

LGBTQ+ TEACHABLE MOMENTS

A Guide for Educators and Allies

I often run into educators who want nothing more than to be an ally to their students but they don't know exactly how to do so. So let's take a look at how you can address some of the more common and trickier things to respond to.

◆ What Do You Say to "That's So Gay" and Other Anti-LGBTQ+ Comments?

It doesn't matter if it is a first grader who might not know what the word "gay" means, a sixth grader trying to sound cool or a tenth grader "teasing" a friend. All of these scenarios have the potential of creating an unsafe classroom or school environment and must be addressed. So, what can caring adults do?

STOP IT — Keep it simple with quick responses:

- "Remember, we don't use put-downs in this class."
- "Do you know what 'gay' means?"
- "It's not OK at this school to use 'gay' disrespectfully to mean something is bad."
- "You may not have meant to be hurtful, but when you use the word 'gay' to mean something is bad or stupid, it is hurtful." Follow-up with, "Do you know why it is hurtful?"
- "Using any derogatory word to tease someone is harassment and is unacceptable."
- "Even if you didn't mean to offend people who are gay, it is offensive to call this assignment gay (or queer); if you don't like something, then say you don't like it!"
- "It is never OK to say, 'you act like a girl (or look like a boy)' as a put-down."
- "Using a slur related to gender or sexual orientation to joke around is not OK. These are hurtful words and can impact anyone who overhears them."
- "It doesn't matter who said it, I don't want to hear that kind of language again. Is that clear?"

DON'T IGNORE IT

- Harassment does not go away on its own.
- Ignoring mean name-calling and hurtful teasing allows it to continue and possibly get worse.
- If other students do not see action, they get the message there is nothing wrong with it.
- Not speaking up teaches the student targeted, as well as anyone within range, that they will not be protected from harassment.
- Almost any response is better than ignoring the situation. You may not know exactly what to say, but you must stop the harassment.
- Taking action reaffirms limits. Interrupting name calling and harassment isn't always easy. With experience you will become more comfortable in handling it. Practice with colleagues.
- You can always go back to the student and say or do something else if you feel you did not respond well.

EDUCATE

- If you have the time and opportunity to educate on the spot, do it. If you don't, make time later.
- If you have been hearing the phrase "that's gay", take time during class to make sure that your students know what "gay" means and know why it is hurtful to use as a comment or put-down.
- Be clear that using the word "gay" in a negative way is disrespectful. Be clear that using the phrase "that's gay" is hurtful to other students who may have family members and friends who are LGBTQ+.
- Be prepared to provide accurate information. For the youngest students, keep it simple—for example, "The word 'gay' describes a man and a man or a woman and a woman who love or are attracted to each other." As students get older, they may want more explanations and discussion.
- In lessons on respect, prejudice or civil rights, include information about discrimination against LGBTQ+ people and the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement.

◆ Responding to Questions About Gender

I often run into educators who want nothing more than to be an ally to their students but they don't know exactly how to do so. This month let's look at how to respond to questions about gender: It is important to practice how to respond to questions related to gender and how to interrupt gender based teasing and bullying. Being prepared will help you embrace teachable moments with your students to foster a gender inclusive school.

"Why does Martin like pink?"

- 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 okay to tease people for the colors that 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."

- 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.
- 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 look like a boy" (to a student who identifies as a girl)

- Why do you say that?
- There is no one way for girls or boys or people of any gender to act or look.
- Those are the kinds of clothes that she likes to wear. Why do you like to wear what you're wearing?
- Here at (name of school) we all get to wear what makes us happy and comfortable for learning and playing.

"But he's a boy, why does he dress like a girl?"

- There are lots of different ways that boys can dress and lots of different ways that girls can dress. There are lots of ways that people of any gender 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? What kinds of clothes do you like to wear?

"Dominic always hangs out with girls. Why?"

