

How to Start a Low-Cost Texting

Helpline in Under an Hour! -

Resource Kit

In this resource kit, you will learn more about some of the more nuanced details and issues that can help you set up and manage a texting helpline.

**Section I** will give you essential information around legal concerns, cost, and setup.

In **Section II,** starting on page 4, you can find detailed information on how the setup works, how to send texts, and how SextEd saves answers and user feedback.

Starting on page 11, **Section III** describes our best practices for writing accessible, supportive, informative, and inclusive texts.

Finally, as an appendix, we’ve included our Inclusive Sex Ed Language Checklist, which we use to ensure that our texts don’t make assumptions on people’s body parts, gender, or sexuality.

For questions and concerns, please contact AIDS Community Care Montreal’s SextEd Coordinator at SextEd@accmontreal.org.

**Section I: Software and Legal Considerations**

**Potential legal issues**

When you’re establishing a service, it can help to detail how any information will be collected or used, like for gathering statistics to apply for grants. It is especially relevant now as the boundaries of what is considered private and confidential are shifting because of technology so it’s helpful for you to be transparent to your funders and let potential users know what will and won’t be shared and with who. Also know that many areas require services that work with youth to report more serious issues to authorities. These may include cases of physical or sexual abuse of children, or when people may be in imminent danger to themselves or others.

As these are legally required in many cases, it can help to talk to a lawyer and create terms and

conditions or an official privacy policy, each detailing when you’d disclose certain information.

You can also check to see what privacy policies are already in place for programming that is similar to yours. You can find some examples of privacy policies for online or texting-based sexual health programming at…

<http://sexted.org/terms-conditions/>

<http://teenhealthsource.com/legal-privacy-policy/>

<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/all-access/chat/program-information-for-774636>

**Softwares SextEd Uses**

SextEd uses Twilio, Slack, and Sunshine Conversations to answer texts, save common responses, and record user feedback. You can learn how to quickly connect the three with this handy guide from Sunshine Conversations:

<https://docs.smooch.io/guide/business-systems/#slack>

<https://slack.com/apps/A03EEEKAC-sunshine-conversations?tab=more_info>

*Twilio*

* Choose an online phone number to accept texts, calls, and MMS (i.e. images).
* Reliable, we haven't had any delays or errors.
* Includes a basic setup for seeing a history of incoming and outgoing texts exported to Excel.
* Many other integrations like Sunshine Conversations are available, letting you receive and send through Twilio.
* Cost
	+ $1 per month for a number
	+ $.0075 for each text
	+ 25% discount on all fees and $500 credit for registered charities by applying for the A Billion Messages for Good program

*Sunshine Conversations*

* Redirects texts from Twilio, Facebook Messenger, website messaging, and other places to

apps like Slack.

* Lets you answer messages from any of these platforms through email, or programs like

Slack.

* Sign up for an account, then connect to Twilio and Slack (see link below).
* Free for up to 500 users a month, $60 for 501 - 3,000 users. It lets you get messages from up

to 3 sources.

*Slack*

* Popular coworking system.
* Easy to customize with JavaScript integrations, and many free or inexpensive pre-made

integrations are available.

* Lets you save and search past answers.
* Built-in coworker messaging, which we use to share and edit drafts.
* Cost
	+ Free for 5GB and saving the 10,000 most recent messages
	+ The Slack for Non-Profits grant is for a standard Slack plan, which includes 10GB of data and unlimited recent message history
	+ Standard plan includes additional security integrations like two-factor authentication or Google OAuth
	+ Grant includes an 85% discount on plans for larger teams

**Comments on these platforms**

SextEd chose these programs largely based on the experience and expertise of volunteer

programmers who helped us establish the system and through consulting community members. We

chose the setup because it is inexpensive, reliable, and allows us to save and search for

previous answers.

We also recognize its limitations. It requires us to manually move URLs from our Wordpress site

into Slack. There is also no simple way to monitor information such as user feedback without

programming knowledge for how to clean data. Sunshine Conversations’ recent limit of 500 users a month for the free service can also cause some difficulties.

We should also note that, while the answering system in Slack doesn’t show any numbers for people that text in, they are accessible through Twilio. As such, this setup may not be ideal for helplines aimed at health or well-being interventions for activities that may be considered illegal, such as drug use or sex work. It also complicates legal issues with situations you may be obligated to report. Unfortunately, we have not found an alternative service that masks users’ numbers, despite considerable research.

