

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

For most people, understanding what someone else means is not always an easy task. There are often confusing double messages and conflicting expectations, a situation that is especially challenging for adolescents.

In this video documentary, a group of ten Halifax high school students agreed to take part in a two week project to explore how issues arising from gender communication affect both their social and intimate relationships.

It was sometimes an unsettling process: "Telling exactly what you mean involves a lot of risk," admits Jessie, as he reflects on why boys are less open with their feelings than girls. And some of the girls in the group are very direct about their standards of behaviour: "I want someone who can grab my heart through words instead of grabbing my wrists," declares Michelle.

These honest, often intense discussions are interspersed with role playing and peer interviews recorded on Hi-8 video. The students cover an impressive range of concerns such as flirting and confusion over body language, sex and love, and ways of resolving anger in relationships.

Family Studies teachers, guidance counsellors, and leaders of community-based youth groups will find this video a useful resource. While the short, themed segments and a brisk pace are designed to stimulate discussion, WHAT DO YOU MEAN? offers valuable insights into the unique and ever-changing realm of teen communication.



Closed captioned for the deaf and hard of hearing. A decoder is required.

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WHAT DO YOU MEAN?



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WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

sex

"Telling exactly

aggression

what you mean

friendship

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flirting

of risk."

love



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GENDERED COMMUNICATION AND ADOLESCENTS

Gender is a central organizing feature of our society. It is deeply embedded within our economic and political structures. It affects our social norms and public attitudes. It permeates our social institutions, including the family, the church and the school. Gender saturates our individual consciousness and actions. It influences all forms of communication, from the numerous informal exchanges in which we engage daily, to the most intimate of our relationships.

"I believe [communication] is a very important topic to be discussing; one that all humans throughout history have needed to work out."

Due to the difference in the socialization of boys and girls, young women and men often hold different attitudes and have different ways of communicating. For adolescents struggling to establish both intimacy and independence, gendered communication can be particularly confusing. During these years of intense friendships, dating and dealing with issues of sexuality, young men and women often grapple with understanding each other. The confusion between friendliness and flirting, the difficulty in understanding when "No-means-No" and the responsibility for using a condom all become problems of communication and interpretation.

"A lot of times people can be really demoralized if people don't listen to them."

By exploring both verbal and body language, young people can begin to see how males and females do not necessarily draw the same meaning from a common experience. With assistance from educators they can begin to develop more appropriate communication skills which will enhance their relationships as men and women.

"Telling exactly what you mean involves a lot of risk"

PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONS



1. Do you think males and females communicate differently?



2. Do you think females and males are stereotyped in the ways in which they communicate?



3. Many times communication can be confusing. For example, how are you able to tell the difference between friendliness and flirting?

POST-SCREENING QUESTIONS

The following quotes from students in the video, along with questions, can be used to generate discussion following the screening of the video. Obviously, some of the questions here (and elsewhere in the guide) will be sensitive in a classroom situation.

Gendered Communication:

"Females tend to be more emotional; they tend to be more direct with their feelings. Men tend to communicate better with other men than with women."

"Women tend to be more insightful; men tend to be a little colder."

"I want to know why guys can't rely on their own feelings."

Questions: Are women more emotional than men? Or is it that men hide their emotions? Why do both women and men sometimes attempt to hide emotions? Is "man-to-man" or "woman-to-woman" communication different than when women and men communicate with each other?

Body Language:

"Something that stands out for me is that when you're talking to a guy, he'll be looking at my breasts and not my face. And that happens with every girl no matter what she's wearing."

Questions: What are some examples of how men use body language? Women? How does body language affect

communication? Do women and men use body language differently? How do we decide what body language is inappropriate?

Misinterpretation:

"We're a lot like women; we just won't admit it. We act differently because we're afraid of girls. We just don't want to get crushed and it's very easy for you to crush us."

"It is scary. You're risking getting your self esteem ripped apart."

Questions: Why is it so difficult to be open and honest in communication with others? Is it harder to be open with someone of the same sex? Are men and women really all that different?

When Does No Mean No?

*"It all depends on how **no** is said."*

*"You've got to take it as **no-means-no**."*

*"Does **no** always mean **no**?"*

Questions: Young women in particular often feel that when they say "no" they are not listened to. Young men sometimes

say they do not always understand if a girl really means "no" when she says it. How can we be sure to communicate to others what we really mean? Does "no" always mean "no"? How can we get others to listen and respect our wishes?

Sex and Love:

"I've always thought that once you have sex in a relationship that's the breaking point."

