

HEALTHY TEEN NETWORK TIP SHEET

Gender, Sexuality, & Inclusive Sex Education



INCLUSIVE SEX EDUCATION

Assuming someone's gender identity or sexual orientation based on how they look, assuming that all young people are only attracted to the "opposite" gender, teaching that there are only opposite genders (boys and girls, and ignoring others). These are all examples where sex education may make youth of different identities, genders, or orientations not feel included.

These assumptions relate to several areas of people's identities and experiences, including sex, sexual orientation, sexual behavior, gender roles, gender identity, and gender expression (see definitions and distinctions, below).

Inclusive sex education means a change both in thinking and in language for these identities and experiences.

Here are some important words and concepts to know when talking about being inclusive.

Heteronormative: The idea that being heterosexual (straight) is normal and not being heterosexual is abnormal. This social norm (also referred to as heteronormativity) puts extreme pressure on people and culture to be straight, and if people stray from that expectation, they are ignored, questioned, or worse, punished.

Cisgender: A person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth. For example, someone who was identified as having female anatomy at birth and identifies as a woman is cisgender (sometimes referred to as "cis").

Cisnormative: Assuming that people are either men or women based on their body parts, that everyone is cisgender. This social norm (also referred to as cisnormativity) is the idea that being cisgender is superior to being transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming. Like heteronormativity, cisnormativity puts extreme pressure on people to be cisgender.



WHY DOES LGBTQ+ INCLUSION IN SEXUAL ED MATTER?

Sex education content often focuses on straight, cisgender young people, but this ignores LGBTQ+ youth in the room by not engaging them or not providing relevant information for their experiences. Many LGBTQ+ youth do not learn what healthy relationships or safe sex might look like for people like them. Even when sex education provides information that could also be useful for LGBTQ+ youth, they might have already tuned out.

In addition, straight, cisgender youth aren't learning about other identities. When LGBTQ+ people are not included in sex education, straight, cis youth miss out on the basic language and knowledge that they need in order to talk about LGBTQ+ issues and to respectfully interact with LGBTQ+ people. Young people also hear an implied message that to be "normal," they shouldn't deviate from this narrow identity.

Inclusive sex education and having honest conversations about gender and sexual orientation can help people become aware of stereotypes. Many people may not realize that some of the assumptions they have about relationships, having sex, what people look like, etc. are stereotypes.

Sex education that is inclusive of LGBTQ+ people can help young people learn in a more accepting environment that acknowledges more identities and different experiences among all students. Queer young people's identities are affirmed, questioning youth are given the space to explore their identities, and straight, cis youth gain the knowledge they need to respectfully interact with and advocate for their peers.

- » **LGBTQ+** is a common initialism used when talking about gender and/or sexual orientation.
- » **L: Lesbians** are women whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to other women.
- » **G: Gay men** are men whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to other men.
- » **B: Bisexual (Bi) people** are people who have the capacity to have enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to those of the same gender or to those of another gender.
- » **T: Trans or transgender:** Trans does not describe a sexual orientation; it describes a gender identity, usually that of someone whose anatomy and thus sex assigned at birth is different from their gender (e.g., a person born with male anatomy whose gender is a woman). The word "transsexual" is no longer commonly used. (Avoid this term unless it's a term someone uses for themselves.)
- » **Q: Queer or Questioning:** Depending on who you ask, "Q" may stand for either queer or questioning. Queer is a kind of umbrella term that includes two groups: 1) Anyone who falls outside of typical social definitions of gender or sexual identity; 2) Anyone who wants to identify as queer. Questioning refers to someone who is questioning their gender or sexual identity.
- » **+ The plus sign (+)** is an attempt to be more inclusive of all identities, to include people who may have identified other gender identities or sexual orientations, such as gender non-conforming, or pansexual. The + signifies an open mind to the continuing ways people define themselves. The + can also include straight or cisgender allies.

You may see varying uses of LGBTQ+ (e.g., LGB, LGBT, LGBTQ, or the "queer community"). The initialism continues to evolve. The most important thing is to be respectful and use the terms that people identify as appropriate.

TEACHING TIPS

Making Assumptions

- » Avoid making assumptions about young people's identities, bodies, or behaviors.
- » Always assume that there are LGBTQ+ youth in the room.