**Section II: Answering Questions in Slack**

**1.0 THE SLACK DATABASE**

The better you get to know the answering system on Slack, the easier and quicker it will be to

respond to questions. Take the time to explore the system, play around, and identify the points listed

below.

For team members to first sign in, the account administrator can invite them through their email.

To log in after that, they can go to the unique URL Slack provides for the team (ex.

sexted.slack.com)

**1.1 CHANNELS**

Slack is divided into separate channels, which have a # in front of them. To go over a few that you’ll

be using more often...

**#ANSWERS**

Answers is a channel SextEd created to save our favorite responses that we’ve sent in the past.

Volunteers can look through them in the channel. You can try this by clicking on the channel, then

the “+” button next to the box at the bottom and choosing a new post. Creating a post is how we

save our past answers – we’ll get to that later!

After this is set up, you can search through them by typing “in:#answers” in the search box, then

whatever you’re looking for (ex. “in:#answers puberty hair”).

Alternatively, you can do a regular search (ex. “puberty hair”) and choose to just look at the files in

your search results. Almost all of these will be these posts with past answers.

Either way, you’ll get a list of potential answers. Volunteers can click on each to read the answer and

its tags.

**#TEXTS**

Texts is where all of our new texts come in. So, if someone texts us, Smooch will show their text

here next to a channel name like #ferocious-squirrel. For more information on how Smooch works,

see the Software and Legal resource.

When new texts show up, you’ll probably also see the #texts channel in bolded white font on the

left sidebar.

You can’t reply to any of these texts here; you have to go to that texter’s specific channel to reply.

Click on the specific channel, and then click the green “Join channel” button at the bottom.

**#ADJECTIVE-ANIMAL OR #FIRST-LAST NAME COMBINATIONS**

These are channels specific to each texter. The titles are their anonymous user name (ex. #sk-

intrepid-platypus, #sk-balding-giraffe, or other versions of #sk-adjective-animal). If they’ve

messaged us through Facebook Messenger, you’ll just see their name as #sk-first-last name.

In these channels, you can see the whole history of questions each texter has asked, what we’ve sent

in response, and the feedback rating they’ve given us (1-5). With this information, you can learn a

few things that can help you write personalized responses:

* Details about them. If it’s not in their most recent text, you might be able to find out what body parts they have, what genders they’re attracted to, or other relevant details.
	+ If you’d like, you can also record this type of information in the “channel details” section, by selecting that option in the settings (the gear at the top of every channel).
* What kind of text they prefer. Sometimes people will spell it out directly. Other times, you’ll be able to tell from when they gave bad feedback. Keeping their personal taste in mind can help you make a text that will best help them!

**1.2 RECEIVING TEXTS IN SLACK**

Texts come in to the #texts channel. Unfortunately, this doesn’t show all texts that come in, so it’s

best to click on “channels” to see any that are still open and might have new texts. From here, you

can click on each channel and click to join it, so that you can respond. You can also check all of the

channels in #texts for the last 3 days to ensure all their questions have been addressed. The person

who creates the system will also automatically have every channel open when texts come in.

\*All examples use sample texts sent by ACCM staff.

If you set up “whispers” in Sunshine Conversations, people can get an automatic response every time they text, when they first text, or in other scenarios you can choose. When someone first texts SextEd, they get an automatic response:

[Hi there! You've reached SextEd, Montreal's anonymous texting helpline for sex and dating. We'll

answer your questions within 24 hours!].

This shows up right after their first text. So, if someone just says “Hi” or “is this SextEd?” we don’t need to send a response.

**1.3 SAVING ANSWERS IN SLACK**

SextEd saves our past answers using Slack, in a channel we created and shared with staff and

volunteers, called #answers.

So, we have a database that we can use as a starting point to write personalized responses. To save a

unique answer the way that we do....

