



Making School Safe for **LGBT and Gender Non-conforming** Children

We Understand:

- ✓ The origins and nature of sexual orientation and gender identity are complex and for some, controversial.
- ✓ What is not controversial is that ALL MARYLAND STUDENTS deserve a safe and nurturing learning environment regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity and gender expression.
- ✓ **YOU** have **tremendous** power and opportunity to influence students' experience.





Objectives:

- ✓ Learn the lingo, so you'll feel comfortable speaking about sexual orientation and gender identity
- ✓ Understand the risks our LGBT children face at school
- ✓ Explore how you can support these kids, even if you don't agree or feel uncomfortable
- ✓ Arm you with resources: where you can go for help and support
- ✓ Play a game, tell some stories and save time for Q&A



Why? Because Our Youth Are at Risk



- **Suicide:** LGB youth are 2-3 times more likely to attempt suicide and trans people are 25 times more likely
- **Harassment:** 90% of LGBT kids experience verbal harassment; 25% experience physical harassment and assault; 65% of those victims never report it; 30% have skipped a day in the last month because of it; 25% drop out of school because of it
- **Homelessness:** One-quarter of children who come out to their parents are thrown out of their home due to conflicts with religious and moral values
- **Lower Academic Performance:** Those frequently harassed have lower GPA (2.7 vs. 3.1) and are less likely to pursue college
- **Straight Kids** perceived to be gay are at the same risk



Words Matter: Definitions



- **Romantic (or Sexual) Orientation:** A core aspect of our identity defining who we love and are attracted to; believed to be developed by adolescence
- **Heterosexism (heteronormative):** The assumption that our children are heterosexual and that being straight is “normal”
- **Lesbian:** A woman who is attracted to women
- **Gay:** A man who is attracted to men; also used as an umbrella term for the lesbian, gay and bisexual community
- **Bisexual:** Someone who is attracted to both genders
- **Pansexual:** Someone attracted to all gender identities



Words Matter: Definitions

- **Gender Assignment:** Based on body parts; how the doctor defines the baby's sex
- **Gender Identity:** Based on internal sense of who we are; it can appear very early, even pre-verbal. Can be clear and stable; can be fluid.
- **Gender Expression:** How we express our gender in dress, movement, gestures, etc. May be mildly different from what others expect of us or it may be so bold as to be considered "variant." AKA Gender Creative
- **Sexual or Romantic Orientation:** Who we love and are attracted to; completely unrelated to and independent of gender identity
- **Transgender or Trans:** An umbrella term for any person whose gender identity differs from their gender assignment
- **Cysgender:** When our gender assignment and identity agree
- **Stealth:** When a trans person does not want it know that he or she is transgender



Questions We Often Ask



Is sexual orientation or gender identity a choice?

- Did you choose to be straight?
- Did you choose to be a man or a woman?

Is this just a phase?

- Has your sexual orientation changed?
 - Could you change it if you wanted to?
- Has your gender identity changed?
 - Could you change it if you wanted to?

Discovering Ourselves: Gender

An inherent and intrinsic part of who we are

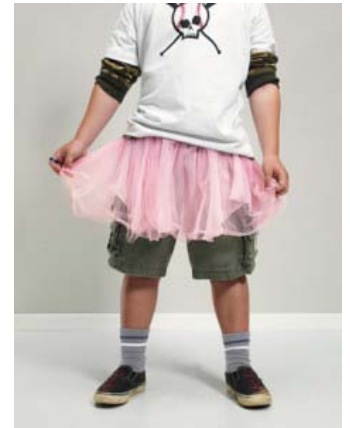
- First awareness of gender: very young, even preverbal
- Develops before and distinct from romantic orientation
- Expressed in clothing choice, toy choice and pretend play
- We give more room to girls who act like boys than we do to boys who act like girls
- Can be rigid or fluid, but cannot be changed
- For more gender fluid or less clear-cut gender identities, the understanding of oneself as “trans” may come in adolescence or even adulthood
- The same spectrum of people we find in all walks of life exist within the trans community. Some are flamboyant and outgoing; some are reserved; some painfully shy



Uncovering Social Influences: Gender

Much of our gender expectations are socially constructed and change over time.

