

# Tactical Sheet

## PROBLEM: Language putting teens in passive roles

- Too often our advocacy puts teens in passive roles: subject to surging hormones, manipulated by bad information, vulnerable to the harm of STIs or pregnancy. But long-term support for sexuality education requires broader recognition of teens as developing decision-makers.
- Terms like protect and keep safe are prototypically used in avoiding serious outcomes – injury, illness, death. Are these the kind of associations we want made with sexuality? Using these terms consistently and exclusively, we are not only painting teens as passive, but sex as *fundamentally* about danger and harm.
- The real fears and anxieties many of us have surrounding the sexual development of teens do need to be acknowledged. But it's also our job to convey that young people, over time, with practice and with support, can and will make their own decisions – and, as much as they must learn responsibility, they also deserve opportunities to create their own positive and healthy experiences.

*“Remember what the middle school years were like? An emotional roller coaster: hormone madness and changing bodies” - [advocatesforyouth.org](#)*

*“Surging hormones intensify our feelings...” - [plannedparenthood.org](#)*

*“If we truly want to protect the next generation, it's time to start supporting programs that provide them with comprehensive, medically accurate information...” - [gutmacher.org](#)*

*“...all agreed that condom access was a key part of keeping teens safe and healthy.” - [teenwire.com](#)*

## ALTERNATIVES: Acknowledge anxieties; focus on teens as developing decision-makers

The more that teens are understood as capable decision makers, the less threatening sexuality education becomes. There are often times, however, when it is important to acknowledge your audience's anxieties surrounding teen sexual development. But don't undermine your long-term vision.

- 1 **Use *hedge phrases*** (e.g., *feels like, seems as if, appears to be*) to help you show empathy for anxiety around adolescence **without reinforcing stereotypes** that teens are out of control, or helplessly subject to the whims of their bodies:

**AVOID:** An emotional roller coaster: ~~hormone madness~~ and changing bodies...

**BETTER:** It was like an emotional roller coaster... we sometimes felt our hormones were taking over...

**AVOID:** ...~~surging hormones~~ intensify our feelings.

**BETTER:** ...hormones seem to surge inside us, and we feel...

- 2 **Highlight that the best outcomes for teens begin with us supporting their own development**, rather than just keeping them away from all danger. We want them to behave responsibly and earn our respect, and that means letting them act in the first place:

**AVOID:** ~~Keeping a child safe~~ and healthy...

**BETTER:** Helping a child be safe and learn healthy behaviors...

**AVOID:** If we truly want to ~~protect the next generation...~~

**BETTER:** ...want to teach teens to take the best care of themselves...

### Insights from cognitive linguistics

- **Hedge phrases** like “seems as if” and “almost” can be powerful ways to acknowledge feelings – without actually affirming ideas you don't believe to be true.
- **Agency** – or someone acting “on purpose” – draws our attention when reasoning. We can have very different reactions depending on whether we think of young people as mostly *passive* (such as “threatened by STIs”) and needing protection, or as *agentive* – sometimes with good judgment and sometimes not-so-good, but always practicing how to make better and better decisions.

Real Reason

“developing political imagination”

[www.RealReason.org](#)