Having a clearly stated agenda means that people know exactly what the meeting is about, how long it will be and what they will gain or contribute.

*Provide a title for the meeting for easy reference*

*Provide venue, date and time.*

*Name the facilitator or chairperson.*

*Provide a concise description of the purpose and invitees for the meeting.*

*List, time and describe the items to be covered. Be realistic in estimating time so that participants do not feel rushed.*

*Include time for informal discussion*

*Ask local agencies and professionals to attend and “bring and brag”.*

*Include a personal benefit to attending the meeting, such as new information or take-away materials*

*Ensure there is a conclusion to the meeting and list any follow-up steps that will be taken.*

Sample Agenda		
The Sexual Health Program in Our School Information for Parents		
Our School Auditorium Street Address March 2, 2005		
Facilitator: Our Principal, Our Nurse (etc)		
The purpose of this meeting is to provide parents with information on the changes and content in the sexual health program being taught in our school. Other background information will be provided to parents. Representatives of the Parents Committee will also be attending.		
Number	Time	Agenda Item
1)	7:00 PM	Introductions
2)	7:15 PM	Overview of SH Program
3)	8:00 PM	Questions/Discussion
4)	8:45 PM	Coffee/Health break (School & community materials/resources will be available for review)
5)	9:00 PM	Support for Parents in Discussing Sexual Health with their Teens
6)	9:30 PM	Wrap-up

## How to Develop the Purposes and Agenda/Content for your Meeting

Before the meeting:

This activity can be used to set an agenda prior to the meeting, without involving participants. If you are a new chairperson or facilitator, preparing an agenda ahead of the meeting will improve your chances of feeling organized and confident.

- Make an initial list of items that need to be covered in the meeting.
- Order the items in a logical sequence.
- Allocate sufficient time for each agenda item.

Answering the following questions can help you make sure that you have not missed any important areas from the agenda:

1. What is the meeting meant to achieve?
2. What information should people leave the meeting with?
3. What information will people who attend the meeting want?
4. What decisions should be made by the end of the meeting?
5. What plans should be made by the end of the meeting?
6. Is there enough interaction and question time?
7. How will it be known if the meeting outcomes have been met? (For example, will some feedback be gathered after?)
8. Type up the agenda. Distribute to participants or display at the meeting. You can give participants the chance to add any items to the agenda prior to or at the beginning of the meeting.
9. Anticipate any points in the agenda in the meeting where it may get bogged down or where it may require further discussion.

### At the Beginning of a Meeting:

This activity can be used with participants at the start of a meeting with an open-ended agenda.

1. Ask participants to identify their expectations and outcomes for the meeting. These can be discussed with a partner or individual. Thinking time can be provided. The following can be used to guide participant's thinking.

- What do you want to gain from attending this meeting?
- What information do you expect to have when you leave this meeting?

2. Invite people to share their responses with the group. Record these on a board, overhead transparency or large piece of paper. Group similar responses together. Move around the circle, adding to the list of items, until all responses have been heard.

It is important not to discuss any of the contents at this point as there is a danger of taking up the whole meeting time.

Please note: This activity can also be used as an icebreaker activity. When gathering responses, ask each pair to introduce their partner and talk about their partner's outcomes for the meeting, rather than their own. Ensure that people know from the beginning of the activity what the process will be so they are not surprised.

3. As a group, decide which items will be addressed in this meeting. Keep the purpose of the meeting in mind.

4. Set some time before the end of the meeting to check that people's needs and outcomes have been met. This provides useful information for monitoring and reviewing, which can be used on the spot to judge whether any further action is required. For example, another meeting could be needed and organized to cover issues that were not covered in this meeting.

5. List these items in a logical order.

6. Gain agreement on the listed agenda from the group.

7. Follow the agenda.

### **3.3 How to Invite People to the Meeting**

Taking the time to consider the time, location, assistance and the process to be used in a meeting can maximize the attendance and participation in our meeting.

The meeting should be well advertised in a variety of ways to ensure that the potential participants are aware of the event. For parents, this includes items in school newsletters, email lists and telephone/fax systems, take home notes from students, notices on the school web site, announcements at previous meetings or at parents committee meeting and other means.

For busy parents, at least a month's notice should be provided.

Consider the issues of time, location, assistance and the meeting process in your planning.

