

# CHOOSING TO BE ABSTINENT

Abstinence  
Sexual activity  
Assertive  
Masturbation  
Oral sex  
Anal sex  
Sex  
Values  
HIV  
STIs  
Violence  
Gay/lesbian  
Heterosexual  
Sexual orientation  
Empowerment

- ✓ 1. For learners to understand what 'abstinence' from sexual activity means.
- ✓ 2. For learners to understand the challenges of choosing and practicing abstinence; techniques for addressing these challenges.
- ✓ 3. To encourage respectful, assertive communication with partners in abstaining from sexual activity.

45-50 Minutes

**Information Sheet: Sexual Behaviours and Risks (provided)**

## PROCEDURE

- 1 To help frame the exercise and discussion, teachers should begin by asking learners to define 'abstinence' in their own words on a piece of paper. Put all of the definitions into a box and have each learner draw one out - by doing so the original author of the definition is obscured, which makes working with the definitions anonymous and therefore easier.
- 2 Ask volunteers to read out what they think are fitting definitions. Write or stick them up on the board.
- 3 Reflect on the definitions that learners have provided, and compare them to the definitions below:

- **Abstinence means deciding not to do something.** Abstinence doesn't only refer to sexual behaviours, but could describe many other kinds of choices. For example, vegetarians **abstain** from eating meat, and some learners **abstain** from watching TV during the week so that they have more time for their schoolwork.
- **Abstinence can be temporary, or a life-long commitment.** For example, followers of some religions abstain from eating food at certain times during the year. For others, the decision to abstain from drugs, alcohol or cigarettes may last a lifetime.
- **Abstinence can start at any time in one's life.** You can choose to become abstinent after you have already done something (for example, with smokers who stop smoking), or you can abstain without ever having tried it. You can return to abstinence after you have engaged with the behaviour for a while, for example, someone who was sexually active while married, but who returned to abstinence when they divorced.
- **Abstinence is a personal decision, and people's definitions of abstinence are therefore different.** For some people abstinence means not engaging in any sexual activity at all (including things like petting, kissing, and **masturbation**), while for others abstinence means choosing not to have **oral, anal** or **vaginal sex**.
- **Everyone has the right to abstain from sexual activity,** and no-one should pressure anyone into having **sex**.

- 4 Remind learners that even the word 'sex' or **sexual activity** may mean different things from person to person. For the purposes of this activity, sex refers to a range of activities including:
  - Sexual intercourse – in other words, the penetration of the penis into the vagina or anus (anal sex) of another person; or
  - Other behaviours and acts such as **oral sex** or mutual **masturbation**.
- 5 Ask the learners to brainstorm some of the reasons that people may choose to abstain from sexual activity. Point out that people may abstain for a number of different reasons, and that people may also choose to abstain from relationships as well as sex (often for the same reasons).

### Expect the class to identify reasons such as:

- Don't feel like they want to have sex at all
- Religious beliefs and values
- Family **values**
- Personal values
- Not ready to have sex/engage in **sexual activity**
- Don't feel comfortable with their bodies
- Don't want to be at risk of **HIV, STIs**, pregnancy
- Focusing on something else right now: school, sports, friends
- Had a previous bad experience
- Want to build relationship based on things other than sex
- Don't feel attracted to anyone
- Waiting for the results of a STI/HIV test

- 6 Ask learners (either as a whole class, or in smaller groups) to brainstorm reasons why it may be hard to abstain from sex after one has made the decision to do so. On the board list some of their answers.

**The class may identify some of the following reasons for finding it difficult to remain abstinent:**

- ‘Everyone is doing it’
- Fear of saying ‘no’ to a partner
- Fear of **violence** if you say ‘no’ to your partner
- Being rejected or relationship breaks up
- Being teased or humiliated (including in front of others)
- Wanting to experience sexual pleasure and orgasm
- Wanting to experiment sexually
- Being curious about one’s sexual orientation and wanting to experiment
- Thinking that one may be **gay/lesbian**, and wanting to see whether **heterosexual sexual activity** feels as exciting
- Wanting intimacy
- Feeling lonely
- Wanting to show your partner you care about them
- Feeling like you owe it to your partner

- 7 Acknowledge that it is often hard to resist the pressure to have **sex** – whether that pressure comes from your partner, your friends or yourself. Ask learners to think of some of means of overcoming the barriers they have identified.

**Learners should identify some of the following:**

- Talk to a friend about how you are feeling, and what you could do to resist engaging in sexual activity. Support is important!
- Talk to a trusted adult.
- Find an appropriate friend, counsellor, or NGO service, to ask questions or get support regarding your **sexual orientation**.
- Talk to religious leaders to clarify what your religious **values** and beliefs are about sex. Ask for their help in supporting you in your decisions around **sexual activity**.
- Find activities that you and your partner can do together that will give you time together that is not focused on sexual activity.
- If you are lonely, join a group or club that will introduce you to new people and friends.
- Engage in **sexual activity** that you **do** feel comfortable with (e.g. **masturbation**).