"I have a friend who believes that sex ruins everything."

*"I am very afraid of using the word **love**. It's a word that guys are afraid of using because maybe they don't understand what it means."*

"Girls are more open and more sensitive; whereas guys don't want to get involved because they're scared and afraid of commitment."

Questions: In the video, one young man suggested that once a couple has sexual intercourse, that the relationship changes. Why might having sex change the way people communicate in a relationship? In what ways might it change? Do males and females feel differently about sex? How might we communicate our feelings to a boyfriend/girlfriend about sex?

POST SCREENING QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES
continued on the other side

POST-SCREENING QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

continued from the other side

Assertiveness and Condoms:

"I want to know how to tell a guy to use a condom."

Questions: The decision to use condoms is a difficult one for some couples. It can be embarrassing both to buy and use condoms. Whose responsibility is it to decide to use a condom? How can you raise the issue with a partner about the use of condoms?

Anger and Relationships:

"With a lot of guys they express their anger violently."

"I want someone who can grab my heart through words instead of grabbing my wrists."

Questions: Do men and women get angry at different things? How do men and women express their anger differently? What is an inappropriate display of anger? In relationships, what is it that makes men angry? Women? How do we deal with anger in friendships? In intimate relationships? What are appropriate ways to deal with anger?

females, is it because of the different topics they choose to discuss? Or is it because of the ways in which men and

POST-SCREENING ACTIVITIES

1. Have students list 8-10 issues from the video that they wish to discuss. Choose a topic for discussion and, using the "orange technique" introduced in the video, have students take turns speaking on the subject. Depending on time constraints, teachers may want to cover several topics in one class; have a topic a week for the semester; or have a specific time set aside each week for a discussion of the issues raised.

2. Have students write assignments based on the specific topics they have raised. Students, often shy about expressing their feeling on some of the issues, may be more comfortable with the privacy of writing. Depending on the grade level and the particular situation, short writing exercises might include:

- A. Guidelines for appropriate communication between dating partners. Compare the responses of the girls to the boys.
- B. The difference between flirting and sexual harassment. Compare the responses of the girls to the boys.
- C. Sex ruins everything.
- D. When I am angry I...

3. As in the video, have students develop a set of questions concerning communication between females and males and have them interview other students in the school.

4. Prepare a video about communication, based on the student interviews.

COMMUNICATION QUESTIONNAIRE

females, is it because of the different topics they choose to discuss? Or is it because of the ways in which men and women communicate?

4. Often young women and men have different expectations while dating. What is acceptable to one partner is often not to the other. Sometimes people feel pressured to participate in behaviour in which they would rather not. How do you decide the limits of what is acceptable to each person? If there is disagreement, how is it best resolved?

5. For many adolescents, the choice to be sexually active is difficult, sometimes because of fear and intimidation. For others, it is the natural outcome of an intimate relationship. How can two people effectively communicate their feelings about sexuality to each other?

6. With the incidence of AIDS and other STD's, the use of condoms is always encouraged if people decide to be sexually active. Sometimes men and women have difficulty talking about the use of condoms. How do you effectively discuss the need to use a condom?

7. Frustration and anger are often difficult emotions to understand and control. Research suggests that women and men may experience and express frustration and anger differently. In what manner do men and women express anger? What is an appropriate way to communicate those feelings?

8. What constitutes good communication between women and men? Women and women? Men and men? And in gay and lesbian relationships? Are there differences?

COMMUNICATION QUESTIONNAIRE

You might wish to have students complete the questionnaire independently; in single or mixed sex pairs; or by dividing the class into males and females.

Our understanding of communication between men and women often involves misinformation based on stereotypes. How much do you know about how women and men communicate?

The 10 items on the communication questionnaire are based on research from studies conducted in many different situations: classrooms, offices, homes, businesses, and so on. If you think the statement is generally accurate from your experience of how men and women communicate, mark the item TRUE. If the statement seems that it does not accurately describe what happens, then mark it FALSE.

	True	False
1. When men and women are talking to each other, women spend more time looking at their partners than do men.	___	___
2. Women use less personal space than men.	___	___
3. Even when a woman and a man say the same thing, a man is listened to more attentively.	___	___
4. Women are more likely to touch others than men.	___	___
5. Men not only control the content of conversations, they also put more effort into keeping conversations going.	___	___
6. Non-verbal messages such as body language and facial expressions are considered more important than verbal ones.	___	___
7. Women are more likely than men to disclose personal details of their lives.	___	___
8. In general women smile less than men.	___	___
9. Teachers are more likely to give verbal reinforcement and praise to female students than to male students.	___	___
10. Men are less lively in their conversational style than women.	___	___

5. Divide the girls and boys into different groups and have each list the topics they would like to discuss. Choose one, and use the "orange technique"; have the girls speak to the issue with the boys responding; then the boys, with the girls responding.

