

Lesson 6: **DEVELOPING EMPATHY AND BEING AN ALLY** Grades 4-6



In the film, a girl who has lesbian parents talked about how important it was for her that her friends stood by her when other students said mean things about gay and lesbian people. Also in the film a fifth-grade teacher talks with her students about being made fun of and how bad that feels. This activity will help students develop empathy and strategies to respond to anti-gay language.

Goals

- Students will increase their understanding of the impact of name-calling on people who have friends or family members who are LGBT.
- Students will increase their ability to be a friend and an ally to people who are targeted by name-calling.

Objectives

- Students will be able to define the words "empathy" and "ally."
- Students will be able to identify ways in which name-calling related to LGBT people is hurtful.
- Students will be able to identify strategies to interrupt name-calling.

Time Required

Two 30-40 minute sessions.

Materials

Enough copies of the "My School Is Accepting—But Things Could Be Better" handout for the whole class.

Four pieces of paper filled out as described in Activity 2.



TEACHING NOTES

Basic Definitions This lesson plan assumes that the class has already had some classroom conversations about LGBT people. It focuses on the impact of name-calling and the development of empathy in relation to an elementary student who has lesbian mothers. For more information about defining words such as lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender see the vocabulary words in the Appendix on page 121 of this guide.

Children with LGBT Parents You may have children in your class who have LGBT parents—some may be open with their classmates about this and some may not be. If you are aware of this, you may want to talk with these parents to ask if they have any concerns about their child feeling comfortable when this lesson is taught. It is important that a child not feel pressured to be out about his or her parents. In addition, you want children to recognize that having LGBT parents is another kind of family structure. Of course, you may not know that a child in your class has an LGBT parent. Also, consider how the content of this lesson will sound to a child who has not told anyone at school about his or her family composition. Think about inclusive language that you can use that might make this child feel less isolated. For example, you could say:

Some of us have lesbian and gay people in our lives who mean a lot to us while some of us may not really have thought about the fact that some kids have two moms or two dads. Some of Robert's classmates (the boy in the handout) who were using hurtful language might not have known that this language would hurt people.

ACTIVITY 1: Developing Empathy

- Write "name-calling" on the left side of the board and the word "empathy" on the right side. Ask students to brainstorm everything they think about when they hear the word name-calling. Record their responses on the board. When you are satisfied with the number of responses they have given, ask them what they notice about the list the class generated. Help them identify any themes in their list such as: the way name-calling makes someone feel, motives for name-calling, or situations where name-calling might occur.
- Ask for a volunteer to define the word empathy. If no one knows the word, define it for them. For example:

Empathy is how a person feels when he or she can understand someone else's feelings and motives in a certain situation; OR

Empathy is when you understand another person's feelings by remembering or imagining being in a similar situation.



From The Film

"It's amazing how teachers—no offense—but it's amazing how teachers

don't notice all the stuff that's going on. They don't necessarily use the word 'fag,' but they say 'oh way, you gay or something?' or something like that. And it's really, it makes you feel like weird in your stomach." —*Third-grader in*

It's Elementary

- Explain that you are going to ask them to read a short essay by Robert, an 11-year-old boy who lives with his family, which is made up of Robert, his little brother and his two mothers. Tell them that as they read the article you want them to consider the impact of name-calling and whether they have empathy for Robert.
- After students have read the article have them meet in small groups of four to five students. Make sure to have one person in each group be designated as the recorder who will write down all of their ideas. Another person could be designated as the reporter to report back the group's ideas. Write the following questions on the board and ask each group to answer them:
 - » How do you think Robert feels when he hears people say things like, "This is gay" or "You're so gay?"
 - » Do you have empathy for Robert? Why or why not?
- As the groups are meeting, go from group to group to check for understanding and to make sure they are staying on track.
- Ask each group to report back the feelings they think Robert had.
- Lead a class discussion about whether your students have ever felt similar to how they imagined Robert felt. Consider prompts to generate discussion such as:
 - » What situations led to those feelings?
 - » How did you respond?
 - » What made you feel better?
 - » If you were Robert what would you do when people said things that felt hurtful?
 - » Do you have empathy for Robert because of these situations that you've experienced?



ACTIVITY 2: Being an Ally

- Put the word **Ally** on the board. Ask students if they know what this word means. Be prepared to define the word:

ALLY A person who does something to help or stand up for another person. For example, if a friend of yours was being teased, you would be an ally if you asked the person doing the teasing to stop being mean.
- Tell students that you are going to ask them to think about different ways that someone might be able to be an ally to Robert.

