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A Lesson on Homophobia and Teasing

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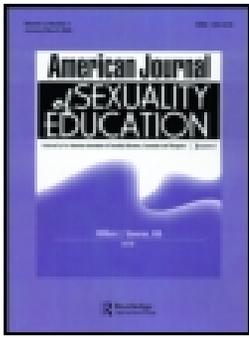
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LESSON PLANS

A Lesson on Homophobia and Teasing

Eva S. Goldfarb, PhD

ABSTRACT. Homophobia and gay-related teasing are already present among young children. This lesson introduces the term “prejudice” and places the concept of homophobia within the context of bullying and teasing with which 8-11 year olds are already familiar. The lesson builds empathy as children think about and discuss how they have felt when they have been teased or called a name and how they think people in gay

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Adapted, in part, from “Family Diversity Lesson Plan,” by Sally Goldin and Kim Lawton in *Overcoming Homophobia in the Elementary Classroom*, 1996, Lesbian and Gay Parents Association, San Francisco.

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or lesbian families would feel. The lesson celebrates the lives of gay and lesbian people as it celebrates diversity among all people and families. Children are encouraged to think about the diversity within their own lives and to think about how all people have pride about who they are and who is in their families. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Homophobia, prejudice, gay, lesbian, pride, diversity, families

GOAL

To increase empathy and understanding among 3rd and 4th grade children about homophobia and teasing.

OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, students will be able to:

- Show their understanding of family diversity by naming, as a group, at least three different family structures or formations.
- Demonstrate their understanding of the negative effects of bullying and teasing by describing, through group discussion, what it feels like to be teased or called a name.
- Demonstrate their understanding of the negative effects of homophobia by describing, through group discussion, how it must feel for a child with gay or lesbian parents or family members to hear hurtful words or teasing of gay and lesbian people.
- Show their recognition of the important roles of gays and lesbians by being able to name at least two famous gay or lesbian people.
- Demonstrate their understanding of the mainstream status of gay and lesbian families by being able to name at least three ways that these families are similar to families with heterosexual parents.
- Demonstrate their commitment to combating prejudice and homophobia by naming at least one thing they will do when they witness someone being teased for being gay/lesbian or having a gay/lesbian family.

TIMING

This lesson takes a minimum of one hour. The time guidelines provided in this lesson plan should be considered minimum guidelines for planning purposes, and each part can certainly be accomplished in the provided time, if needed. Depending on the setting, maturity and interest of the group, however, discussion and processing of the lesson can be expanded. Alternatively, it can be broken up over two or even three sessions. If the videos *Both of My Moms' Names Are Judy* and *That's a Family* are shown and discussed, these will add approximately 20-25 minutes to the lesson. In addition, the optional activity of creating pride flags can take a full hour or longer.

RATIONALE

Children at this age are very attuned to the concepts of bullying and teasing (Banks, 2000). Many major bullying initiatives target this population (CDC, 2005). This is also an age by which virtually all children have experienced some kind of name-calling or teasing directed at themselves, as well as having observed it being directed at others (Limber et al., 1997). The connection of homophobia to the concept of teasing and prejudice, therefore, helps to place this topic in a context with which children are already familiar. The videos provide excellent opportunities for young people to see other children their ages speaking passionately and articulately about this issue and about their own pride in their families. The interactive discussions enable children to make sense of the issue of homophobia within the context of their own lives and experiences.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

This lesson is intended for use with children in grades 3-4 (approximately, 8-11 years old). It can, however, be adapted for older or younger children.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Newsprint, markers, masking tape, OR chalkboard and chalk
- Rainbow flag
- Worksheet with the questions listed below in instruction #10, enough copies for each student to have one

- Video: *Both of My Moms' Names Are Judy* (Optional)
- Video: *That's a Family* (Optional)

PROCEDURE

Note to facilitator: *It is important to set an appropriate atmosphere and context to this lesson. The teacher/facilitator should make sure that the group establishes groundrules for discussion or reviews those that have already been established. Examples of important groundrules include: Respect—It is important to appreciate our differences and different opinions and ideas and not to put anyone down for what they say or believe Children may come from families that have different values about this topic. This group values respecting other people's views and opinions; Boundaries—Each person should only share for themselves (sometimes called "I" statements). No one should share stories or experiences about anyone else. Right to Pass—No one in the group has to talk or share anything if he/she does not feel comfortable. Other ground rules that help to create a safe learning environment are encouraged.*

