

Joint adventure

Would you be prepared to reveal intimate details of your marriage and family life to a bunch of inquisitive teenagers? That's just what one couple have volunteered to do

What? Sit in front of 20 teenagers and tell them all about our married life? When we were invited to volunteer with Explore, we were flattered and terrified at the same time. Yet, with the encouragement of friends and colleagues, this is just what we are doing – and loving every moment.

Explore goes into schools and community centres to talk to young people about their personal experiences of relationships, marriage and family life. Founded in 1996, and established as an educational charity in 2000, it has worked with more than 33,000 young people nationally to discuss the importance of lasting relationships and marriage.

Before we meet them, students have a brainstorming session, which is led by an Explore "facilitator". This helps them to identify their hopes and fears for the future, which they record on charts for all to see. We then join them, sitting in a semicircle on the floor.

Sessions often begin with a brief rundown of our own lives, highlighting the highs and lows. In our case, this includes having five children between us, as well as going through bereavement and divorce.

This summary of ourselves gives them hooks on which they can then base their questions – especially helpful if students are apprehensive about how to start. It opens the way for them to ask questions on a wide range of topics, which we try to answer honestly. This Q&A session lasts for 30 to 40 minutes.

Questions include: How do you know when you've found the right person? How do you make a relationship work long term? Why don't you just live together? Why get married? Doesn't marriage get boring after a long time together? Do you have sex? What would happen if one of you died? How do you sort out arguments? The list is endless.

In our first session, we were very nervous but we soon realised that we were getting a tremendous amount out of it ourselves, sometimes making us reflect on what we had done in our lives – and perhaps could have done better.

The key to making the session successful is to give real-life examples and to avoid preaching. The students are eager for specific instances they can relate to, rather than a theory with no substance. In a way, it's very easy because we are talking about our own experiences. A simple example may be how to solve an argument with your spouse, such as deciding what to watch on

television, or it may be more complex – for example, cheating on a partner. The same themes come through in our answers – the importance of real communication, of understanding and listening to the other, of trust. This may sound obvious, but the students may not have thought about the success of a relationship in these terms.

Often it is apparent that the questions are based on a student's own life experience. Some students will be going through difficult times and may have a very dim view of marriage. However, we hope that by being honest with them, just stating how it is for us, that we can demonstrate how our marriage has given us significant emotional support, happiness and strength, as well as love.

There can be some pitfalls to watch out for. For instance, if you don't feel comfortable answering a question, you have every right to deflect it. In those cases (and there have been very few – usually on specific details related to sex), the students respect you and quickly move on to another question.

At the end of the session, the students are asked to fill in a short questionnaire on whether they enjoyed the session, the differences it made to their thinking, and what questions they still felt were left unanswered.

It is here that you get a strong feeling of having helped these young adults. Their comments refer to the importance of honesty and trust in a relationship; the need to live life to the full; that it takes time to build a relationship; how good communication is essential; to give to your partner, and they will respond by giving back to you; to put effort into everything you do, as life is too short; and, finally, to "be strong because you can't have a rainbow without a little rain".

If a few students are more optimistic and confident about their future, then it is 40 minutes well spent. It has also strengthened our own relationship, and we are even more in awe of the challenges that young people face today. Above all, it is a message of hope, that marriage is a journey well worth taking.

■ The authors are a married couple from Hampshire who have asked to remain anonymous. For more information about Explore, visit: www.theexploreeperience.co.uk