

Inclusive Sex Ed Language Checklist

Using language that removes gendered terms to talk about bodies and the sexual things that people may do with them helps include and respect people with diverse (a)sexualities, (a)genders, bodies, and (a)romantic orientations. However, learning how to speak and write this way can sometimes be challenging, especially without some strategies to help.

Generally, a great goal for using inclusive language **is phrasing things that so you're not assuming anyone's gender, their body parts, or the gender(s) they're attracted to**. While it's simple in theory, it can be hard in practice, especially if you want to phrase things in a variety of different ways.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself to check your language, and suggestions for making it more inclusive. With practice, this new way of communicating can become second nature!

- **Am I making assumptions about people's gender or sexual/romantic orientation? (Someone you're talking to or their partners, friends, or family members)**

Ex. "Hello boys and girls," "Do you have a girlfriend?," "When your mom gave birth," or "Do you have brothers or sisters?"

Alternates:

- If you don't know someone's sexual or romantic orientation, it's best to use gender-neutral terms for people they might be seeing, like partners, significant others, or sweethearts. Using neutral pronouns like, "they" can also be helpful.
- If you don't know the type of relationship that a person has, remember they could be asexual, aromantic, polyamorous, open, celibate, etc. or a combination of these. Try to avoid terms and language that imply specific kinds of relationships, like, "lover," "bae," or "one and only."
- While it doesn't work in every context, talking about someone's romantic future lets you talk about their partners as a whole, rather than individually. This ensures that people who may have more than one partner at a given time feel included. Ex. "Before you have sex, you should talk about what you and your partners like and find what everyone's excited to do."
- Try using the terms, "parent" or, "guardian" instead of assuming that someone has a mother and father. This way you're including many different types of families, like adoptive parents, single parents, queer parents, family-related guardians, trans parents, etc. or a combination of these.
- It's also a good idea not to assume the gender or body of a parent, or that they are genetically related or gave birth to their child. You can talk about, "when you were born" rather than mentioning anyone giving birth to them. If you're talking about pregnancy, you can talk about the parts involved or use the term, "birth parent."
- When it comes to gendered terms for other family members, like brother, sister, grandmother, or grandfather, try alternatives like, "sibling" or, "grandparent." We're still working on gender-neutral terms for aunt/uncle, nephew/niece!

- **Am I gendering people with certain anatomy?**

Ex. "Women should get regular PAP tests" or "Uncircumcised men should clean under their foreskin"

Alternates:

- Generally, avoid words related to gender or sex, like, "boy," "girl," "man," "woman," "male," or "female"
- Use anatomy rather than someone's gender or sex whenever possible:
 - Penises grow, chests develop, and facial hair grows; none of it needs gender!
 - Ex. "Condoms can be put on penises or sex toys" or, "Doctors generally start checking prostates at age..."
- Use, "people with" / "bodies with" phrases
 - Ex. "Bodies with ovaries," "People with a foreskin"
- Alternatively, you can say, "people who have" or, "bodies that have."

- Ex. “People who have a cervix can schedule regular PAP tests” or, “Bodies that have testicles may start making sperm”
- If you’re not talking about individual body parts, you can talk about people with internal or external genitals.
- As a last resort, it’s possible to talk about male or female bodies, but know that this can hurt trans people or people with intersex bodies, who may not recognize their bodies as male or female. Referring to people as, “a male” or, “a female” can be particularly triggering for some people, as you are potentially applying a label that may not fit with their identity.

- **Am I making assumptions on how someone’s body might work or change based on gender?**

Ex. “When women menstruate” or, “Men may ejaculate in their sleep”

Alternates:

- Use nouns for body functions rather than verbs
 - Ex. “Menstruation often begins,” “Ejaculation can happen during sleep”
- For describing what bodies can do, you can use, “people who,” “people that,” or, “bodies that” phrases
 - Ex. “People who develop breasts,” “People that grow facial hair,” or “Bodies that make pre-cum”
- For describing puberty, you can talk about the effects of estrogen and testosterone. Ex. “When puberty begins, testicles can release testosterone into the body. Testosterone causes...” Note that calling these male/female or feminine/masculine hormones can exclude some audience members.

