

Sexual Health In Prime Time¹

by
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The term “sexual health” is used in sexuality education without any concrete, operational definition, and students are left to ascertain the meaning for themselves. In the absence of a clear definition, students may adopt diverse or narrow understandings of this vague term, without learning the full scope of everything that sexual health includes. This lesson introduces the characteristics that describe sexual health from “Life Behaviors of a Sexually Healthy Adult” in SIECUS’s Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten -12th Grade, 3rd Edition (SIECUS, 2005). Students examine and critically evaluate these characteristics in their favorite television programs.

¹ Thanks to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) for granting permission to adapt its “Life Behaviors of a Sexually Healthy Adult” to form the **Worksheet: SEXUAL HEALTH IN PRIME TIME** used in this lesson. Thanks also to Ryan W. McKee for his assistance in updating the adaptation of this worksheet.

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GOAL

To help students understand basic characteristics of sexual health through a critical examination of popular fictional characters in media.

TIMING

One hour. Timing could be shortened or lengthened by adjusting the discussion questions.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Identify basic characteristics of sexual health.
2. Assess the sexual health of a fictional character, using criteria established by SIECUS in “Life Behaviors of a Sexually Healthy Adult.”

RATIONALE

When the term “sexual health” is used in sexuality education without any concrete, operational definition, students are left to ascertain the meaning for themselves. In the absence of a clear definition, students may adopt diverse or narrow understandings of this vague term, without learning the full scope of everything that sexual health includes. This lesson introduces the characteristics that describe sexual health from “Life Behaviors of a Sexually Healthy Adult” in SIECUS’s *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten -12th Grade, 3rd Edition* (SIECUS, 2005). Students examine and critically evaluate these characteristics in their favorite television programs.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

College students or older high school students.

MATERIALS

- Easel paper
- Tape
- Markers
- Two signs: “SEXUALLY HEALTHY” and “SEXUALLY UNHEALTHY”
- **TV CHARACTER CARDS** listing the names of a variety of television characters and the television show on which they appear. Include enough cards so that each student has one. Cards might include the following characters. Add additional cards that reflect current popular television or the viewing interests of your students:
 - BETTE (“The L Word”)
 - CONGRESSMAN SANTOS (“The West Wing”)
 - EVA (“Desperate Housewives”)
 - HOMER (“The Simpsons”)
 - JOAN (“Girlfriends”)
 - MIRANDA (“Grey’s Anatomy”)
 - QUAGMIRE (“The Family Guy”)
 - RACHEL (“Friends”)
 - RAY (“Everybody Loves Raymond”)
 - SAMANTHA (“Sex and the City”)
 - TONY (“The Sopranos”)
 - WILL (“Will and Grace”)
 - “Life Behaviors of a Sexually Healthy Adult” (one for each student, copied from *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education* (SIECUS, 2005), pages 16 and 17. Available online at www.siecus.org/pubs/guidelines/guidelines.pdf.)

- **Worksheet: SEXUAL HEALTH IN PRIME TIME**
- Index cards (one for each student)

PROCEDURE

1. Before class begins, post the two signs, "SEXUALLY HEALTHY" and "SEXUALLY UNHEALTHY" on opposite sides of the room.
2. Distribute one **TV CHARACTER CARD** to each student. Ask them to go to the part of the room that describes how sexually healthy that character is. Tell students that if anyone is unfamiliar with a character or show, s/he can ask other students who watch that show to help them in making their decision about how healthy that character is.
3. Ask students to spend a few minutes talking to other students nearby, explaining their reasons for deciding that their character is "SEXUALLY HEALTHY" or "SEXUALLY UNHEALTHY." Then ask for a few volunteers to share the character name and television show on their cards, and the main reasons they decided the character was sexually healthy or unhealthy.

Discussion Questions:

- a. How easy or difficult was it to decide on how sexually healthy "your" television character was?
- b. What factors made a character sexually healthy? (Write "CHARACTERISTICS OF A SEXUALLY HEALTHY PERSON" on easel paper, and record the factors as they are identified.)
- c. What factors made a character sexually unhealthy? (Write "CHARACTERISTICS OF A SEXUALLY UNHEALTHY PERSON")

on another sheet of easel paper, and record these factors too.)