Time	Is it necessary to organize more than one session/meeting at different times to accommodate parents (e.g. After school and early evening)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Will the time of a single meeting or date suit all interested people?</li> </ul>
Location	Is the meeting venue accessible to all members of the community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is it a central location?</li> <li>- Is public transportation or parking available?</li> <li>- Is the venue wheelchair accessible?</li> <li>- Would it be better to hold the meeting away from the school?</li> </ul>
Assistance	Can various forms of assistance be provided to encourage attendance?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is childcare available or can it be provided?</li> <li>- Are refreshments provided?</li> <li>- Are there any cultural or language barriers that can be overcome by seeking multilingual information from other agencies?</li> <li>- Can transportation be provided through carpool volunteers or other means?</li> </ul>
Meeting Process	Carefully consider how the meeting will proceed if the subject matter is likely to cause differences of opinion. Ensure fairness in presenting different points of view, establish the ground rules for discussion early, seek skilled facilitators if necessary, etc...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- See the checklist for successful meetings in section 3.6 of this guide.</li> </ul>

### Sample Invitation Letters

Personalized letters may encourage attendance at meetings to discuss sexual health programs. See the combined samples below for ideas

*Emphasize the benefit of their attendance at the meeting.*

*Ensure the address of the meeting venue is included.*

*Ensure the purpose of the meeting is clearly stated. Describe the process of the meeting and other attendees/resource people who will be in attendance.*

*Provide an opportunity for receiving information prior to or after the meeting.*

*Clearly describe the responses requested of the parent.*

*Provide a personalized contact person at the school for more information.*

Dear (Name of Parent)

To ensure that all parents have the opportunity to review the sexual health education program in our school prior to deciding on whether to have their child participate, we are holding an information meeting for parents of Grade 6-8 on:

Tuesday, March 1, 2005  
School Assembly Hall  
Street Address  
7:00 –9:30 PM

The meeting will review the aims and content of the sexual health education. Representatives of the public health clinic, the parents committee and the teachers of the program will be attending to provide information. Coffee and other refreshments will be provided.

If you would like further information about our program prior to the meeting, please go to our web site at

Provide specific page address on school web site

The deadline for responding to our request for your decision about your child participating in the sexual health education classes is on March 5th, so your participation in this meeting would provide you with answers to any questions prior to making that decision.

All parents are asked to respond to the request to choose whether your child will participate in sexual health education classes by that date. Please complete the attached form and return it to the school at the following address or by having your child return the form to his/her teacher.

Provide full school address  
with telephone and fax number  
and email or web site form

If you are ready to make that decision now, please return that form in response to this letter.

For more information, contact the Principal, Mrs. Snooks at telephone number or email address.

Thank you,

### 3.4 How to Conduct a Meeting

When conducting a meeting, use a chairperson. Be clear and gain agreement on the decision-making process that will be used, for example, by consensus or majority decision.

A chairperson understands good meeting procedures and uses them to ensure the meeting achieves its purpose.

If the group of people are coming together for an extended period of time, as opposed to a one-time meeting, facilitating sessions that contribute to team building (for example, identifying personality profiles, learning styles and conflict management styles) can be extremely valuable.

#### Tips for dealing with difficult group members

Don't be too quick to label people in a group as difficult. Sometimes another viewpoint is a very good starting point for discussions.

The attitude, style and behaviour of the facilitator can do a lot to minimize difficult behaviour in the group. Following the tips for being a good facilitator will help.

Use creative ways of splitting up participants into groups. This helps to increase energy levels, and is more likely to split up any negative participants so they have the chance to work with more positive group members.

When a group has set up their own ground rules of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, participants are likely to feel that they own the rules and are more likely to obey them.

### 3.5 Setting the Ground Rules

Setting ground rules helps to enhance the tone and climate of the meeting or workshop by making acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour clear to all participants.

Doing this allows a group to explore, express and formulate their values.

Setting ground rules makes it easier for a facilitator to address unacceptable behaviour by a group member.

Ground rules are especially useful for ongoing groups such as a steering committee.

It is useful to get the participants to raise the ground rules themselves. Agreement can be gained from all on how discussions will be conducted. You also need to determine how to make a decision on which ground rules to accept (for example, majority or consensus decision making). Some questions that the facilitator could ask the group include:

- What can we each do to help make this meeting or workshop a pleasant experience for all of us?
- What ground rules will help us function effectively as a group?

### Sample Ground Rules for Meetings

- listen to others
- respect the views of others
- be punctual
- do not interrupt others
- confidentiality
- give constructive feedback
- avoid personally derogatory remarks
- no sarcasm
- the right to pass or not answer
- be tolerant of others
- everyone needs to take responsibility for keeping to these guidelines.

### 3.6 Meeting Checklist

Use the following checklist to help you organize and conduct a successful meeting.

