

## Questions Students May Ask and Possible Responses About Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People

Today, children hear about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people at younger ages than in years past. LGBT people are mentioned more frequently in the newspapers, on the radio and on TV. Some children have parents or other family members who are LGBT. Children also hear the word “gay” used as a slur. Educators need to be prepared to respond to questions from students. If students are met with silence when they ask questions, they will assume they have said something wrong.

The words “gay” and “lesbian” are already used by students in schools. When educators answer students’ questions or intervene in anti-gay put-downs, they are not introducing the topic. When educators integrate factual information about family diversity into the curriculum they benefit from anticipating questions students might have about the topic.

Sometimes the questions children ask may seem difficult to answer only because as adults we haven’t had a chance to consider how we would respond. Often when something new comes up, we rely on past experiences to help us out. However, many of us don’t have much experience talking about LGBT topics. When many of us grew up the words “gay” or “lesbian” were either not mentioned or, if they were, they were used negatively or surreptitiously. Therefore, our past experience doesn’t help us out.

This section is here to help you think about how you might respond to students’ questions so that you feel more prepared and more comfortable when they arise. In some schools these questions will come up. In some schools they will not. These are questions that students have asked and teachers have responded to in the past.

Here are a few notes regarding this section:

- Each question is written as a student might ask it, followed by a possible response. The responses are to help you think about how to respond. They are not word-for-word answers.
- Educators need to adapt their responses to ensure that they are age-appropriate for their particular students.
- Try to listen to what the student is really asking. Sometimes children are asking for very simple answers. You can also check a student’s understanding by asking, “Does that answer your question?”
- Many of the possible responses are longer than you would actually say. Some of the responses offer different ways of answering a question.
- Some students may use slang to ask a question because they don’t know other language to use. Answer them using more appropriate language. If they use slang or epithets, you can check their meaning and be clear that put-downs are not appropriate and are hurtful.
- Direct answers honor the children’s honesty and curiosity. Many children already have counterpoints to biases: values of fairness, personal experience of feeling excluded or put down and positive relationships with diverse people. These can be enlisted to build empathy and problem-solve during discussions.
- Sometimes you may not know the answer to a student’s question. That’s OK. You can say, “I don’t have the answer to that right now, but let me check it out and we can talk about it again later.”
- Try not to let “shock value” questions shock you. That only reinforces the students’ desire to embarrass you or their classmates.
- If the class gets into more of a discussion, beyond a question or two, you may acknowledge that this is a topic about which some people and families hold very different views or beliefs. The goal in your classroom is to create a safe and caring community for all students.

### **What does "gay" mean?**

Being gay means that a person loves, in a very special way, someone who is the same gender. For example, a gay man wants to be involved with and love another man. A gay woman, or lesbian, wants to be involved with and love another woman. Gay people might choose to have a special relationship with someone and share their home and have a family together.

Keep it simple. Focus on relationships and family. For older students you could say, "Men who are attracted to and want to have romantic relationships with men." Or, "Women who are attracted to and want to have romantic relationships with women." (Note: For more definitions see: What Does Gay Mean? on page C2)

### **What's a lesbian?**

The word "lesbian" describes a woman who is attracted to and wants to have a romantic relationship with a woman. Or you could say that a lesbian is a woman who wants to fall in love with or is in love with another woman in a very special way.

### **How does someone know if they are gay? At what age do you become gay?**

Some people may realize they are gay when they are teenagers, while others may not figure it out until they are much older. Being gay has to do with a feeling deep inside of you. (Note: People who are LGBT often say they may have felt different when they were younger but that they didn't identify this feeling of difference with being gay until they were teenagers or older.)

### **Are you born LGBT?**

People don't know for sure. Scientists have not been able to agree about why some people are LGBT. However, most scientists believe that sexual orientation is just a part of who you are when you are born. (According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "Sexual orientation probably is not determined by any one factor but by a combination of genetic, hormonal and environmental influences. In recent decades, biologically based theories have been favored by experts."<sup>1</sup>)

### **Is it a choice?**

No, it is not a choice. People don't choose to be gay or not. As people grow older they become aware of feeling attracted to others, whether those feelings are for someone of the same gender, a different gender or both. (According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "Sexual orientation is usually established during early childhood."<sup>2</sup>)

### **Are there any people of color who are gay?**

Yes. The media may often focus on white people who are gay; however, there is a long history of LGBT people in communities of color. Here are just a few people of color who are LGBT: Bayard Rustin, who worked very closely with and helped out Martin Luther King Jr., was gay. A Latina lesbian sheriff, Lupe Valdez, was elected in Dallas County, Texas. B.D. Wong, a famous Chinese-American actor who has been on TV and in movies and theater, is gay. He was the voice for Colonel Shang in *Mulan*. Finally, Beyoncé has spoken about her gay uncle who helped raise her.