People often assume others' identities based on how they look and act. As an educator, it is important to avoid making assumptions about young people's identities, bodies, or behaviors. Some educators may believe that all young people in their program are straight and cisgender. No matter what you think you know about your participants, **always assume that there are LGBTQ+ youth in the room**, and present information and use language that includes them in the conversation. In addition, be aware of stereotypes that young people—especially LGBTQ+ youth—might face (for example, that bisexual people are promiscuous) and avoid reinforcing these stereotypes.

Using Inclusive Language

- » Use inclusive language, such as gender neutral pronouns (e.g., “they,” “xy,” and “ze”).
- » Use language that describes the anatomy itself, rather than equating it with a gender identity.

When providing examples, rather than using “he” and “she,” use gender neutral pronouns like “they.” When speaking to or about a specific person, the best practice is to use “they” pronouns when referring to them, unless the young person volunteers the correct pronoun to use. So as not to pressure young people to share when they are not ready, or “out them,” it is best not to ask them what pronouns they use.

When discussing anatomy, remember that genitals do not equal gender; rather than using gendered language (such as “boys' bodies”), opt for language that focuses on anatomy and that acknowledges and includes trans

bodies (such as “people/bodies with female anatomy” or “bodies with penises”). Describe the anatomy itself, rather than equating the anatomy with a gender identity.

Creating a Respectful Place

- » Create a respectful place by respecting pronouns and identities and avoiding stereotypes.
- » Include scenarios and examples that acknowledge a wide variety of people and relationships to affirm all identities.

Respect the pronouns and the identities youth might disclose, and avoid stereotypes to create a respectful, inclusive space for marginalized gender and sexual identities in sex education.

Include scenarios, examples, and discussion that acknowledge a wide variety of people and relationships to affirm all identities and support participants' experiences and identities. Be careful not to minimize or ignore the very real discrimination and struggles that some LGBTQ+ youth face. LGBTQ+ youth deserve the same respect as straight, cisgender youth, but their realities and experiences are different.

Asking Questions & Making Mistakes

- » **Ask questions to increase your understanding.**
- » **If you make a mistake, apologize, correct yourself, and move on.**

You're not expected to know and understand everything about gender and sexual identity. You don't need to understand to be respectful. It's okay to ask questions to increase your understanding and your ability to support LGBTQ+ youth. However, ask only what you really need to know to help them. Do not ask questions about any young person's identity, body, or sex life, and do not ask questions that suggest a young person's identity or experiences are not real or valid.

If you accidentally misgender a young person or make another incorrect assumption about them, apologize, correct yourself, and move on; over-apologizing will make your feelings the main priority and might draw unwanted attention to the young person. (To misgender means to make an assumption about someone's gender that is incorrect, such as using pronouns that they do not use for themselves or making a statement that calls out their gender incorrectly.)

COMMON QUESTIONS

“I don't understand this stuff. It's awkward and confusing. Do I really have to teach it?”

If you're teaching a sex education class, it's going to come up whether you plan on it or not. You may not end up talking about all of these things, but you'll need to be prepared to talk about it. It's important to at least have the basics down to present yourself as trustworthy and knowledgeable.

“What are some ways I can respect, support, and advocate for LGBTQ+ youth?”

Affirm (by acknowledging and supporting, and including examples and scenarios about) young people's feelings, experiences, and identities, and provide them with the information and resources they need to stay safe. Ask respectful questions to increase your understanding of LGBTQ+ identities and issues to find out what LGBTQ+ youth need and want.

“None of my participants are LGBTQ+, so do I really have to teach it?”

Chances are that there are LGBTQ+ or questioning young people in your program. LGBTQ+ people might choose to keep their identities to themselves for a number of reasons, including feeling uncertain or they might worry about bullying. Even if there aren't any LGBTQ+ youth in your program, there's really no way for you to know that for sure. Further, it is important for straight, cisgender youth to learn about marginalized gender and sexual identities.

“There are too many identities. How am I supposed to remember everything?”

It's nearly impossible to know every identity out there, and it is unnecessary. If one of your participants brings up an identity you aren't familiar with, ask respectful questions to understand it better and to tailor information to fit the conversation.

DEFINITIONS

These are just a few relevant definitions. For a more extensive resource, check out the GLAAD GLAAD Media Reference Guide (www.glaad.org/reference).

Cisgender: A person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth. For example, someone who was identified as having female anatomy at birth and identifies as a woman is cisgender (sometimes referred to as “cis”).

Cisnormative: Assuming that people are either men or women based on their body parts, that everyone is cisgender. This social norm (also referred to as cisnormativity) is the idea that being cisgender is superior to being transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming. Like heteronormativity, cisnormativity puts extreme pressure on people to be cisgender.

