

## **Childhood and Adolescent Development**

This module includes content related to childhood and adolescent development, which often includes various aspects of psychosocial development for children and adolescents, from socialization and human development to cultural constructions of childhood and transitions to adulthood, to childhood/adolescent learning.

### **What does it mean to queer childhood and adolescent development courses?**

- *Include content that speaks to the realities of queer/trans experiences during the formative years.* Particularly, content should work to resist constructions of 2SLGBTQ+ youth as inherently “at-risk” (with “gay” = “problem”) and rather reinforce positive identity development. In other words, content should enable teacher candidates to affirm emerging, questioning, and established 2SLGBTQ+ identities (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2011; Talburt, 2004; Troiden, 1989).
- *Include content that focuses explicitly on Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer people (e.g., M. Robinson, 2014; Wilson, 1996, 2008), as well as content that focuses on the experiences of Black students and students of colour (e.g., McCreedy, 2004).*
- *Challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity.* Include 2SLGBTQ+ content that challenges heteronormative and cisgender assumptions of heterosexuality and cisgender conceptions of binary gender as the only “expected” and desirable development for youth (with 2SLGBTQ+ experiences tagged on as the “exceptions”). It is necessary to include content that challenges these assumptions and creates space for 2SLGBTQ+ youth to develop safely in schools with the support of teachers and their peers.
- Challenging gender and sexuality normativities also means fostering understanding of the ways that homophobia and transphobia interact with other systems of oppression in people’s lives, including racism and colonialism, disability, and poverty.
- *Challenge the conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality,* and stereotypical expectations about how they “naturally” align: male → masculine boy → attracted to feminine girls; female → feminine girl → attracted to masculine boys.
- *Address gender and sexuality development in childhood.* Discuss healthy sexual development and acknowledge that it begins in early childhood (see Duke & McCarthy, 2009). Many 2SLGBTQ+ children become aware quite early in their lives that they do not fit comfortably within heterosexual or binary gender normativities, and receiving messages from their teachers that supports them as their identities develop is vital.

- *Connect gender and sexuality development to K–12 teaching.* These courses can support teachers in their work by addressing the need for age-appropriate content in all grades. Avoid totalizing discourses about what 2SLGBTQ+ people look or act like (Talbert, 2004).

### Why do we need to do this?

- *Identity development.* Childhood and adolescent development courses need to include a focus on 2SLGBTQ+ content. During childhood and adolescent years, youth are developing their own understandings of the world and social norms/normativities, as well as their own place in it through the socialization processes they experience. Providing content that makes room for diversity in sexuality and gender is essential to ensuring queer/trans youth and teachers are equipped to understand the development of 2SLGBTQ+ identities as part of childhood/adolescent development process.
- Childhood and adolescent development courses seek to provide teachers with support in considering the impacts of home, school, and social contexts of youth, particularly their impact on students' ability to grow and learn. Content that provides teachers with the ability to support students through challenging or traumatic circumstances must include 2SLGBTQ+ content, as 2SLGBTQ+ children/youth will certainly experience common situations (such as divorce, housing insecurity, etc.) as well as some unique situations based on their own sexuality and gender identities (such as stressors related to being in the closet, coming out, family/peer reactions, etc.). Ensuring that teacher candidates are aware of how these experiences and others related to minority stress, and how potential intersectional and compounding aspects (such as racialized identities, poverty, disability, etc.), affect 2SLGBTQ+ students and their learning ensures that teachers are better able to address their needs in the classroom.
- Two Spirit and queer/trans Indigenous students are too often separated from supportive cultural and community traditions. Alongside compounding intersectional factors, additional stressors—such as systemic racism, intergenerational trauma, the legacy of colonialism and residential schools, and systemic violence—differentially affect 2S and queer/trans Indigenous youth. This not only impacts their ability to learn but also their own identity development. *Supporting the development of 2S and Indigenous queer/trans students ensures that teachers enter their classrooms with knowledge about and some strategies to support Indigenous queer/trans students.*
- Gender and sexuality identity development are two processes that have historically been treated as “sensitive” material that parents/guardians may object to (Malins, 2016; K. Robinson, 2005a, 2005b), or as inevitable identities that will arrive with or without educational intervention. However, both gender and sexuality are embedded in developmental processes that are strongly impacted by the normative influences of socialization. When unaddressed, the prevailing assumptions about the sexual

innocence of children (Duke & McCarthy, 2009), binary conceptions of gender, and heteronormativity dominate conceptions of how identity develops among children and adolescents. Not addressing gender and sexuality leads us to expect that “normal” people are cisgender-heterosexuals, and therefore 2SLGBTQ+ people are “abnormal.” Teachers must understand that silence is harmful and including 2SLGBTQ+ content in early years does not involve discussing queer sexual behaviours, just as it does not involve discussing heterosexual sexual behaviours. Early-years teachers can include useful content for healthy sexual development (Duke & McCarthy, 2009) and healthy gender development (Meyer et al., 2016). *Age-appropriate content at all levels supports 2SLGBTQ+ students and discourages all students from engaging in discrimination and gender policing.*

