



RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS ABOUT LGBTQ TOPICS: AN INTERACTIVE SKILL-BUILDING EXERCISE

LEVEL: Educators. **LENGTH OF TIME:** 30 – 60 minutes.

This interactive exercise gives educators an opportunity to practice responding to questions about LGBTQ topics from students, families and colleagues that may feel challenging. The facilitator needs to foster a brave space where participants feel welcome to try out new vocabulary and language. The goal of this activity is for educators to learn from each other and increase their capacity to embrace teachable moments in their school communities.

MATERIALS: Handout with possible responses.

ACTIVITY

- Choose two to three questions for this activity, depending on the topic of the training or topics that you think the educators may encounter in their schools.
- Sample responses to questions are in italics.
- Introduce the activity by saying that it gives participants a chance to practice answering students' questions about LGBTQ topics. It provides participants an opportunity to reflect on their own level of comfort and familiarity with various questions that elementary school students might ask.
- First, focus the group by talking about the goals of answering these kinds of questions from students. Ask people to toss out a few ideas. (For example, stopping hurtful behavior, ensuring all students' families are respected, ensuring students feel included affirmed and safe, etc.)
- Have participants count off by twos. Have all the "ones" form a circle facing out, and have all the "twos" form a circle outside the "ones" facing in. (This can also be done in two lines facing each other.)
- Practice one question and response together as a large group. Then, tell the group they will have 1 to 2 minutes to respond to the next question. Read a question and all the "ones" have one minute to share their answer with the "twos."
- Have a few participants share out their answers to the larger group. This is the part of the activity that will provide the most learning for participants.
- Before reading the next question, the people in the outside circle, the "twos," move one person to the right. The facilitator then reads a new question. This time the "twos" share their answer with their partner. (Lines can rotate so that one person goes from the end of the line to the beginning of the line.)
- Continue shifting the circle/lines and answering questions in this way.
- Close the activity by asking the group to reflect on all of the response they have offered and heard. Ask them if there are any overall lessons or strategies that stand out to them. Record these strategies on large paper or a white board.

PRACTICING RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ABOUT FAMILIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

“What does ‘gay’ mean?”

Clarifying the context of the question will help frame your answer. Is the student asking because they heard it as a putdown or are they asking because they heard that someone in a classmate’s family is gay? A discussion with elementary-age students about the meaning of “gay” or “lesbian” is a discussion about love and relationships. If the word “gay” was used as a put-down, be clear that it is a mean or hurtful thing to say.

- *The word “gay” is used to describe people who love people of the same gender.*
- *The word “gay” refers to people who love or are attracted to people of the same gender.*

You overhear a student say, “That’s gay” or “I didn’t mean anything when I called him gay. We all use that word just to tease each other.”

It’s not OK to use “gay” or “fag” as put-downs or in a negative way. Don’t ignore it. Many children use the word “gay” to mean “stupid” or “weird” because that is the only way they have heard it used. Often students don’t know what it really means. This is a good time to take the opportunity to explore that.

- *You may not have meant to hurt anyone, but saying “That’s gay” can hurt those around you. Do you know what gay means?*
- *It’s not OK to use that word/phrase as a put-down in our school.*
- *Do you know what gay means?*
- *In the future, I expect you to use that word respectfully and not in a hurtful way.*

“Tanya says she wants to marry Aisha. Can girls get married?” (The students are in 5th grade.)

- *When people are adults, they can get married.*
- *Many people of all genders might fall in love with someone and decide that they want to love and take care of each other as a family and get married.*

“How can she have two moms? Which one is the real one?”

If you have a child with same gender parents in your classroom, it is helpful to know how their parents talk about their family. This information will help you respond to other students’ questions.

Be careful about making assumptions about a student’s family. and remember to protect their privacy. It is not the job of the student with LGBTQ parents to teach their classmates about their family. It is the job of the educator to teach students about a diversity of families, whether they are represented in your school community or not.

- *They both are. Both moms take care of her and love her.*
- *All families are different. Who is in your family.*

“How can two women have children? Don’t you need a dad?”

In most elementary grades you can steer the answer to a discussion of family and say something like:

- *Children come into families in many different ways. Every family is different.*

“If two men get married, doesn’t that mean they’re gay? Isn’t that weird?”

