



Learning About Sexual Diversity at School What Is Age Appropriate?

In primary grades, children need to learn things such as these:

- P1. There aren't any "girl colors and boy colors" or "girl games and boy games."** Those are stereotypes of what you have to like to be a girl or a boy. It's OK to be different.
- P2. Families come in all different shapes and sizes, including, among many others, two-mommy and two-daddy families** and families with no kids at all (just grown-ups). Some people are born into their family and some are adopted or fostered or "just" loved into their family. Sometimes families live together and sometimes they don't. What makes a group of people a family is that they love and take care of one another.
- P3. It is wrong to call people names or put them down ... for any reason, including being gay.** Everybody in our school deserves to be treated with kindness. It's important to stick up for yourself (in ways that don't hurt others). It's important to stick up for your friends. It's also OK to ask adults to help you when people use "put-downs." It is not "tattling" when you ask grown-ups to help you be safe. **EDUCATORS: If you hear students use words like "fag" or "dyke," it's perfectly appropriate to add:** Words like "fag" and "dyke" are mean. The respectful words are "gay" and "lesbian." A "gay" man is someone who loves another man best of all. A "lesbian" woman is someone who loves another woman best of all. "Heterosexuals" are people whose dearest love is of a different gender – a man who loves a woman or a woman who loves a man. People are "bisexual" or "bi" if they can fall in love with a woman or a man.

In intermediate grades, children also need to learn that:

- 11. A "stereotype" is a mental picture you have of someone just because they belong to a certain group of people.** For example, you might think that all teenagers like a certain kind of music. That's ridiculous, but it probably isn't hurtful. Still, it's a stereotype. **A "prejudice" is a negative or hurtful stereotype.** If you believed that all teenagers shoplift, that would be hurtful thinking, so it is a prejudice.
- 12. You can't tell if people are gay or lesbian by how they look or talk.** Only some people fit the stereotypes; that's what makes them stereotypes. Some people who *aren't* gay also fit stereotypes about gay people. It's OK to be a gay or lesbian person and fit those stereotypes, but many gay and lesbian people don't.
- 13. If you hear somebody put down gay people – or any people – you can tell them you think it's mean** (unfair, unkind) and you can ask them to stop using "gay" as a put-down. If you see somebody getting picked on, you can let them know that you think they deserve to be treated better and, if necessary, you can ask an adult for help. **EDUCATORS: If you hear students use terms like "That's so gay!" it's perfectly appropriate to add:** You don't say things like "That's so gay!" to mean that you don't like something. It's wrong. It shows prejudice and it might hurt people ... maybe somebody whose mom or dad or another family member or friend is gay. We all probably know someone gay, even if we don't realize it.
- 14. A lot of people are more masculine or feminine than the media says they're "supposed to" be.** It's perfectly OK – and very common – not to fit those stereotypes. **EDUCATORS: If students ask about transgender people, it's perfectly appropriate to add:** Someone who feels as if their body is completely the wrong sex might call themselves "transgender." And a boy or man who just can't act the way people think boys are supposed to act – or a girl or woman who isn't comfortable at all being the way people expect girls to be – might also call themselves *transgender*. These folks aren't necessarily gay or lesbian. Most gay and lesbian people don't think they are or want to be the other sex; remember, that's called being transgender.
- 15. Most people have 2 sex chromosomes (XX if they're a girl and XY if they're a boy); some don't.** Most girls have certain hormones that come from their ovaries and most boys have other hormones that come from their testicles. Girls also have some male hormones and boys also have some female hormones, just not as much as girls have. But there's a lot of diversity in people's bodies and they aren't all exactly the typical way you see in puberty videos. **EDUCATORS: If students ask about intersex people, it's perfectly appropriate to add:** If a person's body isn't exactly the way doctors expect a boy's body to be or the way they expect a girl's body to be – if their chromosomes or hormones or reproductive system are different – they might be what's called "intersex."



In middle school, young teens *also* need to learn that:

- M1. Gay, lesbian and bi people usually want the same kinds of things in relationships that heterosexual people want.** There's a stereotype that all they want from a partner is sex. Some do, of course, just like some straight people. But some gay, lesbian and bi teens have never had sex (with people of any gender). Your sexual orientation isn't what you do; it's how you feel. And anyone can choose to abstain.
- M2. Gay men and lesbians are usually just as respectful of children and others as heterosexuals are.** There's a stereotype that gay men molest children. That's nonsense. Most child molesters are heterosexual. Another stereotype is that gay people "recruit" or "come on" to heterosexuals. That's ridiculous. A person would just be setting themselves up for rejection if they flirted with someone who clearly wasn't interested.
- M3. We don't know why some people are gay, lesbian or bisexual and others are heterosexual. Or why some of us are trans and some aren't.** It may have something to do with your genes or your mom's hormones before you were born and it might be partly developed after birth. But we know it's *not* whether you got abused or how you feel about your parents that causes you to be gay or straight. And your parents' sexual orientations and gender identities have nothing to do with yours; if they're gay, that doesn't mean you necessarily will be.
- M4. All people who have sex – no matter what sex or gender or sexual orientation they are -- need to know how to make it safer.** Everybody is capable of choosing to abstain and everybody who doesn't abstain can still reduce their risks. Gay and bisexual guys are more likely than average to ever have an HIV-positive partner, and that partner may not know that he's HIV-positive, so they need to be *especially* careful about prevention. The same is true for people with partners from harder hit parts of the world or who've ever used injection drugs.
- M5. Some lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) people have made incredible contributions to this world.** They've been scientists, diplomats, athletes, artists, soldiers and human rights activists. Some of the people in your history books were LGBTQ, but you never learned that about them either because of the prejudices of the people who wrote those books or because the person lived at a time when people didn't understand or talk about sexual diversity. **EDUCATORS: Find out more about LGBTQ role models at www.famousandgay.com**
- M6. There are LGBTQ people in all walks of life, of every race, rich and poor, old and young, all over the world.** You know some, although you may not realize it if they don't happen to fit stereotypes or act out like the people on daytime talk-shows. They're part of our schools, workplaces, families, communities of worship, sports teams, social service clubs, etc. They've always been a part of your life.

