

Lesson 1:

A WELCOMING CLASSROOM

Grades K-2

Students in the film talked about how negative references about LGBT people are used as put-downs from early elementary school through middle school. The teachers highlighted in the film set a tone where such put-downs are not acceptable and where conversations about LGBT people could happen in an atmosphere of respect. The following lesson, excerpted with permission from the Welcoming Schools Guide (2007), a publication of the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Family Project, is a good introductory lesson to help students understand what makes people feel welcome and the effect of hurtful teasing, name-calling and exclusion.



From The Film

"I think the neat thing about this issue is that it's already there—it's

already in the classrooms. The kids are already thinking about it. There's ways to just start it off with [talking about] name calling, with a book, with talking about famous gay and lesbian people. There's ways that are pretty standard, elementary curriculum across this country, which, with a little inventiveness and a little risk, you can start going on." —Daithi Wolfe, third-grade teacher in *It's Elementary*

Goals

- To create a more welcoming classroom.
- Students will understand what makes them and other children feel welcome or unwelcome in school.

Objectives

- Students will listen to the story *The New Girl...and Me* and talk about feelings.
- Students will apply that discussion to their own experiences.
- Students will be able to give examples of what makes them feel welcome or unwelcome in school.

Time Required

One 45-minute session or two 30-minute sessions.

Materials

Chart paper and markers, drawing paper, markers or crayons for drawing, pencils.

Required Books

The New Girl...and Me by Jacqui Robbins, illustrations by Matt Phelan (Antheneum Books for Young Readers, 2006). Two girls become friends when Shakeeta boasts that she has an iguana named Igabelle at home and Mia learns how to help Shakeeta "feel at home."

ACTIVITY 1: Defining “welcome” and “unwelcome”

- Talk with your students about what the words “welcome” and “unwelcome” mean. You may choose to ask the students what they think “welcome” and “unwelcome” mean or you may give the students a definition of the words.

Welcome: When you feel good/comfortable about where you are and the people you are with.

Unwelcome: When you do not feel good/comfortable about where you are or the people you are with.

The teacher in the book *The New Girl...and Me* uses the phrase “make her feel at home.” You may want to say that the phrase, “Make her feel at home” means the same thing as make her feel welcome.

- Read the book *The New Girl...and Me*.
- After reading the book initiate a discussion by asking your students:
 - » Has anyone ever seen an iguana? What did it look like? What did it eat?
 - » What did DJ do or say that made Shakeeta feel unwelcome or “not at home?”
 - » When DJ told Shakeeta that she looked like an iguana, what did other people in the class do?
 - » How do you think Shakeeta felt when children in her class laughed at DJ’s comment?
 - » What did Mia do that helped Shakeeta feel welcome?
 - » How do you think Mia felt after she talked to Shakeeta?
- Ask the students to give examples of when they feel unwelcome. Prompt them to include what makes them feel unwelcome at school. Prompt them to include name-calling and hurtful teasing if they do not bring it up. Record their responses on a chart entitled *I Feel Unwelcome When...*
- Review the chart together, then read some of the responses aloud, and ask your students, “What does it feel like when you feel unwelcome?” You can prompt them to think more about how it feels by using some of the examples that are on the chart. For example, you can say, “How does it feel when someone calls you a name?”
- Next, ask the students to give examples of when they feel welcome. Prompt them to include what other students, teachers and administrators do that helps them feel welcome. Record their responses on a chart entitled *I Feel Welcome When...*
- Review the chart together, read some of the responses, then ask your students, “What does it feel like when you feel welcome?”



ACTIVITY 2: Student Responses

- Using the writing prompt, "I can help others feel welcome by..." have students draw a welcoming picture and write a response.
- Display the pictures around the room or in the hall near your classroom OR turn the responses into a class book.



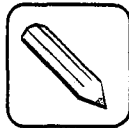
From The Film

"I don't think that it's appropriate that values only be taught at home.

There are social values as well. There are community values. And when you allow a child on a playground to hurl an insult at another child or to say, 'your mom is queer' or to say those sorts of things without addressing the issues is I think unconscionable. What's the message the child gets? The child gets the message, 'my teachers would step in if it was wrong, my teachers would—they know, my teachers would do something.'"

—Woody Price, headmaster, in *It's*

Elementary



TEACHING NOTES

Modifications

- If needed, arrange to take dictation from individual students.
- Other suggested books to read: *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes (1991), *Oliver Button is a Sissy* by Tomie dePaola (1979) or *The Sissy Duckling* by Harvey Fierstein (2002).

Extension Activities

Community Building Brainstorm with your students what could make their classroom and school feel more welcoming. From this list, have the students pick an action that they could take. Make a plan and carry it out.

Welcoming Classroom Chart Label a piece of chart paper, "Our Welcoming Classroom" and post it on the wall. When you notice students doing something to make a more welcoming classroom, add their name and what they did to the chart.

Credit: This lesson is based on some ideas from *I Feel Welcome/Unwelcome* in: Froschl, Merle, and Barbara Sprung, and Nancy Mullin-Rindler with Nan Stein and Nancy Gropper. *Quit it!: A Teacher's Guide on Teasing and Bullying for Use with Students in Grades K-3*. Educational Equity Concepts, Inc., Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, NEA Professional Library. 1998.