

Principles for Gender-Inclusive Puberty and Health Education

Executive Summary

While puberty and health education (PHE) typically provides students with knowledge about body changes during puberty, secondary sex characteristics, emotions, and relationships, gender receives little to no attention in even most “comprehensive” PHE curricula.

PHE that explicitly incorporates content related to gender diversity benefits all students because it recognizes and affirms all students. Students who see themselves reflected in health curricula are more likely to succeed in school academically. All young people have a right to accurate information to make healthy, informed decisions about their bodies and their relationships. Beyond their own unique development, this includes understanding the diversity of human experiences they will encounter as adults.

Without access to gender-inclusive PHE, many students are left to believe that they are alone as they struggle to make sense of rapidly changing bodies and feelings. This universal human experience leaves them feeling isolated at the precise time they are seeking to be connected to others.

Nowhere is this potential for feeling alone and invisible more prevalent than among transgender and other gender expansive students. These feelings, along with the stress borne of all-too-common stigmatization and discrimination, have been associated with alarming outcomes related to health and well-being.

But these adverse outcomes are preventable. Research shows that support for transgender students by schools and families does much to alleviate mental health risks. The power of schools to make a difference in young people’s lives by reflecting their experiences through curriculum and other supportive strategies cannot be overstated. Simply stated, gender-inclusive PHE is life-affirming for all students, and life-saving for some.

Five Principles of Gender-Inclusive Puberty Education

The document is not a curriculum. Rather, when applied to existing course materials, the principles convey perspective, language and practices that ensure that no student’s passage through puberty is stigmatized or made invisible. They are designed to be relevant to all schools and communities while recognizing that the implementation of PHE varies across schools, districts, and communities. Regardless of how PHE is taught, today’s young people are part of a generation that generally views the complexity of gender as a fact of life. Fifty-six percent of 13-to-20-year-olds said that they know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns such as “they,” and 74 percent said they are more accepting of people with “nontraditional” gender identities than they were a year ago. Elementary and middle school students are immersed in a world of gender diversity through their own families, popular culture, social media, and their peers. Gender-inclusive PHE addresses this evolving landscape through five principles that provide strategies to deliver inclusive PHE to all students.



Principle 1: Provide a Foundation of Gender Literacy

Gender literacy provides students with foundational concepts and vocabulary to comprehend puberty and human growth and development. It creates understanding and comfort with their individual pathways and the variety of pathways that may be experienced by their peers.

Principle 2: Distinguish Patterns from Rules

Recognizing the concept of “patterns vs. rules” helps students understand the diverse ways in which gender is experienced and expressed. Given time to reflect, even young children can see that many gender stereotypes are not true for themselves or for their classmates; they likely know children who engage in activities that fall outside of gender stereotypes (or perhaps they do so themselves). Acknowledging natural variation allows young people to accept themselves and others for who they are.

Principle 3: Emphasize Physiology, Rather than Gender

A gender-inclusive approach to PHE conveys the important physiological terms and definitions students must grasp without assigning or assuming genders. On a basic level, this means describing the parts that different bodies come with (and their functions) as opposed to connecting those parts to a particular gender.

Principle 4: Describe Many Pathways to Adult Bodies

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of adolescence for many students is the absolute certainty that there is something wrong with them, because their body is not developing like the kid sitting next to them. Educators who convey the range of experience people have in this maturation process will help every student see their path within a norm and will help to decrease any sense of marginalization for students.

Principle 5: Describe Many Pathways to Families

A common theme of many traditional PHE programs is the idea that the sole reason bodies are changing is to produce children and create families. Describing different pathways to starting families fully incorporates information about basic processes of reproduction, but it does not limit the creation of a family to one particular narrative. Expanding discussion of family creation means that instruction can embrace the array of family building options that exist today and that are almost certainly represented in the classroom in which instruction is taking place.

These five principles of gender-inclusive puberty and health education have already been used in many schools and are within the grasp of any school or educator seeking to incorporate the experiences of all young people into their instruction. The result is healthier, more accepting students who are prepared for the diverse world in which they live.

Endorsers of This Document

This document was released in partnership with six national organizations that developed “A Call to Action Related to LGBTQ Youth and Sex Education” in 2016. This landmark document delineated the need for PHE to include content reflective of both sexual orientation and gender diversity. The “Principles for Gender-Inclusive Puberty and Health Education” were created to address how educators can provide students with PHE that reflects the gender diversity of all young people and meet the needs of students frequently neglected by PHE programs. Gender Spectrum garnered feedback and endorsements for this document from the organizations that released the “Call to Action”: Advocates for Youth, ANSWER, GLSEN, HRC, Planned Parenthood and SIECUS.

