

Tips for talking with children and young people about marriage equality, respect, diversity, and relationships

The recent introduction of marriage equality legislation in Australia brought us in line with many other countries around the world in recognising the rights of same-sex couples to legally marry. This information sheet provides some helpful tips for parents, caregivers and teachers for talking with children about relationships and gender diversity, sexual orientation and marriage equality.



Talking with children and young people about marriage equality and related issues

From very early on, children are learning about relationships, love, romance and marriage (and also about gender), and forming ideas about what this means for them and the people around them. The change in our marriage law provides an important opportunity to talk with children about marriage, but also about relationships, diversity, equality, justice and fairness.

Most children, unless they are very young, will have already heard about marriage equality at school, amongst their peers, in the media, or from overhearing adult conversations, amid heightened community and media attention in the postal survey period and the lead-up to the change in legislation at the end of 2017. Many children will also have heard homophobic, negative and prejudiced views about members of the LGBTQI+ community. This is likely to be particularly upsetting for children in same-sex families, and for young people who are exploring their own sexual orientation.

Talking with children about marriage equality, respect, diversity, and relationships is important, and the following tips are intended to help parents, caregivers and teachers to have these conversations with children and young people. It also includes tips for how to help children cope with anti-LGBTQI+ or gender-related put-downs.

Listen to understand what they are really wanting to know

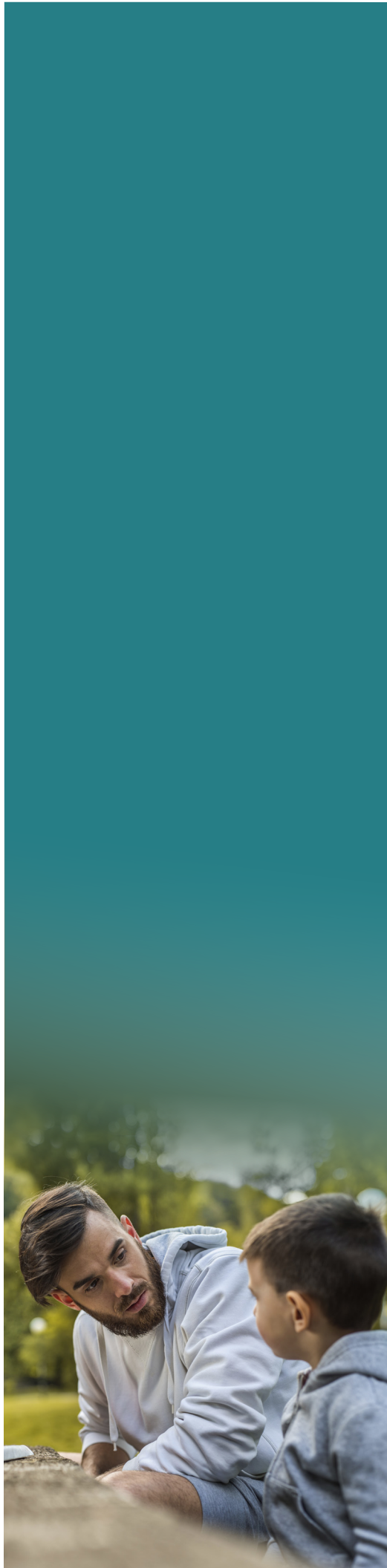
Let children know it's ok to talk with you about relationships, gender diversity and sexual orientation, and marriage equality.

Listen carefully to what children are saying to work out how best to respond. Sometimes children will repeat a comment they've heard, or ask a question, and you might need to listen carefully, or ask clarifying questions, to find out what they really want to know. Will your answer be about marriage equality? Or gender diversity, diversity in relationships? Or will it be about fairness and justice; or about name-calling?

Talk to them about LGBTQI+ words and relationships

Sometimes children aren't quite sure about the meaning of LGBTQI+ words, or have heard them used in an unkind way.

- Give children direct and simple answers to questions they might ask about LGBTQI+ words. There are some good resources available here. www.welcomingschools.org/resources/definitions/youth-definitions/
- Focus the discussion on love and committed relationships.
- Let children know that there is great diversity in how people love other people.
- People can fall in love and want to be in a relationship with people of the same sex or with people of a different sex or gender.
- A person's sexual orientation is defined by who they love or are attracted to.
- Give them examples of people they know who might be in a same-sex relationship.