- Take four pieces of paper or four sticky notes and put one of the following labels on each of them:

1: I would be VERY UNCOMFORTABLE.

2: I would be A LITTLE UNCOMFORTABLE.

3: I would be PRETTY COMFORTABLE.

4: I would be VERY COMFORTABLE.

Put each piece of paper in order somewhat evenly spaced across a part of the wall where you have enough space for students to line up.

- Read the words on each piece of paper. Tell students that you are going to read some statements about ways they could be an ally to Robert. Ask them to imagine that Robert was their friend and that they had empathy for what he was going through. When you read each statement ask them to stand next to the piece of paper that best describes how they would feel taking the action described by the statement. Tell the students that there is not a right or wrong way to respond. After you read each statement and the students have chosen where they want to stand ask for some volunteers to say why they chose to stand where they did. Engage in discussion about what makes it hard or easy to stand up for someone. Repeat this for each statement.

- » Talk to Robert individually and tell him that you are sorry that people are calling him names and using phrases like, "This is so gay."
- » Talk to Robert and ask him what he thinks would help people stop name-calling. Offer to help him.
- » When you hear a person say something like , "That's so gay" say, "It's not OK to say that. Using the word gay like that hurts people's feelings."
- » Tell a teacher or another adult that you're bothered by the kind of words you're hearing other students use. Ask this adult to do something about the situation.

- Ask the class to share what they have learned about how to be an ally for someone. Write all of these on the board.
- Ask if anyone in the class has a suggestion for class-rules related to name-calling.



Teaching Tip

You may want to define any of the words or phrases that you think will be unfamiliar to students. For help with defining words please see the Vocabulary Guide in the Appendix on page 121. If you have not had conversations about LGBT people in the past leave time for some questions and conversations from students. In the context of this lesson plan it would be helpful to keep the focus on families. For example: *There are families that have two moms, two dads, etc. The article that we're about to read is about a boy who has two mothers. His mothers are lesbians. That's a word for women who when they fall in love, fall in love with women.*



Handout

My School Is Accepting—But Things Could Be Better

By Robert Mercier

My name is Robert Mercier. I'm eleven years old, and I am in sixth grade. I go to Doyle-Ryder Elementary which is in Flint, Michigan. I have two moms and a little brother who I love a lot. He is almost five. Our family is one of just a few families with LGBT parents in our community. I am proud to have two moms.

My school seems to be OK with people who are LGBT. My friends all know I have two moms and are OK with it. I think they react better if I just tell them when we first become friends. I think that if you don't come out right away when you meet someone, it's like you are not OK with it, maybe kind of ashamed, and it's easier for other kids to say mean things to you or about you. At the beginning of each school year, my moms go and tell my teacher that I have two moms. I haven't had one teacher that has been obviously uncomfortable with it.

The only thing that annoys me at school is when people start saying stuff like, "This is gay" or "You're gay." I think that saying these things is a way to bully other kids. When I hear people say that, I tell them to stop, but they normally just keep doing it. The teachers don't do anything about it either, but some of my friends and their parents tell them to stop too. But if only a few people are telling the kids who are saying that to stop, they are just going to keep saying it. (I can't believe they actually think it is cool to say stuff like that!) I think that if the schools would start to pay attention more, they would see that it is a problem too.

Sometimes, not as often, some of the boys in my school (always the boys) have started saying stuff like, "Dude, you're a lesbian." I believe that the children who say this phrase don't understand what they are saying.

I think that if some of the kids who have LGBT parents and other kids whose parents support LGBT people would get together and talk to the schools about the things kids say, they might pay better attention. I think one reason I don't do it is that I'm scared the principal or the other sources of power at the school might discriminate against my family. The other reason is that there aren't many other kids and their parents who would speak up.

When kids learn that I have two moms, they are normally OK with it. Sometimes I'll come across someone who says it is weird but that doesn't bother me because I'm fine with my family. I tend to not be very good friends with the kids who say it is weird to have LGBT parents because I am almost certain that the kids who say that are some of the few who are not OK with it. I think it helps that my family and I are so out with who we are.

Other than that situation, my school is very accepting. I could tell just about anyone that I have two moms, and they would be OK with it. But until the kids stop saying "This is gay, That's gay," I am going to do my best to get them to stop saying that and make my school a safer environment for the other kids with LGBT parents.

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