

Sexual education free from heterosexism

What is heterosexism?

Heterosexism is a system of attitudes, biases, and discrimination that positions heterosexuality as normal and superior within society. It presumes that everyone is heterosexual and that a person born male or female should assume gender roles traditionally associated with their biological sex.

The effects of heterosexism in sexual education

- excludes some students from the benefits of learning about safe sex practices to protect themselves from STIs. Sexual health education should give equal consideration to safe sex practices for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth.
- leads to isolation and can contribute to depression and lower self-esteem for students who are LGBTQ.
- limits straight students' understanding and appreciation of others.
- Bullying often happens when an imbalance of power exists. Teaching about only heterosexual relationships and ignoring other relationships denotes straight people as “normal” and LGBTQ people as abnormal. This form of marginalization encourages systemic bullying of LGBTQ people.

Inclusive sexual education

- is taught via a co-ed model (all students have access to the same information in a gender-neutral and supportive environment).
- redefines sex as being about more than just reproduction.
- considers that some students will identify as LGBTQ and lesson plans include information that will address their needs and affirm their identities.
- doesn't assume heterosexuality. For example, avoid conversations like, “Girls at your age may notice that they are beginning to have feeling for boys. This is a normal development.” Same sex attractions are also normal.
- includes images of same sex couples and families in order to role model acceptance and diversity.
- moves beyond tokenism—integrates information about LGBTQ people into curriculum in a significant way.

The following resource offers some interesting videos looking at the effects of “abstinence only” health classes which reinforce heterosexism. *Rainbow Bear's Wedding* (www.amplifyyourvoice.org/videos) offers insight into how a youth participating in a heterosexist lesson about relationships may feel.