

## **Rights, Respect, Responsibility (The 3Rs):** ***An Age-Appropriate, Comprehensive Sexuality Education Curriculum Grades K – 12***

In implementing the 3Rs curriculum, educators and administrators may receive questions from parents and other community stakeholders about the rationale for topics being addressed at various ages. This document is designed to help you explain why we, the authors of 3Rs, addressed particular topics in particular grades, and in the manner in which we did. While not exhaustive, this list will provide some key examples about the theoretical, developmental and experiential bases informing our decision-making.

Overall, age- and developmentally-appropriate sexuality education is:

- Based on what we know about how people grow, physically, psychologically and emotionally
- Based on what we know about external factors (social/cultural) that can have an impact on that growth
- Based on what we know about brain development and how people learn and process a wide range of information

It is also informed by our organizational values, and the professional experience and knowledge of many sexuality and general education and youth development experts.

### ***Organizational Values***

- Advocates for Youth, along with hundreds of other youth-serving organizations, believes young people have the right to access comprehensive and accurate reproductive and sexual health information that will enable them to make well-informed, healthy decisions, both now and in the future.

### ***Expert Input***

- The 3Rs is the only K-12 sexuality education curriculum that is mapped completely to the *National Sexuality Education Standards: Core Content and Skills, Grades K – 12*. These standards, released in 2012, were developed with the feedback of more than 50 youth development experts, including representatives from the Society of State Leaders of Health and Physical Education, Council of Chief State School Officers, National Assembly on School-Based Health Care, National Association of State Boards of Education, American School Health Association and American Association for Health Education, among others. Several young people, and representatives from several universities, state departments of education and school districts from around the United States also reviewed them.

### ***Expert Curriculum Development***

- The 3Rs was developed by three of the leading sexuality education experts in the United States, Elizabeth Schroeder, EdD, MSW, Eva S. Goldfarb, PhD and Nora Gelperin, MEd. Their bios appear in the curriculum.

### ***Educational Philosophies and Developmental Theories***

Development of the 3Rs curriculum was informed by numerous health behavior, child development and learning theories and concepts. These include, but are not limited to:

- *Jean Piaget*, who explained that younger children are capable of concrete thinking and operationalization of thoughts, and that as they grow older, they gradually become able to think critically and more abstractly. What this means is that the topic of a lesson or question is less important than how it is addressed or answered by the adult.
- *Social Learning Theory* asserts that scaffolding – beginning to address a topic early on and in age-appropriate ways and then gradually building on its complexity as a young person gets older – is the most effective way of teaching young people about any topic, not just sexuality education. For example, even though geometry is age-appropriately taught in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 10<sup>th</sup> grade is not the first time young people learn math. They start at much younger grades learning addition, subtraction, multiplication and so on, and then more complex math skills are built upon those (like a scaffold) to prepare the learners for what's to come later.
- *Personalization*. When students perceive learning to be relevant to their lives, it increases the likelihood they will both learn and retain that learning. Ensuring that students see themselves represented in the materials and learning activities used can assist in furthering personalization. This is one of the main reasons why you will see a range of diversities in the curriculum.
- *Susceptibility*. Developmentally speaking, many young people do not perceive themselves to be susceptible to the risks of certain behaviors, including sexual activity. Far too many curricula respond to this imperception by trying to scare young people with photographs of STI-infection genitals, exaggerated statistics and more. The 3Rs recognizes that young people are capable of learning how to assess the relative risks of various behaviors, without exaggeration, to highlight their susceptibility to the potential negative outcomes of those behaviors.
- *Self-Efficacy*. Self-efficacy is the belief a person has in their ability to do something. So even if students come to understand they are susceptible to certain health-related risks, they may not believe they can do anything to reduce those risks. The 3Rs helps students overcome misinformation and develop confidence by creating opportunities for them to practice the skills they need to manage risk in their lives.
- *Social Norms*. Given that middle and high school students are highly influenced by their peers, the perception of what other students are, or are not, doing influences their behavior – no matter how many websites, articles or statistics we share with them showing the opposite to be true. Debunking myths and highlighting positive behaviors among young people can further encourage the adoption of health-positive behaviors.
- *Social Cognitive Theory*. In addition to social learning theory, social cognitive theory (SCT) is reflected throughout the 3Rs. Like social learning theory, SCT encourages self-efficacy, but adds in the motivation of the learners and an emphasis on affective or emotional learning, an invaluable component of learning about human sexuality.
- *The Social Ecological Model of Prevention*. This model focuses on individual, interpersonal, community and society influences and the role of these influences on people over time. Developmentally, the core content and skills for kindergarten and early elementary focus on the individual student and their immediate surroundings

(e.g., their family). At the middle and high school levels, core content and skills focus on the expanding world of students that includes their friends and other peers, the media, society and cultural influences.