1. Explain that you are about to introduce a topic and some terms that might be new for some people but not others. Encourage the group to feel free to ask questions if they don't understand something, and to remember the ground rules that were agreed upon. Ask the group "Does anyone know what the words 'lesbian' or 'gay' mean?" Ask for responses from students, acknowledge how much they know and understand. If needed, provide clarification on definitions. (For example, "When you get older most of you will begin to have romantic feelings for or attractions to other people. People who are mostly attracted to people of the other gender—men who are attracted to or have romantic feelings for women and women who are attracted to or have romantic feelings for men—are called 'heterosexual' or 'straight.' People who are mostly attracted to people of their own gender—men who are attracted to or have romantic feelings for other men, and women who are attracted to or have romantic feelings for other women—are called 'homosexual' or 'gay.' The word 'lesbian' refers specifically to a gay woman.") (5 minutes)

2. Explain what the word "diversity" means. People come in all shapes, sizes, colors, religions, backgrounds. That is what makes each person special. Ask the class, "What are some ways that people are dif-

ferent?” Let students give examples of differences among people. Then ask, “What are some ways that people are the same?” Again, solicit responses. “One of the ways that people are different is in the ways their families are put together. There are many different kinds of families and each one is special and wonderful. That is what we mean by ‘diversity’—all of the ways that we are different and special. What are some different kinds of families?” (examples may include numbers of siblings, living with one parent or two parents, living with grandparents, foster families, adoption, etc.) Children love to share their own stories. If there is time, allow students to describe their families. Suggest some different kinds of families if the group does not name them. (10 minutes)

3. Define the word “prejudice.” (Prejudice is when you judge or make assumptions about someone based on who they are or who you think they are.) Write the word “prejudice” on the board. Show the class that the word prejudice looks like pre-judge. To make a judgment or assumption about the person before you really even know them. People who are prejudiced against someone often treat that person poorly or are hurtful to them or don’t treat them fairly. Explain that some people show prejudice against other people and it is not okay. Some people show prejudice against gay and lesbian people. It is never okay to be rude or to insult anyone. When you do this to someone just because of assumptions you make about them, that is a form of prejudice. Ask the group if anyone can think of an example prejudice that they have seen or heard about. (5 minutes)

4. Ask the group, “Has anyone ever been called a name?” Ask students what names they have been called (be prepared for a lot of sharing). Next, “How did it feel to be called a name?” Students will generally express that it feels/felt pretty bad. (5 minutes)

Note to facilitator: Depending on the group and the safety level of the environment, the teacher/facilitator may choose to do a less threatening version of this discussion. Instead of asking children for personal examples of being called a name, which can feel very threatening to some children in different contexts, ask, “Have you ever heard anybody called a name?” Ask students what names they have heard other people called (reminding them not to use people’s names or identities or to talk about anyone in the room). Follow this up asking, “How do you think it felt to be called those names?”

5. Ask, “Does anyone know what the word “faggot” (or “fag”) means?” Define for students that actually, a faggot is a bundle of sticks, but that it is a word that has been used to put down gay and lesbian people or people thought to be gay or lesbian. (Depending on the maturity of the group, particularly for fourth graders, you may share more about the history of the word “faggot” as a bundle of sticks being associated with gay men. In medieval times, when witches and “heretics” were burned at the stake—often lesbians were accused of being witches, and gay men, heretics—they were forced to gather and carry the “faggots” or bundles of wood that would be used to burn them. Some people believe the origin derives from the fact that gay men were actually used as the “kindling” or bundle of sticks and were burned along with the witches.) The word “dyke” is a term that is used to put down women who are or who are perceived to be lesbian. Women and girls who have not followed other people’s ideas of how women and girls should behave (dress, talk, etc.) often have been labeled as “dykes,” whether or not they’ve identified as lesbians (“What Do ‘Faggot’ and ‘Dyke’ Mean?,” 2001). (5 minutes)

6. Ask, “Why do some people think it is okay to insult someone because they are lesbian or gay?” “How do you think a kid who has lesbian or gay parents or family members or friends would feel to hear someone use a word that is insulting to gay people?” Solicit and acknowledge responses from the group. (5 minutes)

Note to facilitator: *If there is enough time this is a good place to show a clip of the first 5-7 minutes from the video Both of My Moms’ Names Are Judy. After showing the clip, ask the group what they heard the children saying in the video. Was the group right about how they thought a kid would feel who has lesbian or gay parents and heard someone use an insulting word about them? Is there anything else they noticed about how the children in the video were feeling that they didn’t mention before? (15 minutes)*

7. Say, “Lesbians and gay men are everywhere. Let me tell you about some very famous lesbians and gay men. Tell me if you know any of them.” (Feel free to add to or edit this list based on famous people the group is likely to know.)