#### Tasks

##### Before the Meeting

- Set a clear purpose for the meeting. Is a meeting the best way to achieve your purpose?
- Set an agenda
- Set date(s), start time and finish time (consider difficulties people might have with the time and location of the meeting and offer assistance that will help people to attend)
- Enlist the support of the principal and other key members of the school community
- Invite people from all areas of the school community, explaining the purpose and importance of the meeting
- Publicize the meeting widely through a variety of methods to encourage attendance
- Select a meeting facilitator or chairperson
- Organize a suitable meeting room that is accessible and easy to find
- Use a seating arrangement that suits the purpose of the meeting, for example horseshoe or round table
- Obtain information on the number of people attending and organize tea/coffee/refreshments
- Provide childcare

Identify and locate any resources and equipment (for example, photocopies, overhead transparencies, whiteboard, overhead projector)

During the Meeting:

Keep to the agenda (appoint a timekeeper if necessary)

Present information in an interesting way rather than a teaching/lecturing session

Invite opinions, views, feedback, suggestions and questions

Value and acknowledge the information, skills, differences and cultural diversity that participants bring to the meeting

Use the meeting to identify interested school community members and give them immediate opportunities to become actively involved

Record minutes of the meeting and/or follow-up actions, including the persons responsible for the actions

Check that participant's needs and outcomes have been met (if not, another meeting could be set to address these needs)

Thank participants for their attendance and interest

Encourage people to give feedback about the meeting and use the feedback to improve any following meetings

Set a date for the next meeting (if applicable)

Keep a list of people attending

After the Meeting

Finalize minutes of the meeting

Give copies of the minutes to participants

Publicize what was achieved at the meeting to inform other school community members unable to attend the meeting

Review how well the meeting went. Identify what could be done in the future to help achieve the desired outcomes and ensure the meetings run smoothly

#### 4. Using Workshops to Communicate

School, school district and community workshops are a great way to create and maintain wide-spread support for your school sexual health program. Remember, the broader the base of people who are informed about your school's program, the less likely that a minority of people can affect the direction of the program by complaining or lobbying with school or school board administration.

##### 4.1 Different Types of Workshops

There are a number of different types of workshops that can be organized to support your school sexual health program. These include:

- A school workshop for parents on sexual health education, or sexual health issues on your school's sexual health program such as date rape, sexual harassment, gender equity, HIV and STIs or teen pregnancy. Resource people for this type of workshop could include local physicians, local public health staff, teachers of the sexual health program, school trustees, education ministry personnel and others
- A school workshop for teachers on sexual health education, the school's sexual health program, urgent sexual health issues, methods for incorporating health topics into other curricula, etc. Resource people could include experienced teachers and resource people from within the school district or public health authority, provincial organizations, local university experts and others
- Workshops that invite all members of the school and community. Resource people could include a combination of the ones identified above
- District-wide workshops, with several schools participating. Resource people could include a combination of the ones identified above.

##### 4.2 Designing a Workshop Program

Here are ten tips about community forums that can apply to almost any workshops.

#### 10 TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL FORUM ON SEX EDUCATION

A community forum provides a great opportunity for activists, community stakeholders, parents, and youth to discuss the need for youth to receive sex education.

Key points to remember when organizing for a successful community forum:

##### 1. Determine your audience, budget, and timeline.

Who will your audience be? Community professionals, clergy, parents, education professionals, elected officials, all of the above? How much time will it take to plan the event (see sample time line)? Will you need a budget for a speaker, location or refreshments?

2. Look for key sponsors to make your event a success.

These sponsors should be like-minded groups who support sex education. Other progressive organizations can help you assure a broad-based audience and help carry out subsequent work that may come out of the forum discussion. Make sure to involve youth in your leadership. It is important that the leadership of your potential partners is engaged in the organizing process and supportive of the issues publicly. Use mailing lists from your partners to promote the event.

3. Look for a friendly location that is perceived as neutral.

Having a community forum at a Planned Parenthood office may not be the best way to present broad-based support for sex education. Sex education is a “wedge” issue that will bring in non-traditional allies. The Planned Parenthood name/venue may be intimidating or even off-putting to some. Your goal should be to have Planned Parenthood perceived as part of a greater (mainstream) movement to support sex ed. Look to friendly religious groups, community centers, and libraries to host your forum.

4. Be clear on the agenda for your forum and pick a great moderator.

Use the sponsors of your forum as a steering committee to decide what the event’s agenda will be. Be sure to discuss this agenda with all your speakers/panelists, so that everyone is on the same page as to the goal of the forum. A successful community forum allows time and space for audience participation. The ideal moderator is familiar with the issue of sex education and adept at managing the agenda and facilitating the questions/comments from the audience.

5. Determine your action steps in advance.

The forum provides a captive audience. What can participants do to make them feel engaged and to be effective in promoting sex education? Be sure to provide forum participants with very tangible action steps (e.g., sign a petition, send a letter, etc).