- Here at (name of our school) we want everyone to play together with lots of different friends.
- Dominic hangs out with friends who he likes to spend time with, just like you do with your friends. We all like to spend time with people who share our interests.
- We can all be friends with people of many genders.
- Do you want to play with Dominic? Do you want me to help you feel included? I am sure they would love to play with you too.
- Here at (name of our school) all children can play and do things together. He's a boy who likes to play with girls and that's OK.

Additional Gender-Related Scenarios

- **You overhear a student call another student who identifies as a boy, a "girl" in an insulting way.** — "That's not OK at our school to call someone a 'girl' to insult them or make them feel bad. We don't use gender as a put-down."
- **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."
- **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."

◆ Defining LGBTQ+ Words for Elementary Students

When children ask questions about LGBTQ+ words, it is often best to offer simple and direct answers. You might choose to answer a student's question with another question to figure out what they are really asking—is it about name-calling, a classmate's two dads or something they saw on the internet. Listening first helps you respond. The following list can serve as a starting place for educators to respond to questions about LGBTQ+ words. These suggested definitions can help to ensure that you feel confident in your own knowledge and ability to communicate these ideas to students. Use your own expertise to modify definitions based upon the age of your students.

Gender Related Terminology

Cisgender

When your gender identity (how you feel) is the same as what doctors/midwives assigned to you when you were born (girl/boy or sex assigned at birth).

Gender Binary

A way of seeing gender as two distinct and opposite groups—girl and boy. This idea doesn't include all the ways we can have a gender identity and express our gender.

Gender Expression

People express themselves in many ways, such as through clothes or hairstyles. Sometimes people think that these things go with certain genders, but really you cannot guess someone's gender or pronouns from how they look. In our school we respect that every person is unique and different, and we don't tease or bully anyone about their personal expression.

Gender Identity

How you feel. Girl, boy, both or neither. Everyone has a gender identity.

Non-Binary

People who do not feel like the words "girl" or "boy" fits. They may feel like both or neither. They sometimes use pronouns such as they, them, theirs.

Transgender or Trans

When your gender identity (how you feel) is different than what doctors/midwives assigned to you when you were born (girl/boy or sex assigned at birth).

◆ Responding to Questions from Families About LGBTQ+ Curriculum Content

Here are some points to keep in mind when discussing LGBTQ-inclusive initiatives and topics:

Why Educators May Tolerate Anti-LGBTQ Behaviors

Often, educators and school staff tolerate anti-LGBTQ behaviors because they...

- **Aren't sure how to address it.** Many teacher education programs lack LGBTQ specific resources and training, so educators aren't equipped to effectively stop anti-LGBTQ comments and behaviors.
- **Are nervous about reactions and resistance from other adults.** Some educators fear that family members, school staff members, or other teachers will react negatively to LGBTQ-inclusive practices and materials in the classroom.
- **Don't see the importance in stopping the behavior.** Some educators don't see anti-LGBTQ behaviors and words for what they are: bullying.

Some community members may feel concern about creating LGBTQ-inclusive school environments. When addressing concerns and fears, emphasize values of community and respect rather than dwelling on myths and stereotypes about LGBTQ people. Creating welcoming learning environments supports all students by developing a safe school climate where students can focus on learning.

CEA Pride Liaison Chris Teifke

Key Principles for Family Conversations

- **We are talking about families.** All students need educators to validate and respect their families, regardless of family members identities that may be LGBTQ, cisgender, adoptive, straight, divorced or married.
- **We are talking about respect.** Anti-LGBTQ and gender-related put-downs are among the most common slurs in school environments, and addressing these slurs is essential for the physical, emotional, and academic well-being of all students.
- **Diverse people come together at school to learn.** Schools are places where people of different races, families, ethnicities, faiths and gender identities come together. Understanding, discussing, and valuing differences at school is essential for healthy learning environments.

