

Responding to Sexism, Homophobia and Transphobia: Tips for Parents and Educators of Younger Children

Preparing children to navigate diversity, and equipping them to treat everyone with equitable levels of respect and dignity, begins by interrupting restrictive ideas about gender, instances of gender policing, and also attitudes that are rooted in sexism, homophobia and transphobia.

It also means engaging children in a dialogue which asks them to critically reflect upon the messages they receive from others, and seizing moments that expand their world perspective.

Potential Challenges to Entering These Conversations with Children

Children Who Challenge Your Intervention

As children start to internalize messages they receive from the larger world to guide and assert their own identities as gendered beings, society's strict adherence to the gender binary and its standards of behaviour and interests for boys and girls will be of huge influence.

Due to a bombardment of sources telling children their identity as a boy or a girl hinges on what clothes they wear or don't wear, how they style their hair, and how they act, you may find that they challenge your counter message of gender equality and universality.

This is normal, and only signals more so how important your interruptions of these attitudes are. The best way to manage children who push back against your interventions is the classic "broken record" strategy.

If you, have stated that toys are for everyone, and that there is no such thing as "girls' toys" and "boys' toys" then calmly, and purposefully continue to repeat your message. There is no need to come up with anything new, just stick to your assertion until its heard, or it's time to walk away.

Preparing Allies for Situations Where They Do Not Speak Up

Often when adults prepare children to be allies, they equip them with the language to speak up and move from being a "bystander" to an "upstander."

However, we need to account for the feelings of guilt that may accrue if children know they could have spoken up, but due to circumstances were fearful about doing so or the moment passes too quickly and they said nothing.

In these situations children may feel that they have done something wrong by staying silent, so they won't tell an adult for fear of getting in trouble.

It needs to be communicated to children that it is normal to sometimes feel afraid to speak up, and it's okay if they wanted to but weren't able to when they tried. Everyone, even adults can sometimes get scared to stand up to bullies. If it happens that they don't speak up in the moment, they should still let an adult know, and ask the adult to do something about the bullying. They won't get in trouble by telling someone what happened, even if they didn't intervene.

Contextualizing the Conversation

Sometimes children respond best to multi-media based dialogue about social equality and allyship. As such, it is suggested that adults engage children in discussions by way of a video, story, or an event that already connects their attention to the topic you intend to discuss.

Gender Policing and Sexism

Disrupting Restrictive Gender Norms and Gender Policing

“You can’t play with dolls! Dolls are for girls!”

“You can’t be a princess. Only girls can be princesses!”

“You can’t play football! Football is for boys!”

Interrupting Instances of Gender Policing:

Example Responses for Adults:

Quick Responses:

- There is no such thing as “girls’ toys” or “boys’ toys.”
- All toys are for everyone.
- Toys are just toys! They don’t have a gender. You can like whatever toys interest you.
- Boys can be princesses, and girls can be princes. It doesn’t matter.
- Everyone has the right to play the games that they choose to play.

Conversational Responses:

- It’s true that some boys don’t like to play with dolls, but some boys do!
Just like some of you like to draw, and some of you don’t!
No one should have to pick and choose what they do just because they are a boy or a girl.
- Some girls like to be princesses, it’s true! But not *only* girls.
Why do you think boys can’t be princesses?
All children can be princesses! Just like all children can be princes, or super heroes!
Everyone deserves to be happy, and if being a princess makes you happy, then it doesn’t matter what your gender is!
- Acting in a certain way, like being interested in sports, is based on someone’s personality and interests, not on whether they are a boy or a girl.
Everyone has the right to play the games that they choose to.
It is not okay to exclude people.
I expect/ at [name of school] we expect you to treat everyone equally.

Empowering Allies:

Equipping Children with the Language to Interrupt Gender Policing:

What can you say if someone tells you, “You can’t have that! That’s for boys (or girls)!”

- There’s no such thing as “for boys” or “for girls.”
- Toys don’t have a gender. Anyone can play with them.
- That’s a problem for you, not for me.

Teaching Impact of Language and Phrases Rooted in Sexism

Calling someone, “a girl” or “girly” as a taunt, or meant as an insult.

Phrases such as, “You run like a girl!” “Don’t be such a girl!” “Quit acting so girly!”

Interrupting Instances of Gender Policing:

Example Responses for Adults:

Quick Responses:

- It is not okay to call someone a “girl” to tease them. It is hurtful because it implies that there’s something wrong with being a girl, and there is not.
- All people are equal. Being a girl is not an insult.
- All people are allowed to express themselves as they choose.
It is not up to you to decide how someone should act, or whether or not it is “girlish” or “boyish.”

Conversational Responses:

- When you call someone a girl to joke around, or to make someone feel bad, you are saying that being a girl is bad, or wrong.
This is disrespectful.
People of all genders are equals, and I expect you to treat all people as equal.
- To say, ‘you run like a girl’ is to say that girls are not as good at running as boys are.
How well you can run is not based on your gender.
Statements like that are hurtful, and are not acceptable.
- I heard you say, “Quit acting so girly!” I’m curious, what does that mean?
[Example responses: Well, he wanted to play the girl character in our game. Well, she was scared of getting dirty.]
Is [action specified] something that only girls/ boys experience?
I know lots of [people of all genders] who also [action specified], and that’s okay.
Also, to say that someone should *not* act girly is to say that being a girl is bad or wrong.
That is bullying, and not acceptable.

Empowering Allies:

Equipping Children with the Language to Interrupt Casual Sexism:

What if one of your classmates says to someone, “You’re such a girl!”