- d. Were there differences of opinion about how healthy a character was? What factors did other students consider about this character? (Record these factors on the appropriate sheets of easel paper.)
 - e. Did you see any stereotypes in how "your" character is portrayed? Regarding gender? Race? Sexual orientation?
 - f. If you had to give television a grade of A through F for how it portrays sexual health, what grade would you give? Explain why.
4. Collect the cards and ask students to return to their seats. Explain that sometimes it's hard to understand what "sexual health" means. For some people, it means avoiding sexual behaviors; for others, it means protecting oneself by using condoms and contraception; still for others, it means lifelong health practices, like having breast or genital exams. This class is going to allow us to have a broad understanding of "sexual health."
 5. Distribute the "Life Behaviors of a Sexually Healthy Adult" to each student. Ask students to pair up and:
 - a. Identify the characteristics of sexual health that were recorded or discussed earlier. Mark these with a check. ✓
 - b. Identify three other characteristics of sexual health that were NOT recorded or discussed earlier, but

that they think are very important. Mark these with a star. ★

- c. Identify any characteristics that are unclear. Mark these with a question mark. ?

Discussion:

- a. Which characteristics did you see on the handout that we identified earlier. (*Place a check next to each "SEXUALLY HEALTHY" characteristic as it is identified.*)
 - b. Which new characteristics did you mark with a star? Why are these important?
 - c. Which characteristics were unclear? (*Invite other students to clarify, or clarify the characteristic yourself.*)
 - d. Are there any other characteristics that you think are important signs of sexual health? Explain.
6. Ask individuals who paired up to pair up once more, to form small groups of four. Distribute the **Worksheet: SEXUAL HEALTH IN PRIME TIME** and explain that each group will now have the opportunity to critically evaluate the sexual health of two television characters, using the checklist. They are to decide whether the television character follows or does not follow the recommended characteristic, checking "YES" or "NO" as appropriate, citing specific examples whenever possible.

They should check "DON'T KNOW" box only if it is impossible to know something about the character. Explain that they may reference other non-sexual examples to give an

informed opinion about a character. (For example, if Tony Soprano avoids visiting the doctor at all costs, it is reasonable to assume that he probably does not do monthly genital self-exams!)

7. Hold up the cards, and call out the names of the character on each card, and ask groups to raise their hands if they wish to critically evaluate that character. Continue until each group has two characters to analyze. Allow groups to select their own characters if they want to evaluate someone who is not on one of the cards. Explain that if anyone in the group is unfamiliar with the character assigned, the other group members should give a description of the character.

Ask each group to assign two people who will be responsible for recording the group's decisions, and two people who will be responsible for reporting the group's findings to the larger group.

8. While students are working, distribute an index card to each student. After about 15 minutes, ask the groups to make a final, overall decision about the sexual health of their characters. Then ask the groups' reporters to comment on ONE of the characters to the larger group, identifying the major reasons why a character was sexually healthy or unhealthy.
9. After every group has had a chance to report, conclude by asking students to write down on their index cards one thing they learned, or one thing they want to remember about the lesson.

COMMENTARY

This lesson evolved from what was originally a take-home assignment for college students. The assignment had students observe several episodes of their favorite television shows, and then report their findings on the sexual health of a character in a five-page paper. (An example of such an assignment is included in Appendix A, and an excerpt from a sample student paper can be found in Appendix B.) Sometimes I have given the assignment for students to complete by themselves; other times, the assignment may be completed in teams. As time and resources permit, you may also ask students to bring in DVD or video clips that illustrate the main points of their papers.

I have sometimes lectured using the very popular character Homer Simpson (“The Simpsons”) as a case study. Images of Homer (and many other television characters) are in ample supply by visiting www.images.google.com and conducting a search for the character desired. These can be put on PowerPoint slides, next to specific sexual health characteristics that are being examined. Using a case study, such as Homer, can help clarify the different indices in the SIECUS checklist. I find that of all the characteristics, students are most confused about the one that says a sexually healthy adult “appreciates his or her own body.” Students often take this to mean that the character works out, or is vigilant about their beauty and appearance. By using Homer Simpson as a model, I am able to illustrate two competing ideas about this characteristic. I found one illustration that has Homer frowning as he looks at his ample waistline; another in which he smiles seductively wearing nothing but underwear and a bowtie; and yet another in which he poses in a sexy way wearing a

woman’s bathing suit. These images allow me to explain that “appreciating one’s body” is not about how one looks *physically*, but how they *feel* about their bodies. Clearly, Homer has mixed feelings!