LGBTQ+ Parents and Guardians Are Diverse

- LGBTQ+ people are family members to youth across the country and schools need to reflect that reality.
- Households headed by same-sex couples are reported in virtually every U.S. county according to the U.S. Census.
- In a look at U.S. Census data, approximately two thirds of same-sex Latino couples are raising children. Connecticut Census data show that 19% of same-sex couples are raising children.

Youth Must Understand the World and the People in It

Your students will meet people in their lives both in and outside of school with many kinds of families and identities, and hear about LGBTQ+ people in their places of worship, at the dinner table and on TV. It is normal for students to be curious about LGBTQ people. Adults must be prepared to participate in conversations with students to help them to learn facts instead of myths and stereotypes.

Some states require guardian consent when school curricula address sexuality. However, when educators discuss family diversity, they are not talking about sexuality—they are talking about

understanding the importance of family, love and acceptance for everyone.

Additional Key Points

- **Family respect includes respect for religious beliefs.** Schools include people with many different religious beliefs, and schools can help foster climates that respect the diversity of beliefs and families within a community. Schools build respect by acknowledging community diversity, promoting opportunities for dialogue and teaching kindness and empathy.
- **Schools are a place for informed and open discussions.** Learning about LGBTQ people will not "turn" students LGBTQ. What learning about LGBTQ people will do is:
 - Give students the opportunity to understand LGBTQ people instead of learning about them through negative myths and stereotypes.
 - Allow students to respect all types of families and people.
 - Help students to better understand the world around them.
 - Minimize shame or unhappiness in students who do and will identify as LGBTQ.

◆ What Do You Say When a Student Asks, "What Does Gay Mean"?

There Is No Single Right Answer

Many educators are unsure how to respond when a student asks you what does gay mean. It is better to try to answer than to respond with silence or evade the question. Practice different responses with colleagues, just as you practice other things that you want to learn. Figure out what you feel comfortable saying. Responses will vary by age and developmental stage of the student. Your comfort in answering these questions will set a welcoming tone in your class and school community.

Here's Some Advice on Different Ways to Respond

Keep it simple. An answer can be as simple as: "'Gay' means when a man loves a man or a woman loves a woman." Try to answer the question honestly without overloading a student with information. Throughout elementary school, a student's ability to understand what 'gay' means and what your explanation means may increase with development.

Focus on love and relationships. A discussion with elementary-age students about the meanings of 'gay' or 'lesbian' is a discussion about love, relationships and families. You can just clarify that people love each other in different ways. Some women love and want to be partners with a man and some women love and want to be partners with a woman. It can be helpful to give concrete examples, such as "Tanya and Angela love each other, and they are Juliette's moms."

Understand what the student is asking. Before responding to a student's question, first understand what it is they are asking. Is the student asking about a family with two dads or are they using 'gay' as a put down? You may ask, "Why do you ask that?" or "Why do you think they said that?" Listening first gives you a good idea of what your student wants to know and needs to know. Will your answer be about name-calling, defining what it means to be gay, different kinds of families, or some combination of answers?

Think About What Messages You Want to Share

- All people deserve respect.

- People can fall in love and want to be in a relationship with people of the same gender or with people of a different gender.
- Making fun of people by calling them 'gay' is hurtful. It can hurt both the student who is targeted and anyone who hears it who may have a gay relative or friend.
- Using the name of any group of people as an insult is not OK, because it is most often based on negative stereotypes.

Sample Responses to "What does gay mean?"

Grades PreK-2

"Alexia said that Ricardo's dad is gay. What does 'gay' mean?"

- "The word 'gay' describes a man and a man or a woman and a woman who love each other."
- "The word 'gay' means that someone may have two dads or two moms just like some people may have a mom and a dad."

Grades 3-5

"Is being gay the same as being lesbian?"

- "'Lesbian' describes a girl who likes girls and wants to have a girlfriend someday. Just how 'gay' means a boy who wants to have a boyfriend someday."
- "'Gay' can refer to either men or women but it is sometimes used just to refer to gay men. Women who are gay can also use the word 'lesbian.'"

