

Inclusive Sex Ed Language Checklist

In general, using language that removes gendered terms to talk about bodies and the sexual things that people may do with them helps to ensure that people with diverse (a)sexualities, (a)genders, bodies, and (a)romantic orientations are included and respected. Learning how to speak and write this way, however, can sometimes be challenging and may initially sound awkward. While this can lead some people to raise an eyebrow initially, you can briefly take the time to explain why, and start a conversation about respecting everyone's reality in sex ed.

Here are some things you can look for in your language and alternative suggestions for making it more inclusive. With practice, this new way of communicating becomes second nature!

Am I gendering and making assumptions about the people I'm teaching, their attraction, their relationships, or their families?

Ex. "Hello boys and girls," "When you're with your girlfriend," "When your mother gave birth to you," or "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Alternates:

- "Hello class/everyone/folks/purple pandas." You can get creative with the way you address people, and pet names or school mascots can work well with some groups.
- It's ideal to use gender-neutral terms for significant others like, partner or sweetheart, and pronouns like "they" when making examples.
- Offering gender-neutral terms to people you're teaching when they're referring to significant others can help create a safer space and ensure that people in the class will not need to lie or out themselves or their partners. You can also recommend using these terms to anyone who is comfortable, ensuring that negative attention or assumptions don't fall on those individuals who already do.
- Try using the terms "parent" or "guardian" instead of assuming that someone has a mother and father. This ensures that you're addressing many different types of families (adoptive parents, single parents, queer parents, family-related guardians, trans-identified parents etc.).
- It's also a good idea not to assume the gender or body of a parent, or that they are genetically related or gave birth to their child. Birth can be described as exiting the womb, and if you're talking about pregnancy, you can talk about the parts involved in isolation or use the term "birth parent" instead of assuming the gender of the person who gave birth to them or their place in the child's life.
- If you're not aware of how a person identifies, try to avoid gendered family terms like brother/sister, grandmother/grandfather. Instead, use terms like, "sibling" or "grandparents." (We're still working on gender-neutral terms for aunt/uncle, nephew/niece!).

Am I gendering people with certain anatomy?

Ex. "Women should get regular PAP tests" or "Uncircumcised men should clean under their foreskin"

Alternates:

- Generally, take words like "boy," "girl," "man," "woman," "male," or "female" out of the

equation

- Use anatomy rather than gender whenever possible:
 - Penises grow, chests/breasts develop, and facial hair grows; none of it needs gender!
 - Ex. “Condoms can be put on penises or sex toys” or “prostates should be checked”
- Use “People with” / “Bodies with” Language
 - ex. “Bodies with ovaries” or “people with mammary glands”
- Alternatively, you can say “people who have” or “bodies that have”
 - ex. “People who have a cervix should get regular PAP tests” or “Testicle-having people should check them regularly for lumps”
- If you’re not talking about individual body parts, you can talk about people with internal/external reproductive systems or, as a last resort, male or female bodies. Note that referring to people as “a male” or “a female” can be particularly triggering for some people, as you are potentially applying a label that may not fit with their identity.
- For younger age groups or people with developmental disabilities, it may be helpful to focus on the body parts they can see and often learn about early in sex education. Be sure to frame these generalizations carefully with words like “can,” “may,” or “might” to avoid excluding certain groups, such as people who are intersex or trans. Ex. “People with vulvas may notice their hips widen” “people with penises might see that their shoulders have gotten broader.”

□ Am I gendering bodies that may do certain things or develop in specific ways?

Ex. “When women menstruate” or “Men will grow facial and chest hair”

Alternates:

- Use nouns rather than verbs
 - “Menstruation most often begins”
 - “For some, sexuality and attraction start”
 - “Ejaculation can happen when”
- “People who / bodies that” language
 - People who get erections / bodies that develop breasts
- For describing puberty, talking about the effects of estrogen, testosterone, and other hormones can help. “When puberty begins, testicles often start making testosterone and releasing it into the body. Testosterone causes...”

□ Am I gendering safer sex, contraception practices, or the people who use them?

