

Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms

Advocates for Youth is committed to strengthening teachers' abilities to create culturally responsive sexual health education for all students. Along with the racial justice content that was added to *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* in 2021, a foundational health educator skill is the ability to recognize one's unconscious bias, reduce its impact, and enhance cross-cultural communication. Additionally, sex ed teachers should be able to discuss racism and power, and their impact on sexual health outcomes. Each of these indicators and skills is outlined in the [Professional Learning Standards for Sex Education](#).

To learn how to increase your cultural responsiveness while teaching sex ed, [watch this short video](#).

USING INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Advocates for Youth strongly believes in the rights of transgender youth and the importance of intentional and authentic inclusion of transgender issues. *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* introduces gender-neutral names and a wide range of identities and is careful to note that biological sex characteristics are separate from gender identity. Recommendations from the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) confirm what we know about gender development—an effective way to support young people's sexuality and gender identity is to “discuss and explore gender identity in a developmentally appropriate way with all children beginning at ages 4 to 5 years.”¹⁰

Rights, Respect, Responsibility aligns with the concept of a gender spectrum. In the earlier grades, gender- binary language is used to accommodate the developmental levels of younger students. Even when there are transgender or gender non-conforming students in younger grades, they are more likely to identify with the gender binary at that age. Therefore, the terms “boys” and “girls” are used in the early grades, and this language evolves to be increasingly inclusive and non-binary at upper grade levels, along with lessons explicitly exploring the concepts of gender and gender expression. *Rights, Respect, Responsibility* also creates space for diversity in gender identity and expression by urging teachers in the early grades to use inclusive language like “most girls have a vulva” or “most boys have a penis” rather than using exclusive words like “all” or other exclusive language.

Similarly, in early grades, relationships may be described using gender-neutral language, such as “when two people are in love” or “a couple...,” or teachers may discuss families with “two mommies” or “two daddies” while not explicitly discussing sexual orientation. This approach keeps the earlier grade lessons fully inclusive and supportive of all sexual orientations and relationships while remaining developmentally appropriate by not specifically discussing the more complex concept of sexual orientation. Later lessons, however, explicitly introduce and explore the concept of sexual orientation as falling along a spectrum. In middle school and high school lessons, the terms “partner” and “same-sex relationships” are used deliberately and proactively both to avoid heteronormativity (the assumption that people and relationships are heterosexual unless proven otherwise) and to help students explore, at a developmentally appropriate level, the full range of sexual feelings and expressions both in and out of relationships.

In this curriculum, we use the phrase “parent or caregiver” to acknowledge the variety of family formations. We also use “trusted adult” to refer to a parent, coach, faith leader, teacher, or other adult who may not be an immediate family member but is someone a young person knows and can trust and who may be able to respond appropriately to the young person.

TERMS RELATED TO GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

For many teachers, understanding the language and terminology related to sexual orientation and gender identity is a useful place to start. There are many good sources for defining terms related to gender and sexual orientation. The Glossary below lists terms that are either directly quoted or adapted from various definitions in order to provide the clearest guidance for teachers using this curriculum. However, don't let not understanding the difference between “asexual” and “pansexual” prevent you from teaching the basics of sexual orientation and gender identity.

TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES TO SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION

Unfortunately, many students have experienced trauma. Trauma, often linked to adverse childhood experiences, can be caused by singular acute events, such as a natural disaster or the death of a parent or guardian, or it can be caused by

10. Bright Futures, an initiative of the American Academy of Pediatrics. (2022, July). Guidelines for Health Supervision of Infants, Children, and Adolescents, Fourth Edition. Downloaded from <https://www.aap.org/en/practice-management/bright-futures/bright-futures-materials-and-tools/bright-futures-guidelines-and-pocket-guide/>