



WHAT DOES GAY MEAN?

There is not one right answer.

Many adults have grown up without hearing the words “gay” or “lesbian.” Therefore, you may not be sure how to respond when a student asks you what they mean. It is better to try to answer than to respond with silence or evade the question.

Practice different responses with colleagues, just as you practice other things that you want to learn. Figure out what you feel comfortable saying.

Responses will vary by age and developmental stage of the student. Your comfort in answering these questions will set a welcoming tone in your classroom and school community.

Keep it simple.

An answer can be as simple as: “‘Gay’ means two people of the same gender who love each other – two women or two men.” Try to answer the question honestly without overloading a student with information. Throughout elementary school a student’s ability to understand what “gay” means and what your explanation means may increase with development.

Focus on love and relationships.

A discussion with elementary-age students about the meanings of “gay” or “lesbian” is a discussion about love and relationships. You can just clarify that people love each other in different ways. Some women love and want to be partners with a man and some women love and want to be partners with a woman. It can be helpful to give concrete examples, such as “Tanya and Angela love each other, and they want to be family to each other.”



Understand what the student is asking.

If a second-grader says to you, “Alexia said that Ricardo is gay. What does ‘gay’ mean?” You could begin with, “Do you know why Alexia said that?” Or a student could say, “I heard that Omar’s dad is gay. What does that mean?” Listening first gives you a good idea of what your student wants to know and needs to know. Will your answer be about name-calling, defining what it means to be gay, different kinds of families or some combination of answers?

Think about what messages you want to share.

- All people deserve respect.
- Making fun of people by calling them “gay” (or “sissy,” “queer,” etc.) is hurtful. It can hurt both the student who is targeted and anyone who hears it who may have a gay relative or friend.
- Using the name of any group of people as an insult is not OK, because it is most often based on negative stereotypes.
- People can fall in love and want to be in a relationship with people of the same gender or with people of a different gender.

Sample responses to “What does gay mean?”

- The word gay means two people of the same gender, a man and a man or a woman and a woman, who love each other.
- It describes a boy who wants to have a boyfriend or a girl who wants to have a girlfriend.
- “Gay” can refer to either men or women but it is sometimes used just to refer to gay men. Women who are gay can also be called “lesbians.”