◆ Navigating Support for LGBTQ+ Special Education Students

Disproportionality of Historically Marginalized Identities in Special Education

Significant disproportionality in the field of special education, or the overidentification of students from historically marginalized identities, has long been documented for students of color, students who do not speak English as their first language and students from low socio-economic circumstances. LGBTQ+ youth are included in all of the intersections described above, but also have unique experiences related to their gender identity and sexual orientation.

For example, many alternative learning centers for students with behavior disorders have overrepresentations of queer students who display a reasonable behavioral response to unreasonable conditions that discriminate against LGBTQ+ people. In a similar vein, many gender expansive students are understandably distracted by the effort and associated anxiety of hiding their authentic gender identity. In many parts of the United States, gender expansive students are also forced to endure misgendering or flat refusal to acknowledge their existence at school.

When considering eligibility criteria, it is necessary to determine if a student's learning needs are a result of disability or stem from the incredible effort it takes to navigate school climates that are deliberately hostile to queer and trans people.

3 in 10

LGBTQ+ youth aged 13-17 identified with a disability by a health care provider (HRC 2022)

55%

of LGBTQ+ youth feel unsafe in at least one setting at school

2x

Gender expansive youth are over twice as likely to feel unsafe than their disabled cisgender LGBTQ+ peers

3-6x

Transgender, non-binary and gender expansive people are more likely to be autistic; ~12x more likely to be neurodivergent

While not the sole explanation, bias and discrimination towards historically marginalized populations are a significant influencing factor leading to their over-representation in groups of students receiving special education services.

Eligibility Considerations for LGBTQ+ Students

When educators examine the events leading up to an LGBTQ+ student's referral for special education services, it is important to consider the impact of school culture and climate on their academic and behavioral performance. Are a student's needs associated with an inherent exceptionality, or are their needs the result of discrimination or the inability to be their authentic selves at school? Is it possible that a student's needs are compounded by both learning differences and a culture that "others" and "dehumanizes" their identity?

Care should be taken to isolate influencing factors on a student's learner profile and consider the context of why a student may or may not be responding to the interventions and instruction provided in the general education setting at school.

Inclusive Language for Disabled Students

"Human Needs" not "Special Needs"

As language continues to evolve and we learn best practices in centering the autonomy of disabled people, we recommend moving away from terms like "special needs." Instead, simply describe what supports or needs a student has. For parent communities and some educators, this recommendation may come as a shock or even be in conflict with the language you have used to describe your children or students for many years. However, best practice is always to follow the lead of the community impacted.

The disabled community has consistently asked for all people to stop using the term "special needs" because:

1. It was not developed by the disability community.
2. A disabled person's support needs are not their defining characteristic.
3. The term "special needs" often has the impact of infantilizing disabled people or encouraging pity for the people who provide them care.
4. It encourages "tragedy narratives" that view disabled children and adults as a burden or problem that need to be solved.
5. "Disability rights" should be viewed as "human rights." The word "special" implies an extra privilege.

"Person-First Language" vs. "Identity-First Language"

Like all aspects of language, the best practice is to use the language people ask you to use when describing who they are. We should not make assumptions about the language of our students receiving special education services. Ask for clarity about the terms and phrases that make students feel safe and seen.

Most teacher preparation programs have historically taught future educators to refer to our students' disabilities as separate from who they are as people using "Person-First Language." We were told to describe individual students as "a student with autism" or "a student with a learning disability."

In the disabled community, a clear message has emerged that encourages replacing "person first language" with "identity-first language." The theme of these discussions is that for many disabled people, their disabilities are not separate from who they are and know themselves to be. Their disabilities can not be distanced from their identity. Furthermore, many disabled people view their disability as a source of pride. When a person automatically shifts to "person-first language" it signals that a nondisabled person views disability as a problem to be solved.

For example, it is recommended that a teacher say, "I have 5 autistic students in my class" instead of, "I have 5 students with autism."

