

Gender Inclusive Language in the Sexual Health Education Classroom

Language matters. It can be awkward at first, but it is crucial that sexual health educators use language that affirms and recognizes our students in all of their identities and diverse situations. When students feel validated through language, they are better able to hear the information that is being conveyed to them and internalize it as relevant to their lives. Language evolves, as such, we will continue to update our recommendations.

Goal: all students see themselves reflected in the language teachers use!

1. Practice these words in front of a mirror; the more you practice the less awkward it feels.
2. Incorporate language like ‘many bodies, and some bodies.’ For example, “Many people with a vagina also have a uterus and ovaries. Many people with a penis also have testicles.” This simple phrase signals that you are aware of the many variations that are possible.
3. In addition to recognizing all identities, inclusive language is actually more factual.

Instead of...	Try this	Instead of...	Try this
Male bodies Boy's body A man's penis	Avoid gendering anatomy - not all boys have penises Bodies with penises, testicles, bodies that produce sperm, etc.	Girls and boys Ladies and gentlemen	Acknowledge non-binary students. Students Friends All/everyone
Female bodies Girl's bodies A woman's vagina	Avoid gendering anatomy - not all girls have vaginas Bodies with vaginas, uteruses, ovaries, bodies that menstruate, etc.	Opposite gender Opposite sex	Avoid the gender binary. Different gender/sex Other gender/sex Gender/sex assigned at birth
Female or male reproductive system	Avoid discussing anatomy or reproductive systems as a binary. Acknowledge intersex people. Internal sexual/reproductive organs	Girlfriend Boyfriend	Avoid gender binaries. Not everyone identifies as a boy or a girl. Significant other Romantic partner Sexual partner

When a woman is pregnant	Not all women can get pregnant, and not all pregnant people are women.	Normal Natural	Many students ask questions like “Am I normal...?”. We want to make sure to reassure students by underscoring that they don’t need to be concerned about normative development. However, using the term “normal” may send the message that some students are “abnormal” if they don’t fit that definition. Common, frequent, or often
When a girl starts menstruating	When a person is pregnant Not all people who menstruate are girls, not all girls menstruate. When a person starts menstruating		
When a boy has an erection	People with clitorises and penises experience erections. When a person experiences an erection		
Heteronormative example names	Include a wide variety of example names including gender neutral, affirmatively same sex or queer couples, and culturally relevant names	Mom/Dad Motherhood/ Fatherhood	Mix it up to include many family configurations Mix it up to include many family configurations. Supportive adults Trusted adults Parents/Guardians/Car egivers Grown-ups in your life

More tips on gender-inclusive language:

Phrasing things that don't assume anyone's gender helps educators to include everyone. Inclusive language is important both in and out of the sexuality education context. Let's look at some examples:

Instead of saying...	Try saying...
It's normal for girls to start puberty between ages 8-13, and it's normal for boys to start puberty between ages 10-16.	It's common for people to start puberty anywhere between ages 8 and 16. Often, people with vaginas start puberty a bit earlier than people with penises. Remember, everyone's bodies are different and on their own schedule. Whenever you start puberty is the right time for you!
All girls are born with all the eggs they'll ever have. During a female's period, eggs are released.	Most bodies born with ovaries already have all their eggs present at birth. The eggs begin to mature and release during puberty.
Now we are going to learn about boys' anatomy and how their bodies develop during puberty.	Now we are going to learn more about the penis and testes. Follow along as we learn about sperm production and ejaculation.
All women can become pregnant after they start their period.	Most bodies with a uterus and ovaries can become pregnant after they start their period.
A typical or normal girl has a vagina, uterus, and ovaries.	A person who identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth is cisgender. A person who has a gender identity that differs from their sex assigned at birth is not cisgender, and may identify as non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid, demigender, transgender, or another identity.
Males have penises and testicles; females have vaginas and uteruses.	Some people have penises and testicles, other people have vaginas and uteruses, and some people have a different combination (e.g., a penis and ovaries). When a person's chromosomes, hormones, or reproductive anatomy do not fit a binary pattern, that's called intersex.
If a man is transgendered, it means he was born into the wrong body and he used to be a woman.	If a person is transgender, it usually means that their gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth.

Selected Resources:

[Pronoun Guide - Human Rights Campaign: All Children All Families](#)

[Inclusive Sexuality Education Resource – Healthy Teen Network](#)

[Gender-Inclusive Language: Resources, Examples & Student Friendly Discussion Supports – Gender Spectrum](#)

[Bilingual Teen Health Hub: Resources, Courses, Connection – WA Department of Health](#)