1. Go to #answers.

2. Click the “+” at the left side of the writing pane at the bottom

3. Create a post

4. Paste, write, or edit your short answer

5. Create a title at the top by typing over the large bold “Untitled”

6. Write tags at the bottom in quotes, with each tag separated by commas, e.g.

"relationship,sex,communication,desire"

7. Click share. Make sure that it’s being shared in the channel #answers

8. Tick the box that says “Let others edit this post”

**1.4 ARCHIVING AND UN-ARCHIVING**

After someone hasn’t texted for a period of time that you can set in Smooch, you’ll be prompted to

archive their channel by typing “/archive.” This makes it disappear from the channels list, freeing up

some space. Generally, we always do this when we’re prompted. You’ll always be able to get it back.

This also makes any future texts from them appear in the #texts channel.

A channel is un-archived automatically when someone sends a new text.

If you need to un-archive another channel for any reason, you can do a search for the channel or

click on the channel name in #texts to get it back. Once you’re in, click the gear at the top right and

select un-archive.

**2 RESPONDING TO A TEXT MESSAGE**

Our database of texts grows with every new question we receive. While many responses have already been drafted, they still need to be reviewed, personalized, or combined to create a unique entry

when necessary.

Here are some quick notes to get started:

* Answer the first text that came in first. So if one came at 2am and another at 9am, start with the 2am! When we start our shifts, we typically open all of the #adjective-animal channels and see which came in first.
* Smooch used to cut off texts at 640 characters, after 4 full SMS texts, which are 160 characters each. This means that if you send more than this, it may split words between texts. This can be mid-word, so it’s best avoided. A low character limit also keeps the answers concise and easily readable for youth.
* If you’re answering questions at the same time as someone else, it’s good to let them know that you’re working on it. This way, you avoid doing the same work or sending two answers to a texter. You can do this by typing a message in the #general channel. Something like “I’m working on #obtuse-penguin!” Whenever someone joins a channel, it also says so right in the channel. After a while, you’ll also find other ways, and that’s ok too!

**2.1 STEPS TO ANSWERING**

The first step when you’re answering a question is to figure out how much we’ve already done and

how to personalize it.

Generally, the first thing to do after you’ve claimed a text is to search Slack for any short answers

that might be useful. This can be tricky, particularly with limited keywords and only seeing the titles

of each post.

Try a few different keywords and click on any titles that might be remotely relevant before deciding

whether or not we have anything similar to what a texter is asking.

**2.2 WORKING WITH A SIMILAR ANSWER**

If you find something that’s perfect for what they’re asking, and reflects their language, you’re ready

to send!

If you found something that just needs a few tweaks, you can just make the changes in a text editor

and copy and paste into the texter’s channel on Slack without saving. These are things like:

* Very specific details: “Are there drug interactions between \_\_\_ and \_\_\_?”, “I had sex \_\_ days ago, and now \_\_\_\_, could I \_\_\_”, “He washed his hands with \_\_\_\_ before \_\_\_”
* Small tweaks to reflect their language or situation, like pronouns or slang words: “My \_\_\_ is worried...”, “I noticed some bumps on my balls, what could they be?”

**2.3 CREATING A NEW SHORT ANSWER**

In Slack, if we’re working on a subject that we don’t have a short answer for yet, the first step is

research. Even if we’re 90% sure about something, it’s still best practice to look it up before writing. You can check later sections for how we decide if an online source is reliable or not. Then, you can look for saved posts that have any sentences or information you want to use for this

one. At SextEd, we often re-use our favorite statements about consent whenever they’re relevant.

If you can’t think of any of these parts, you can start a new answer!

Whether or not you’ve taken from saved answers, it also helps to decide whether your new answer is

worth saving. Many people will ask questions that it’s unlikely you’d ever get again, and it may save

searching time in future questions if we don’t save these in the database.

**2.4 SENDING AN ANSWER IN SLACK**

The #texts channel is only where new texts appear, so you can consider it our dashboard or

homepage. If you send a text to this channel, it will not go to any texters.

In order to answer, you need to be in that person’s anonymous channel, either by clicking on their

#sk-adjective-animal name under channels or clicking it in the #texts section. Then you need to join

that channel.

Once you’ve joined their channel, you can simply follow the directions that are right below the text:

type /sk, and then the answer to their question.

One tricky thing: Smooch will split up any messages over 640 characters (including spaces).

So, it’s best to make sure your message is under this limit before sending, or split it into several

messages where each are under 640 characters.

SextEd also sends a feedback response [Was this question helpful?...] after we send our answer.

We saved this and other common responses in a post called Common Answers.