Other illustrations and clips from DVD collections of “The Simpsons” enable me to illustrate many other aspects of Homer’s sexual health: the way he sometimes fails to “express love and intimacy in appropriate ways” by saying to his wife in one episode, “I’m going to miss you so much. And it’s not just the sex. It’s also the food preparation”; or how he sometimes fails to communicate effectively with family and friends (he calls his infant daughter Maggie, “the little one...what’s her name?” and keeps track of his two best friends, Lenny and Carl by writing on his hand Lenny = white; Carl = black). Viewing episodes over time can also illustrate Homer’s evolution with respect to his hom(er)phobia. In an early episode, his discomfort with gay men is obvious, and he tries to make his son more “manly” by taking him to the steel mill and on a hunting trip. (As it turned out, the steel mill workers and hunters they met were gay, thereby defying traditional stereotypes.) A more recent episode, however, has Homer championing the rights of same sex couples to marry. In the classroom, demonstrating short clips of these episodes allows students to examine the development of a character while also investigating contemporary issues related to sexuality.

Homer Simpson is but one example of many that can be used to demonstrate the intricacies and dimensions of sexual health. Many other television characters, especially those on shows that are situational comedies that examine

relationships (like “Will and Grace”) work very well for illustrating major points. Shows that focus more on the storyline, but not the characters’ relationships (CSI, Law and Order) give students less to work with in assessing sexual health.

When selecting the television characters for the cards, be sure to include characters that reflect your students’ television viewing habits, and also their range of diversity. In having groups work together to assess television characters’ sexual health, students who do not watch television can glean information from their peers; however, when giving a written assignment, it is important to give everyone the option of choosing a television character OR a favorite fictional character in literature. Note that popularity of television programs changes over time, and so your stack of cards will change frequently!

Finally, the lessons “It’s Your Body: Understanding Reproductive Health” (Montfort & O’Leary, 2001) and “It’s Your Right: How to Access Reproductive Health Services” (Montfort & O’Leary, 2001) both make excellent precursors or follow-up lessons. The same is true of your favorite media literacy lesson.

REFERENCES

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He is the co-author of *Making Sense of Abstinence*, and the director of The Center for Family Life Education, the acclaimed education department of Planned Parenthood of Greater Northern New Jersey. Co-founding editor of the *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, Taverner is the author or co-author of numerous sex education manuals, including *Sex Ed 101*, *All Together Now: Teaching about Contraception and Safer Sex*, *Streetwise to Sex-Wise: Sexuality Education for High-Risk Youth* and *Positive Images: Teaching Abstinence, Contraception, and Sexual Health*. He is also the editor of several editions of *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Human Sexuality*, and a contributing author to the *International Encyclopedia of Sexuality*.

Taverner received a national award given by the electronic journal *Sexual Intelligence*, and he was the first recipient of the “AASECT Founder’s Award,” given by the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT). An adjunct professor of human sexuality at Fairleigh Dickinson University, Taverner has trained sexual health professionals throughout the nation. He received his Master of Arts degree in human sexuality from New York University, and can be reached at Taverner@ptd.net.

Worksheet: *SEXUAL HEALTH IN PRIME TIME*

Directions: There are many characteristics that make a person sexually healthy or sexually unhealthy. Choose a fictional character to evaluate and check whether she or he meets each of the following sexual health characteristics. Give specific examples whenever you can.

Name of fictional character _____

	This character...	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW	EXAMPLE
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT	1. Appreciates her or his own body.				
	2. Can get information about reproduction if they need it.				
	3. Knows a person can choose not to have children or not to have intercourse.				
	4. Treats people of all genders with respect.				
	5. Understands their sexual orientation and respects others' sexual orientation.				
	6. Understands their gender identity and respects others' gender identities.				
RELATIONSHIPS	1. Shows love and intimacy in appropriate ways.				
	2. Builds meaningful relationships.				
	3. Avoids harmful relationships.				
	4. Decides with their partner about whether (or when) to become a parent.				
	5. Knows how to make their relationships better.				
PERSONAL SKILLS	1. Lives according to their values.				
	2. Takes responsibility for their own behavior.				
	3. Can make good decisions.				
	4. Can think critically.				
	5. Can communicate well with family, friends, and partners.				