- While certainly not all 2SLGBTQ+ youth experience familial rejection—and we do not mean to imply an at-risk identity for all 2SLGBTQ+ youth (Talbert, 2004)—*the profound difference that supportive parents/guardians or a positive living situation can make for 2SLGBTQ+ youth should be well understood by teachers so that they can support families in their interactions with them* (e.g., Campbell et al., 2022). For example, it can be critically important for the health, well-being and educational success of 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth to support families in moving from rejecting to accepting behaviours. Teacher candidates should also learn about the potential outcomes of disclosures of sexual and gender identity and their impact on the well-being, personal relationships, and home lives of 2SLGBTQ youth (including rejection, eviction, abuse, outing to extended family and faith community, etc.). Developing this understanding will help teachers to better understand and support 2SLGBTQ youth affected by such situations. 2SLGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately impacted by homelessness/housing insecurity (Abramovich & Shelton, 2017; Gaetz et al., 2016) and health disparities (Saewyc et al., 2016) as a result of negative reactions to 2SLGBTQ youth’s identities from family members or at home. This may result in 2SLGBTQ youth living in temporary or unstable living situations, being in care or in foster homes, or living at home amidst strained or hostile family relations. Interpersonal family dynamics or relations within the home can severely impact the well-being of 2SLGBTQ+ youth and detrimentally affect their ability to learn, experience school connectedness, or engage meaningfully at schools. These pathways to homelessness should be explored alongside ways to help 2SLGBTQ+ children and youth develop positive coping strategies and resiliency. Even just one supportive practice can make a world of difference in the lives of 2SLGBTQ+ students.

### How do we do it?

- *Include appropriate 2SLGBTQ+ information at all levels and discuss the importance of role models.* 2SLGBTQ+ children and adolescents often consider what they know about 2SLGBTQ+ people to understand their own identity development, and it is vital they have access to appropriate information and role models during the development of their gender and sexuality identities (Talbert, 2004). Similarly, there

is age-appropriate material that can be included at all grade levels, and teacher candidates can learn about what appropriate content looks like at different levels based on developmental stages (e.g., excellent books that include 2SLGBTQ+ content are available at all age/reading levels; discussing 2SLGBTQ+ relatives and families is appropriate for early years; including accurate content that includes 2SLGBTQ+ identities in sex ed curriculum and healthy relationships units). Children are not too young for 2SLGBTQ+ content and teacher candidates should learn appropriate ways to do this. It's important to remember that children know who they are: Talking about 2SLGBTQ+ issues will not cause children to become 2SLGBTQ+. What it will do is give space to 2SLGBTQ+ people in schools, make 2SLGBTQ+ people and content visible in the classroom and open up conversations about gender and sexual diversity in the classroom, and give cisgender-heterosexual youth an opportunity to learn about 2SLGBTQ+ content and recognize the validity of gender and sexual diversity.

- *Include content that challenges heteronormativity and cisnormativity.* Including 2SLGBTQ+ content will in itself begin to challenge heteronormative and cisgender assumptions of heterosexuality and binary/cisgender conceptions of gender as the only expected and desirable development for youth (with 2SLGBTQ+ experiences tagged on as the “exceptions” to be accommodated). 2SLGBTQ+ content challenges these assumptions and creates space for 2SLGBTQ+ youth to develop safely in schools with the support of teachers and their peers. However, challenging gender and sexuality normativities that marginalize 2SLGBTQ+ people requires more than including 2SLGBTQ+ representations: It also means explicitly challenging the normativities that *all* children grow up with and that inadvertently make 2SLGBTQ+ youth seem like deviations from the norm. This content also helps cisgender-heterosexual students by challenging oppressive discourses that affect non-2SLGBTQ students, as all students are negatively impacted by gender and sexuality normativities—through gender policing, toxic masculinity, unrealistic beauty standards, incidents of “gay panic,” attempts at “conversion therapy,” and so on.
- *Include discussions of trans and nonbinary identities in conversations about gender identity.* Challenge binary conceptions of gender and discuss socialization of gender normativities. Seek to instill an expansive, more realistic sense of gender diversity among teacher candidates beyond binary conceptions. This is particularly relevant for early years teachers, as children often rely on gender policing as a way to organize and socialize. Normalizing gender creativity and challenging normative conceptions of gender and gender roles allows children freedom and creativity to develop their own identities (Ehrensaft, 2011; Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Gender Creative Kids <https://gendercreativekids.ca>; Orr & Baum et al., 2015); this includes cisgender children as much as trans and nonbinary children. Some trans and nonbinary children affirm their identity early in their development (e.g. ages 5-6), so early-years teachers should be prepared for this to occur and understand what their responsibilities are (e.g., taking proactive steps to ensure gender identity is respected, and knowing what their professional responsibilities regarding