Tschaikovsky-Famous composer
Greg Louganis-Olympic Gold Medalist in high diving
Babe Didrickson-Famous female athlete

Martina Navratilova-One of the greatest tennis champions of all time
William Shakespeare-Famous playwright
Peter the Great-Russian Czar
Michelangelo-Great Renaissance artist
Barney Frank-United States Congressman
Julius Caesar-Roman Emperor
Leonard Bernstein-Composer (“West Side Story,” for example)
Susan B. Anthony-Women’s rights activist. Fought for women’s right to vote
Marie Antoinette-French Empress
Ellen DeGeneres-Actress and comedienne
Rosie O’Donnell-Comedienne, actress
Elton John-Musician, pop star

Process by asking,

- What do people think of this list?
- Are there any names that surprise you?
- What is surprising about hearing that all of these people are gay or lesbian?
- What can we learn from hearing about famous gay and lesbian people that we didn’t know were gay or lesbian? (5 minutes)

8. Say, “Some people are afraid to say they are lesbian or gay. Telling people they are lesbian or gay is called ‘coming out.’ Why might they be afraid?” Solicit responses from the group. If the children do not come up with any ideas, remind them about prejudice and what you talked about regarding how people treat others when they prejudge or make assumptions about them.

9. Say, “Most of us feel very proud about who we are. Lesbians and gay men do too. June, in fact, is Lesbian and Gay Pride month, a time when lesbian and gay people from all over the country show their pride in who they are. Many cities have big Gay Pride parades.” (If there is a city or town nearby that holds a Gay Pride celebration, mention it to the group. Also include some of the biggest cities such as New York and San Francisco.) “There is also a rainbow flag (hold up the flag). This flag stands for Gay pride. So if you see a rainbow flag or sign or bumper sticker, you will know what it means. Flags are a good way for people to show their pride in who they are.” (5 minutes)

Note to facilitator: *As an optional class project, have students create personal “pride” flags that represent pride in who they are. This activity can be very simple or more elaborate depending on time and desire.*

Note to facilitator: *This is a good place to show a clip from the video, That’s a Family. If this option is available to you say: “I want to show you some kids who are proud of their families.” Show clip from That’s a Family from beginning and through gay/lesbian families. After video, ask, “What did you think of the families in this video?” “Do you think the children are proud of their families?”*

10. Break students up into pairs. Give each pair a worksheet with the following questions on it: “What is one thing I can do if I hear someone being teased for being gay or lesbian?” “Who is one responsible person I can tell?” “What is a good rule for us to have in our class (group) to make sure that everyone is treated fairly and with respect?”

After the children have finished discussing the questions with their partners, ask for responses to each that you can record on newsprint. (Use the newsprint later to create attractive posters with these suggestions that can be hung on the walls of the room as reminders.) (10 minutes)

Note to facilitator: *It is important to spend time specifically addressing what children can do to prevent homophobic teasing and to address it when they witness it. If there is not enough time, provide the worksheets for homework and encourage children to discuss the questions with their parents/guardians. When they come back the next day, conclude with the closing questions.*

11. Close the lesson by asking:

- What can kids do so that everyone gets treated with respect?
- What can kids do when they hear someone being teased for being gay or lesbian or having gay or lesbian parents?
- What can kids do when they hear or see someone being teased for any reason?
- What is one thing you will do to make sure that people are treated fairly and with respect? (5 minutes)

VIDEO RESOURCES

That's a Family is a video about diversity. It is narrated entirely by children who talk about their various types of families (gay and lesbian parents, disabled parents, grandparents as caregivers, different races/ethnicities, different religions, foster families, adopted families). The video also includes vignettes showing the children living day-to-day within their families. It is a wonderful celebration of diversity from the perspectives of children. It is produced by New Day Films. 35 minutes/VHS.