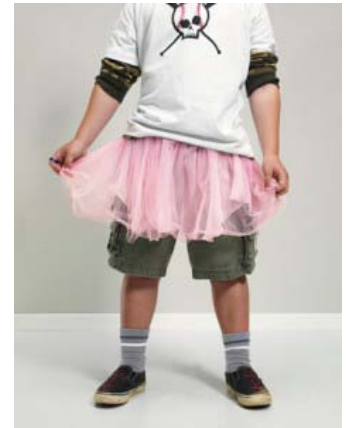
- Back in the 1950's and '60's, how many men wore earrings?
- How many women sported tattoos?
- How many do you see today?
- What foreign cultures can you think of that have different gender norms than the United States?



Can Gender Variance be Cured?

Reparative therapy does not work

- There is **no scientific evidence** that supporting a child's gender variance or cross-gender identity results in physical or psychological harm.
- There is **significant evidence** that lack of support leads to **suicidal ideation and even death**.



Plotting Ourselves on the Gender Spectrum

1. My birth gender was assigned as:

Female

Intersex

Male

2. My gender identity is:

Hear Me Roar

Woman

Gender Queer

Man

Macho

3. My gender expression is:

Feminine

Female

Androgynous

Male

Macho

4. My romantic attraction is to:

Macho

Sensitive Men

Androgynous

Sporty Women

Feminine



Discovering Ourselves: Romantic Orientation



First awareness is younger than you might think

- First awareness of same-sex attraction is in elementary school (boys at age 9; girls at age 10)
- First same-sex experience is in middle to high school (boys at 12-14; girls at 14-15)
- Self-identifying as a lesbian or gay comes in high school (boys at 14-16; girls at 15-16)

It Isn't Easy Being an LGBT Child

We assume our children are straight

- LGBT children tell us they know from a very young age (usually pre-school) that they are different, but cannot articulate how they are different for many years.
- Why do we never ask our straight children if it is a stage or if they are “sure”?
- We can help our children articulate their gender identity and romantic orientation, so they know they are not “freaks,” but part of nature’s great diversity.



Challenges of LGBT Development

LGBT youth must develop a healthy and integrated identity

- In spite of their greater risk for harassment
- Amid a wealth of negative stereotypes
- In the midst of prejudice
- With few role models
- With no help to articulate or explore themselves in public
- Often without family support



Coming Out

Gay and lesbian youth who are more open about their romantic orientation experience

- Lower rates of depression
- Better psychological adjustment
- Greater satisfaction and higher self-concept

As well as

- More negative peer pressure
- Higher levels of stress
- Increased discrimination and harassment



Transgender and Gender-Variant Youth



Have a great need for support

- Are often diagnosed with ADD, anxiety, depression, OCD and other illnesses and learning disabilities before their gender identity is discovered
- Lack knowledgeable and accepting providers
- Often find themselves bullied at school and shamed at home
- Extremely high risk for school failure, homelessness, substance abuse, self-harm and suicide
- Puberty can trigger a crisis
- Rarely have the opportunity to transition in private
- Often cannot hide who they are

Creating a Safe Environment



Try to avoid prejudice and fear.

- Don't presume to know someone's orientation. And don't assume heterosexuality.
- Never "out" an LGBT child to others, especially to parents. Remember, home is not safe for many of these kids.
- Don't worry that by listening, you can influence a child's sexual orientation or gender identity. It cannot be done.
- Don't turn a deaf ear to gay-bashing jokes or hate speech. Assert that name-calling and hateful speech is offensive to you, just like racial slurs, and will not be tolerated.