6. Confirm your speakers/panelists early.

Think creatively about key allies. Look beyond the obvious guest speakers and use your sponsors to generate a list of potential speakers that could represent surprising alliances. For example, progressive clergy, outspoken parents, school nurses, and leaders from youth organizations in your community could lend further credibility and objectivity to your forum.

7. Be sure that you have good audio equipment.

Nothing is worse than staging a community forum or panel that no one can hear. Be sure to have microphones for the panelists/speakers and for the audience so they can be heard when asking questions. It is important that you have volunteers attend to these floating microphones, so the microphones are not commandeered. Videotaping the forum is also a good way to get the message out for people who could not attend.

8. Invite the media and make sure that they attend.

A news release should be distributed a week before your forum and sent again the day of the forum. Call to confirm they will be there. Send notices listing community events to media (newspapers, public access TV stations, etc...) three weeks in advance. Prepare press packets with facts sheets and information. Do not underestimate the power of community newspapers (book clubs etc.).

Be sure to make forum sponsors and Planned Parenthood spokespeople available to answer questions ahead of time, because many smaller publications and groups work on long deadlines or do not meet very frequently.

9. Invite elected officials.

This may be a discussion point for your sponsors/steering committee. Elected officials are sometimes eager to speak at forums like this, you may decide when and if this is appropriate among your organizing partners.

10. Plan for follow-up.

What follow-up will you have to the forum? If participants are interested in the issue, how can you keep them involved?

Adapted from Get the Facts: Sex Education in New York State [www.getthefactsny.org](http://www.getthefactsny.org)

Planning the Schedule

Try to be creative with the format and structuring, but be prepared to jump in if your creative ideas don't work out. Some possibilities:

1. Send out a list of questions in advance. Invite anyone who wants to, to prepare a slide and talk about an issue for 5 minutes.
2. Break out into working groups to discuss and prepare a short presentation on a specialized topic of interest.
3. Pose a specific problem (application) at the beginning of the workshop. Have people talk about it and work on it throughout the symposium (e.g., how would different approaches be applied to solve the problem? What are the hard aspects? How well would methods discussed at the workshop scale to a large problem?).
4. Instead of (or in addition to) having authors present their own work, have a discussant read it and present a summary, then have an open discussion with the author participating.

Leave plenty of time for moderated discussion and questions after talks. The goal should be exchange of ideas, not merely presentation of information (which would be appropriate at a larger conference).

Often workshops work better with fewer people giving talks, and more time for discussion, rather than inviting everyone to speak.

Panels work better if (1) there is a well-defined topic, and (2) presentations are limited in length, with the focus on general issues rather than panelists' individual research work.

Invited speakers often work well, but be sure they're interested in the subject, knowledgeable about the specific topic covered by the symposium and aware of the nature and interests of the audience.

Be sure that presenters know well in advance what the format will be (length of presentation, time for questions, how the discussion will be organized) and what context they're presenting in (are there other similar or related papers being presented in the same session?)

### 4.3 How to Conduct a Workshop

Arrange for the workshop chair or another "distinguished member of the community" to give an overview talk at the beginning of the workshop. This helps to define a common vocabulary and shared set of issues, which is particularly valuable if people from diverse research communities are participating in the workshop, or if the topic of the workshop doesn't have a commonly agreed definition.

Try to keep things on schedule. If you've scheduled well, there will be some slack time in the schedule for open discussion that will help if speakers run over. But try not to let this happen too much, because that discussion time is often the most valuable part of the workshop.

Make sure the program committee members are prepared to ask questions and initiate discussion if they have to.

(Adapted from texts by Marie desJardins, SRI International, Menlo Park, CA; Marie desJardins, University of Maryland, Baltimore County)

### 4.4 Setting the Ground Rules

This section is adapted with permission from Just Loosen Up and Keep Talking, published by the Nova Scotia Round Table on Youth Sexual Health

#### Safety in a learning environment means

People have the *right* to state their beliefs, feelings and opinions; to ask questions; or to say nothing if they wish. People have the *responsibility* to respect others' views and life experiences.

#### Some guidelines that help create safety are

Expect differences of attitudes, beliefs and opinions.

Demonstrate respect for others — presenters and participants.

Any question is okay.

Use "I" statements ("I feel...", "I think..."). Speak from your own experience.

Challenge yourself to learn new things during the session.

Continue learning about youth sexual health after this session.

As the presenter, explain each of these points and ask the group to agree to these “guidelines,” at least during the session. Post them in a visible spot and refer back to them, if necessary, during the presentation.

As a presenter, keep in mind

It is very difficult for people to take in material that challenges their beliefs, values or knowledge.

Sometimes people need to agree to disagree.

People can have differences of opinion without personally attacking others.

As a group leader, you are responsible for introducing the topic of safety and getting participants to agree on some guidelines. However, *every member of the group* is responsible for ensuring safety is maintained during the session.