**2.5 ADDING A FEEDBACK RATING**

When texters send feedback, their text will appear as any other does. To add a feedback rating, we find the post for the text that we used to answer. Since there’s a lot of

variation, the easiest way to find it is to copy and paste part of the text we sent into Slack’s search

bar, most often the url.

Like when you’re looking for a saved text you can use, looking through the Files in the search results

on the right is your best bet, as you can’t add feedback to the messages themselves.

When you find the right file, click on it to view it, go to the bottom, and click to add a comment.

Then just write in the rating they gave as “\_/5”, along with any text they sent (ex. Amazing! / This was really helpful! / What took so long?)

Ratings help us identify how helpful our answers are and evaluate if any need to be changed. They

also help us report the success of our program when we’re looking for grants or generally showing

how effective it is. Comparing our ratings to the tags on these answers, we can also show that we

helped with certain subjects that funders may want to focus on.

**RESPONDING TO LOW RATINGS**

When we receive a rating of 2 or lower, we check in to see what we can do to try to give the texter

the information they need. In these cases, we send the “low rating text”, a saved answer that asks

users if we misunderstood their question, or if they were hoping for other information. This gives

them a chance to rephrase their question or let us know how we can improve the service in the

future.

**Section III: Writing Checklist**

A lot of volunteer training and what they learn during their shifts centers around writing texts that

are accessible and inclusive. Each of these can get pretty complex, and even our long-term

volunteers and staff learn more during shifts. This is often what people struggle with the most.

Especially as you start answering texts, going through this checklist can help make sure you’ve

included everything you need to. It can also help you write the kinds of responses we’ve found get

the highest ratings. We hope this helps!

**2.6 TONE AND PERSONALITY**

* Is the tone sympathetic, but professional?
	+ Remember there is a real live person on the other end looking for information and support. If they texted, they may not have any other options.
	+ Be prepared to answer further questions, some of which may seem obvious to you, with kindness and patience.
	+ If someone says they’re worried or stressed, starting texts with a sympathetic “That sounds hard”, “It’s common to...”, or another supportive message often helps to validate their feelings.
	+ At the same time, it’s important not to assume what people might be feeling. This can sometimes create the feelings you assumed they were experiencing, or give a subtle suggestion that they should be feeling a certain way.
* Are you sticking to only giving information, or are you giving advice or commands?
	+ Our goal is to empower our texters to make their own informed choices. This is why we try and stick to only giving out well researched information and avoid giving advice or commands. Remember that what you might think is right may not be right for someone else.
	+ We also don’t give specific diagnoses. When a texter asks for one or if they could have an STI, it’s best to talk about what someone might be at risk for and where they can get tested.
	+ In emergency situations, we will tell a texter what they should do (ex. If \_\_\_\_, you should go to an emergency room).
* Could anything you wrote be seen as judging their question or choices?
	+ Look out for unnecessary and loaded adjectives like “obvious,” “incredibly,” “very,” “really,” “better,” or “dangerous.” These are ok sometimes, but you should consider them red flags – something to look at closely to see if the texter could interpret them as judgment.
	+ As an example, you could change “anal sex without a condom is very dangerous” to it being “a high risk for HIV and other STIs.”
* Are you reflecting the language a texter uses?
	+ This can help us seem friendly and approachable. If they say “boyfriend,” it could be alienating to read “partner.”
	+ However, we avoid any derogatory language a texter uses, even when referring to themselves. For example, if someone asks if they could be infected, it is still best to write about chances of transmission; if they ask about slutty behavior, we focus on their actions and talk about social stigma.
* You’re not a robot! While many short text responses are already scripted, it’s important to think about what someone’s asking and why they might be asking it before being sending a response.

