

# TENETS FOR UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL ORIENTATION

*These are core research based understandings that are essential for a safe, affirming, and equitable learning environment. Understanding and affirming sexual orientation is not just for our gay community; it benefits everyone at The Park School of Baltimore.*

1. Sexual orientation is but one of several lenses through which we try to understand students.
2. It is important to understand terminology and use language accurately (see below).
3. The dominant culture is built upon heterosexist assumptions, practices and privilege.
4. Sexual orientation is a continuum and for some individuals remains fluid and resistant to identifying labels.
5. Sexual orientation is more than one's sexual behavior.
6. People across the gender and sexuality diversity (GSD) spectrum are similar in most areas of their development.
7. The sexual identity development process differs for each individual, yet models exist to help us understand it.
8. Family, school, and/or society struggle more than the individual to accept an individual's sexual orientation.
9. In any class, team, or activity, we should assume there are students across the GSD spectrum.
10. There are many ways to affirm individuals across the GSD spectrum. (see *Twelve Things You Can Do...*)

## WAIT, WHAT DOES THAT WORD MEAN AGAIN?\*

**HETEROSEXISM:** the conscious or unconscious assumption that all people are and/or *should be* heterosexual; prejudicial attitudes or discriminatory acts against lesbians and gays which follow from the above beliefs.

**SEX:** willful behavior that is intended to lead to sexual arousal.  
*SEX is something that people DO.*

**BIOLOGICAL GENDER:** refers to whether a person is biologically male, female, or some combination of both (intersexed), as determined by the interplay of chromosomes, hormones and anatomy.  
*BIOLOGICAL GENDER is something that people HAVE.*

**GENDER ROLES:** refer to those traits, characteristics, values, interests, behaviors, etc., expected of a person because of his or her biological gender.  
*GENDER ROLES are things people ENACT.*

**GENDER IDENTITY:** refers to the gender with which an individual self identifies or experiences him/herself to be.  
*GENDER IDENTITY is something people EXPERIENCE internally.*

**SEXUAL ORIENTATION:** refers to whether an individual is romantically, affectionately, physically, and sexually attracted to individuals of the same (homo) gender, different (hetero) gender, or both (bi).  
*SEXUAL ORIENTATION has to do with to whom people are ATTRACTED.*

\*Separate Components of Who We Are as Sexual and Gendered People adapted from: *Sex and Sensibility* by Deborah M. Roffman

# 12 THINGS YOU CAN DO RIGHT NOW

## TO INCREASE SAFETY AND AFFIRM ALL STUDENTS IN YOUR CLASSROOM

**Challenge anti-gay language both when setting behavioral expectations and when you hear it.** Ask your students what they mean when they say “that’s so gay” and remind them that it is not acceptable to use the name of a group of people as a synonym for “atypical” or “weird”.

**Deliberately use the words “gay” and “lesbian” in their proper context.** We know students hear the word “gay” as a pejorative often enough, and they need to hear it in a matter-of-fact way.

**Make gender and sexuality diversity part of your discussion of current events.** There’s no shortage of news on these issues.

**Acknowledge humanity’s gender and sexuality diversity in your curriculum.** For example, Frida Kahlo’s and Alan Turing’s sexual orientation is an important part of their stories. Much more can be found on our wiki.

**Change handouts and worksheets to acknowledge that same-sex couples exist.** For example, a math problem might say, “Joe and Tom purchased a \$275,000 house with a 5 percent mortgage...”

**Be sure to include all kinds of families when discussing and doing activities about “families”.** Some students have a mom and dad, some have a single parent, some have two moms, some have two dads, some have stepparents, some are adopted, some have parents and grandparents at home, etc.

**Be aware of your students’ family situations.** Some kids’ parents are gay, and some kids’ parents are straight.

**Display images, stickers and symbols that clearly express support for gender and sexuality diversity.** These might be safe space stickers, newspaper articles about important gay issues, photographs, bumper stickers, etc.

**Talk freely about your gay and lesbian friends and relatives who are open about their sexual orientation.** It’s OK— out gay people just don’t have the time to come out to every single person.

**Challenge heterosexist behavior, attitudes, and assumptions.** Society still largely equates heterosexual with “normal” and homosexual with “abnormal”. Challenging those assumptions makes school a safer place for students.

**Accept students’ expressions of gender. Support students who don’t always conform to expected gender norms.** Students are often quick to challenge those who step out of the gender box, and teachers need to model and encourage open-mindedness and flexibility.

**Include the Park School Philosophy as a guide for establishing the expectations in your classroom, and be specific about affirming diversity of all kinds, including gender and sexuality diversity.**

Much more can be found on our website [www.parkgayresources.pbworks.com](http://www.parkgayresources.pbworks.com)

*~The Park School of Baltimore, 2012~*