### **If you know someone or are friends with someone who is gay, will that make you gay?**

No, knowing someone who is gay will not make you gay. Being gay is something that comes from deep inside you. People who are LGBT know a lot of people who are not LGBT, but that hasn't changed who they are.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara L. Frankowski, American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Adolescence, "Clinical Report: Sexual Orientation and Adolescents," *PEDIATRICS*, June 2004 (pp. 1827-1832). Available at: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/113/6/1827>  
<sup>2</sup> Frankowski (2004).

### ***If a girl plays with boys all the time or a boy plays with girls, does that make them gay?***

No, it does not. Some girls like the activities that more boys are doing and therefore prefer to play with boys more often. Some boys prefer the activities that more of the girls are doing and therefore prefer to play with girls.

### ***Can animals be gay?***

Yes, they can. Among the hundreds of different kinds of animal species around the world, there are some animals that are attracted to others of the same sex — from rams to penguins to Japanese monkeys (macaques).<sup>3</sup> (See the picture book *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson.)

### ***Can doctors make someone straight?***

No, you cannot change whether someone is gay or straight. These are feelings that come from deep inside of you. (According to the president of the American Psychiatric Association, “There is no scientific evidence that reparative or conversion therapy is effective in changing a person’s sexual orientation. ... There is, however, evidence that this type of therapy can be destructive.”<sup>4</sup> Also see *Just the Facts: Sexual Orientation & Youth: A Primer for Principals, Educators & School Personnel*.)

### ***Why do kids always use the word “gay” to put someone down?***

Many children use the word “gay” that way because that is the only way that they have heard it used. Often children don’t know what it really means. They think that they can bother other children by using it. It’s not OK to use “gay” or “fag” as a put-down.

### ***What does “fag” mean?***

The word “fag” is a slang term for “gay.” It is usually used when someone is trying to be mean. It is not OK to use this word. It hurts people’s feelings when it is used as a put-down.

### ***What’s a dyke?***

The word “dyke” is a slang term for “lesbian.” It is often used when someone is trying to be mean. Sometimes kids use this word to insult a girl who acts tough, is strong or who stands up for herself, especially if she is standing up to a boy. Sometimes kids use this word to insult two girls who like each other a lot whether or not they are lesbians. It is not OK to use this word. It hurts people’s feelings when it is used as a put-down. (Note: There are some lesbians who have reclaimed the word “dyke” to use it in a positive way to identify themselves.)

### ***What if my religion says it is wrong to be gay?***

Every faith tradition is different. Even in the same religion people sometimes believe different things. However, they all believe in treating people kindly. Here at school we try to respect everyone’s faith. But we also need to remember that each person has a right to be respected. So, sometimes we have a belief from our tradition that we follow while at the same time we try to respect other people even if they believe something different from us. This would be a good thing to talk about with your family or someone from your religion that you trust. There are LGBT people in every faith tradition around the world. There are many religious communities that welcome LGBT people. (Note: For more information see *Welcoming Religious Organizations and Resources* on page K15.)

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance, Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*, St. Martin’s Press, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> “APA Maintains Reparative Therapy Not Effective,” *Psychiatric News*, Jan. 15, 1999. Available at: [www.psych.org/pnews/99-01-15/therapy.html](http://www.psych.org/pnews/99-01-15/therapy.html).

***My grandma says it's bad to have two moms.***

People have lots of different ideas about families. Your grandma is not the only one who thinks that. There are many kinds of families. Some have a mom and a dad. Some have two moms. Some have one mom. 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.

***Do gay men act like girls? Do lesbians act like boys?***

Some gay men and some heterosexual men do appear more feminine and some lesbians do appear more masculine. At the same time, some gay men appear very masculine and some lesbians appear very feminine. You can't tell just by how someone acts whether or not they are gay. There are football players who are gay and there are ballet dancers who are lesbians. (Note: Teachers may want to help their students think about traditional images of masculinity and femininity/boys and girls.)

***If girls play sports or if boys play with dolls, does that mean they are gay?***

No, it does not. Some girls love to be active and enjoy sports and competition. Some boys like to play with dolls. (Note: For further discussion see Gender Identity and Stereotypes: The Impact on Children on page 124.)

***Can you tell if someone is gay or lesbian just by how they look?***

No, you can't. Most LGBT people can't be identified by physical appearance or by what they wear any more than anybody else. Being LGBT is not limited to just one type of person. There are LGBT people of all ages, cultural backgrounds, races, religions and nationalities, just like all people. They work in all occupations and live in all parts of the country.