**2.7 ACCESSIBLE LANGUAGE**

* Are you using youth-friendly terms a 6th grader will understand?
	+ Words that are over 2 syllables (ex. contracted, transmitted, penetration, etc.) should be a red flag. Look at these carefully and think about what age you might have been when you learned it before keeping it.
* When talking about sexual health, we often explain terms in parenthesis.
	+ ex. Using a dental dam (a rectangular sheet of latex held between a vulva or anus and the mouth for oral sex) can lower your risk for gonorrhea.
	+ Dental dam, vulva, foreskin, g-spot, p-spot, and urethra are common words we explain.
* Are you using short, concise sentences?
	+ If you see a place where you could make 1 sentence into 2, do so! Phrases like “, and” or words like “but” or “either” should be red flags for this.
	+ Removing any complicated grammar, like sections with a comma on either end, helps make reading easier.
* Using a clear subject and object and switching to active rather than passive voice can also help simplify things
	+ ex. Changing, “It may be said that condoms are helpful” to “condoms are helpful” or “according to research, condoms are helpful”
	+ ex. Changing, “It’s safer sex when condoms are worn by penis-havers” to “Penis-havers can wear condoms for safer sex.”
* While editing, it can help to use the Hemingway app at [hemingwayapp.com](http://hemingwayapp.com/), which will highlight complex words and sentences.
* If you ever get stuck, you can use helpful guides like the CDC’s Everyday Words for Public Health Communication, which is available for [free online](https://www.cdc.gov/other/pdf/everydaywordsforpublichealthcommunication.pdf).

**2.8 INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE**

* Am I using words that might be stigmatizing?
	+ You can avoid stigmatizing or triggering terms like “infected,” “disease” or “weird,” even when they aren’t used to describe people.
	+ Ex. “Blood carrying the virus” can replace “infected blood.” “the virus entered the body” can replace “became infected”
* Am I using gender-neutral terms, and not making assumptions about someone’s gender?
	+ You should use gender-neutral pronouns like “they” or “you” unless people gender themselves or their partners.
	+ You can do this by talking about body parts and functions rather than boys or girls. “The penis becomes erect” or, “Menstruation typically begins...” are ideal while, “boys get erections” or, “girls typically start menstruating” are not.
* Am I using plural, non-gendered terms for talking about partners?
	+ This is also effective if they aren’t asking about a certain partner, or if you’re writing a longer FAQ for a general audience.
	+ “People you have sex with” or, “partners” can work better than “your boy/girlfriend” for this. This can include people who have more than one partner, and it only sounds like giving general suggestions for their entire sexual life.
* Am I imposing labels on situations that people haven’t used themselves?
	+ People can think of a variety of things as, "real sex" versus, "not real sex," and labelling something they describe as one or the other can be jarring, especially if the idea of virginity is important to them.
	+ If they haven’t used the terms, we work to avoid labelling an experience as assault, rape or nonconsensual, as this can be very emotionally difficult for survivors.
* Am I avoiding loaded or emotionally heavy words around a pregnancy or the possibility of one?
	+ “embryo” or “fetus” can work better than to “baby” or “child” and potentially triggering words like “conceived” can be replaced with “when the egg was fertilized” or just talking about symptoms, like a missed period.
* LGBTQIA2S+ inclusive language can be especially hard, but you can check out the “Inclusive Language Checklist” in the appendix for helpful suggestions on some of these.

**3.0 A RISK REDUCTION FRAMEWORK**

SextEd operates on the principle of risk reduction: providing as much information as possible

without judgment while refraining from guiding or giving advice. In our context, this means

answering questions to our full ability, giving as much relevant information as we can, and recommending all available services and information possible. No part of any texts sent by SextEd

demonstrates judgment toward consensual behavior. We only give specific advice in clear emergency

situations (ex. “You should call 911 immediately”).

**Appendix: Inclusive Sex Ed Language Checklist**

Using language that removes gendered terms to talk about bodies and the sexual things that people

may do with them helps include and respect people with diverse (a)sexualities, (a)genders, bodies, and (a)romantic orientations. However, learning how to speak and write this way can sometimes be

challenging, especially without some strategies to help.

Generally, a great goal for using inclusive language is phrasing things that so you’re not assuming

anyone’s gender, their body parts, or the gender(s) they’re attracted to. While it’s simple in

theory, it can be hard in practice, especially if you want to phrase things in a variety of different ways.

It’s also difficult because our language is very gendered and we learn to make a lot of assumptions

when we talk about these things!

Here are some questions you can ask yourself to check your language, and suggestions for making it

more inclusive. With practice, this new way of communicating can become second nature!

**Am I making assumptions about people’s gender or sexual/romantic orientation?**

* (Someone you’re talking to or their partners, friends, or family members)
* Ex. “Hello boys and girls,” “Do you have a girlfriend?,” “When your mom gave birth,” or “Do you have brothers or sisters?”