#### 4.5 Tips for Presenters

This section has been adapted with permission from Just Loosen Up and Keep Talking, published by the Nova Scotia Round Table on Youth Sexual Health.

Preparing for the Presentation

Clarify with the group or organization to which you will be presenting:

- what they are expecting
- what information you can or will be presenting
- what their expectations are
- the number of participants expected
- whether their attendance is mandatory or voluntary
- how much time is allotted for the presentation
- how the room and seating will be arranged

What materials will you need to bring, and what materials or equipment will they provide (flip chart, markers, tape, an overhead projector, etc...)?

What materials (activities, handouts, overheads, flip charts) do you need to prepare ahead of time? You may want to make extra copies of the handouts, in case more people show up than expected. Don't forget the Participant Response Sheet! It is an invaluable source of information and feedback about the presentation and possible next steps.

Will you present the information alone, or with a co-presenter? If you co-present, will your partner bring a particular perspective — for example, youth, parent, a member of a particular cultural group or profession? What do you need to do to prepare together?

Are there ability, age, cultural, gender, language or religious factors that need to be given special consideration?

Do you need to adapt the materials or the presentation so everyone can participate? Keep in mind when preparing for the session that your language needs to be appropriate for the age, background and experience of the audience.

How well does the audience know each other? What is their common history? Is it close, comfortable, oppositional, stormy? How will they relate to one another?

### During the Presentation

Introduce yourself and get the participants to introduce themselves. Tell them your purpose for being there and what you hope to accomplish.

Go over the agenda; let them know what they can expect.

Tell them you hope they will participate, but their participation is voluntary.

Stress that you are not trying to change their perspectives and values — only they can do that. You are giving them information and points to consider. Recognize and respect differences. If you don't do this, people will tune out the information.

Lead the group in setting some ground rules for creating a safe environment.

Be respectful at all times, even if you are dealing with a participant who is not. The participants will be watching your reaction, and often, following your lead.

Try to allow for silence; people need time to reflect and think on each question and topic. Silent moments can be some of the most valuable for learning.

Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know..." You are not expected to know everything about youth and sexual health. By admitting that you don't have all the answers, you avoid giving incorrect information *and* act as a role model for others.

Relax! This information can be fun! Try not to worry about making mistakes. We all make mistakes. There is no such thing as a perfect presentation or discussion. There are, however, excellent presentations that are carried out with enthusiasm, humour, integrity, respect and professionalism.

### After the Presentation

Some participants may want to linger or stay after to ask questions or get clarification about things they may have been shy to bring up during the presentation. This can be a valuable learning time.

It is often helpful to "debrief" or go over the presentation with someone else, especially if they have done this type of presentation before. Take a look at what went well. If there were rough spots, you may want to prepare for them should they come up again.

It is essential to debrief with youth presenters. Check in with the host. Were their expectations met? How do they think the presentation was received? Review the Participant Response Sheets. Feedback can help you identify possible changes and next steps.

## 4.6 Workshop Checklist

Use this checklist to ensure that your workshops in sexual health promotion and education are effective and well-organized.

### Before the Workshop

Set a clear purpose for the workshop. Is a workshop the best way to achieve this?

Set date(s), start time and finish time (consider difficulties people might have with the time and location of the workshop and offer assistance that will help people to attend)

Enlist the support of the principal and other key members of the school community

Develop a workshop program with input from participants, if possible

Invite people explaining the purpose and importance of the workshop

Publicize the workshop widely through a variety of methods to encourage attendance

Select a workshop facilitator or co-facilitator

Select a suitable venue that is accessible and easy to find

Organize a seating arrangement that suits the purpose of the workshop, for example, small group clusters, horseshoe or round

Obtain information on the number of people attending and organize catering and other essential services (for example, child care)

Identify and provide any resources and equipment (for example, photocopies, overhead transparencies, whiteboard and pens, overhead projector, workbooks)

### In the Workshop

Establish values and ground rules with the group

Explore the outcomes that participants are hoping to achieve by attending the workshop

Keep to the workshop program (appoint a timekeeper if necessary)

Present information in an interesting way rather than a teaching/lecturing session and make sure that information presentation is punctuated with interactive sessions

Invite opinions, views, feedback, suggestions and questions

Value and acknowledge the information, skills, differences and cultural diversity that participants bring to the workshop

Record outcomes/actions of the workshop, the names of who's responsible for what and deadlines for the actions

Check that participants' needs and outcomes have been met (if not, another workshop could be set to address these needs)

Thank participants for their attendance and interest

Encourage people to give feedback about the workshop and use the feedback to improve any following workshops

Set a date for the next workshop (if applicable)