“Coming Out”: The process of a (LGBTQ+) person stating their gender identity, sexual orientation, or any part of their personal identity that this person wants to confirm to those around them (who may have assumed they were straight and/or cisgender). Coming out doesn’t just happen once, but multiple times. Coming out is often stressful for LGBTQ+ people; it’s best not to put pressure on people to come out.

Gender expression: The way a person shows their gender to the world around them and has to do with the way other people might perceive their gender (e.g., feminine/femme, masculine, androgynous). Gender expression may be shown by how someone dresses, talks, moves, and/or their interests.

Gender identity: A person’s perception or feeling about their own gender (e.g., cisgender, transgender, non-binary, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, woman, man)

Heteronormative: The idea that being heterosexual (straight) is normal and not being heterosexual is abnormal. This social norm (also referred to as heteronormativity) puts extreme pressure on people and culture to be straight, and if people stray from that expectation, they are ignored, questioned, or worse, punished.

LGBTQ+: An initialism for community that includes all gender and sexual minorities/people who do not identify as both straight and cis; stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning—but includes many more (represented with the +)

Misgender: Making an assumption about someone’s gender that is incorrect (e.g., using pronouns that they do not use for themselves or making a statement that calls out their gender incorrectly).

Pronouns, also, “Gender Pronouns”: how you refer to someone without using their name. You can create a respectful, inclusive environment by introducing yourself with your pronouns, and using “they” if you don’t know what someone else uses (e.g., she/her/hers/herself, he/him/his/himself, they/them/theirs/themself, xy/xem/xyrs/xemself, ze/hir/hirs/hirself, person’s name).

Sex: Has to do with a person’s genitalia, chromosomes, and hormones (e.g., male, female, intersex)

Sexual behavior: Encompasses a wide range of consensual sexual acts a person might engage in with other people

Sexual orientation: Has to do with three things: behavior, attraction, and identity. Sexual orientation is about which genders a person is emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually attracted to (e.g., straight/heterosexual, gay/lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual)

Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.

RESOURCES

101 & TIP SHEETS

- » Advocates for Youth: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, & Questioning (GLBTQ) Youth: Tip Sheet (www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/424-glbtcq-youth)
- » American Psychological Association: Answers to Your Questions About Transgender People, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression (www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/transgender.aspx)
- » Gender Spectrum: Understanding Gender (www.genderspectrum.org/quick-links/understanding-gender/)
- » Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) Network (<https://gsanetwork.org/>)
- » GLAAD: Media Reference Guide (Terms and Definitions) (www.glaad.org/reference)
- » Intersex Society of North America: What Is Intersex? (www.isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex)
- » Jack & Jaques: Inclusive Sex Ed Language Checklist (http://jacketjacques.ca/SITE_sexted-add/Adapting-Sex-Ed-Language%20-Guelph-Checklist.pdf)
- » Teaching Tolerance: Sex? Sexual Orientation? Gender Identity? Gender Expression? (www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-50-summer-2015/feature/sex-sexual-orientation-gender-identity-gender-expression)
- » Teen Health Source: Sex, Gender and Sexual Identity (<http://teenhealthsource.com/giso/sex-gender-sexual-identity/>)
- » Trans Student Educational Resources: Gender Unicorn (www.transstudent.org/gender)
- » Unitarian Universalist Association: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity 101 (www.uua.org/lgbtq/identity)
- » University of Michigan: LGBT Terms and Definitions (<https://internationalspectrum.umich.edu/life/definitions>)

TEACHING

- » Edutopia: Heteronormativity in Schools (www.edutopia.org/blog/heteronormativity-in-schools-jason-flom)
- » ThinkProgress: Can We Adapt Sex Ed For The New LGBT-Inclusive America? (<https://thinkprogress.org/can-we-adapt-sex-ed-for-the-new-lgbt-inclusive-america-2b1797e5e45f#h2r0e7glz>)

THEORY

- » Autostraddle: Rebel Girls: Waiter, There's Some Theory in My Gender (www.autostraddle.com/rebel-girls-waiter-theres-some-theory-in-my-gender-271633/)

Suggested Citation:

Cortes, N., Eisler, A., & Desiderio, G. (2016). *Tip sheet: Gender, sexuality, and inclusive sex education*. Baltimore: Healthy Teen Network.

© 2016 Healthy Teen Network