

Ted Talks – Lindsay Amer: Why kids need to learn about gender and sexuality

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Alright, let's get this kicked off.

(Singing) It's OK to be _____. We are different in many ways. Doesn't matter if you're a boy, girl or somewhere in between, we all are part of one big family. _____ "_____". Queer Kid Stuff. You are enough here at Queer Kid Stuff.

Opening a performance with lyrics like "It's OK to be gay" for a roomful of adults is one thing, but it's entirely different for a roomful of kindergarteners. What you've just heard is the theme song for my web series "Queer Kid Stuff", where I make _____ and social justice videos for all ages. And when I say all ages, I mean _____ babies to your great-great-grandma.

Now, I know what you're thinking: "Whoa, they're talking about _____ with kids." But talking to kids about _____ is actually crucial. The American Academy of Paediatrics has found that children have a _____ understanding of their gender identity by the age of _____. This is when children are developing their sense of self. They're observing the world around them, absorbing that information and _____ it. Now, most parents want their children to become kind, empathetic, self-confident adults, and exposure to _____ is an important part of that social and emotional development. And – gender nonconforming kids and trans kids and kids with trans and nonbinary and queer parents are everywhere.

In the series, my stuffed bear co-host and I talk about the LGBT community, activism, gender and pronouns, consent and _____. We _____ these topics through songs, not unlike the one you just heard, simple definitions and metaphors. We approach these ideas, to steal a phrase from an old professor of mine, from "under the doorknob" – getting down to toddler height and looking up at the great big world through their tiny little eyes, taking these seemingly complex ideas and simplifying them – not _____ them _____, but _____ on the core concept. Gender is about how we feel and how we express ourselves. Sexuality is about love and gender and family, not about sex. And these are all ideas children can _____. In one of my earliest episodes about gender, I used the idea of pronouns to _____ the definition and introduce gender-neutral pronouns like "they" and "them". I encourage children to think about their own pronouns and to ask others for theirs. In later episodes, I build on this foundation and introduce big fancy words like "nonbinary" and "transgender". I get emails from viewers in their 20s who use my videos to explain nonbinary gender to their grandparents.

But, I get one comment over and over again: "Let kids be kids."

Well, that's a nice sentiment and all, but only if it actually includes all kids. Just a few weeks ago, a 15-year-old in Huntsville, Alabama died by suicide after _____ for _____. In 2018, it was a seven-year-old in Denver, Colorado. There have been and will be many more. Lesbian, gay and bisexual teens are more than _____ more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers, and transgender teens are almost _____ more likely. According to one study, roughly _____ of homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning, and about _____ of homeless youth identify as transgender, compared with _____ of the general youth population surveyed. According to the Human Rights Campaign, there have been _____ killings of trans people in _____ cities across _____ states since _____. And those are only the reported cases.

And _____ of those killings were of trans women of colour. The queer situation is bleak, to say the least.

The YouTube comments on my videos are not much better. I'm used to the harassment. I get messages daily telling me I'm a paedophile and that I should kill myself in a number of increasingly creative ways. I once had to put the word "truck" on my block list because someone wanted me to get run over by a truck. "Shower" and "oven" are in there, too, for the less creative and more disturbing Holocaust reference. When neo-Nazis marched in Charlottesville, I was unsurprised to learn that the creator of a violent Reddit meme about one of my episodes was in the tiki torch crowd. This _____ of negativity is what we're up against: the crushing statistics, the violence, the mental health risks, the well-meaning but _____ response my parents gave me when I came out that they didn't want me to have a harder life. That's what we're up against.

But in the face of all that, I choose joy. I choose rainbows and unicorns and glitter, and I sing that it's OK to be gay with my childhood stuffed teddy bear. I make queer media for kids because I wish I had this when I was their age. I make it so others don't have to struggle through what I did, not understanding my identity because I didn't have any exposure to who I could be. I teach and spread this message through joy and positivity instead of framing it around the hardships of queer life. I want kids to grow up and into themselves with pride for who they are and who they can be, no matter who they love or what they wear or what pronouns they use. And I want them to love others for their differences, not in spite of them. I think _____ this pride and empathy will make the world a kinder and more equal place and _____ the _____ and hate that _____ in our world.

So, talk to a kid about gender. Talk to a kid about sexuality. Teach them about consent. Tell them it is OK for boys to wear dresses and for girls to speak up. Let's spread radical queer joy.

Thank you