Keep a list of people attending

### After the Workshop

Finalize the report of the workshop

Give copies of the report to participants

Publicize what was achieved at the workshop to inform other interested parties who were unable to attend

Review how well the workshop went. Identify what could be done in the future to help achieve the desired outcomes and ensure future workshops run smoothly

## 5. Using School Media and Facilities

There is a variety of school-based and school-linked media that can be used to communicate with parents and the community about your sexual health program. These include:

- posters and displays in the school
- school and community web sites
- the school handbook or student agendas purchased by your school
- the school newsletter and community newsletters
- school email, telephone and fax lists

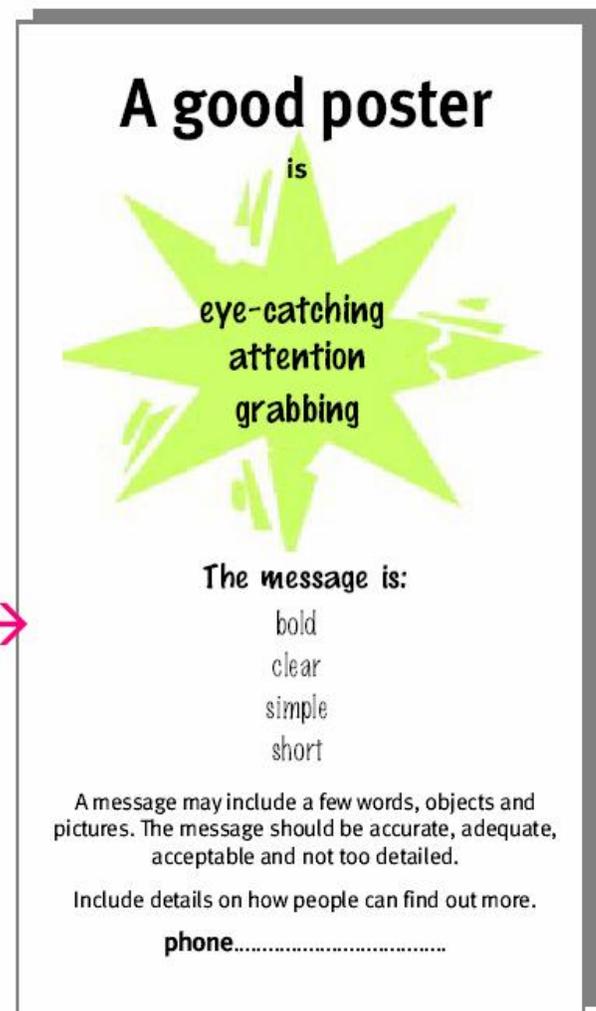
### 5.1 Posters and Displays in the School

Posters and displays are used to inform, promote ideas and stimulate interest. They are not typically used for complicated and detailed information. Posters only have a few seconds to get the message across. People decide in these few seconds whether they want to look at a display or poster in more detail.

#### Make Effective Use of Posters in the School

- Realize that successful posters generally rely on being simple but effective.
- Consider the importance of using colour, movement, light, pictures or photographs to grab attention.
- Test the poster first by showing it to a variety of people and getting their comments.
- Try to present complicated information in ways that are simple, easy to read (size of print) and understand.
- Ensure the language and concepts are well suited to the audience.
- When positioning elements of the design use lots of white space, for example, spacing between text lines, space around pictures to enhance readability.

Figure 3: guidelines for effective poster design<sup>4</sup>



### Make effective Use of School Displays

- Place the display where people gather (for example, staff room, canteen, tuckshop, library).
- Make displays eye-catching by using colour, movement, light, and live objects to grab attention.
- Ensure the display appeals to multiple senses (for example, audio and visual).
- If a display is to be staffed, ensure it is set-up to encourage staff and members of the school community to talk to each other.

### **5.2 School Web Site, Email List, Fax List or Telephone List**

School and Community web sites and email lists are excellent ways to communicate with the parents in your school. However, you should consider how these communication tools are being used now, who is using them for which purposes and for which audiences. The messages that you send out via these media needs to be consistent with the format, tone and other features of the email list, web site or other means. That being said, web sites and email lists can be used for the following purposes:

- to provide information on the sexual health-related issues, trends and events in the community and your school (It would be best if the web site and email list included information on health issues affecting children and youth, not just sexual health)
- to keep people up-to-date with school health progress and school activities, including the times during the year when sexual health topics are to be covered in the health classes
- to ask for assistance or help with school health activities and advise parents of meetings to explain the sexual health program in the school
- send and receive feedback, questions and responses. See how to create simple surveys on [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)

Please note that despite the wide reach of the Internet, not all school community members will be using their access to the Internet to receive school-related information, so, e-mails and websites would be best used in conjunction with other tools to spread and gather information.

