



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

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

This is an interactive exercise to help participants develop language to respond to questions from students and adults that may feel challenging. Most of the things we teach about are topics that we have had practice talking about in school. However, most of us did not grow up talking about LGBT topics and did not discuss them as part of our professional training as educators.

It is difficult to be articulate about topics that we've never discussed before, and even more so to be articulate about topics that are often considered controversial and about which many have strong feelings. Therefore, it is important to *practice, practice, practice* formulating and articulating answers and letting thoughts evolve based on current experience and conversations.

Participants will have a wide variety of responses to these questions, including not being able to find words. It is important that participants feel comfortable enough to try out new vocabulary and language that initially may feel awkward and uncomfortable. Focus them by starting out talking about goals. If the process unfolds in the way we want it to, then the less comfortable folks learn from their more comfortable colleagues and everyone moves forward in their skills and comfort.

MATERIALS: Handout with questions and possible responses. Large paper or a white board and markers.

ACTIVITY

- Introduce the activity by saying that this activity gives participants a chance to practice answering students' questions about LGBT 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. Most of the schools that we attended did not address how to have these conversations with students. So we thought we'd take some time to practice how to respond. This is really a chance to practice. There is no pressure to get it right!
- 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 or safe.)
- Have participants count off by twos. Have all the "ones" form a circle facing out, and have all of 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." You can choose at this point to give the twos a chance to respond to the same question or ask for a few examples of answers that were generated in the pairs.
- 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.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS OR STATEMENTS

Choose 4-6 questions for this activity, depending on the topic of the training or topics that you think the educators may encounter in their schools.

- What does 'gay' mean?" (When talking with a first-grader? When talking with a fifth-grader?)
- You overhear a student say, "That's gay."
- I didn't mean anything when I called him gay. We all use that word just to tease each other.
- Can two boys or two girls get married?
- You overhear a child say, "Gay people are bad."

ABOUT FAMILIES WITH GAY OR LESBIAN PARENTS

- How can she have two moms? Which one is the real one?
- She has two dads? How is that possible? Don't you need a man and a woman to have a baby?
- My grandma says it's wrong for two men to get married.

ABOUT GENDER

- Michael plays with dolls and is always hanging out with girls. That's weird.
- He's a boy, why does he dress like a girl? Or, if she isn't a boy, why does she look and act like one?

QUESTIONS OR STATEMENTS FROM PARENTS/GUARDIANS OR COLLEAGUES

- Aren't the students too young to talk about gay topics?" (from a colleague or parent/guardian)
- I don't want my child to think that being gay is an OK option for them.
- My religion teaches that it is wrong to be gay.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FROM WELCOMING SCHOOLS

- What Do You Say to That's So Gay (a one-page handout)
- What Does 'Gay' Mean? (a one-page handout)
- Be Prepare for Questions and Put-downs on Gender
- Yes, They are a Family.
- Can Two Women or Two Men Get Married?
- Definitions for Students on LGBT Topics

Developed by Lesley Strang, early childhood educator, and edited by Emmy Howe, Open View Farm Educational Center, Conway, Mass. See: www.openviewfarm.org.

PRACTICING RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ABOUT LGBT TOPICS

(Sample responses are in italics)

“What does ‘gay’ mean?” (When talking with a first-grader? When talking with a fifth-grader?)

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 someone’s dad is gay? A discussion with elementary-age students about the meanings of “gay” or “lesbian” is a discussion about love and relationships. If a student heard it as a put-down, be clear that it is a mean or hurtful thing to say.

- *The word gay is used to describe a man and a man or a woman and a woman, who love each other and want to be family to each other.*
- *The word “gay” refers to a man who falls in love with another man in a romantic way or a woman who falls in love with another woman in a romantic way. Sometimes people use the word just to refer to a man who loves another man in a romantic way. “Gay,” however, can refer to both men and women.*

You overhear a student say, “That’s Gay” or “Fag!” 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.*

“Can two boys or two girls get married?”

- *In some places women can marry women and men can marry men. In some places, they can’t. Whether they are married or not, two people who love each other can live together, take care of one another and be a family.*
- *No, children can’t get married! Grown-ups, on the other hand, create families in many ways. Many grown-ups live their lives in couples and take care of one another. Being married is one way to do this.*

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

If you have a child with two dads or two moms in your classroom, it is helpful to know how his or her parents talk about their family. This information will help you respond to other students’ questions. Don’t offer up information about adoption or children born in previous relationships unless you know that the child and family readily offer up that information. Be careful about making assumptions about a student’s family.