Alternates:

* If you don’t know someone’s sexual or romantic orientation, it’s best to use gender-neutral terms for people they might be seeing, like partners, significant others, or sweethearts. Using neutral pronouns like, “they” can also be helpful.
* If you don’t know the type of relationship that a person has, remember they could be asexual, aromantic, polyamorous, open, celibate, etc. or a combination of these. Try to avoid terms and language that imply specific kinds of relationships, like, “lover,” “bae,” or “one and only.”
* While it doesn't work in every context, talking about someone's romantic future lets you talk about their partners as a whole, rather than individually. This ensures that people who may have more than one partner at a given time feel included. Ex. "Before you have sex, you should talk about what you and your partners like and find what everyone's excited to do."
* Try using the terms, “parent” or, “guardian” instead of assuming that someone has a mother and father. This way you’re including many different types of families, like adoptive parents, single parents, queer parents, family-related guardians, trans parents, etc. or a combination of these.
* It’s also a good idea not to assume the gender or body of a parent, or that they are genetically related or gave birth to their child. You can talk about, "when you were born" rather than mentioning anyone giving birth to them. If you’re talking about pregnancy, you can talk about the parts involved or use the term, “birth parent.”
* When it comes to gendered terms for other family members, like brother, sister, grandmother, or grandfather, try alternatives like, “sibling” or, “grandparent.” We’re still working on gender-neutral terms for aunt/uncle, nephew/niece!

**Am I gendering people with certain anatomy?**

* Ex. “Women should get regular PAP tests” or “Uncircumcised men should clean under their foreskin”

Alternates:

* Generally, avoid words related to gender or sex, like, “boy,” “girl,” “man,” “woman,” “male,” or “female”
* Use anatomy rather than someone’s gender or sex whenever possible:
	+ Penises grow, chests develop, and facial hair grows; none of it needs gender!
	+ Ex. “Condoms can be put on penises or sex toys” or, “Doctors generally start checking prostates at age...”
* Use, “people with” / “bodies with” phrases
	+ Ex. “Bodies with ovaries,” “People with a foreskin”
* Alternatively, you can say, “people who have” or, “bodies that have.”
	+ Ex. “People who have a cervix can schedule regular PAP tests” or, “Bodies that have testicles may start making sperm”
* If you’re not talking about individual body parts, you can talk about people with internal or external genitals.
* As a last resort, it’s possible to talk about male or female bodies, but know that this can hurt trans people or people with intersex bodies, who may not recognize their bodies as male or female. Referring to people as, “a male” or, “a female” can be particularly triggering for some people, as you are potentially applying a label that may not fit with their identity.

**Am I making assumptions on how someone’s body might work or change based on**

**gender?**

* Ex. “When women menstruate” or, “Men may ejaculate in their sleep”

Alternates:

* Use nouns for body functions rather than verbs
	+ Ex. “Menstruation often begins,” “Ejaculation can happen during sleep”
* For describing what bodies can do, you can use, “people who,” “people that,” or, "bodies that” phrases
	+ Ex. “People who develop breasts,” “People that grow facial hair,” or “Bodies that make pre-cum”
* For describing puberty, you can talk about the effects of estrogen and testosterone. Ex. “When puberty begins, testicles can release testosterone into the body. Testosterone causes...” Note that calling these male/female or feminine/masculine hormones can exclude some audience members.

**Am I gendering safer sex and/or contraception practices, or the people who use them?**

* Ex. “Male and female condoms” “Women have many options for birth control,” “Guys should put on a condom before having sex”

Alternates:

* Say internal or external condoms (or, more commonly, condoms and internal condoms)
* Talking about dental dams includes people who have oral sex on vulvas, anuses, or both.
* For contraception, you can focus on, “internal” and “external” genitals, or use what you just learned!
* Focus on the body parts involved: “People with ovaries can take the pill,” “IUDs can be inserted into the uterus”
* Use bodily functions. Ex. “People who ejaculate semen can avoid sharing their bodily fluids with their partner by using external condoms” or, “Taking the morning after pill prevents ovulation”
* For STIs, you can talk about safer sex supplies and the body parts involved rather than gendering people.
	+ Ex. “Condoms can be used on penises or sex toys,” “Dental dams are great for safer oral sex on a vulva or anus,” or, “If you’re masturbating a partner with your hands, using latex gloves can make it safer”
	+ Mentioning sex toys when you talk about penises can particularly include some trans men, but also anyone who might share sex toys.
* It helps to be specific about the type of sex you're talking about, and the parts that are involved. This helps you talk about the unique risks involved, even more accurately than when you use gendered language!
	+ Ex. “Hand job on a penis,” “Penis-in-vagina sex,” “Anal sex with a dildo,” or, “Oral sex on a vulva”