"Nonspeaking" vs. "Nonverbal"

The term "nonverbal" has long been used in clinical settings to describe people who do not speak words out loud. Advocacy communities and disabled adults have drawn attention to the stigma that the nondisabled population attaches to the term "nonverbal" and the misperception that it implies a person is not able to communicate with other kinds of language. There are many forms of communication, so disabled people have shifted towards the term "nonspeaking" to describe people who do not primarily use verbal communication.

Considerations for Due Process Documentation — IEPs, Evaluations and 504 Plans

"Gender Markers," "Legal Names" and "Affirmed Names/Pronouns"

The paperwork and documentation required for eligibility and the provision of services in the field of special education is significant. Understandably, a student's name and identifying information are used exhaustively throughout the process because the items are viewed as legal documents.

Students use the documentation created at school to collaborate with their medical care teams, receive services outside of school from providers like speech and occupational therapy, and attend youth programming like childcare and afterschool programs. Many gender expansive students use different names and gendered pronouns than the name and pronouns in learning management systems and records. Due to the significant barriers that exist for legal name and gender marker changes, your students may or may not have access to achieving congruence between the language they use to describe who they are and what their legal documentation displays.

When a student's affirmed name and legal name are different, the following recommendations can help mitigate harm as you are developing their IEP, Evaluation or 504 plan:

1. Begin the first narrative or background information section of all documentation with a disclaimer about the affirmed name of the student being discussed. *Ex: "This student uses the name _____ and the pronouns_____. The student's legal name will not be used for the rest of this document to reflect the language they use in school on a daily basis."* For any section displayed before the disclaimer, place the student's legal name in parentheses.
2. When your school circumstances prevent you from following recommendation #1, collaborate with the impacted student and their family to inquire about how they would like you to handle the in-person meetings or sharing of information. For students who are 14 years old or older who are

attending their due process meetings, and especially for students who are not affirmed at home, follow their lead on how they would like you to handle using their name/pronouns. Offer options for correcting the other participants at the meeting, alternatives to using their legal names like first initials, and provide support for processing before and after the meeting occurs. The unfortunate reality of schools in the United States is that political circumstances are preventing best practice support for students from being delivered. Attempt to reduce the harm present in these situations.

3. For students using Evaluation Plans to access outside services where legal documentation is not required, offer to rewrite or provide clean copies of the documentation that do not contain a student's dead name (former name used by gender expansive students) or incorrect pronouns.

Accommodations For IEP Team Meetings

Parents/Caregivers are as diverse in identity as the students we serve. The following recommendations and accommodations will help keep your IEP team meeting accessible for all participants:

1. There is a present, but not fully understood, genetic component to both LGBTQ+ and neurodivergent identities. Sometimes the accommodations necessary for your students to be successful academically and socially mirror the needs parents have to equitably participate in IEP team meetings.
2. Care should be taken to ensure that all Prior Written Notices (PWNs) reflect the titles and honorifics used by the parents/caregivers of your students. Avoiding binary assumptions about a parent's/caregiver's gender or honorifics is important.
3. Inquire about potential accommodations or needs during the IEP Team Meeting planning process, including interpreters who are native speakers of the parent's/caregiver's first language.
4. Offer parents/caregivers text-to-speech options for large portions of text.
5. Have name tags with options for sharing names and pronouns present for every member of the IEP team.
6. As a default, make sure to communicate a detailed agenda and all documentation necessary to participate in team meetings well in advance. For neurodivergent parents/caregivers, this is especially important as it allows time to fully process information ahead of time and feel secure in knowing the direction a meeting is going. Understanding the order of the agenda ahead of time will also allow parents/caregivers to ask questions and participate fully.
7. Plan for a quiet meeting location free from sensory distractions.
8. Make sure that all team members communicate in ways free from jargon or language that people outside the field of education will understand.
9. Frequently pause for 10-15 seconds to offer additional processing time or opportunities to clarify understanding of findings/recommendations during the meeting.

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A resource for creating inclusive, supportive learning environments for all students