



Education Department Resource

## For Valentine's Day: Talking About Love and Marriage

Suggestions for Classroom Discussion

### Introduction:

Valentine's Day can be a confusing and frustrating time for young LGBT students, or those with LGBT family members. Your students may find themselves isolated or confused, or may feel excluded from the "typical" school culture. In schools and in the world at large, peers, teachers, and just about everyone else, continually make the assumption that everyone is heterosexual. (This inadvertent bias is known as "heterosexism".) Children with lesbian or gay parents, with LGBT family members, or who are themselves wrestling with sexuality issues, may feel cut off by the assumptions that are made in the school community, and by discussions that occur at this time of the year. We recommend that you handle this topic gingerly, giving your students the space they need to negotiate their own answers to the questions you raise.

Begin the discussion by informing your students that you're going to take a few minutes to talk about love, marriage, and the family unit. Ask your students to define a "family". Then ask them how many are from two-parent households, and who lives in their house. (It's likely that a number spend time in multiple homes.) Explain to your students that there are all kinds of families; including families headed by Gay or Lesbian people. Then ask your students if gay people can get married.

(Some students take this opportunity to make disparaging comments about LGBT people at large. If you haven't already, this might be an appropriate time to lay down some groundrules about what can be said in the classroom, said outside of the school, and some guidelines for tolerance.

[Example: words like "fag" or "lezzie" are probably not acceptable in your classroom.] It's important for your students to hold their own beliefs; and at the same time, to be respectful and mindful of others. While the conversation continues students should acknowledge that the way they say things -- the words and phrases they use -- may seem intolerant, and hurt others.)

Ask your students: Are there any states where two women, or two men, can marry? Yes, lesbian women and gay men can marry. However, there are currently no states where their marriages will be legally recognized. Vermont now recognizes "Civil Unions," but no state currently extends the full privileges of marriage to same sex couples. Ask, "Who knows what D.O.M.A. is?" DOMA is the Defense of Marriage Act; federal legislation passed in September 1996, which prevents recognition of marriages between people of the same gender. Previously, there had been no federal legislation recognizing or prohibiting gay or lesbian marriage.

Do your students know of religions-churches and synagogues - which conduct

marriages between men or between women? This may surprise your students. Ask them what they think about it. Provide them with a list of religious organizations that perform gay or lesbian marriages. This includes some Episcopalian churches, some Methodist churches, some Reform Judaism synagogues, Unitarian churches, and a number of other religious institutions.

### **Suggested topic questions:**

#### **Benefits: What are some of the benefits of legal marriage?**

Legally recognized and sanctioned marriages provide a series of external benefits; some directly from the government, some from secondary institutions, such as banks, schools, hospitals, or insurance companies. These benefits include: filing joint tax returns with family rates and exemptions; joint parenting, adoption, foster care, custody and visitation rights; sharing Social Security and Medicare; joint insurance policies; obtaining veterans' discounts; taking sick leave to care for a spouse or a child; and the right to apply for immigration or residency for partners born in other countries. Ask your students what this would mean on a day-to-day basis. Is this fair? Is it right? How might such a policy be seen as discriminatory?

#### **What is Domestic Partnership?**

Domestic Partnership is a way of naming and recognizing the committed relationships of people who live together, as family, without being legally married. It's become a convention for some workplaces and universities to offer "domestic partnership" benefits, as way of acknowledging the inherent unfairness of the disparity between the benefits offered to their heterosexual employees and homosexual employees. These companies include IBM, Apple Computers, and many universities and municipal governments. Engage your class in a discussion of why

these benefits and protections exist. What does DOMA mean in terms of De Facto prohibitions? (explain de facto) And simply ask your class: is it fair that some people get these benefits and others do not?

#### **Outlawing gay and lesbian behavior: Is there a right to privacy?**

In what way could the legal sanctioning of gay and lesbian marriages be an issue about recognition and validity? You may wish to discuss the meanings of the word "valid". (Ask the class, does anyone know what it means for something to be "valid"?)

The argument has been made that marriages between gay men or between women will "erode" the meaning of marriage, and erode societal values. What exactly does this mean? Ask your students to examine this argument. Will marriages between straight people mean less if non-straight people are allowed to marry? (Please do not discourage your students from holding their own opinions in this matter. One of the goals of this subject-area is simply to make the students more comfortable discussing these issues.) What does that say about the institution of marriage? Encourage your students to continue to contemplate the topic.

#### **Separation of Church and State.**

Are your students familiar with this concept? In what ways may DOMA be seen as a disruption of this separation? What place is there for moral recognition within the law? How do you define morality? Some people define their morality in terms of impact on others, asking, who is being hurt by this action? Other people define their morality as a matter of a personal relationship with their God, or along a strict religious code. To these people, some actions are inherently wrong. Your students are most likely, during their young adult years, to be contemplating and examining their own moral codes. This kind of conversation provides an important

moment to acknowledge that contemplation.

**Students may raise some of the following questions:**

**Aren't LGBT people promiscuous? Is it even possible that they are monogamous?**

Explain that monogamy is the choice to spend your life with one person, and that quite a few gay and lesbian people choose to do so. Your students may ask if that attitude reflects only a small portion of the lesbian and gay population. You might answer that while there are few definitive studies, having one partner is a highly valued ideal for many people within LGBT communities.

**Why would anyone who wants to get married become gay or lesbian? Or, if you were gay or lesbian, why would you want to be married?**

You could simply try to explain that people in love find marriage rewarding. Or, you could explain that some people find that there really is one person with whom they wish to base their life. You could also ask, "Why would anyone choose to marry?" You may wish to inform your students that you are not looking for a simple answer here; that, in fact, there is no simple or right

answer. Apply this to the parents of your students. Not all are (or have been) married; but some will be.

As a corollary: your students may say that [their parents, or] straight people marry to have kids. Explain that lesbian and gay people also choose to raise their families together, or may decide to adopt. And that in some cases, the LGBT step-parent will adopt the children whose natural parent is their partner. This is legal in some states, not in others; and is generally contested. (This could become an interesting research project for some students.)

**Conclusion:**

Remember: following so closely on the heels of the winter family-oriented holidays, Valentine's Day can seem like a celebration of heterosexual love and romance. LGBT-identified students, those who are questioning or confused, or those with LGBT parents or family, may be depressed by this concurrence. Simply by using one class period, or taking a few minutes during a class, to address this topic, you will be sending out a positive signal, and letting the students know that they are not alone in struggling with this issue.