LGBTQ+ Content for Early Childhood Educators: A Primer

As an early-childhood educator, you already have the skills to be a caring, affirming adult in a child's life. This guide offers tools and guidance to make your classroom space even more inclusive of students and families of different LGBTQ+ identities.

> *Why is this relevant to you as an Early Childhood Educator?*
> - LGBTQ+-affirming spaces are important for students, staff, and families who are LGBTQ+, for those with LGBTQ+ loved ones, and for those who are in community with LGBTQ+ people (hint: that's everyone!)
> - Norms about gender and sexuality come up in all classrooms! Young children develop gender identity as young as age 2-3. 80% of transgender adults say that they knew their gender identity before the age of ten.
> - Many LGBTQ+ youth know that something is "different" about them, but do not yet have the language or an affirmative community to articulate their LGBTQ+ identity.

Childhood Stages of Exploration[1]

Stages of gendered development are not "biologically determined" or "natural psychology" - they are stages that exist within a cultural context. In other words, children do not innately know about gender stereotypes; they internalize messages about gender expectations from the world around them. (e.g. children won't say "only girls play with dolls" if we do away with that messaging.)

- **Ages 2-3**
  - Aware of physical differences between bodies.
  - Conscious of the "gender" of toys and clothing.
  - Capable of understanding non-binary gender identities.[2]
- **Ages 3-4**
  - Associate "boy" and "girl" with specific traits and behaviors.
  - Play starts to be segregated by gender.
- **Ages 4-6**
  - Hold scripted, rigid ideas of gender e.g. "only girls play with dolls."
  - Most play happens with members of their own sex.
- **Ages 6-8**
  - Distance gender identity from gender expression.[3]
  - Expanded attitude toward hairstyles and clothing

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[1] Source: Transgender Training Institute, Reimagine Gender

[2] NONBINARY (adj): A gender identity that specifically rejects the notion of binary gender. Can sometimes be used interchangeably with genderqueer. LGBTQ+ Terminology.

[3] GENDER IDENTITY (n): A person's inner understanding of the gender(s) with which they identify. This is each person's unique knowing or feeling, and is separate from a person's physical body or appearance (although often related).

GENDER EXPRESSION (n): The manner in which one outwardly expresses, signals, or performs their gender. Can encompass appearance (clothing, haircut, makeup, etc.), behavior, mannerisms, etc.
LGBTQ+ Terminology.

RESPONDING TO PUSHBACK

When people say: "LGBTQ+ topics are not age-appropriate," know this: No one is too young to be reminded that their whole selves have your affirmation and love. We talk about gender, identity, and relationships all the time ("he will break all the girls' hearts when he's older!" or "your mommy and daddy are having another baby!"). LGBTQ+ identities are no more "adult" than cisgender or straight ones. Treating them as "adult topics" increases stigma.

If a child is ready to formulate a question, they are ready for an answer to that question. Saying, "I'll tell you when you're older" keeps an air of mystery that will cause children to seek out the information themselves from unreliable sources. Providing healthy answers is the move instead. Of course, it's fine to say, "I'm not sure how to answer that. Let's research it together / let me get back to you."

Conversations about LGBTQ+ identities do not have to center around sex – because LGBTQ+ people experience the world beyond sex! You can discuss identity, relationships, and bodies – and a child does not have to be LGBTQ+ or out to you to have these conversations. You can discuss television shows you're watching, or books you're reading, or media you're consuming with LGBTQ+ characters, as you would any other conversation.

When people say: "these ideas will influence students to think that they are gay/gender expansive," know this: There is no way to "cause" a person to hold one identity or another.[4] Hiding information cannot erase LGBTQ+ people; it can only cause distress. Sharing information and providing words for experiences is educational and validating.

CLASSROOM PRACTICES FOR LGBTQ-AFFIRMING SCHOOLS

Classroom Norms

- Assume that there are students of all identities in your classroom, even if they are not out to you.
- Remember gender expression and interests do not necessarily equal identity! Just because someone is doing a stereotypically gendered activity, it doesn't mean anything about their internal sense of self. For example, a boy playing with dolls might later come out as gay, or might just be exploring gendered play. Affirming this exploration, regardless of the child's identity, helps children feel validated by adults in their lives.
- Check your language and practices for assumptions.
- Challenge transphobic/homophobic comments and assumptions from students.
- Set up clear classroom expectations for navigating conflict, incidents of harm, and relationship-repair.[5]

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[4] Your actions cannot influence your child's inherent identity. On the contrary: the harmful practice of "conversion therapy" – which tries to adjust LGBTQ individuals "back to being straight and cis" not only does not work, it has been deemed harmful by every reputable mental health organization across the globe. It is impossible to "pray the gay away" or to affect someone else's identity in any way.

[5] For example, the Ouch/Oops Framework:
diversityinclusioncenter.com/archives/ouch_files/Archives/Ouch_Vol5No1.html

- Know your school's policies on:[6]
  - Nondiscrimination, anti-harassment, and anti-bullying.
  - Access to gendered programming and facilities: What gendered programs or spaces exist? Do they need to be gendered?
  - Dress code and ritual wear.
  - The scope of privacy and confidentiality for youth, adults, and families.
  - How incidents of harm or perceived harm should be addressed.

Visual Displays of Values

Clear symbols of LGBTQ+ belonging communicate to children and parents that your classroom is welcoming to people of all identities.