Advertising the website and e-mail addresses is required so others are aware they exist and know where to find them. Add the school's internet and e-mail addresses to posters, newsletters, etc... Your school may also have a fax list or telephone list that can be used in a similar way to communicate about your sexual health education program.

#### Other Telephone Information Services

An information hotline is a service where interested people can gain information. People may receive a message or a personal answer to their questions.

These services may include a phone-in, e-mail addresses or a session on the internet. Usually, a hotline allows for an immediate response to enquiries and requests for information. The person(s) responding to enquiries need to have a great deal of knowledge about the information that is being given out. The service must be advertised so people know it exists and how to contact it.

Your school could partner with a community or provincial telephone hotline or email-web site service that can answer questions about sexual health. You can advertise this hotline in your communications with parents and refer parents when they call asking about sexual health issues or topics. Contact your local health authority or health clinic to see if they provide such a service or fund other organizations to do so.

### **5.3 School Handbook/Student Agenda**

Almost all schools have a handbook that is sent to parents and given to students each year. A brief note can be included in this handbook that:

- describes the goals of the school's sexual health and health programs
- indicates when the classes on sexual health will likely be held in the school year
- repeats the school, school board or education ministry policy on opting out of such classes if the parent so chooses
- provides contact information within the school and the community

It would be best if such sexual health information is provided in the context of other health information that is relevant to parents and students.

### **5.4 School Newsletter**

Newsletters are cheap, effective, and allow control of the content. Newsletters should still be eye-catching and informative, but readers do not expect a glossy presentation.

Make Effective Use of School Newsletters

School newsletters and other written communication from the school can be used for:

- sharing information
  - reporting progress on your school's sexual health program and activities
  - requesting expressions of interest, volunteers or community representatives
  - advertising upcoming events, meetings and reports
  - reporting results of surveys
  - acknowledging contributions and saying thanks
  - celebrating the achievements of your school's program and related activities.

## 6. Using Community Facilities and Community Media

### 6.1 Posters and Displays

Well-placed and timely posters in selected places in your community can inform community members about your school activities or events such as workshops or information meetings. As well, you may want to inform the general community that student projects may have your students visiting clinics, professionals and other places as part of their school work.

The same suggestions as noted in section 5.1 above (posters in schools) should apply here.

Posters and displays are used to inform, promote ideas and stimulate interest. They are not usually used for complicated and detailed information. Usually posters only have a few seconds to get the message across. People decide in these few seconds whether they want to look at a display or poster in more detail.

#### Make Effective Use of Posters in the School

- Realize that successful posters generally rely on being simple but effective.
- Consider the importance of using colour, movement, light, pictures or photographs to grab attention.
- Test the poster first by showing it to a variety of people and getting their comments.
- Try to present complicated information in ways that are simple and easy to read (size of print) and understand.
- Ensure the language and concepts are well suited to the audience.
- When positioning elements of the design use lots of white space to enhance readability, for example, spacing between text lines and around pictures.

### 6.2 Local Newspapers, Radio and Cable Stations

Newspapers, newsletters and other written communication can be used:

- for sharing information
- for reporting progress on the sexual health or school health activities and programs
- as an opportunity for public debate through letters to the editor
- for requesting expressions of interest or community representatives
- for advertising
- for reporting results of surveys
- for acknowledging contributions and saying thanks
- for celebrating the achievements of school activities.

Newspapers can feature news releases, articles, and editorials on specific issues. You can also use newspapers to distribute fliers, usually for a fee. Local and community newspapers are likely to be most useful for this.

#### How to get your article or information into a newspaper

Build and maintain a good working relationship with the editor and reporters of the local paper throughout your activities.

Contact the editor directly. Ask if he/she would like an article on your topic. Ask about any word length requirements.

Send regular copies of newsletters, reports, results, speeches and anything else that may be of interest to your audience.

Invite the local press (newspaper, radio, television) to important functions.

Send a media release of your activities. Print on a letterhead. Date and head the sheet Media Release. Include short, simple sentences with most important details first, a catchy heading, double spacing and margins.

Write and send an article to the editor and include photos (preferably digital photos, including details of who, what, where and when) of your activities.

Study the style of the intended publication and lay out your article in a similar way.

Send the final copy (or deliver by hand) to the person you originally contacted, marked for his/her attention.

#### How to get your information on the radio

Speak directly to the radio station programmers for details. Many radio stations run community service announcements at no cost.

Provide an announcement in typed form, double-spaced so that it is easy to read.

Keep the announcement short, generally about 15 to 20 seconds reading time.

### **6.3 Links to Clinics, Drop-in Centres**

Research shows that strong linkages between school-based sexual health education and convenient, accessible sexual health services will result in more young people making positive and responsible sexual health choices.