Or, what if someone tells you, “Hurry up! You’re running like a girl!”

What do you think you could do or say?

- Disrupt the insult:
 - So. There’s nothing wrong with being a girl. All genders are equally good and valid.
 - Being a girl is not an insult.

- Treat it as a compliment or statement of fact:
 - Thank you!
 - When I think “girl” I think strength, wisdom and power.
 - Thank you. I am a girl.
 - I hope I [action specified] so that I [successful accomplishment].
 - For example:
 - I hope I’m running like a girl! The girls I know are way better runners than me!
 - I hope I write today’s test like a girl. I’ll get an A+!
 - I’m a girl? No way! That’s so cool, girls are awesome.
 - Regan is *way* faster than me, I hope I run like a girl!

Note: “Regan” stands for any name of a fast runner in the class or the group who is a girl. It could be “my sister is…” or aunt, mother, best friend, etc.

Homophobia and Anti-LGBTQ Language

Teaching Respectful VS Disrespectful Use of Words Like “Gay” and “Lesbian”

While interrupting the negative use of the word is crucial, it is also central to their learning that this moment is expanded upon with meaning, context and teaching respectful use of language.

“In my classroom when students would use the word gay in a negative way I would always tell them to not say that. One day I overheard a student talking to friends about a gay relative in a respectful way. One of the students saw me nearby and whispered, “Shhh, stop! Mr. B doesn’t like gay people.” That was an ‘aha’ moment for me. I learned that stopping negative language is not enough. We need to educate students about why language is hurtful and help them appreciate the diversity in our schools and in the world.”

– 2nd Grade Teacher
www.welcomingschools.org: Tips for Elementary School Educators

Interrupting Instances of Homophobia:

Example Responses for Adults:

Quick Responses:

- Gay does not mean bad. If you meant that you don’t like something, then say that.
- Lesbian is not an insult. Please do not use it in that way.

Conversational Responses:

- You may not have meant to hurt anyone’s feelings, but saying “that’s gay” when you meant “that’s bad” or “that’s weird” can hurt other people.

Do you know what gay means?

If no, a simple response could be – the word gay is used to describe a man and a man or a woman and a woman, who love each other, and want to be family to each other.

(If relevant: Just like me and mommy/daddy/my boyfriend/your uncle Sam, etc).

In the future I expect you to use that word respectfully, and not in a hurtful way.

Empowering Allies:

Equipping Children with the Language to Interrupt Casual Homophobia:

What will you say if tomorrow someone says, “Oh, these shoes are gay!”

- State discomfort with the word use:
 - Using gay to mean ‘bad’ is hurtful. I think we should use a different word.
 - Some people here might have two moms or two dads.
It would hurt their feelings to hear us use ‘gay’ to mean ‘bad.’
- State the accurate context of the word:
 - Gay means two women, or two men who are in love.
So we can’t use that word to describe these shoes.
 - Gay doesn’t mean weird. I think it’s better to say what we mean.
So, ‘these shoes are weird.’
- Use humour:
 - These shoes are both boys, and they are in love! That’s so nice!
 - They are! I wonder if they will get married?
 - These shoes are gay? Are those shoes straight?

Proactively Engage Children in Conversations about Homophobic Language

Blatant homophobic terms such as “fag,” “faggot,” “dyke,” start to be used in elementary school years. Most young children do not know what these words mean, and are likely to just be repeating what they have heard without any understanding of context or impact. Other children may only know that these terms can be used as a way to put down other people, the same way they know “loser” can be used to be hurtful.

It is important to pre-emptively engage young children with these words. In a classroom this can be done by opening up the conversation after reading a book about a same-gender family. At home this can be done during a quiet moment such as while eating supper, or during a TV show with LGBTQ content. Remember to keep your tone calm and casual, and your attitude inviting for children to feel safe in being honest with you.

Example Conversation:

- “Have you heard the word “fag” before?”
If so, “where did you hear it?”
“Do you know what it means?”

These questions will lead to teachable moments about the origin of the words, why people use them, their impact on others, and give you a chance to make it clear that these words are hurtful and what you expect from them when this word is heard.

Some example phrases to convey this message may be:

- Those words are very hurtful.
- Using those words when you know they are hurtful is bullying.
- It is not okay for you to use those words negatively in any situation.
- It is not okay for others to use those words negatively either.
I'm sorry others have said them to you/ around you.
- If you hear other people use those words negatively you can ask them to please stop. If they don't, tell an adult or a teacher.
- Those words are harmful and can make people feel unsafe or lesser than.
Everyone has a right to feel valued and safe.

Transphobia and Cisnormativity

Equating Gender Identity with Body Parts

"You can't be a boy, you don't have boy parts"

"You can't be a girl if you have boy parts."

Interrupting Instances of Transphobia:

Example Responses for Adults:

Quick Responses:

- Being a boy/girl/neither comes from your brain/mind, not from your body parts.
- Gender identity comes from your brain/mind, not from what your body looks like.
- Boys and girls have all kinds of parts, but that's not what's important for gender identity.
- It's none of your business what body parts someone has. That is private.

Conversational Response:

- Often society tells us that our gender is connected to what our body looks like.
But these two things are different.
Your brain tells you what gender you are, not the body parts you have.
Boys and girls have all kinds of parts. What makes parts "boy parts" or "girl parts" is how the person who has them identifies.
It's important to respect people's gender identities.
So if someone knows themselves to be a girl, then they are and we respect them as a girl.
How they feel about themselves is much more important than the body parts they might have.