disclosures are, etc.). Talking about trans, non-binary and gender diverse children—including the professional responsibilities, policies in your area, and some strategies to support students (e.g., how to talk to parents, how to advocate for trans students, what resources/services are available locally) —is a useful and practical way to do this.

- *Talk about what the term cisgender means and challenge binary conceptions of gender.* These courses provide important opportunities for teacher candidates to learn about essentialist notions of sex/gender and the damage that these inflict upon children’s and adolescents’ identity development. Discussing what *cisgender* means—a term that refers to the alignment between sex assigned at birth and societal expectations of one’s gender identity (in comparison to transgender or nonbinary gender identities)—provides an opportunity for teacher candidates to understand the socially constructed nature of gender and to reflect on cisnormative, binary assumptions about gender.
- *Address healthy sexual identity development.* Adolescents usually receive some form of sexual education during their schooling, but it is vitally important that healthy sexuality begins even among children. This can begin with practices such as having teacher candidates interrogate their own feelings and attitudes toward sex/sexuality and gender, addressing misconceptions about children being “innocent” or in need of sheltering from discussions of sexuality, being able to discuss the body and sexual development without shame or embarrassment, and recognizing that healthy sexual and gender identity development are already relevant for children (Duke & McCarthy, 2009). For adolescents, sexual orientation and gender identity may be more overtly pressing, and discussions may be more comfortable to have and supported by curricular resources; however, many youth will have gone through classrooms and socialization that has not affirmed 2SLGBTQ+ conceptions of gender and sexuality. As a result, many adolescents will have already formulated notions about “acceptable” gender expressions and sexualities (e.g., toxic masculinity, beauty standards, attitudes about “passing” as ways to regulate expressions of gender/sexuality), which may require focused attention to dismantle. Provide teacher candidates with an opportunity to reflect on their own assumptions about sexuality, affirm questioning as a valid and important part of sexual and gender identity development (not an identity crisis), and question the assumption that only out or disclosed 2SLGBTQ+ identities are valid. Remind teacher candidates not to assume a student is straight/heterosexual or cisgender; work to counter the minoritization of 2SLGBTQ+ identities by encouraging challenges to normativity. Remember to challenge the conflation of sexual orientation with gender identity (Airton, 2009), and discuss the differences between sex, gender, sexual orientation, sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression.
- *Challenge the conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality,* and the stereotypical expectations about how they “naturally” align: male → masculine boy → attracted to feminine girls; female → feminine girl → attracted to masculine boys. Gender is not a biological destiny. As well, challenge the conflation of gender



identity/expression and sexual orientation (Airton, 2009; García & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010). Sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and attraction are different aspects of an individual's identity; heteronormative and cisnormative connotations of these different aspects are unhelpful and damaging to children's and adolescents' identity development.

- *Include discussions of gender and sexuality development in early years and for children.* Healthy sexual development begins in early childhood (see Duke & McCarthy, 2009), and many 2SLGBTQ+ children become aware quite early in their lives that they do not fit comfortably within heterosexual or binary gender normativities. Receiving positive messages from their teachers and peers that support them as their identities develop is vital. For instance, often schools have policies that outline how accommodations for transgender and nonbinary children/youth should be implemented, but accommodation does not go far enough if teachers do not also address the problematic gender binary system and the socialization processes of gender roles. Provide opportunities for teacher candidates, especially early or middle years candidates, to develop their understanding of how gender normativity and heteronormativity impacts the lives of children/youth. This includes the realization that questioning one's sexual or gender identity or realizing that one is not cisgender-heterosexual does not have to be a crisis but is a natural part of identity development.
- *Devote time and space in class for teacher candidates to reflect on 2SLGBTQ+ development among children and youth.* It is vital that teacher candidates enter classrooms already having thought about and considered their own positionality, privilege, socialization, and questions about sexuality and gender. Focus on how normativities regarding gender and sexuality interlock with other systems of oppression like colonialism, racism, and capitalism. Teachers' awareness of their own assumptions and biases create an opportunity for them to question those assumptions and biases, effectively revealing the otherwise hidden power of heteronormativity and cisnormativity. This can assist teacher candidates in recognizing the importance of engaging in 2SLGBTQ-expansive practices in the classroom.
- *Help teacher candidates imagine how to support better socialization practices.* Ensuring that 2SLGBTQ+ students at all levels have supportive social experiences (including school experiences) is important to their development. For instance, Gay-Straight Alliances / Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) or Queer-Straight Alliances (QSAs) can help provide social supports and safer spaces in schools for 2SLGBTQ+ students to find friends and be open about their identities/experiences, make connections to staff and peers, and see their own identities respected and valued in school spaces. These clubs can also support the development of anti-oppressive values in cisgender-heterosexual students. Building healthy relationships and finding personal connections may include the wider community, such as community 2SLGBTQ+ youth groups or Two-Spirit Elders/gatherings.