School-linked clinics that have convenient office hours and are within walking distance from local high schools are one alternative. Or, your school and public health authorities can consider school-based teen clinics that are now widely used in Nova Scotia, Quebec and other parts of Canada.

Public health units provide or fund sexual health services for adolescents in your community. Your school should establish and maintain direct communications with the nurses, program managers and other relevant personnel at those programs. This should include health teachers, guidance counsellors and the school principal.

At a minimum, an up-to-date list of contact numbers, nurses who work with teens and crisis intervention staff should be maintained by the school and be readily available to students, parents and staff. Other steps should include a meeting of concerned staff in the public health unit and school staff at least once a year.

For more in-depth linkages, readers can consider the suggestions contained in these two documents published in England:

- Secondary Schools and Sexual Health Services: Forging the Links  
[www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk/PDF/linkingschools.pdf](http://www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk/PDF/linkingschools.pdf)
- Suggested Multi-Agency Workshop on Teen Sexual Health Services  
[www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk/linkingseminar.pdf](http://www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk/linkingseminar.pdf)

Partnerships with local physicians are also part of this linking strategy. SOGC and the web site [www.sexualityandu.ca](http://www.sexualityandu.ca) would be pleased to help your school locate health care professionals in your community.

#### **6.4 Links to Community Sexual Health Groups**

Linkages with community-based organizations can also assist your school program as well. You can locate such groups by contacting the Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada ( [www.ppfc.ca](http://www.ppfc.ca) ) or visiting the [www.sexualityandu.ca](http://www.sexualityandu.ca) web site. As well, several AIDS organizations provide prevention/promotion programs that include schools.

When approaching such community-based and voluntary groups, your school should consider the following:

- The philosophy and mission of the organization
- The type of services they offer and their sustainability
- The training that their staff or volunteers have received in sexuality, health, working with children and working with schools
- How they are funded and to whom are they accountable

## 7. Using Written Reports

Reports can also promote school-based sexual health programs. Reports are used to spread information to people about something that has happened. Reports can also be used to show the need for a sexual health program at your school, to assess the program so that decisions can be made to improve the program, or to spread the word about the success of the program.

Reports, especially those that include survey results or statistics, as well as examples and stories that illustrate your points, can be very powerful tools for your school.

### 7.1 Types of Reports

There are several types of reports, including:

- **ongoing progress reports** that are written during planned activities to keep people up-to-date with what is happening.
- **evaluation reports** that are written at the end of planned activities to share results and conclusions. These reports can include recommendations of steps to take in the future.
- **survey reports** that provide information on the process and results of a survey. These could include student and parent opinions on the quality of the current sexual health program in the school.
- **research reports** that summarize the evidence supporting the effectiveness and need for sexual health programs. These types of reports can be used to initiate or support action. Sometimes national or provincial/territorial reports on these topics can be used in this way.

Uses of reports

- to spread information and provide feedback to key stakeholders and the wider community
- to keep a record of the steps, processes and procedures used for future reference and for new people entering the process to see what has occurred
- to create enthusiasm and encourage new people to participate by providing ongoing reports.

Decide on the purpose of the report.

Plan the structure of the report to suit the purpose. Sometimes a more formal report may be needed. Other times you may wish to put key points in a colourful, friendly looking pamphlet. A presentation or display that communicates survey results may also be more relevant for the audience.

## 7.2 Sample Contents of Reports

A report can include the following sections. Not all sections are needed as it will depend on the purpose of the report and who your audience is.

- Executive summary: a summary of the main themes
- Findings and/or recommendations: usually only needed for lengthy reports.
- Introduction: provides some background information, sets the scene and usually includes a rationale, for example, what has been achieved so far and reasons for the activities and the report.
- Method: explains the steps taken and the processes used (may include questionnaire design, how participants were selected etc.).
- Results: the facts, the data, and the outcomes The results are grouped and placed in a logical sequence.
- Discussion: interprets and explains the results, discusses findings and conclusions and discusses any conflict in the results.
- Recommendations: provides suggestions for further action that should be taken.
- Conclusion: sums up what has been discussed, states what is going to happen next.
- References or appendices should also be included.

A report does not need to include all these sections. For example, an ongoing report for the school community may include: some background information (introduction); a section on the steps taken so far (method); a section on the outcomes and achievements so far (results); and what is going to happen next (conclusion).

Share your stories by sending copies of reports to the school board, local health authority, teachers association, provincial/territorial health and education groups, specialist teacher associations, education publications etc. You may also want to publish reports in journals or newspapers to inform the public about progress that has been made.

Use a combination of reports, information in newsletters, newspapers, displays, posters and meetings to ensure that the school community receives regular feedback on the progress of your school's sexual health program.