## SCRIPT FOR ONLINE VIDEO – ANSWERING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

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| **1** | Hi I’m Mandy Stevens and I’m a Specialist Teacher with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority in the area of Health and Personal and Social Capability (specifically Respectful Relationships). Today I’m going to discuss strategies to answer difficult questions that students might ask as part of teaching respectful relationships in the classroom.  |
| **2** | Teaching about respectful relationships requires open discussion and critical reflection and it is important that we set up a learning environment where students feel comfortable to ask questions or discuss sensitive issues. I recommend that you watch the short videos on *Setting up a Safe and Supportive Environment* and *Protective Interrupting* - both of which are available on the VCAA website. These videos will outline some things you need to consider to ensure your classroom environment is a safe place for all students to contribute to this important area of their social and emotional learning.  |
| **3** | Discussion and the critical reflection of a range of personal values and beliefs is a central part of teaching respectful relationships. This may be challenging for teachers at times as students might say things or ask questions that make you uncomfortable or even angry. It is important to remain calm, to not make value judgements and to help students make sense of this complex area of the curriculum. Remember that students are often asking these questions to make sense of their world and the classroom may be the only safe space where they can gain this type of information. It is far better they gain information from a trusted, credible adult who is able to facilitate a respectful discussion between students than receiving inaccurate or inappropriate information from online sources or their peers.  |
| **4** | Occasionally students do ask a tricky or ‘out there’ question to gain approval from their peers. This can either be gently discouraged or it can be handled more effectively by answering the question in a simple, factual and technical way. Students are often not expecting an honest answer and so it can actually shut down the bravado. However, in all my years of teaching respectful relationships and sexuality education I have realised that students rarely ask questions to embarrass you – usually there is a genuine need for information behind the question. So be careful not to be too harsh in your handling of this situation as the classroom may actually be one of the few safe places where students can gain this type of knowledge. |
| **5** | As classroom teachers you have the best working relationship with your students so they are more likely to trust you and take on board the answers you give them. Following are some further practical tips for answering some of the more challenging questions that students might ask: |
| * Listen carefully to the student’s question and ask them to explain further if you are unsure what the question is actually asking. Younger students for instance might confuse language or use terms in the wrong context. Seeking clarification firstly will make sure you don’t go down the wrong path with your answer or give too much information.
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| * Validate the question with comments such as “That’s a great question” or “I can understand why you might ask that”. This will help minimise any embarrassment the student might feel and encourage other students to feel OK about asking further questions themselves.
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| * Keep your answer short and simple. It is better to give a short answer and then ask the student if they need further information. When we are dealing with complex concepts we can be tempted to go into a long, convoluted answer but this is often confusing for students and means we might not provide a direct answer to their question.
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| * Make sure that your answer is age appropriate. Again, even older students often need a simple and specific answer firstly and then further discussion and reflection can be encouraged with the class as a whole to build and enrich understanding.
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| **6** | * Be honest if you don’t know the answer to something. It is important to model to students that none of us have the answers to everything especially when it comes to complex issues. Let students know that you will get back to them with an answer or encourage students to research the question themselves if appropriate.
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| * If students ask about your personal values and beliefs, be careful about providing this information. Sharing some of your values might be appropriate at times, however be aware that you hold a position of influence over students. It is never acceptable to impose our own values onto a student. Make sure you include a diversity of viewpoints in your answer – for example you might say “I believe strongly in equality between males and females however some may have a different view of this”. Encourage other students to express alternate opinions and model respect for the right to hold different values. Be aware however, that some viewpoints about personal issues are simply not in line with legislation in Australia (for example a student expressing their view that same sex partners should not be allowed to gain certain employment or live together). Distinguishing between the right to hold a personal belief and abiding by the law is always important here.
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| * If you believe the question is not age appropriate you could thank the student for their question and suggest that you are happy to speak with them after class as the information does not specifically relate to the current discussion. Be aware that parents and families will have a wide range of personal values so it is not always appropriate to answer every question. You could also encourage the student to go home and discuss the question with their family.
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| * Finally use gentle humour where appropriate to lighten the mood and let students know that discussion of these issues does not have to be totally serious. Be careful however not to use humour that is disparaging or discriminating.
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| **7** | Elements of respectful relationships education might be challenging or uncomfortable but as classroom teachers we are in a unique position to provide answers to some fairly complex issues and to build the capacity of our students to be more resilient and to have more respectful and productive relationships throughout their lives. |
| **8** | Thank you for listening and I hope this has given you some practical strategies and increased your confidence in answering difficult questions when teaching respectful relationships in your classroom.  |