Creating a Safe Environment



Try to offer a safe space

- Be respectful of differing sexual orientations and identities. Practice a diversity-centered approach to individual differences on a variety of issues.
- If a student comes out to you, listen and convey acceptance. Be patient. Coming out is a process, not a once-and-done thing.
- Deal with feelings. Most GLBTQ youth feel alone, afraid and guilty. Allow them to express feelings and thoughts that are often in conflict.
- Identify and provide appropriate referrals for support

Creating a Safe Environment



What YOU can do is POWERFUL!

- **One moment** of you stepping up on behalf of a child can **mean the world** to that child.
- Begin to notice and point out bullying and stereotypes based on gender identity.
- Say the words: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.
- Include lesbian, gay and trans people and their history in your curricula, on posters and on your walls.
- Volunteer to run your Gay Straight Alliance, even in middle school (same-sex attraction can begin as young as age 9).
- Intervene when you hear gay, faggot, dyke, freak, etc.



We Cannot Remain Silent

Now that we know what we know



**“Silence encourages the tormentor,
never the tormented.”**

--- Elie Weisel, *Night*



What to say to “That’s so gay!”

What words can *you* use?

- It’s not okay to say that.
- That is hurtful and disrespectful.
- I don’t think you mean to call all gays and lesbians stupid, do you?

How can you define the terms?

Being gay is about who you love (just like being straight is).

Being trans is about who you are.



Words Matter: Speak Out



It's hard to be a gender non-conforming child.

Reach out. Don't be afraid. Talk to the child; see what comes up....

- You say you have the best of both worlds: you're both a boy and a girl. Wow! Do you want to talk about that? It sounds pretty magical, but I bet it could feel confusing too, huh?
- Do ever feel like you're just not who everyone thinks you are?
- Do you like being a girl (boy)?
- It's okay to like girl things better than boy things and still be a boy. What makes a toy a "girl toy" or a "boy toy" anyhow?
- I have short hair and I'm a girl; does my short hair make me less of a girl?



Words Matter: Speak Out



It's hard to be a parent to a gender non-conforming child. Reach out. Don't be afraid. Often it will have nothing to do with being transgender. Sometimes it will.

- I saw Jimmy playing Barbies with the girls yesterday. It's so good to see a young child so comfortable just being himself. But I saw him getting teased too. Is he okay? How do you feel about his creative side?
- I understand Susie like to pretend she's Sam while she's here at school. Isn't that courageous of her? Do ever wonder if it's more than just play? Are you comfortable with her exploration?



Words Matter: Do's & Don'ts

Try not to use these words:

- Sexual preference or alternative life style
- Homosexual
- Confused about their gender; *used to be* a boy; or is *really* a girl

Instead, try to use these:

- Sexual or romantic orientation
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
- Knows herself to be a girl or himself to be a boy
- The gender pronoun the child prefers



Words Matter: What Can You Say Instead?



Instead of this:

- Do you have boyfriend (or girlfriend)?

Try this:

- Do you have someone special?

Instead of this:

- Ladies and gentlemen, let's get settled in.

Try this:

- Students, fellow humans, children, let's get settled in.

There is Help Out There!

- PFLAG Howard County, Baltimore County, Frederick and Carroll County (and coming soon to the Eastern Shore)
 - Parents' forums
 - Education and support
 - Rainbow youth groups
- Online support
- Welcoming congregations
- Resources, videos and books



Resources

Information

- *GLSEN Safe Space Kit, 2009 School Climate Survey, K-12 curricula* (www.glsen.org)
- *Supportive Families, Healthy Children, Family Acceptance Project*, San Francisco State University
- *Teaching Tolerance* (www.tolerance.org)
- *The Transgender Child*, by Stephanie Brill
- *Gender Born Gender Made*, by Diane Ehrensaft PhD
- *Lesbian & Gay Youth: Care and Counseling*, by Caitlin Ryan & Donna Futterman

Support

- PFLAG (www.pflagmd.org or www.pflag.org)
- Family Acceptance Project (familyproject.sfsu.edu)
- Gender Spectrum (www.genderspectrum.org)
- Trans Youth Family Allies (www.imatyfa.org)



Questions