***Didn't that person used to be a man? Why does he look like a woman now?***

Yes, she was once a man. Some people who were born as boys or men say they always felt like a girl or a woman on the inside. As an adult they decide to make their outside appearance look like a woman so that their body and their feelings inside match. They believe that they will be happier to have what they look like on the outside match what they feel on the inside. (Note: This all could be said in reverse if the question were about a woman who had transitioned to be a man.) (For more information see: *No Dumb Questions*, a documentary about three young sisters and their transgender aunt.)

***Do gay men or lesbians have kids?***

Yes, many LGBT people have children.

***Don't you need a woman and a man to have a baby?***

Children come into families in many different ways — sometimes through birth, sometimes through adoption. Children are raised in many different ways. Some children have a mom and a dad, some a mom, some a dad and some have two moms or two dads. What's important is to have a parent or parents who love and care for you. (Note: If you have a child with two dads or two moms in your classroom, it is helpful to know how his/her parents talk about their family. This will help you respond to other students' questions.)

***How can two men have children?***

Sometimes two men can bring a child into their family through adoption. Sometimes two men will raise children together because one of the men was married to a woman before and had children with her. Sometimes gay men make a family with a woman.

***How can a kid have two dads?***

Families are made up in many different ways. Some children live in a family where there are two dads. Their dads are the ones who make a home for them, take care of them and love them.

***How do two women have a baby – don't you need a man?***

Children can come into a two-mom family through either birth or adoption, just like with other families.

***How can a family have two moms? Which one is the real mom?***

They both are. Both moms take care of the children and love them. 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. In some families the adults are grandparents, other relatives or guardians.

***Why doesn't she have a dad? Doesn't she miss having a dad?***

Because she has two moms instead. They are her parents. Sometimes kids wish for things they don't have but see that others have. It may be that some kids who don't have a dad wish that they had one, but others do not. Conversely, some children with a mom and a dad have remarked, "It's not fair that s/he gets to have two moms. I wish I did."

***Will someone be gay because her moms are gay (lesbian)?***

No. Children will grow up to be who they are born to be. Having LGBT parents does not make a child become LGBT. (Most people who are LGBT were raised by heterosexual parents.)

***Will I be gay if I play with someone who has two moms or two dads?***

No. You are always going to be who you are, no matter whom you play with. Being LGBT or straight is something that's inside a person. No one else can put it there.

***For children with two moms or two dads another student may ask: Are their parents married?***

Depending on where you live the answer would be different. In Massachusetts, the answer could be, "Yes." In other states, students may be answered in different ways, such as: "It is like they are married. They are committed to being together. They love each other and take care of each other. They are raising their children together. They are a family." (Note: For more detailed questions and answers on marriage, see "Can two women or two men get married?" on page C10. For more background information on marriage equality, see page K10.)

***Angela's mom and dad just got divorced, and now her dad is involved with a man. What's that all about?***

When children's parents get divorced, sometimes their parents will get involved with other people. Sometimes that person is of the same gender. Maybe Angela's dad knew that he was attracted to (or liked) men before. Maybe he didn't. The important thing is that no matter whom he gets involved with, he still loves Angela, and he is still her dad.

When parents divorce, the adults usually work things out to be sure that children still see both of them. All new things take getting used to. What's most important is for everyone to have opportunities to create and maintain relationships that are healthy, caring and respectful of one another. Parents still love their children and want to include them in their life as much as possible. (For additional resources see [www.colage.org](http://www.colage.org) or [www.straightspouse.org](http://www.straightspouse.org).)

***What if a young boy says, "I want to marry Willie," or a young girl says, "I want to marry Melanie"?***

I know you are really good friends with Willie (or Melanie). I know you have a long time to figure out who you will marry!

***Can girls marry girls or boys marry boys?***

No, children cannot get married! Grownups, on the other hand, create families in many ways. Many grownups live their lives in couples and take care of one another. Being married is one way to do this. In some places women can marry women and men can marry men. In some places, they cannot because there is no law that says they can. But people who love each other can live together, take care of one another and be a family, with or without children.

***Why do gay and lesbian people have rainbow flags or rainbow stickers?******What does it mean?***

The rainbow flag or stickers show support for LGBT people. Anyone can use them to show their support. The rainbow flag is also a symbol of LGBT pride. It was designed to represent the diversity of the LGBT community. Uses of symbols such as flags are common for many people. For example, the American flag is often used as both a symbol of the United States and to show support for the United States.

***What does the pink triangle mean?***

The pink triangle is used as a symbol to represent or support LGBT people. (Note: In the concentration camps during World War II an upside down pink triangle was used to identify gay male prisoners. If you have taught or discussed the Holocaust on any level, it's worthwhile to explain the origin of the pink triangle and make the connection between different kinds of bigotry and persecution.)