

As a child, I learned about the concept of being gay through watching a neighborhood boy, Cedric. From hurkies to toe-touches, Cedric could give any cheerleader around a run for her money, which made him quite popular with the girls.

But among the guys, he became the brunt of gay slurs and jokes, hurled by adult men and young boys alike. And those were pretty much the only words I ever heard about the topic of being gay. Mine was an education, based on stereotypes and narrow-mindedness that many of us probably share.

Now I have a kindergarten-age child of my own, and my job is to make sure he isn't as uninformed as I was.

Recently, we stopped at a gas station. I had just finished telling him for the trillionth time that he could not have any candy from inside the gas station when he matter-of-factly called me "gay" — clearly meant as an insult.

I took a few seconds, then, with all the calmness I could muster, asked, "Well, what does 'gay' mean, sweetie?"

His answer, a completely articulate, pint-sized definition, was perhaps more surprising to me than the initial comment. He simply said, "It's when you're a man's husband or a woman's wife."

Wow.

I used his explanation to say I wasn't gay, emphasizing that "gay" should not be used as an insult or to hurt people.

That, I hope, is the start of an important, ongoing — and admittedly difficult — conversation with my growing son.

Communicating values of tolerance and respect

According to The National Mental Health Association, 31% of gay youth were threatened or injured at school in the last year.

And anti-gay prejudice affects straight kids, too. For every gay, lesbian and bisexual youth who reported being harassed, four straight students said they were harassed because they were perceived as being gay or lesbian.

Clearly, as parents, educators and caregivers — especially those of us who are straight — we have a long way to go in our discussions about sexual orientation and prejudice. "What Does Gay Mean?" is an anti-bullying program initiated by the National Mental Health Association. It offers the following guidance:

- **Talking to Kids Ages 3-5**

Preschool-age children, always full of questions, are much more aware of homosexuality than former generations due to increased media coverage. Children in this age group don't need complex or graphic explanations, just simple and concise answers.

For example, after seeing two women neighbors holding their new baby, your 3-year-old might ask, "Who is the mommy and who is the daddy?" You may simply explain that "Both are mommies," perhaps adding that two moms are a family and can make a home for a baby.

You also may use picture books to help discuss these concepts, as well as allowing for the normal and healthy exploration among children that involves them experimenting with toys, clothing and games traditionally associated with the opposite gender.

- **Talking to Kids Ages 6-12**

Children aged 6 to 12 see most things in terms of how they relate to their own lives. If your 7-year-old asks, "Mommy, my friend Timmy says our teacher is gay. What does gay mean?" you might say, "Gay means that Ms. Chambers loves a woman like I love Daddy."

It's also important to understand why your child wants to know. Maybe someone said the teacher was gay in a scary or prejudiced way, and your child is looking for reassurance. Maybe your child has come up with his or her own ideas about being gay, and wants to check them out with you. Again, listening first gives you a good idea of what your child wants and needs to know.

Children aged 11 to 12 can identify with others. They understand that they can have several feelings about something at the same time. Their bodies are changing, and many preteens are thinking about sex, even if they aren't talking about it. Sexual curiosity and attraction to other kids of the same sex is a normal part of development. Just because your child has these feelings doesn't mean he or she is gay.

- **Talking to Teenagers**

Sexuality and expressing oneself as a boy or girl and, in some cases, as transgendered, are major parts of adolescent lives. In adolescence, your child's friendships may become more intimate and involved. The opinions and actions of your child's peers are also highly valued by your teen.

Most teens want the freedom to express themselves and want privacy around their changing bodies and sexual activity. But they also want parents to show interest by asking questions about their lives.

As teens begin dating, their sexual orientation often becomes apparent, as well as the orientation of their classmates and friends. This makes adolescence an important time in your child's life for you to discuss anti-gay prejudice and to model healthy behavior. Whatever your own values and beliefs, it's important to always discourage harassment or violence.

Your child or one of his friends may tell you, "I think I'm gay." Listening carefully helps teenagers feel safe to talk with you about their feelings. It took courage for your child to begin this conversation, and it will take courage on your part to follow up. This can be a confusing and difficult time, and your child needs to hear again and again that you love him or her no matter what.

Regardless of their age, more than anything, children want to know they can turn to parents and caregivers for honest answers about any topic. But in some cases, even more important than honest answers are good examples. In order to truly communicate values of tolerance and respect, we must not only talk about them but live them as well.

Dana Williams is a staff writer with Tolerance.org.

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