In high school, teens *also* need to learn that:

- H1.** Your **biological sex** is the way your body was made. Most people's bodies are male or female. Their chromosomes, their brains, their reproductive systems, their skeletons and their hormones are either male or female. But some people's bodies are different from the typical male or female; they're still male or female but they have important differences, too. They might have XXY chromosomes instead of the typical XX of a girl or XY of a boy. Or they might have been born with a reproductive system that looked different from other babies'. They're **intersex**; a doctor might say they had a "**disorder of sexual development**" or **a DSD**. The truth is human sexuality is simply beautifully complex.
- H2.** Your **gender identity** is who you feel as if you are on the *inside* (male, female, both, neither, flexible). Your **gender expression** has to do with how you act on the outside (how you walk, talk, sit, dress, etc. ... whether you're more masculine, feminine, some of both). Some folks call themselves **transgender** or **trans** because they were born biologically one sex, but emotionally and spiritually another. Other **trans** people have just never really fit people's expectations about how boys or girls are supposed to act.
- H3.** Your **sexual orientation** has to do with whom you mostly find sexually and emotionally and romantically attractive (guys, girls or both). **Heterosexual** (straight) people like or fall in love mostly with people of a different gender – guys who like girls and vice versa. If a guy likes other guys best, he may call himself **gay**. A girl who gets crushes mostly on other girls may consider herself **lesbian**. Somebody who could fall in love with a girl or a guy is **bisexual** or **bi**. It's not who you have sex with; it's who you think you'll want relationships with.



- H4. Most experts say that you can't change your sexual orientation or gender identity through therapy.** Some people have changed their behavior, especially if they were bisexual to begin with and wanted to live heterosexual lives. But there's no proof that therapy can make a person's sexual *feelings* or feelings of *love* disappear or effect whether they feel like a boy or a girl on the inside. Of course, many people wouldn't want their feelings to disappear.
- H5. It is currently *not* against the law to discriminate against sexual minority people in most parts of the United States. In 30 states a person can be fired, denied service in restaurants, or lose their homes just for being gay, lesbian or bisexual. In 43 states, a person can be fired for being Transgender.** Like women, union workers, various communities of color and people with disabilities, there's a long proud history of struggle for equal rights for GLBT people. (For updates re: where discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity is still legal, go to: http://thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/nondiscrimination_laws)
- H6. Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont are the only places in the U.S., as of this printing, where same-sex couples can get legally married. Only these six states and New York and Washington, DC recognize these marriages; the federal (U.S.) government does not.** For a while, gay and lesbian couples in California could get legally married, but they can't anymore (although the courts allowed those who already got married there to remain legally married). Some other states offer *some* of the rights of marriage to couples, thorough "domestic partnership" or "civil union." Some have laws or constitutional amendments defining marriage as exclusive to heterosexual couples. In South Africa, the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Spain, Norway and Sweden same-sex couples can marry, too. Some couples all over the world do have ceremonies to celebrate their commitment to one another. Some clergy of various faiths conduct and bless those commitment ceremonies, but the unions are recognized by the church, not most governments. (For updates re: where marriage is legal, go to: http://thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/relationship_recognition)
- H7. LGBTQ people have suffered from violence and discrimination globally.** In the U.S. about 5 LGBTQ individuals -- mostly young trans people of color -- die in brutal hate crimes every year. Twelve states and Washington, DC prohibit hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity; 19 others, on sexual orientation (but not gender identity). **Fourteen have hate crime laws that mention neither of these types of crimes and 5 have no hate crime laws at all.** (For updates re: where discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity is still legal, go to: http://thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/hate_crimes_laws)
- H8. There are laws in the U.S. and in some other countries which discriminate against LGBTQ individuals and families.** According to a June, 2009 report by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, homosexuality is a crime in more than 80 countries [though not in the United States]. In some places that includes consenting sex between adults in the privacy of their own home ... and in some places just attending a same-sex wedding. *"In Nigeria, gay men presently face up to 14 years in jail if they live in the Christian areas of the country, and death by stoning in those parts of Nigeria that apply Sharia [Moslem] law. In Uganda in 2002, two lesbian women were arrested after having arranged a private engagement ceremony. They were not engaging in any sexual activity at the time of their arrest."* (See <http://www.iglhrc.org/cgi-bin/iowa/article/pressroom/iglhrcscommentaries/929.html>)
- H9. An LGBTQ equality & human rights movement has grown internationally** since the 1950's. As with most social justice movements, youth have often led the way. See ways youth can work for change:
- American Civil Liberties Union: <http://gbge.aclu.org/>
 - Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere: <http://www.colage.org/programs/youth/>
 - Gay Straight Alliance Network: <http://www.gsanetwork.org/>
 - International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission: <http://www.iglhrc.org/cgi-bin/iowa/content/takeaction/index.html>
 - Lambda Legal: <http://www.lambdalegal.org/publications/out-safe-respected/>
 - Safe Schools Coalition: <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/volunteer.html>
 - Youth Resource: <http://www.youthresource.com/>