

# RESPONDING...

simply to questions from children in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cycles of elementary school

Resource guide for  
**+ OLDER kids**

Nowadays, children hear about gay and lesbian people at younger ages than in past years. Lesbian and gay people are mentioned more frequently in the newspapers, on the radio and on TV. Some children have parents or other family members who are gay and lesbian.

Children also commonly hear the word gay used as an insult. When children's questions go unanswered or when homophobic insults go unchallenged by adults who are present, they presume that homosexuality is bad and that it is fair game to make fun of it or to use it as an insult.

**Teachers and educators can prepare themselves to answer students' questions in ways that are both honest and age-appropriate.**

People working with children sometimes find it is difficult to answer their questions simply because they have not had time to think about a simple and natural response. Many professionals don't have much experience talking about gay and lesbian topics. Not very long ago, the words *gay* and *lesbian* weren't spoken or, if they were, they were used pejoratively or furtively.

This section is intended to help those working with children in schools to reflect on how to answer students' questions so that they feel better prepared and more comfortable when the situation occurs. Certain of these questions will arise in some schools but not in others. These are questions that students have asked and teachers have responded to in the past.

It is important for teachers and educators, to be able to identify the essence of each child's question and to be able to respond in an age-appropriate, clear and respectful manner.

We have assembled a number of the questions asked by children from 9 to 12 years of age. We suggest a variety of answers which should be adapted to your own personality and the nature of your group. You can also check a student's understanding by asking, "Does that answer your question?"

Some of the possible answers are longer than those you will provide, while others provide different ways of answering the same question.

Some students will use slang or unacceptable language in asking a question since they do not know the correct terms. Your answer should employ the more appropriate vocabulary. If they use slang or inappropriate language, you should be sure what the child means by it. Then you can indicate clearly to the entire group that, as with other subjects, certain words are acceptable and others are not when we talk about homosexuality. Humiliating language is hurtful and unacceptable.

Direct answers show respect for the honesty and curiosity of the child. Some children may have thought about discrimination in the context of, for example, the values of fairness, a personal experience of exclusion or humiliation, or positive relations with others. These can be recounted in the discussion to generate empathy and demonstrate problem resolution.

**On occasion, you will not have an answer to a student's question. That's fine. You can answer, "I don't have an answer for that right now, but I'll find out and get back to you."**

Try not to appear offended by questions you find shocking. That will only reinforce the desire to embarrass you or the other students in the class. 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.

## NOTES

# Questions

## EXAMPLES OF CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS WITH SOME SUGGESTED ANSWERS

### 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 have a loving relationship with another man. A gay woman, or a lesbian, wants to have a loving relationship with another woman. A gay or homosexual person may want to have a special relationship with another person of the same sex, to live with that person, and to have a family with children.

*Note: Answer simply. Focus on relationship and family. With older children, you can mention that they are "men who are attracted to and want to have a loving relationship with other men" or "women who are attracted to and want to have a loving relationship with other women."*

### What is a lesbian?

The word "lesbian" describes a woman who is attracted by another woman and wants to have a loving relationship with a woman. You can also point out that a lesbian is a woman who is or wants to be in love with another woman in a very special way.

### How can a person know if he / she is gay? How old are you when you become gay?

Some people become aware they are gay as adolescents or young adults, while for some others it is much later. Being gay is a feeling that is deep inside you.

*Note: Gays or lesbians often say they became aware of their difference much earlier, but didn't associate that feeling or difference with being gay until adolescence or later.*

### Are people gay or lesbian from the time they are born?

We don't know for sure. Science has not come to any agreement on the reason some people are gay or lesbian. However, most scientists believe that sexual orientation is at least partially something you are born with.

*Note: According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "Sexual orientation is probably not determined by any one factor but by a combination of genetic, hormonal, and environmental influences. For the last several decades, specialists have been inclined to favour theories based on biology."*

### Is it something people choose?

No, it is not a choice. People do not choose to be gay or not. As they grow up, people realise that they are attracted to other people, whether of the same sex, the opposite sex, or both.

*Note: According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "Sexual orientation is generally determined in early childhood."*

### If I know someone who is gay or if I'm friends with a gay person, does that mean I'm friends?

No, having a gay friend or acquaintance doesn't make you gay. Being gay is something that is deep down inside you. Gay people know a lot of people who aren't gay, but that doesn't change who they are.

### Can animals be gay?

Yes, it's possible. Among the hundreds of different species of animals on earth, some are attracted to others of the same sex, from rams to penguins, not to mention macaques.

### Can a doctor make someone a heterosexual?

No, it is impossible to change a person, whether gay or heterosexual. Those feelings are deeply rooted.

*Note: According to the president of the American Academy of Paediatrics, "There is no scientific proof that conversion or correction therapy is effective in modifying a person's sexual orientation. (...) On the contrary, there is evidence that such therapy can be destructive."*

### Why do children always use the word *gay* to put someone down?

A lot of children use the word *gay* this way because that is the only way they have ever heard it used. Often, they don't know exactly what it means, but they want to hurt someone by using it. They think they can get to other children by using it. It is not acceptable to use the words *gay* and *lesbian* as insults. It hurts everybody.

### What do the words *queer* and *faggot* mean?

The words *queer* and *faggot* are slang words that mean gay. They are usually intended as insults and are not acceptable. They are hurtful.



