

HAIRSPRAY:

A GLSEN DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

It's been nearly three decades since John Waters brought us his film, [Hairspray](#), in 1988. From there, the story of Tracy Turnblad and her friends and family has lived on through the original film, the [Broadway adaptation](#) in 2002 and subsequent presence in school and community theater productions, the [remake of the film](#) in 2007 and NBC's 2016 [Hairspray LIVE](#).

Set in racially-segregated 1960s Baltimore, *Hairspray* remains relevant to today's audiences as it reflects many current events and issues in U.S. society and can be used to address a variety of themes, including, racism and bias of all kinds, body image, individuality and identity, student activism, community-police interactions and media bias. And, of course, it is a lot of fun.

However you watch *Hairspray*—live, recorded, on stage or on screen—the story is full of potential inspiration, teachable moments and conversation starters for middle and high school educators and students, alike. Below you will find suggested discussion questions for use in your school.

HOW TO USE HAIRSPRAY IN YOUR SCHOOL

EDUCATORS AND COLLEAGUES: Consider discussing *Hairspray* at a staff meeting, PD session or professional learning community (PLC). Ask educators to watch *Hairspray* ahead of time or focus on a particular theme or song that you can watch/listen to together. Pick a topic or two that seem particularly relevant to your school community and use the educator questions below to guide the conversation.

IN THE CLASSROOM: Bring *Hairspray* into the classroom through discussions and assignments aligned with your existing curriculum. Possible connections include social movements of the 1960s, identity and bias, music theory, media literacy and current events. Depending on the technology and time available, consider showing clips or listening to a song from the soundtrack in class, followed by a discussion using the student questions below to guide the conversation.

STUDENTS AND GSAs: *Hairspray*, the film, play and soundtrack, can be a great conversation starter for your GSA, Diversity Club, Leadership Class or other student group. Try having a club movie night, afterschool screening or watch/listen to clips or songs during a regularly-scheduled meeting. Consider inviting other student clubs or groups to join you. Pick a theme or two ahead of time that seems most relevant to your school community and use the student discussion questions below to guide the conversation.

THEMATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

APPEARANCE AND BODY IMAGE: *Hairspray* centers on the main character, Tracy Turnblad, as she navigates a society that often judges her because of her body size and shape. Tracy's struggle to remain confident in the face of rejection mirrors that of many real-life students in our country today. According to GLSEN's 2016 research report, [From Teasing to Torment: School Climate Revisited - A Survey of U.S. Secondary School Students and Teachers](#), middle and high school students reported that "appearance/body size" was the most common reason that other students were bullied, called names or harassed at their schools.

EDUCATOR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What messages did you receive growing up about people of diverse body sizes and shapes? How have those messages impacted you as an adult and as an educator?
- In what ways do issues of body size and body image play out in your school and what are the impacts on students? What types of bodies are represented in school curriculum, functions and decorations? What can you do to foster respect for all body sizes and shapes? Why do you think it might be important to do so?
- In the beginning of *Hairspray*, Tracy's mother, Edna, doesn't want Tracy to try out for *The Corny Collins Show* because she fears that Tracy won't be accepted because of her size. In what ways might some of your students be discouraged from participating in something due to the fear of adults around them? How, as educators, do you balance the desire to protect seemingly vulnerable students with their need to follow their instincts and participate in the world around them?

STUDENT DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Tracy starts her day with the song, "Good Morning Baltimore." Despite what others may think about her, she sings with confidence about how she looks, "Oh, oh, oh look at my hair/ What 'do can compare with mine today?" and how she moves, "'Cause when I start to dance I'm a movie star." What do you or could you say to yourself each morning that would make you feel proud and confident? What do or could other people say to you that would make you feel special and beautiful?
- Tracy doesn't see anyone on *The Corny Collins Show* that looks like her, but she quickly becomes the most popular "new girl in town." Why might it be important to see people who look like you in the media and in your community? Other than in *Hairspray*, where do you see images or examples of people with all types of body shapes and sizes? Where else would you like to see this? What other identities could be present that would make you feel represented?

