WA HEALTH PROMOTING SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION (INC.)
Supporting Student Health
www.wahpsa.org.au

FACT SHEET:
Engaging Guest Speakers for Sensitive Topics

The sensitive nature of some topics requires that students feel safe and comfortable in a supportive environment. Talking about topics such as emotions, resilience, bullying, body changes, respectful relationships, alcohol and other drugs (AOD), consent, sexting, sex, pregnancy and STIs can be very triggering for many students (and staff) - reminding them of their own experiences or experiences of those close to them. It is vital that schools have strategies in place for supporting students (and staff) who may be distressed by sensitive content presented by guest speakers.

Guest speakers do not have the established relationships with students that teachers ideally do. Teachers are often privy to student backgrounds and experiences that need careful consideration when discussing sensitive topics. Even with an established rapport, teachers cannot be aware of every experience of every student, and lessons and presentations on sensitive topics need to be delivered carefully with this in mind.

Often guest speakers present to large numbers of students at a time. It is crucial to consider if the content is appropriate for large group sessions. In any session that focuses on contexts that are potentially highly values-laden (such as AOD, respectful relationships education, sexual assault prevention, etc) there is a possibility that students may disclose personal issues or abuse. It is essential that schools have strategies in place to protectively interrupt where required and staff know how to appropriately deal with any disclosures. In large group settings this can be very difficult. Another concern is that students may not feel safe and comfortable learning about sensitive content in large group settings and may disengage.

Suggested strategies to reduce the likelihood of possible negative impacts or unintended outcomes from guest speakers.

- Guest speakers should be part of a structured curriculum that has spent time introducing the topic prior to the session. Lessons after the session should be structured to enable discussion and reflection. Never invite guest speakers as a 'one-off' and/or reactive strategy.

- Ask guest speakers if they provide follow up activities and discussion – many do. Check these are age and developmentally appropriate for your students and school community. Some speakers also provide materials for parents/carers.

- Research your speakers to ensure they deliver appropriate and engaging content.

- Ask guest speakers how they manage sensitive topics, potential triggers and disclosures.

- Inform the guest speaker of any relevant background information of the students or school community that may impact their presentation (whilst ensuring confidentiality of students and staff). e.g. if there has been a case of image-based abuse in the school.

- Consider the timing of the presentation - will students be heading straight to another lesson, into an exam, to lunch, home? How will students be supported if they are distressed by the content of the presentation or discussions that take place after the presentation?

- Consider which staff will be present during the presentation and what roles they will play - Will staff be catching up on marking or planning at the back of the room (not good practice)? Will staff be available if required to support students? How will student behaviour be managed? Has the school nurse and/or counsellor been briefed about this session in case of a potential increased need for student support?

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