- *They both are. Both moms take care of her and love her. There are all kinds of families. Some have two moms, some have two dads, some have one mom or dad and some have a mom and a dad. Some children are raised by other caring adults such as grandparents, other relatives or guardians. What’s important is to have adults who love and care for you.*

“How can he have two dads? Don’t you need a mom and a dad to make a baby?”

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 – sometimes through birth, sometimes through adoption. Children are raised in many different ways. Some have two dads, some a mom and a dad. What’s important is to have adults who love and care for you.*

In older elementary grades, a question like this may come up in a health lesson as it could also refer to how babies are made. It is better not to avoid the question. However, you can answer it simply that you do need an egg and a sperm to make a baby but biological parents don’t always raise children. However, children come in to families in different ways such as adoption. Then, you could move on to children being raised in different kinds of families.

“My grandma says it’s wrong for two women to have children.”

The goal in answering this question is not to put-down a student’s grandmother. At the same time, you might want to imagine how your response will sound to a student in earshot who has two moms.

- *People have lots of different ideas about families. Your grandma is not the only one who thinks that but in this school we respect all families*
- *There are many kinds of families. Some have a mom and a dad. Some have two moms. Some have one mom or one dad.*
- *There are many different opinions about families. In this school we respect all families that love and care for their children. Making sure children are well-cared-for is what is important. I have met all kinds of healthy, happy families.*

“Michael plays with dolls and is always hanging out with girls. That’s weird.”

- *I encourage all boys and girls to play together.*
- *Michael hangs out with friends who he likes to spend time with, just like you do.*
- *I don’t believe there are girls toys or boys toys. Everyone should play with the toys they like to play with.*
- *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 and some of you like to play kickball and others don’t. No one should have to pick and choose what they do just because they are a boy or a girl.*

“But he’s a boy, why does he dress like a girl?” Or “If she isn’t a boy, why does she look and act like one all the time?”

If you know that a student entering your class presents as a different gender than the student’s biological sex, check out some of the additional resources on the *Welcoming Schools* website to help give you the background to work with the student and family.

- *Because that is what (he or she) likes to wear? Why do you have on the clothes that you have on?*
- *There are lots of different ways that boys can dress and lots of different ways that girls can dress.*
- *Some boys like to wear pink or to have long hair. All of these things are OK in our school.*
- *There are many ways of being a boy (girl), and all are okay ways of being a boy (girl).*
- *Those are the kinds of clothes that he likes to wear? Why do you like to wear what you’re wearing?*
- *Sandy has always felt like a girl deep down inside. So that is just the way she likes to dress.*

“You overhear a student say, “Gay people are bad.”

You could ask that student why he or she thinks that. You also could check to see if the student knows what gay means. Depending on the response, you may first have to define what gay or lesbian means. This could also be an opportunity to dispel stereotypes and the notion of a category of people being all bad or all good.

It is also an opportunity to reaffirm that we respect all people in our classroom. Saying that a group of people are bad is hurtful not only to people who are gay and to students who may have relatives or friends who are gay, but also to anyone who cares about not hurting other people's feelings.

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.

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

- *In elementary school, learning the meaning of “gay” or “lesbian” can come up in a couple of contexts – families, name-calling and current events.*
- *Students often use the word “gay” to mean that something is stupid, or they use it as a put-down for a boy whom they think is not acting masculine enough. However, they often don't know what “gay” actually means. We are teaching the students to understand the words they are using or hearing. We are talking about not hurting classmates and others with our words.*
- *For example, we may be talking about the mothers or fathers of one of our students or we may be looking at a book that shows a child with two moms or two dads. If we are defining the word for students, we are talking about adult relationships.*
- *Students also see the 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 gay people, however, might make someone less likely to insult or threaten someone he or she thinks is gay. Hopefully it will help our students not allow a friend to be bullied or ostracized for having a gay or lesbian parent.*
- *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.”

Schools include people with many different religious beliefs. Some religious organizations support inclusion of LGBT 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.