Talk to them about what marriage equality means

- Marriage is about love, commitment and responsibility.
- Weddings are about celebration and recognition of a committed relationship.
- The new marriage equality legislation has changed the definition of marriage from being between ‘a man and a woman’ to ‘two people’ regardless of their sex or gender. As well as same-sex couples being allowed to legally marry, transgender and gender diverse people are also able to marry their partner.
- Not being able to marry discriminated against people in same-sex relationships. because it did not give them the same rights as heterosexual couples.
- Discrimination is hurtful and harmful to people. This is one of the reasons why the marriage legislation needed to change.

Offer alternative views of relationships

- Not everybody wants to get married, or believes in marriage.
- There are many ways of showing love, commitment and responsibility that do not involve getting married, but might include living together, or bringing up children together, or maintaining separate lives but having a close, loving relationship, or being a loyal, loving friend.
- There are also many different ways of loving and having relationships. Being a part of a couple is not what everyone wants or needs.

If children have been upset by homophobic or hateful views, listen to them, provide them with opportunities to express their feelings, and create opportunities to build their resilience

- Acknowledge and validate children’s feelings and emotions.
- Help them to put words to feelings.
- Let them know that it’s ok to question one’s sexual orientation (i.e., who you are attracted to) or one’s gender identity, and that there are many different ways for people to “be” in the world.
- Make sure your child knows that you love them for who they are and they don’t deserve to be bullied or abused.
- Create opportunities for children to build their self-confidence and personal resilience. Help them find opportunities to do well in activities that they are interested in (e.g. sport, music, dance, chess etc.).
- Let the teacher or school know if homophobic behaviour has been happening in the school community and ask them what the school does to deal with this.
- Help children come up with and practice appropriate responses to teasing or mean remarks. A good website to help with this is:
www.welcomingschools.org/resources/challenging-questions/
- Use books, websites and movies that show children in diverse families (e.g., www.rainbowfamilies.org.au/resources/books/).
- Take care of yourselves and the people around you. Mean or poorly informed remarks say more about the speaker than whoever they are targeting.

- Practise self-care and help children to do the same. You don't have to watch every ad or read every news story together with a child. We can all walk away from conversations that make us feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Switch off and do something you love.

Talk about how to treat others

Have discussions with children about how to treat others, and to share opinions about what sort of a society you want to have. You can use it to open up a frank discussion about realities in society, and the ways in which some people who live in this country are treated. Homophobia, hate, and prejudice are not innate but learned.

- Let children and young people know that everyone deserves respect. No one deserves any act of violence for their sexual orientation, gender identity, race, religion, or culture.
- Making fun of people by calling them “gay” (or “sissy,” “queer,” etc.) is hurtful. It can hurt both the person who is targeted and anyone who hears it who may have an LGBTQI+ 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.
- Let them know that hate directed at anyone who is different is unacceptable, and that meeting hate with more hate does not solve the problem.
- Talk with them about ways that people can stand up to name-calling, bullying or prejudiced behaviour. These include:
 - Letting an adult know
 - Being an ally – a person who speaks out or takes actions on behalf of someone else or for a group that they are not a part of
 - Saying something like “It’s not ok to use ‘gay’ unkindly to mean something bad”.

Make sure children have the facts they may need to challenge any misunderstanding or discrimination, such as ‘not all children need a mother and a father’ or ‘children need parents who love them’.

Help them to see that the majority of the population strives to be just and kind. While there may be differing views on marriage equality, the problem group (e.g. bullies, bigots, haters, homophobes) is just a small number of people. A narrow definition reduces the problem’s impact and the potential leverage of people advocating or using violence, and opens up space for respectful conversations with people who are confused, uncomfortable or uncertain.

Seeking professional assistance

Talking with a psychologist may be helpful if you feel you or your family need further assistance with issues that are raised around gender and sexual diversity. An APS psychologist may be able to assist with how to communicate effectively around these issues, explore personal issues and feelings that may arise during this time, and provide an affirming and supportive response to LGBTQI+ families.