- **Am I gendering safer sex and/or contraception practices, or the people who use them?**

Ex. “Male and female condoms” “Women have many options for birth control,” “Guys should put on a condom before having sex”

Alternates:

- Say internal or external condoms (or, more often, condoms and internal condoms)
- Talking about dental dams includes people who have oral sex on vulvas, anuses, or both.
- For contraception, you can focus on, “internal” and “external” genitals, or use what you just learned!
 - Focus on the body parts involved: “People with ovaries can take the pill,” “IUDs can be inserted into the uterus”
 - Use bodily functions. Ex. “People who ejaculate semen can avoid sharing their bodily fluids with their partner by using external condoms” or, “Taking the morning after pill prevents ovulation”
- For STIs, you can talk about safer sex supplies and the body parts involved rather than gendering people.
 - Ex. “Condoms can be used on penises or sex toys,” “Dental dams are great for safer oral sex on a vulva or anus,” or, “If you’re masturbating a partner with your hands, using latex gloves can make it safer”
 - Mentioning sex toys when you talk about penises can particularly include some trans men, but also anyone who might share sex toys.
- It helps to be specific about the type of sex you’re talking about, and the parts that are involved. This helps you talk about the unique risks involved, even more accurately than when you use gendered language!
 - Ex. “Hand job on a penis,” “Penis-in-vagina sex,” “Anal sex with a dildo,” or, “Oral sex on a vulva”

- **Am I using sweeping statements about people, their bodies, or what’s normal?**

- Words such as, “many,” “may,” “might,” “can,” “could,” or “often” can help include people in statements that may not apply to them, such as people who are asexual, intersex, trans, or have physical disabilities. Ex. “People who have a penis often also have testicles, a prostate, and a vas deferens”
 - Note that statements like, “typically,” “usually,” or, “most of the time” can still create an idea of what is normal, which can make people feel excluded if they don’t fall within it.

- If people ask questions about whether or not something is, “normal” or, “natural,” it’s easy to want to reassure them that they are, “normal.” Unfortunately, this can reinforce the idea that some things are normal while others are *abnormal*. Instead, consider using words like, “common,” “frequent,” or “many” when responding.
 - “It’s common for people to feel self-conscious about the size and shape of their nipples”
- **Get Creative!**
 - Once you dedicate yourself to using inclusive language and start adopting some of these tricks, you may discover many new ways of saying things inclusively.
 - “If someone has a cervix, it’s good for them to get regular PAP tests,” “Many people have an anus,” or, “Smelly discharge and pain in the urethra can be signs of gonorrhoea”
 - You can also streamline your language using the 2nd person, “you”
 - Ex. “If *you* have a vulva it can open up when *you* get aroused, and *your* clitoris can grow and get harder.”

For more tips, or to download our infographics, you can see the full version at sexted.org/presentations-press.

Some quick notes:

At SextEd, we primarily use this checklist when we're talking about topics in general, or when someone asks a question without disclosing their gender, their body parts, or the gender(s) they're attracted to. If you're answering a question where any of them are disclosed, or when you're talking about a specific situation where you know any of them, we recommend using the specifics of the situation. In particular, mirroring people's language around these topics can be affirming and supportive.

We also know it can be challenging to use inclusive language when students, peers, or service users don't, or they're not familiar with the practice. In these cases, you can still take the time to gently explain why you speak or write the way that you do: to respect the diversity in people's sexualities, genders, and bodies. If someone asks why you phrased something a certain way, you can take the time to explain why. In situations where a person is asking a question or speaking in a way that isn't inclusive, you can....

- Use phrases like “Yes, men, or anyone with a penis, can get an erection at random.”
- Gently remind them of identities they didn't include in their statement or question, “Yeah, for sure. But I also think it's important to keep in mind that some men don't have penises, and some women do, to make sure we're being inclusive”

Resources:

- Queering Sex Ed - Planned Parenthood Toronto
- *Trans Sexuality: A Safe Sex Guide for Trans People and Their Partners* by Tobi Hill-Meyer
- *The Teaching Transgender Toolkit: A Facilitator's Guide to Increasing Knowledge, Reducing Prejudice & Building Skills* by [Dr. Eli R. Green & Luca Maurer, MS](#)

References:

- The participants of the “Adapting Sex Ed Language for Diverse (A)genders, Bodies, and (A)sexualities” workshop at the Guelph Sexuality Conference, Friday, June 19th, 2015
- Raimi Marx and Joanna Gattuso of Cambridge Health Alliance’s presentation, “Trans Inclusive Sex Education” at the 2014 National Sex Ed Conference.
 - Contact rmarx@challiance.org or jgattuso@challiance.org to learn more
- ““I Want Them to Know Who They Are Is Ok”: Supporting Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Students – A Guide for Primary and Secondary School Educators” by Raimi Marx
- “Beyond Trans 101” by Dr. Eli Green
- “About Purportedly Gendered Body Parts” by Dean Spade
- Trans* Sexual health video series created by @CommunityHealthCU on YouTube