- *You may have heard many different opinions about being gay. The word “gay” describes people of the same gender who love each other. In our school, we respect all students and their families, and we don’t use gay as a put-down.*
- *It does mean they are gay and that they can legally get married. Here at our school, we don’t use gay as a put-down. We want to be respectful of all families and relationships.*
- *There are over 1 million LGBTQ people in the U.S. who are married to someone of the same gender. (A.P. Romero, Williams Institute, 2017)*

PRACTICING RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ABOUT GENDER

“Why does Martin like pink?” (Martin identifies as a boy.)

- *Here at (name of school,) we all get to like what we like. What is your favorite color? Why do you like that color?*
- *There are so many beautiful colors; we can all like different ones.*
- *There is no such thing as “boy colors” or “girl colors.” Colors are colors. All people like different colors.*
- *It is not OK to tease people for the colors they like. We are all different, and we can like different colors that make us happy.*

“Why is her hair so short? She looks like a boy.”

- *People of all genders can have long hair, medium hair or short hair. And some people do not have any hair.*
- *That’s just how she likes it. How would you like your hair to be?*
- *Hair is hair. That is how she likes it.*
- *There is no such thing as “boy hair” or “girl hair.” Here at (name of school), we all get to have our hair the way that makes us happy.*
- *You cannot tell someone’s gender from how they have their hair.*

“Juan plays with dolls. That’s weird.” (Juan identifies as a boy.)

- *It’s true that some boys don’t like to play with dolls, but some boys do! Just like some of you like to draw, and some of you don’t. Some of you like to play kickball, and others don’t. No one should have to pick and choose what they do just because of their gender.*

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- *The dolls are for all children in this classroom.*
 - *Sometimes this is confusing. We get messages about some toys being for boys and some toys being for girls. They are just for kids!*

You overhear a student say, “Boys are better at sports than girls.”

- *Some boys are good at sports and some are not, and some girls are good at sports and some are not. All kids have different things that they are good at.*
- *Some people are good at sports, and some are not.*
- *People of all genders are good at different things.*

You overhear a student say, “Girls are better at art.”

- *No group is best. Some people are good at art. Some people are not.*
- *People of all genders can like and be good at art.*

You see that some children who are playing soccer at recess are excluding others because of their gender.

- *We don't exclude any gender in play. Here at (name of school), we include everyone.*

TALKING WITH PARENTS/GUARDIANS

Thank them for coming to talk with you. Ask questions about their concerns and what they heard. “What did Louis tell you we talked about in class? Why do you think children are too young to talk about gay people?” Don't engage in religious debates. Don't get into specifics about any one child — respect their privacy.

“Aren't the students too young to talk about LGBTQ topics?”

- *In elementary school, learning the meaning of LGBTQ words can come up in a few contexts—families, name-calling and current events.*
- *Students often use the word “gay” as a put-down; however, they may not know what “gay” actually means. We are teaching the students to understand the words they are using or hearing and teaching them about respect and kindness. We are talking about not hurting classmates and other people with our words.*
- *For example, we may be talking about the family of one of our students, or we may be looking at a book that shows a child with LGBTQ parents. If we are defining the word for students, we are talking about adult relationships and families.*
- *Students also see words like “gay” or “lesbian” in headlines at the grocery store checkout counter. They overhear them in the news. Then they come into class and ask what they mean.*
- *Talking about families and caring adults that love each other is appropriate.*

“I don’t want my child to think that being gay is an OK option for them.”

- *Information and discussion about gay and lesbian people will not make anyone gay or straight. Knowing or learning about LGBTQ people, however, will help someone be respectful to people who are different from them and create a school community where all are welcome, free from bullying or harassment about their identities or their family.*
- *Knowing someone who is gay will not make you gay. People who are gay or lesbian know a lot of people who are not gay or lesbian but that hasn’t changed who they are.*

“My religion teaches that it is wrong to be gay.”

- *School communities include people with many different religious and spiritual beliefs. Some religious organizations support inclusion of LGBTQ people, and some don’t. The role of schools is not to get everyone to agree but to foster a climate where there is respect for the diversity of beliefs and families within a community.*
- *Respect is built by acknowledging the diversity in the community, promoting opportunities for community dialogue and allowing the diversity of families to be visible within the school. Most people can agree that it is appropriate for schools to teach kindness and mutual respect for everyone’s beliefs.*