## Teaching Activities

- *Responses to resistance and discomfort.* The time for teacher candidates to reflect on their own attitudes and practices regarding 2SLGBTQ+ expansive education is during their teacher preparation programs—not once they're faced with a situation in the classroom.

One activity that can help prompt this reflection is to introduce teachers to a list of 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive practices or strategies and ask them to identify ways of implementing these practices at their own grade levels (you may expand this activity by having students develop the list themselves or to identify items that are missing from the list). For instance, Duke & McCarthy (2009, p. 369) provides a list of “Strategies to Promote Healthy Sexual Development” for early childhood education; this can be particularly fruitful given the common excuse that early-years students are “too young” for 2SLGBTQ+ content or content that discusses sexuality or gender identity.

This provides the opportunity for teacher candidates to recognize and reflect on their own assumptions about sexual and gender identity development, what is involved in including 2SLGBTQ+ material, children’s understanding of sexuality and gender, when students are “too young” for certain material, the presumed conflation/alignment of gender identity and expression with sexual orientation, and most importantly their own attitudes and beliefs, the teaching practices that ensue from them, and the impacts of those practices on 2SLGBTQ+ and cisgender-heterosexual students.

- *Textbook audit.* Have teacher candidate students engage in a critical assessment of one of their course textbooks; this can be for your current educational psychology/childhood and adolescent development course, or you could have them identify a text from another education course with an eye to educational/developmental psychology material. Essentially, this will be a “2SLGBTQ+ content audit” of the critical learning material that students are reading/learning from and trying to identify what kind of content appears, whether it is integrated throughout the text (or whether it appears as a sidebar or added chapter), and what the larger perspective/stance of the text is (e.g., does it assume a gender binary except for the 2SLGBTQ+ chapter? Does it utilize a heterosexist/heteronormative conception of sexuality with 2SLGBTQ+ content treated as an exception to the norm? Does it include Two Spirit, Indigenous, Black, people of colour in mentions of 2SLGBTQ+ experience?).

Have students critically engage with these questions. Prompt students to assess what 2SLGBTQ+/gender and sexuality content is included, what is excluded, and what assumptions are made; consider whether heteronormativity and gender binary systems are left unchecked (even, or maybe especially, when 2SLGBTQ+ content is present); look at whether 2SLGBTQ+ identities are treated as “exceptions,” or constructed as inherently at-risk, and so on.

Have students develop content or suggest improvements to the text (e.g., writing assignments on topic areas, on developmental stages, etc.), with particular attention to creating 2SLGBTQ+ expansive content that they are able to use in their own practices.

- *Trans accommodation policy analysis.* Have students locate and review the trans accommodation policies in their practicum school or local district, and analyze them for the extent to which they go beyond accommodation of the “exceptional” child and move towards a more gender-expansive school culture. Look at the ways that policies accommodating transgender and nonbinary identities reinforce binary conceptions of gender and/or leave traditional notions of gender unchecked. Ask whether the policy only works to accommodate or whether it provides opportunities to educate students/teachers, to introduce curricular content, or for nonbinary individuals to take up space. Does the policy address intersectional identities and Indigenous realities? How does the accommodation policy interact with other aspects of school culture (e.g., team sports, student clubs, harassment)?

### More ideas/resources/references

#### Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey report

<https://www.saravyc.ubc.ca/2020/03/18/being-safe-being-me-2019/>

#### Gender Creative Kids

<https://gendercreativekids.com>

#### Gender Spectrum

<https://genderspectrum.org>

#### Native Youth Sexual Health Network

<https://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/what-we-believe-in>

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