

Tactical Sheet

PROBLEM LANGUAGE: Premarital sex

- Simply using premarital with sex asserts that “normal” sex is not premarital. Ideally, having sex without being married would be recognized as the typical case that it is, so that “premarital sex” would sound nearly as nonsensical as “electronic computers” or “illegal stealing.”
- Premarital implicitly divides life into two distinct periods: before marriage and after. Non-marital and LGBT relationships, as well as relationships after divorce, are irrelevant and marginalized.
- This phrase reinforces seriously oversimplified thinking about sexual development. Marriage is presupposed to be the standard trigger for sexual activity – the one valid precondition for sex.

“A contract...to teach teens pregnancy prevention is being criticized by groups that say the program promotes pre-marital sex.” - takeissue.takecharge.org

“Finer’s conclusion was that premarital sex is not only normal but nearly ubiquitous.” - plannedparenthood.org

“Abstinence-only-until-marriage approaches to sex education are counter-productive, dangerous, and even harmful to youth. The approaches present premarital sex as intrinsically harmful.” - advocatesforyouth.org

ALTERNATIVES: Avoid the phrase premarital sex all together

What do you believe are the conditions that support positive sexual experiences? Be proactive and talk about those instead of about marriage. There are times, however, when you may need to make reference to it.

If you can't avoid referring to marriage, still avoid premarital sex. Here are three guiding principles:

- 1 Allow for conceptual distance between sex and marriage. **Keep the concept of marriage after the word sex**, instead of saying premarital before it:

AVOID: ...conclusion that premarital sex is not only normal...

BETTER: ...conclusion was that having sex outside of a marriage is not only normal...

- 2 **Eliminate the time element** by highlighting *whether* or not there is a marriage, not *when* it is:

AVOID: ...criticized by groups that say the program promotes pre-marital sex

BETTER: ...criticized by groups that say the program promotes having sex without being married.

- 3 Work to reduce the impact of the word marriage.
Experiment with using a in front of marriage:

AVOID: ...approaches present premarital sex as intrinsically harmful.

BETTER: ...approaches present sex separate from a marriage as intrinsically harmful.

These examples probably sound a bit cumbersome. They should! Weakening a link reinforced by everyday speech takes slow, deliberate effort. But notice that more common-sounding alternatives like sex before marriage or unmarried sex adhere only to one or two of the principles. While they are better than premarital sex, they are still to be avoided.

Insights from cognitive linguistics

- Certain **modifiers carry strong associations**: currently, the word premarital is strongly associated with sex – very few other words follow it in natural language.
- **Placement matters**: certain phrase structures strengthen or weaken conceptual relationships.
- Use of definite or indefinite articles such as the, a or an can help in **avoiding unproductive generalizations**.

Real Reason

“developing political imagination”
www.RealReason.org