

Values Question Protocol

The Values Question Protocol (VQP) is an approach to answering non-universal value questions that permits the educator to appropriately address the question and at the same time respectfully address the spectrum of beliefs related to the topic. This protocol helps one identify a non-universal value question, address the facts pertaining to the issue, introduce the spectrum of beliefs about the issue, and encourage a conversation with family about their beliefs. This protocol is most appropriate for non-universal value questions and is not necessarily applicable to other challenging questions such as personal questions, slang questions, etc.

Read (or listen to the question):

1. **Affirm the asker.**
2. **Note question as values-based.**
3. **State the facts.**
4. **What is the range of values/beliefs?**
5. **Encourage talking to family, faith leaders, and/or other trusted adults.**
6. **Remain available & check if you answered the question.**



Example of Values Question:

Q: I masturbate; is that OK?

A: That's a great question; a lot of kids wonder about masturbation. Masturbation is when a person strokes or touches their genitals for pleasure. I can't share my own beliefs about whether or not it's OK to masturbate because families have really different beliefs about masturbation. One thing I can tell you is masturbation will not physically hurt your body. Nor will it lead to blindness or make hair grow on your palms or drive you "insane." Some families believe it is okay as long as you're in a private place. Other families believe it's never OK. You need to check with your family or another trusted adult to find out how they feel about it. Have I answered your question? If I didn't, you can leave another question in the box or you can talk to me after class.

You will eventually tailor your use of the protocol, only using **every** step the first time masturbation, for example, comes up. For now, you should practice the protocol step by step until it becomes a natural part of your teaching.

To start... Read the question. Verbatim, if you can. Use your judgment, of course, but even reading aloud relatively crude language—as long as you do it with a serious tone and facial expression—conveys your respect for the child who asked the question. It is likely to promote respect in return. If the language is too crude to repeat, even with a red face and an explanation ("*Someone used slang, but let me read it for you as they wrote it before I translate it.*"), then don't read it directly. But when you paraphrase it, make sure you are clear enough that the author of the question will recognize it as his or hers.

1. **Affirm the asker:**
"I am glad someone asked this one."
"That's an interesting question."

"People ask me this one every year."

"This one is really thoughtful/compassionate/imaginative/respectful."

This will encourage your students to keep asking even as it discourages snide remarks about whoever asked that particular question.

2. **Note question as values-based.** *"Most of the questions you've been asking have been 'fact questions' where I could look up an answer that all the experts agree upon. This one is more of a 'value question' where every person, every family, every religion has a different belief."*

Teaching your students to distinguish facts from opinions (and from feelings) is at least as important as any content you will convey.

3. **State the facts.** Thus, for instance, if the question is about the rightness or wrongness of masturbation, you need to make sure that your class understands that—values notwithstanding—no physical harm results from masturbating:

"Before we get to differing beliefs about masturbation, let me just make sure you know it doesn't cause people to go blind or mentally ill or to grow hair on their palms or anything like that."

Even questions that are fact questions on their face may need a discussion of the underlying values, but always start by answering them:

"Can you get birth control without your boyfriend or husband's knowing? Yes, legally in our state, you can. Now let's talk about the different beliefs people might have about couples communicating about birth control."

4. **What is the range of values/beliefs?** On sensitive issues such as sex and religion, it can be really unfair (and, in some cases, illegal) to ask individual students their own beliefs. But it is very appropriate to generalize:

"Tell me some of the things you've heard that people believe about that."

Prompt the group with a stem sentence:

"Some people believe ____?"

"Um, hmm, and some people believe ____?"

In a class that is used to thinking about the range of community values, you will be able to draw a full assortment of answers from the students. In other groups, especially younger ones, you may draw only a dichotomy (*"Some people believe abortion is wrong."* and *"Some people believe it is right."*) In any case, your role is two-fold: (1) to make sure that every belief gets expressed—or paraphrased—respectfully, hopefully just as the person who believed it might express it, and (2) to make sure that a complete range of beliefs gets expressed, even if you have to supplement the few values the group can think of:

"That's right; some people believe that it is wrong under any circumstances. And some believe it is right under any circumstances, as long as the woman and her doctor think it is best. Some believe it is OK to have an abortion if you have been raped or if your life is in danger, but not otherwise. Some believe it is OK to have an abortion if there's something seriously wrong with the fetus and it is doomed to a life of pain. Some think it is best for teens to have abortions rather than to raise babies when they are still

growing up themselves. Others disagree. Some feel it is better to have an abortion if you already have as many children as you can afford or take proper care of. Again, others disagree. They may feel that abortion is the same as murder, whereas other people think it is not really a separate human being with rights until it is developed enough to have feelings or until it is actually born."

5. Encourage talking to family, faith leaders and/or other trusted adults

"Because people have such different beliefs about this, I really want to encourage you to talk with your families—your parent or guardian, grandparent, auntie, uncle, stepparent, mom's or dad's partner—or with somebody at your community of worship, if you attend a church or synagogue or temple—or with some other adult you love and whose opinions matter to you. That could be your babysitter, your best friend's parent, a counselor, or whoever will listen to your opinions and honestly share theirs. Have a conversation within the next week if you can."

Notice that this encouragement didn't assume that every child has a parent they can talk with. Some may have only be newly in a new foster home and don't yet have that kind of relationship with their new "parents." Also, notice that we shouldn't assume that every child goes to church or synagogue or temple.

What if the family is likely to convey values that the child will feel hurt by (a teen who has come out to you as gay, for instance, but whose family is strongly opposed to homosexuality)? Still, knowing one's family's beliefs is developmentally important for young people. But help them think of other trusted adults as well.

6. Remain available & check if you answered the question

"Is that what you were asking?"

"Do you all think that was what the person who wrote this question was asking?"

"If that isn't what you really wanted to know, you can drop another question in the box. Or come talk with me in private. You can also get a friend to ask it aloud for you or to explain to me what you meant. Just keep asking until I understand and tell you what you need to know."

Finally, if you can do it sincerely, thank the class—or, in a one-on-one situation, the student—for their maturity or curiosity or compassion or whatever positive qualities the Q-&-A session has helped them to demonstrate. That will not only increase their retention, it will improve the odds of their repeating the positive behavior on the next occasion.

Want more information about VQP?
Google: "public health" "values question protocol"

Values Question Protocol

A

Affirm the Asker.

“I’m glad you asked that.”

“Lots of people have that question.”

N

Note question as values-based.

“That’s actually a question that depends on someone’s beliefs or values.”

S

State the facts.

“Gay is being sexually attracted to someone of the same gender.”

W

What is the range of values/beliefs?

“Some people think that.... Others find.... There are also people who...”

E

Encourage talking to family, faith leaders, and/or other trusted adults.

“This is a great question to ask your parents or another adult.”

“Eventually you will have to decide for yourself what you think is true.”

R

Remain available & check if you answered the question.

“I hope I answered your question.”

“If anyone has other questions about this topic, please let me know.”