### ***Why Address What You Did When You Did?***

Colleagues who have been using the 3Rs throughout the country have shared that the following topics and age groups have received the most questions around age-appropriateness, content and methodology used:

- ***Anatomy (Kindergarten): “Understanding Our Bodies: The Basics”***

There are a number of reasons why we began with anatomy lessons and talked about the body parts we did in Kindergarten. First, in discussing genitals, nipples and anus openly and directly, we communicate to children that these are body parts that should not have shame associated with them just because they are often referred to as “private parts.” Second, introducing medically-accurate words for these body parts gives children in this age group the clear language they need if they need to report that someone has touched them inappropriately on any of these parts. The lesson is repeated and expanded upon in second grade in order to scaffold learners’ knowledge.

- ***Reproduction (First Grade): “The Circle of Life”***

In our first-grade lesson on reproduction, we define reproduction by putting it into the context of a real-life, non-sexuality-related example most children in the US will be able to relate to: A copy machine. The lesson compares making copies to making babies, with the overall goal of helping learners understand that only living things can make babies.

In addition to being an age-appropriate lesson, this lesson reinforces what is often taught in the science curriculum around reproduction and the life-cycle in which students are provided a small cup, some soil and a seed so they can watch a living thing grow.

- ***Sexual Abuse (Second Grade): “Seeking Help”***

Many adults are accustomed to lessons at this age group talking about “good touch” vs. “bad touch.” The 3Rs breaks down in very concrete ways the different things people who take advantage of children and adolescents may say or do to help reduce the confusion children often feel should something happen that makes them feel uncomfortable. The lesson emphasizes helping children to identify who exactly they can go to if someone touches them in a way that feels bad or unsafe. In doing so, the lesson addresses the reality that parents and caregivers are not the only adults children can – or should – go to under these circumstances.

- ***Sexual Orientation (Fifth Grade): “What Is Love Anyway?”***

Although there is a range in when young people start going through puberty, the starting age has been dropping over the years. Most commonly, it will begin between the ages of 9 and 12. This means that for some young people, the emotional changes of puberty begin to kick in as early as fourth grade. Since middle school (usually starting at grade 6 or 7, or ages 11 to 12) is, developmentally, when young people begin to expand their social interactions beyond friendship to the beginnings of romantic relationships, this lesson is designed to explain the different ways this attraction might feel to young people and connect those feelings of attraction to one’s sexual

orientation. Feelings and emotions are abstract experiences, and this lesson makes them more concrete by defining them, normalizing them and reassuring learners they are normal.

In addition, learners may have parents, caregivers or other family members who are not heterosexual. Leaving these family members out of the discussion is confusing for young people, and misinforms learners that there is only one type of relationship or family. This lesson also emphasizes that learners should speak with trusted adults in their lives if they have additional questions about the topic.

- ***Condom Demonstration (Eighth Grade): “Using Condoms Effectively”***

Very few young people are in shared sexual relationships in eighth grade, or at the age of 13 or 14 – although some are. As youth get older, however, the likelihood that they will be doing something sexual with another person where condoms or other barriers are necessary increases significantly.

The key to having this lesson in eighth grade is to teach young people how to use condoms before they will be in a situation when they will need to use one. Research shows that teaching about sexuality – whether condoms or any other sexuality-related topic – does NOT increase the likelihood that a person will have sex, nor does it provide any kind of encouragement to a young person that they should have sex. Young people who do not know about and are not told about the importance of using condoms, the first time and every time they have any kind of sex, are much less likely to use them consistently or correctly while young people who are taught about contraception before they initiate sexual behaviors are MORE likely to use it. Further, when condoms are described to young people in this age group without actually showing them what they are and letting them practice how they work on a banana, they become a hypothetical, abstract concept. This lesson concretizes safer sex, and builds self-efficacy among young people.

- ***Other: Why Is Gender Inclusive Language Used Less in the Lessons for Elementary School than in Middle or High School?***

The 3Rs adheres to the concept of a gender spectrum, although in the earlier grades, gender binary language is used to accommodate the developmental levels of younger students. Therefore, the terms “boys” and “girls” are used in the early grades, and this language evolves to be increasingly inclusive and non-binary at upper grade levels along with lessons explicitly exploring the concepts of gender and gender expression.

Similarly, in early grades, relationships may be described using gender neutral language, such as “when two people are in love,” or “a couple...” or may discuss families with “two mommies” or “two daddies” while not explicitly discussing sexual orientation. This approach keeps the earlier grade lessons inclusive and supportive of a diversity of sexual orientations and relationships while remaining developmentally appropriate by not specifically discussing the more complex concept of sexual orientation. Later lessons, however, explicitly introduce and explore the topic of sexual orientation. In middle school and high school lessons, the terms “partner” and “same-sex relationships” are used deliberately and proactively both to avoid heteronormativity (the assumption that people and relationships are heterosexual unless proven otherwise), and to help students explore, at a developmentally appropriate level, the full range of sexual feelings and expressions both in and outside of relationships.