Ex. “Male and female condoms” “If a woman decides to use birth control” “Guys, roll a condom onto your penis before you start having sex”

Alternates:

- Internal or External condoms (or, more often, condoms and internal condoms)
- Dental dams can be used on a vulva or anus (meaning learning about them could be useful for anyone who wants to have sex!)
- For contraception, you can say “people with ovaries” or “people who ejaculate semen,” or focus on internal and external reproductive systems.
- For reducing STI risk, you can talk about the safer sex materials and parts involved rather than gendering the people in each act.

- Ex. “condoms should be used on penises or sex toys,” “dental dams are great for safer oral sex on a vulva or anus,” or “gloves can make mutual masturbation safer”
- Be specific about the type of sex you are talking about, and the parts that are involved in it.
 - Ex. “hand sex on a penis,” “penis-in-vagina sex,” “anal sex with a dildo,” or “oral sex on a vulva”

□ Am I including and normalizing less common realities?

- Words such as “may,” “might,” “can,” “could,” or “often” can help include people that a statement may not apply to, such as intersex or trans people when discussing anatomy. Ex. “People who have a penis often have testicles, a prostate, and a vas deferens”
 - Note that statements like “most often,” “typically,” or “usually” can still be harmful for audience members, as they create a norm that can make people feel excluded if they don’t feel like they fall within it.
- When receiving questions about whether or not something is “normal” or “natural,” it’s easy to want to reassure someone that they are “normal.” Unfortunately, this can perpetuate the idea that some things are normal while others are *abnormal* which can create uncomfortable binaries. Instead, consider using words like, “common,” “frequent,” or “many people/bodies/parts” when responding.

□ Get Creative!

- Once you dedicate yourself to using gender-neutral language, there are a wide variety of ways of saying something that you may find yourself slipping into.
 - “If someone has a cervix, they should get regular PAP tests”
 - “All bodies have an anus”
 - “Smelly discharge and pain in the urethra are signs of gonorrhea”
- Streamline your language using the 2nd person, with pronouns like “you” and “we”
 - Saying “people with vulvas” every sentence can get repetitive, but using the 2nd person, (ex. “If *you* have a vulva”) can let you give more comprehensive information about a specific situation or body part: “it can expand and open when you get aroused, and your clitoris can grow and get harder.”
 - If something applies to yourself and others, you can also use “we.” Ex. “As people with ovaries, we may go through menopause, which can have an impact on our libidos.”

Note:

Using gender-neutral language should also be combined with checking your assumptions. Our culture focuses on very specific ideas of what sex and virginity mean, and it’s important to challenge these preconceptions in order to include diverse experiences. You can ask yourself if you assume certain things when communicating about sex or virginity, like if sex always puts someone at risk for pregnancy. You can also teach that sex and virginity can mean different things to different people, and that people can decide what each means for them.

While using gender neutral language to teach about (a)sexuality and bodies can make the experience more inclusive, there are realities around how people interact and gender dynamics that are equally important to discuss. Since everyone is affected by gender and its complications, you aren’t necessarily

being less inclusive by using gendered examples or pronouns to talk about how people may interact. The purpose of this language is to include everyone's reality, and gendered media and relationship expectations are important to address. Ideally, you can use diverse examples to ensure that you represent and engage people with a variety of (a)sexual orientations, (a)romantic orientations, (a)gender identities, and bodies.

Resources:

- Queering Sex Ed - Planned Parenthood Toronto
- *Trans Sexuality: A Safe Sex Guide for Trans People and Their Partners* by Tobi Hill-Meyer
- *The Teaching Transgender Toolkit: A Facilitator's Guide to Increasing Knowledge, Reducing Prejudice & Building Skills* by Dr. Eli R. Green & Luca Maurer, MS (to be published September 2015)

References:

- The participants of the "Adapting Sex Ed Language for Diverse (A)genders, Bodies, and (A)sexualities" workshop at the Guelph Sexuality Conference, Friday, June 19th, 2015
- Raimi Marx and Joanna Gattuso of Cambridge Health Alliance's presentation, "Trans Inclusive Sex Education"
 - Contact rmarx@challiance.org or jgattuso@challiance.org to learn more
- "I Want Them to Know Who They Are Is Ok": Supporting Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Students – A Guide for Primary and Secondary School Educators by Raimi Marx
- Beyond Trans 101 by Dr. Eli Green
- About Purportedly Gendered Body Parts by Dean Spade
- Trans* Sexual health video series created by @CommunityHealthCU on Youtube

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