INDIVIDUALITY AND DIVERSITY: *Hairspray's* core message is one of positive self-image, open-mindedness and respect for people of all identities. Particular attention is paid to the need for acceptance of people of color and folks of all body sizes and shapes, who face bias, discrimination and even violence in the story. Tracy embodies the idea that you don't have to conform to anyone else's standard of what is "acceptable" or "beautiful".

EDUCATOR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Tracy never let other people tell her how she should look or act. She appreciates when she stands out in a crowd, and she helps other people to appreciate their own identities and experiences. What strategies does Tracy use to stay positive and show self-love throughout the movie? What students have you known who are like Tracy in that way? What can you do as an educator to help students appreciate their own and others' individuality and identities? What can you do to ensure that your efforts are inclusive of all students, including students who may face bias based on their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, ability, socioeconomic status, immigration status or some other part of their identity?
- The teachers in Tracy's world seem to focus only on content without really relating to their students. In what ways do you or the educators at your school make time for encouraging student individuality and celebrating diversity? How are the various identities present in your school represented and appreciated for what the contributions they make to your school community?

STUDENT DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Tracy never let other people tell her how she should look or act. She appreciates when she stands out in a crowd, and she helps other people to appreciate their own identities and differences. What strategies does Tracy use to stay positive and show self-love throughout the movie? How do you do this for yourself?

- What spaces or celebrations in school help you to proudly show off your individuality and/or the identities that are important to you? If you could invent a school event for celebrating individuality and accepting differences, what would it look like?

RACISM AND SOLIDARITY: As Tracy's dream of dancing on *The Corny Collins Show* comes true, she becomes aware of the injustices faced by her African-American friends who are barred from the show and face racism and discrimination in their everyday lives. Tracy, who is white, shows active allyship and solidarity with the black community in segregated Baltimore. She stands up for what she believes in and inspires others to do the same.

EDUCATOR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Outraged that people of color are not allowed on *The Corny Collins Show*, Tracy suggests that the community hold a march against racism and segregation. As a white person, Tracy defies expectations by participating in the march herself and showing solidarity with the black community. In what other ways does Tracy engage in ally behavior in the story? Why might allies be important to individuals and social movements?
- What does solidarity and allyship look like at your school? What groups are most marginalized and/or targeted (for example, students of color, undocumented students, LGBTQ students, students with disabilities, etc.)? What efforts are being made to address issues of bias and discrimination and what do you or could you do to support those efforts?
- Several scenes in *Hairspray* portray police officers that are disrespectful to Motormouth Mabel and the black community, leading to a chaotic and violent clash between protesters and law enforcement. How might those images relate to current events in your community or the U.S., in general? What connections do you think your students might make and how might you address the issues of police brutality and racial discrimination if/when they arise?

STUDENT DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Outraged that people of color are not allowed on *The Corny Collins Show*, Tracy suggests that the community hold a march against racism and segregation. As a white person, Tracy defies expectations by participating in the march herself and showing solidarity with the black community. When have you stood up for/with people who are being treated unfairly, even if you weren't the target? How would you want your allies to show their solidarity with you?
- How did you feel when watching the interactions between Motormouth Maybell, the other peaceful protesters and the police? In what ways do you think your identities and experiences influenced your reaction to the protest scenes? How might this experience be different for white people vs. people of color? In what ways might the protest in *Hairspray* compare to current events in your community or the U.S., generally?
- Tracy feels passionately about racial justice. What social issues are you passionate about (for example, racial justice, ability justice, LGBTQ rights/gender equity, animal rights, environmental protection, indigenous rights, rights of undocumented students, etc.)? Have you ever wanted to help organize other students to make change? What actions could you take to spread awareness and create change?