6. Have the class role play various situations. Some suggestions might be:

A. How to say "No" to sexual advances that are unwelcome.

B. How to display anger inappropriately, and then a replay, with a more acceptable form of anger.

C. How to ask someone to use a condom.

D. A display of friendliness? Of flirting? Of sexual interest? How to communicate the difference?

7. Have your students write their own scenarios as suggested by the following example:

PAULA'S DILEMMA:

Paula went to the first school dance of the year with two of her girlfriends. About halfway through the evening, John asked her to dance. She knew him only slightly. He was in her grade 11 English class, but she had never talked with him. Paula had noticed John looking at her in class and he had said hello to her in the halls. She had smiled back at him in class and responded to him in the hall with a friendly hello.

John and Paula danced together for the remainder of the evening. As the time progressed John began to dance closely and rub Paula's back. It made her somewhat uncomfortable. When the dance was over, John asked Paula if she would like a drive

home. She said she was supposed to go home with her friends, but would tell them she was going home with him instead. On the way home, John stopped in a deserted area. John and Paula kissed and John began to make sexual advances. Paula asked John to stop. He persisted. Finally Paula threatened to get out of the car and walk home. Eventually John agreed to stop and to drive Paula home. In English class on the following Monday, she was still upset by John's behaviour and felt uncomfortable in his presence.

Did Paula and John have what is often referred to as a problem in communication? Or would you describe it in another way? How could they have handled the situation differently? Can anything be done about it now?

Additional Topics for Discussion

1. Towards the end of the video, one of the students makes the following admission: "We didn't learn a lot of differences; we learned a lot of perceived differences." Were you surprised by this? Do you agree?

2. Academic research, on the other hand, suggests that men and women use quite different communication styles. What are some of the differences in the ways male and female adolescents communicate?

3. If communication is difficult between males and

Answers with some explanatory notes.

1. **TRUE** Studies indicate that women are more likely than men to look at their partners during conversations. Several reasons have been given for this. We have learned, for example, that men talk more and women listen more and that listeners look at speakers. In addition, research on conversational style reveals that women defer to men and seek their approval through friendly gazes and glances.

2. **TRUE** Women use space in very different ways than men. For example, men are more likely to sit with arms and legs apart while women sit with legs or ankles crossed and hands folded in laps taking up far less space. In addition, women are much more likely to walk around other people or to move aside, whereas men tend to walk directly.

3. **TRUE** Men are listened to very differently than women. Both males and females pay more attention to men speakers than women speakers. In addition, when men and women listen to a male speaker, both males and females have better recall of material discussed than they do when the material is presented by a female speaker. This, of course, has to do with issues of status and power.

4. **FALSE** Often we hold the stereotype that women are the touchers. Studies indicate that men touch women, as well as other men, far more often than women touch men or other women. For example, men often lean over women at their desks and touch them on the shoulder; men frequently put their arms around women, guide them through doors and across the street or help them on with their coats.

5. **FALSE** Research indicates that women put a great deal more effort into maintaining conversations than do men. Women ask more questions and once a topic is introduced are much better at sustaining it. Men, on the other hand, give minimal responses

and fail to ask questions or make comments on topics raised.

6. **TRUE** Research indicates that both men and women consider nonverbal messages extremely important; however, women are much better at decoding nonverbal messages. In addition, they use facial expressions, including smiling, far more extensively than men do.

7. **TRUE** Research indicates that women are more likely to tell personal information about themselves than are men. The stereotype of men not being able to share feelings and personal information is, in fact, true.

8. **FALSE** Research indicates that women smile far more often than men. This may have more to do with submission than with friendliness. Women learn early, through socialization, to defer.

9. **FALSE** Research indicates that girls and women, both in school and university classrooms, get far less praise and verbal reinforcement. The studies demonstrate that the sex of the teacher is not a factor. That is, both male and female teachers give more attention, including criticism and praise, to boys than to girls.

10. **TRUE** Studies indicate that women are more expressive in conversational style than men. Women use more facial expressions and body movements, smile more often and make more eye contact. In addition, they use more expressive and descriptive words, as well as more varied intonation and pitch.

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