- Examples:
  - Signage and stickers, Pride flags
  - Posters on LGBTQ+ Jewish Heroes
  - Poster of Seven Jewish Values for Inclusive Community

Representation: Windows and Mirrors

- "Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange… When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books."[7]
- Ask yourself, "What windows and mirrors are present in my classroom? Whose voices and images are dominant? Whose are missing?"

Imaginative Play & Modeling Possibility

There are many ways to make your classroom an open and affirming environment where youth can explore and play. Your classroom might be the only place where they get this opportunity.

- Consider: What clothing do your classroom dolls wear? What jobs do story characters have? How can these "correct" gendered assumptions, or offer different examples of gender presentation?
- Encourage students to dress in ways that feel good for them. It's developmentally normal if their outfits or hairstyles change daily, weekly, etc.
- Describe family structures that aren't only a mother and father (e.g. single parent, two mothers, two fathers, non-binary parents, inter-generational caregivers)

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[6] Use Keshet's Institutional Self-Assessment/Audit Tool for LGBTQ+ Inclusion to assess your school's policies. Reach out to Keshet at education@keshetonline.org if you have questions or need support in crafting LGBTQ-affirming policies.

[7] Rudine Sims Bishop: Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors

- Many of the ways that English speakers communicate can be unintentionally gendered along the binary.[8] Our use of everyday language can be a key way that we create an affirming experience for students.
- Some options for language beyond the binary:

Instead of:	*Try:*
"Good morning, *boys and girls*"	"Good morning, *everyone / friends / children*"
"Take this [item] home to your *mom and dad*"	"Take this [item] home to your *parent / grown up / adult*"
"Please form two lines, *one for boys and one for girls*"	"Please form two lines based on *Jan-Jun and Jul-Dec birthdays / those wearing warm or cool colors / those who love salty or sweet foods*"
"Gather around *boys and girls*"	"Gather around *artists / explorers / scientists / learners*"

Teaching Pronouns

- Create space for students to share what language they use for themselves.
- Explain pronouns[9] as:
    - "The words we call someone when we aren't calling them by their name."
    - "Fill in the blank" words: For children under the age of 7, you can ask them to "fill in the blank sentence" or can call pronouns "feel-good words".
- Model sharing your pronouns and pronouns of characters/historical figures.
- Incorporate gender expansive pronouns naturally into sentences.
- Consistently use the language for people that they use, including in front of other students, parents, staff etc.

Answering Tough Questions

- Questions reflect where children are developmentally. If a child is ready to formulate a question, they are ready for an answer to that question. Saying, "I'll tell you when you're older" keeps an air of mystery that will encourage children to seek out the info themselves from unreliable sources. Providing healthy answers is the move instead. Of course, it's fine to say, "I'm not sure how to answer that. Let's research it together / let me get back to you."

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[8] GENDER BINARY (n): A system of thinking in which there are only two genders (man and woman). The gender binary posits these two genders as opposites and mutually exclusive, and forces all people in one of these two options. The gender and sex binaries are not universal and are not upheld by many cultures today and historically, including Talmudic Judaism. (For more on this, check out this article.) Western colonists have a history of forcibly imposing the gender binary on Indigenous and racialized people. LGBTQ+ Terminology.

[9] For more on pronouns, visit Keshet's resource: What's in a Pronoun?: Third-Person and All-Gender Pronouns

- Consider an affirming framework for answering questions, such as SOY: "Some people…Other people….You…" e.g. "Some people figure out their identities sooner, other people take a little longer. You might be in one of those groups, or somewhere in the middle."[10]
- Use matter-of-fact, anatomically correct answers that are inclusive of all bodies e.g. "a baby grows in a person's womb" instead of "a baby grows in a mommy's tummy." Note that this applies to speaking about bodies generally rather than one specific person's body without their permission.
- Weave in teaching about privacy and reinforcing boundaries to your classroom. It is not our job to share information about someone else's body (e.g. having questions about a child's anatomy). You could say, "It doesn't matter what someone's private parts are, we don't talk about it with other people. We don't question people's bodies, as that isn't appropriate/kind." Avoid a conversation like, "this student is transgender which means xyz about their body". Encourage staff to reach out to trans children's parents and check in on whether there is any language they would like you to use or that feel affirming to their child if students have questions.
- If a child has questions about their own body, you can keep your response low-key and curious, saying, "Thank you for telling me" or "Would you like to talk more about that?"

Signs of an Evolving Gender Identity?

- Remember that children do not inherently/innately know about gender stereotypes; they internalize messages about gender expectations from the world around them. (e.g. children won't say "only girls play with dolls" if we do away with that messaging.)
- Persistent, consistent, and insistent behavior may indicate settling into an identity beyond exploring gendered play.
- Lean into the child's autonomy; follow their lead.
- Be affirming and responsive, mindful of the influence of other adults in their lives. Make sure they are not feeling pressure to be one way or another but build language for diversity in the world that meets the need they are expressing at that time e.g. "You know, lots of people feel that way. Sometimes people grow up to be a gender different than what people think they are when they are little, and that is OK." Refer to your school's policy on parent communication and student confidentiality, and encourage your administration to reach out to the Keshet Education & Training Team with questions about crafting inclusive policy.
- If they do not in the end grow up gender-expansive in any way, that is fine! They will remember that trusted adults cared for them, and that no one made drama out of developmentally appropriate exploration. If they grow up trans/nonbinary/gender expansive, it will have been life changing to have gotten the support they needed.

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[10]Source: SharpSchool