- 8 Wrap up the activity by reminding learners that many **sexual activities** carry a risk of getting a **sexually transmitted infection**. Hand out the information sheet (provided) which lists a range of sexual practices (including alternatives to sexual intercourse), the risks involved, and methods that can be used to prevent transmission of **STIs**. Teachers who feel equipped to do so may discuss these with the class.

## TEACHER TIPS

### General

It is important to reinforce with learners, that the decision to abstain from sex (or to engage in some sexual activity but not others) is a personal decision that should be based on reliable information and (if applicable) informed discussion with their partner. It is also important to remind learners that these decisions – although personal – are not decisions that they have to make all on their own. There are people and organisations that can help them with information and support in making the right choice.

A key aspect of this exercise is to help learners understand that all people – regardless of their age – make decisions to engage in sexual activity or to abstain. This is critical because it casts abstinence as one of a range of choices someone may make about their sexual health, rather than a choice that is only appropriate for young people. By showing abstinence to be a legitimate choice, at any age, it becomes a personal and empowering choice rather than a marker of youth.

It is important in this lesson not to vilify sexual behaviour. There will be learners who have engaged in sexual activity (some consensually, others not) and it is important that they not be shamed for their experiences and choices.

### Making the Link with Gender & Violence

By thinking through their choices around having sex, as well as the barriers they may encounter and ways to work around those barriers, learners are able to exercise their rights, make choices and negotiate sex in such a way that is informed, respectful and consensual.

### Assessment Ideas

The exercise forms a good basis for assessment because its emphasis on building assertiveness skills, conceptualisation of sex and abstinence, and reasons for choosing to abstain, are in line with CAPS curriculum. The objectives at the beginning of the exercise can guide an assessment task.

### References:

*Adapted from:*

Seattle and King County Department of Public Health (1988) *FLASH [Family Life and Sexual Health] Lesson 9: Lesson Plan*. Accessed at:

<http://www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/personal/famplan/educators/HighSchool.aspx>

*Table adapted from:*

Muller, A. *Sexual and Reproductive Health for Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People: Guidelines for Health Care Workers in Primary Care*. Cape Town: Gender Dynamix; 2013



# SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS AND RISKS

SEXUAL PRACTICE	HIV AND STI RISK	PREVENTION METHODS
VAGINAL SEX	HIGH RISK FOR <b>HIV</b> HIGH RISK FOR <b>STIs</b> RISK OF PREGNANCY	USE MALE CONDOM (PENIS) USE FEMALE CONDOM (VAGINA)
ANAL SEX	HIGH RISK FOR <b>HIV</b> HIGH RISK FOR <b>STIs</b> HIGH RISK OF INJURY	USE MALE CONDOM (PENIS) USE WATER-BASED LUBRICANT
ORAL SEX	MEDIUM-LOW RISK FOR <b>HIV</b> MEDIUM-LOW RISK FOR <b>STIs</b> (HERPES, GONORRHEA, CHLAMYDIA)	USE MALE CONDOM (PENIS) USE FEMALE CONDOM (VAGINA)
FINGERING AND HANDJOBS (MUTUAL MASTURBATION)	LOW RISK FOR <b>HIV</b> LOW RISK FOR <b>STIs</b>	WASH YOUR HANDS BEFOREHAND, ENSURE THERE ARE NO CUTS ON YOUR HANDS
RIMMING (LICKING OR SUCKING THE ANUS)	LOW RISK FOR <b>HIV</b> HIGH RISK FOR <b>STIs</b>	WASH THE AREA, USE DENTAL DAMS OR CLING WRAP
RUBBING GENITAL AREAS AGAINST EACH OTHER WITHOUT INTERCOURSE (ALSO CALLED DRY HUMPING OR SCISSORING)	LOW RISK FOR <b>HIV</b> LOW RISK FOR <b>STIs</b>	WEAR UNDERWEAR USE CLING WRAP
MASTURBATION (SEXUAL STIMULATION OF SELF)	NO RISK FOR <b>HIV</b> OR <b>STIs</b>	NONE
KISSING	LOW RISK FOR <b>STIs</b>	DON'T KISS SOMEONE IF YOU (OR THEY) HAVE AN OUTBREAK OF HERPES (A COLD SORE)
KISSING, TOUCHING BREASTS OR NIPPLES	NO RISK FOR <b>STIs</b>	NONE
PHONE/SKYPE/CHAT SEX	NO RISK FOR <b>HIV</b> OR <b>STIs</b> , BUT THERE IS A SAFETY RISK IF YOU ARE DOING THIS WITH SOMEONE THAT YOU DON'T KNOW.  THERE IS ALSO A RISK OF EXPOSURE, FOR EXAMPLE IF THE OTHER PERSON SHOWS OTHERS YOUR PICTURES, POSTS YOUR CHATS	BE SURE THAT YOU KNOW AND CAN TRUST THE OTHER PERSON.  THINK CAREFULLY (BE HESITANT) BEFORE SENDING PICTURES OF YOURSELF TO OTHERS - ESPECIALLY SEXY OR REVEALING PICTURES.  THINK WHETHER YOU WOULD BE COMFORTABLE WITH OTHERS (NOT THE RECIPIENT) SEEING THE PICTURE. IF NOT, DON'T SEND IT!