To order:

New Day Films
190 Route 17M, P.O. Box 1084, Harriman, NY 10926
Phone: 888-367-9154 Fax: 845-774-2945

Or:

www.newday.com

Or:

www.womedia.org

Cost:

Institutional (colleges/universities)	\$199
Community Groups, public	
Libraries, K-8 schools	\$75
Rental	\$50

Both of My Moms' Names Are Judy is a video developed for teachers and school administrators. It is narrated by a diverse group of children ages 7-11 who describe what it is like for them to have lesbian and gay parents. The children talk about the harassment and homophobia they have experienced in school and the help (or in most cases, total lack of help) they have received from their teachers and other adults in the school around this issue. It makes a very strong case for the need to begin talking and teaching about issues of homophobia in elementary schools. 11 minutes/VHS, English only and Spanish subtitles available.

To order:

Lesbian and Gay Parents Association
260 Tingley Street, San Francisco, CA 94112
Phone: 415-387-9886

Or:

shayndel@aol.com

Or:

lgpasf@aol.com

Cost:

\$25.00

COMMENTARY

I have used this activity many times and have found that while, in writing, it appears to be very passive, given its question-and-answer format, in fact it is a very active lesson. Children love to share personal stories and talk about their families. Very lively discussion always ensues. In fact, the challenge with this lesson is keeping it moving and not getting sidetracked with interesting, but not necessarily germane, conversations. While this enthusiasm for personal sharing (which begins to lessen as children approach adolescence) is great for the lesson, it also requires caution on the part of the facilitator.

In my experience with this lesson, when children are asked what names they have been called in the past and how it has felt, they are very forthcoming. Both time and care need to be taken to make sure that children are not opening themselves up to teasing or harassment as a result of this. What typically happens is that children find comfort in hearing that everyone (or virtually everyone) has been teased or called a name at some point and been made to feel bad. This is a very empowering moment that should not be glossed over. Nonetheless, I have provided a less threatening alternative way to have this discussion if the teacher/facilitator is concerned about being able to maintain a feeling of safety in the group.

In spite of the best efforts at setting boundaries and ground rules, there is still a risk that a child might disclose a serious teasing or bullying experience. If a child does disclose such an experience, it is important to protect him/her by providing positive acknowledgement of his/her statement, and then quickly shifting the focus away from him/her. Depending on the nature of the disclosure, however, (in some cases, disclosure of serious abuse or violence may have to be reported by law) the facilitator/teacher may need to follow up with the child, a school counselor or social worker, and/or with parents.

Obviously, a lesson such as this (as all sexuality-related lessons) should only be taught after the establishment of ground rules (respect for differences, no put-downs, one person speaks at a time, right to pass, etc.). If this is taught as part of an ongoing group, these guidelines may already have been established. If this is the case, it would still be a good idea to remind the group of them and review some of the guidelines. If ground rules have not previously been discussed or established, the facilitator will need to take extra time at the beginning of the session to do so.

One common guideline worth mentioning here is that of confidentiality, typically defined as “what’s said in this room stays in this room.” It is quite unrealistic to expect, given the developmental stage of this age group, and given the topic, that such a rule could be or even should be enforced. First of all, it is important for children to feel that they can (should?) be talking with their families about these issues. Second, it is important for children to be mindful of what personal stories they may choose to share because they should not have the expectation that other children will never find out. Group members need to be cautioned of this and the facilitator needs to be very diligent in making sure that no one shares personal information that might potentially cause them harm.

Another caution to keep in mind is that a lesson like this is best done with the full knowledge and consent of the organization or school in which it is being conducted. The issues that are discussed WILL be shared with parents/guardians, other family members and friends. Discussing the lesson’s content and goals ahead of time with administrators, and possibly sending a note home to parents makes sense, and helps families to prepare for the conversations that will be coming home with their children.

A note on the videos: The videos are included here as optional resources. The reason for this is that organizations may not have the time to spend on an expanded version of the lesson and may not have the resources to purchase or rent the videos. The lesson is designed to stand alone without the use of the videos. I have facilitated this lesson in this way and it is still extremely effective. When used, however, the videos add a personal aspect to this issue through the perspectives and voices of children themselves and can be provide very powerful images.

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