**Am I using sweeping statements about people, their bodies, or what’s normal?**

* Words such as, “many,” “may,” “might,” “can,” “could,” or “often” can help include people in statements that may not apply to them, such as people who are asexual, intersex, trans, or have physical disabilities. Statistically, these people make up a small proportion of the population, but it is really important that they are still included, as they’re disproportionately affected by issues such as STIs and mental health issues. Ex. “People who have a penis often also have testicles, a prostate, and a vas deferens”
	+ Note that statements like, “typically,” “usually,” or, “most of the time” can still create an idea of what is normal, which can make people feel excluded if they don’t fall within it.
* If people ask questions about whether or not something is, “normal” or, “natural,” it’s easy to want to reassure them that they are, “normal.” Unfortunately, this can reinforce the idea that some things are normal while others are abnormal. Instead, consider using words like, “common,” “frequent,” or “many” when responding.
	+ Ex. “It’s common for people to feel self-conscious about the size and shape of their nipples”

**Get Creative!**

* Once you dedicate yourself to using inclusive language and start adopting some of these tricks, you may discover many new ways of saying things inclusively.
	+ “If someone has a cervix, it's good for them to get regular PAP tests,” “Many people have an anus,” or, “Smelly discharge and pain in the urethra can be signs of gonorrhea”
* You can also streamline your language using the 2nd person, “you”
	+ Ex. “If you have a vulva it can open up when you get aroused, and your clitoris can grow and get harder.”

For more tips, or to download our infographics, you can see the full version at

[sexted.org/presentations-press](https://sexted.org/presentations-press/).

**Some quick notes:**

At SextEd, we primarily use this checklist when we're talking about topics in general, or when someone asks a question without disclosing their gender, their body parts, or the gender(s) they’re attracted to.

If you're answering a question where any of them are disclosed, or when you're talking about a specific situation where you know any of them, we recommend using the specifics of the situation. In particular, mirroring people's language around these topics can be affirming and supportive.

We also know it can be challenging to use inclusive language when students, peers, or service users

don’t, or when they're not familiar with the practice. In these cases, you can still take the time to gently explain why you speak or write the way that you do: to respect the diversity in people’s sexualities, genders, and bodies. If someone asks why you phrased something a certain way, you can take the time to explain why. In situations where a person is asking a question or speaking in a way that isn’t inclusive, you can....

* Use phrases like “Yes, men, or anyone with a penis, can get an erection at random.”
* Gently remind them of identities they didn’t include in their statement or question, “Yeah, for sure. But I also think it's important to keep in mind that some men don’t have penises, and some women do, to make sure we're being inclusive”

**Additional Resources:**

* Queering Sex Ed - Planned Parenthood Toronto
* Trans Sexuality: A Safe Sex Guide for Trans People and Their Partners by Tobi Hill-Meyer
* The Teaching Transgender Toolkit: A Facilitator’s Guide to Increasing Knowledge, Reducing

Prejudice & Building Skills by Dr. Eli R. Green & Luca Maurer, MS

**References:**

* The participants of the “Adapting Sex Ed Language for Diverse (A)genders, Bodies, and (A)sexualities” workshop at the Guelph Sexuality Conference, Friday, June 19th, 2015
* Raimi Marx and Joanna Gattuso of Cambridge Health Alliance’s presentation, “Trans Inclusive Sex Education” at the 2014 National Sex Ed Conference.
	+ Contact rmarx@challiance.org or jgattuso@challiance.org to learn more
* “I Want Them to Know Who They Are Is Ok”: Supporting Trans and Gender Non- Conforming Students – A Guide for Primary and Secondary School Educators” by Raimi Marx
* “Beyond Trans 101” by Dr. Eli Green
* “About Purportedly Gendered Body Parts” by Dean Spade
* Trans\* Sexual health video series created by @CommunityHealthCU on YouTube

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