

 CLASSROOM VOICES

“Oh Miss, I’ll always be a virgin!”

Teachers are uniquely placed to support their students as they negotiate adolescence, says our **anonymous correspondent** – but where should they draw the line?

One of my Y11 students is going away for the weekend with her new boyfriend. She is excited and talking about it with her friends. She is confident and funny and generally appears at peace with herself, but we have all read the #metoo reports and sadly, too many of us already know how the politics of private lives can go.

I pick my moment and ask her if she has anyone to talk to about her budding relationship. She looks astonished that I would even ask her. “Oh Miss,” she cries, “I’ll always be a virgin!” But of course she won’t, and I explain this to her, and I ask again if she has someone to talk to while she navigates this new part of her life. And here is where I, an experienced and generally confident teacher, falter.

There is so much I want to say; what stops me? The answer is simple: parents. What if I say something they are unhappy for their child to be told? Students often welcome open invites to talk and in this case I feel I have an idea of the young person’s home life, as within her art work, the subject I teach, she has explored and talked about her family in great depth. I make an educated guess they would be happy for me to talk to her, but for many I simply don’t know and so shy away, with a feeling of lost opportunity.

Unspoken truths

But what would I tell her, even if I were able to? There is so much I would like to say.

Consent. Be clear on what you want and your right to express it. But don’t think consent is one way only. Men are allowed to say no too and women are

allowed to express their desires. Sex is not all about boys pushing and girls pushing back.

Be wary of technology and how easily it can be used.

No part of your body is wrong or ugly.

What do you think your parents’ views are regarding sex and relationships? How have you concluded this? Do you talk to them or have you assumed? Have they met your boyfriend? Do they get on? What about your friends? Do you agree or disagree with these views?

Remember porn is a construct; have you ever watched *Bake Off* and then recreated the cakes shown? No, because its entertainment not reality. Leave that stuff to the ‘professionals’.

Have you thought about the practicalities and prepared for safe sex? What’s your GP like? Or the local nurse? What can the college provide? And do you feel able to access these

services? If not how might that be made possible?

Do you have someone you trust and can talk to? That means about the good stuff too. A relationship with a regular open dialogue when it doesn’t matter could be vital when it does.

And finally, I’m here, I’m unshockable (mostly) and I’ll always listen.

Make a plan

It is true that SRE has come a long way since I was at school, both in terms of what it covers and how many students access it; and that increasingly open and nuanced discussions often take place in the family home – but it is also true that every student’s family life, access to information and experiences differ widely. And it is often true, too, that we as teachers hold that important ground of being both known well enough and yet not personally known by students, leading us to be trusted with information they might not want to discuss with anyone else.

So we must have a plan, an idea of what we might say when these times arise. An awareness of when a discussion raises safeguarding issues, and our institution’s policies around that. A sense of how far we can or should go, and of how we offer support without intrusion or crossing the boundary from teacher into quasi friend, counsellor or parent. We are part of the lives of these almost-adults – and it is vital that we understand the responsibilities and limitations of our role in supporting them, for us as well as for them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

‘Miss’ teaches art and design in the West Midlands.

