Why Inclusive Sex Ed Is So Important

Attitudes of teachers and staff members have a huge impact on creating a safe environment for LGBTQ+ students.

Jennifer Fink on July 19, 2017

Sex ed curriculum has changed drastically over the years, but the influence of teachers and staff has never been more critical. As our society has become more open about gender and sexuality, inclusive sex ed has become a pressing issue.

According to GLSEN's 2015 National School Climate Survey report, more than 50 percent of surveyed LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe in school. Fifty-six percent said they've heard homophobic remarks at school—*from teachers and school staff.* In addition, more than 60 percent have heard negative remarks about gender expression, also *from teachers and school staff*.

According to sex education experts, most schools' sex ed courses gloss over or completely ignore LGBTQ+ sex and relationships. Think about it: Do the sex ed classes at your school talk about same-sex relationships? In the same way they cover heterosexual relationships?

Teachers have a huge responsibility to educate themselves and be positive role models in order to provide a safe environment for all students.

Inclusion vs. exclusion

In the U.S. right now, there is no federal mandate which dictates the essential components of sex education in schools. Decisions about sex ed are typically made at the local level. As a result, the quality and content of sex education varies greatly. Some schools use comprehensive sex ed curricula; others take an abstinence-based approach. But there's one thing most school sex ed programs have in common. Most are heteronormative, meaning that they assume heterosexuality as the norm.

That's a problem, for two reasons:

1. LGBTQ+ kids need information about puberty, relationships, and safe sex too. "If we want young people to grow up healthy and safe, they need medically and age-appropriate sex ed," says Elizabeth Schroeder, EdD, MSW, a sexuality education and youth development expert.
2. Children and teens who don't hear or see their concerns represented stop listening and shut down. Most significantly, they get the message that there's something "wrong" with them. "Early on, you have the seeds of internalized stigma," says Dennis Flores, PhD, ACRN, teachers—is simple recognition and validation.

"Most LGBTQ+ youth are not going be asking about the nitty gritty of sex. They're much more concerned about being recognized as an individual with a distinct

Trending


34 Must-Share Poems for Middle School and High School


42 of the Best Books for Celebrating Earth Day


55 Easy Science Experiments Using Materials You Already Have On Hand


28 Awesome Team-Building Games and Activities for Kids

much more concerned about being recognized as an individual with a distinct personality," Flores says.

How classroom teachers can create an inclusive climate

The first step towards a more inclusive school culture is simple, frank recognition that LGBTQ+ people and relationships exist. "When the teacher makes an acknowledgment that some girls will marry boys and some will marry other women, with no value judgments, that makes a difference," Flores says. Using non-gendered language when discussing relationships— substituting the word "sweetheart" for "boyfriend" or "girlfriend"—helps too.

"The language a teacher uses in incredibly important," says Al Vernacchio, Upper school English and sexuality teacher at Friends' Central School in Wynnewood, PA.

Here's what inclusion might look like at the classroom level:

Elementary school:

"At this level, we're talking about general respect for differences," Vernacchio says. Talking about different kinds of families, including mom and dad families, families with two dads or two moms, single parent families, and grandparent-headed families.

Giving kids space to explore their interests free of rigid gender expectations. Make sure that students know that it's okay to play with any toy, and quickly intervene if other children are calling a boy "girly," for instance because he's playing with the toy kitchen.

Middle school:

As kids approach and move through puberty, they need reminders that everybody's body is different, and that's okay. Kids this age begin to experience sexual desire and are looking for guidance regarding how to ask someone out and how to show affection.

"These are skills that everybody needs," Vernacchio says. Don't make assumptions about students' sexuality or gender expression; use inclusive language.

High school:

"The number one things teens want to know is, *Am I normal? Am I OK?*" Schroeder says. Use matter-of-fact, inclusive language in your classroom—and turn homophobic or other offensive comments by students into teachable moments.

Integrated, inclusive sex ed

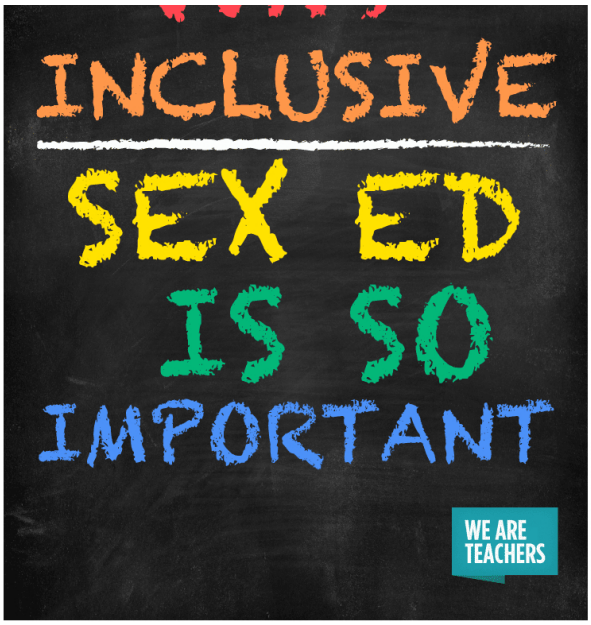
Sexual education courses should not relegate LGBTQ+ topics to one chapter or discussion. Such an approach conveys the message that LGBTQ+ is "other," while heterosexual relationships, sex, and cis gender expression are normal.

"One of the first things I do when I check out a new human sexuality textbook is look to see if there's a separate chapter of homosexuality," Vernacchio says. "Books that integrate LGBTQ+ issues into the fabric of the curriculum are better." (However, he notes, they're not easy to come by.)

Sexual information—including discussions of safe sex, sexual orientation, and relationships—should occur in such a way that they are applicable to everyone in the room. So instead of using the terms "male condom" and "female condom," try "internal condom" and "external condom." Rather than emphasizing role of condoms in preventing pregnancy, say something like, "Heterosexual couples may use a condom as a means of birth control, but condoms are incredibly important for anybody who is interacting sexually with another person." When discussing relationships, be sure to use same-sex examples as well as heterosexual examples.

"Our job as teachers is to provide information that's accessible to our students," Vernacchio says. "Sexuality education is for everyone."

For more information on how you can help create an inclusive sex ed curriculum in your school, visit Advocates for Youth to download "Rights, Respect and Responsibility"—a free comprehensive, inclusive sex education curriculum.

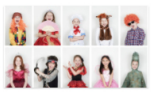


Posted by Jennifer Fink

Jennifer L.W. Fink is a freelance writer who specializes in education, health & parenting. She's also the founder of BuildingBoys.net.

All Posts Website

Related Content


7 Tips for Creating a More Gender-Inclusive Classroom


5 John Green Quotes to Help Your Students Survive High School


An Open Letter From a Teenager to High School Teachers Everywhere

50 Tips and Tricks for High School Classroom Management

Explore WeAreTeachers

12 Meaningful Earth Day Activities for Every Grade


35 End of Year Assignments and Activities for Every Grade


11 DIY Fidgets You Can Make on a Budget


22 Unique Ways to Introduce Yourself to Your Students, In Person or Online

Leave a reply

You must be logged in to post a comment.