	This character...	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW	EXAMPLE
SEXUAL BEHAVIOR	1. Enjoys and expresses their sexuality throughout their life.				
	2. Holds true to their values when sexually expressing themselves.				
	3. Enjoys sexual feelings without necessarily acting on them.				
	4. Knows the difference between life-enhancing sexual behaviors and those that are harmful.				
	5. Respects the rights of others.				
	6. Gets new information to improve their sexuality.				
	7. Has sexual relationships that are consensual, not harmful, honest, pleasurable, and protected against disease and unplanned pregnancy.				
SEXUAL HEALTH	1. Gets regular checkups and does breast or testicular self exams.				
	2. Uses contraception to avoid unplanned pregnancy.				
	3. Avoids getting (or giving someone) STIs, including HIV.				
	4. Acts in line with one's own values when dealing with an unintended pregnancy.				
	5. Gets prenatal care if needed.				
	6. Prevents sexual abuse.				
SOCIETY AND CULTURE	1. Respects people with different sexual values.				
	2. Advocates for sexual issues in government.				
	3. Thinks about how different sources of sexual information affect their sexual thoughts, feelings, values, and behaviors.				
	4. Examines the world around them for biases based on gender, sexual orientation, culture, ethnicity, and race.				
	5. Stands up for the rights of all people to get accurate sexuality information.				
	6. Does not express prejudice or bigotry.				
	7. Rejects stereotypes about the sexuality of others.				
	8. Teaches others about sexuality.				

Adapted with permission from SIECUS (2005). *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Kindergarten -12th Grade, 3rd Edition*. New York, NY: SIECUS.

APPENDIX A

This assignment is included on students' syllabi. It can be given in a variety of ways: as a written assignment for each student to complete individually; as a group paper; or as a group paper in which students also report on their characters with media (i.e. DVDs, videos, etc.)

SEXUAL HEALTH PAPER

This assignment will enable you to critically analyze the sexual health of a fictional character in popular culture – television or literature.

To complete this assignment, you will need to refer to the resource “Life Behaviors of a Sexually Healthy Adult” (included in this syllabus) and the checklist summary, “Sexual Health in Prime Time” (also included in this syllabus). You will need to:

1. Find one or two other students to work with.
2. Select a fictional TV or literary character who will serve as a case study to analyze his or her sexual health, based on the criteria indicated on the handouts.
3. Complete the checklist “Sexual Health in Prime Time” for your character.
4. Write a 5-page paper elaborating on the criteria in the handouts as it pertains to your character. Address at least one aspect of each of the six areas covered in the checklist.

Each pair or group of three needs to submit only ONE paper, with all the names of the students who worked on that paper. Remember to attach the completed checklist to your paper.

APPENDIX B²

The following are excerpts from a sample student paper on the sexual health of “Quagmire,” a character on the hit television show “The Family Guy.”

Quagmire is an airline pilot and has been sexually active with multiple partners. He is very open to trying different sexual activities with a multitude of different types of people. His main purpose in life is to have sex. He is not a very healthy individual. ...One healthy thing that can be said about Quagmire is that he does appreciate his own body. He usually can be seen either walking around naked or in just a robe; however, he has been known to get his penis stuck in different household objects. In one episode he was looking out the window at his neighbor and the window closed on his aroused penis. He called the hospital and said “Hi, it’s Quagmire. Yeah, it’s stuck in a window this time.” Another time, he received a package from UPS. He came out wearing a robe, and, upon seeing the delivery person was a woman, he walked back inside and then came out naked, saying to her “I’ve got a package for *you!* Giggity, giggity!” He does appreciate his own body but it causes him to show [it to] other people when they don’t want to see it.

...Quagmire does not appreciate others’ feelings or decisions. He does not know that a person can choose not to have intercourse. He has been known on more than one occasion to give “ruffies” to women. His “drink of choice” to buy women at the bar is a “rufficolata.” He has no respect for a woman’s privacy or rights. He was

² Thanks to Nathan Minetti, student at Fairleigh Dickinson University, for giving permission to reprint excerpts from his assignment.

once arrested for hiding in a bathroom stall while his neighbor was going to the bathroom, and he hid in the dark during his teenage neighbor's sleepover party. On more than one occasion he has asked that same neighbor when she is turning eighteen. He thinks of women as objects, not as people.

Clearly, the student who wrote this paper is a fan of the show, or at least a regular viewer, but he was also able to see past the humor and identify unhealthy, problematic, and illegal aspects of the character's sexual

health and behavior. The paper concludes:

Quagmire only cares about himself when it comes to relationships, and even then, he does not make healthy decisions. Contraception and safer sex are not in his vocabulary. He needs to be better educated about sex and relationships. Quagmire is a terrible role model for people and needs to get not only mental health to determine why he does such things but also physical help for all the diseases he has been getting from his actions.