

Responding to Sensitive Issues

Because we provide a safe place to openly discuss sensitive issues, there may be times when girls make comments or ask questions that we are uncomfortable handling. The final solution may be to yield to their guardians or a professional, but we must find an initial way to appropriately respond since the girl has made the comment to us. . For various reasons, some girls will not ask a parent (which is potentially why they have come to you) and the way we respond can communicate quite a bit to the girl about herself and her situation.

It is important that we not disregard or avoid the difficult or sensitive comments and questions that the girls bring up in the context of Girls on the Run. Often when girls blurt out an inappropriate or startling comment, it is their way of asking for help or to fulfill a need to be heard. When we ignore their comments as a way to avoid addressing the uncomfortable comments), we teach the girls that their concerns are not important and should not be discussed. This response can reinforce a bad situation and/or give the girl the feeling that she is a bad person. It is challenging to address sensitive issues because we are not counselors trained to deal with specific topics. It is important to be as prepared as possible, however, to handle the girls' comments/questions in a way that validates her experience. We should embrace this opportunity to help a girl work through a potentially confusing situation. More than anything, we want the girls to know they are in a space where it is okay to talk about sensitive issues, rather than to give her the "right" answer.

One way to feel more prepared and confident about handling such situations is to engage in role play and practice your own response to difficult situations that could potentially arise. Role play some of the following scenarios with another adult. Have one person play the role of the girl bringing up an uncomfortable issue while the other person responds as a coach in the context of practice. Practice putting the fundamental idea of these responses into your own words. Keep these responses handy and review them before some of the more challenging lessons such as Drugs Are Not Cool, Beware of Bullies and Making Healthy Decisions.

GIRL: “My sister is 13 and she drinks alcohol” or “My dad smokes cigarettes”

COACH:

- **“Have you ever talked with her/him about it?”**
- **“Would you feel comfortable telling her/him some of the things we learned today about alcohol?”**

GIRL: “When my mom drinks, she looks sleepy and she doesn’t make sense when she talks”

COACH:

- **“What do you think of your mom drinking? Are you comfortable with it or uncomfortable?”**
- **“Is there something you can do or somewhere you can go to make you feel better or safe? Could you read a book or go to your room and listen to music?”**

GIRL: “My mom smokes marijuana”

COACH:

- **“How does it make you feel when she does that?”**
- **“Is this something you think you would ever do? Why? Why not?”**
- **“Do you understand why it is a bad idea for you to smoke marijuana?”**

GIRL: “Sometimes when I am on the computer, my classmates send mean messages to me and they make me feel bad”

COACH:

- **“Hmm, that doesn’t sound like something an emotionally healthy or confident person would do”**
- **“How do you feel when you receive those messages? Are there things you can do to make yourself feel better? Like what?”**

- **“Do you think the people who are sending mean messages to you feel very good about themselves?”**
- **“What is something you could do when you get a mean message from someone?”**
***Just make sure the girl is not saying she could send a mean message back!**

At the end of the lesson or after any intense conversations it is important to tell the girls:

COACH:

“I want you all to know that as your Girls on the Run coaches, we are here to listen to any questions or concerns you might have. If there is anything you would like to talk about today or throughout the season, please find a time to pull one of us aside and chat.”

During the workout:

COACH:

- **“Did you get all of your questions answered today?”**
- **“Is there anything else you would like to ask me or to talk about?”**

If you ever feel like the situation is over your head and you are not able to answer her question:

COACH:

- **“You know, this is a really big situation for you to be handling on your own. I want to help you out, but I’m not sure I know the answer right now. Would you mind if I got back to you next week with some more answers?”**

***The most important part of this situation is that you do get back with her - either to provide an answer to the question she has asked or to tell her that a school counselor would like to speak with her.**

On days when tough issues are being discussed, you should make it clear to all of the girls that as their Girls on the Run coach, they can always talk to you about any issues, whether it is later on in practice or later on in the season. Another good idea is to spend some time during the workouts running with the girls, one at a time, to ask if they have other questions. Some girls may not feel comfortable talking in a big group, but value the opportunity for a one-on-one discussion.

Of utmost importance is to not judge the behaviors of their friends or family members. We do not want the girls to think we believe they or their family members are bad people. The goal is to allow these girls to feel heard and to have them understand that while they may not be able to control the behaviors of others, they can choose for themselves whether or not to participate in unhealthy behaviors. Take the time to listen and, if you feel it is necessary, find help through her school counselor.

Finally, please know that these situations are EXTREMELY rare. You are well equipped from your own experiences to answer most questions that the girls will have.
