

## Tips for talking with children and young people about marriage equality and related issues

There is a lot of discussion at the moment – in the media, in the community and in people’s homes – about marriage equality. Relationships are important to everyone, and the marriage equality debate is not just for adults. What’s more, when adults talk, children are listening!

This information sheet provides some helpful tips for parents, caregivers and teachers for talking with children about 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 current marriage equality debate 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 the marriage equality debate at school, amongst their peers, in the media, or from overhearing adult conversations. Many children will have also 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.

#### Let your children know it’s ok to talk about it

Children are likely to have already heard about the marriage equality issue and the proposed postal vote.

Let them know that they’re welcome to talk about it with you.

You can even open the conversation with them. Say things like “As you probably know, there’s a lot of attention on marriage equality at the moment. I’m happy to talk with you about this and answer any questions you may have”.

#### Listen to understand what they are really wanting to know

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 the postal vote? Or gender diversity, diversity in relationships? Or will it be about fairness and justice; or 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/](http://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.
- 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.
- Since 2004, Australian law has only allowed marriage between a man and a woman.
- The marriage equality law would change the definition of marriage from being between 'a man and a woman' to 'two people' regardless of their sex or gender. Even though the current focus is on 'same-sex marriage', transgender and gender diverse people will be able to marry their partner as well if the law is changed.
- Surveys show that most adults in Australia support marriage equality.
- We are now the last developed English-speaking country not to allow same-sex couples to marry.
- Not being able to marry discriminates against people in same-sex relationships because it does not give them the same rights as heterosexual couples.
- Discrimination is hurtful and harmful to people.

### 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.
- However, regardless of people's views of marriage, it is the right to choose whether or not to get married that is important to remember in discussions around marriage equality.

### Clarify any confusion or misconceptions about the current marriage equality vote

- It is likely that children will have heard diverse views about marriage equality. Even though opinion polls suggest the majority of Australians are in favour of marriage equality, some groups are strongly opposed to it on ideological or religious grounds, or because it seems like a major change from what they are used to. Community views can vary widely on many sensitive issues, but we are not usually expected to vote on each one.
- Listen to what your children are saying, and correct any misconceptions or confusion. Give them honest, thoughtful explanations that will help them to develop a realistic understanding of the issues and clear up any misinformation. This is also an important opportunity for learning and communicating pro-social values (see below).



- Some people may be opposed to marriage equality on religious grounds. Note that different religions have different views about marriage equality – some supportive, some not. Explain to them that an important principle in our society is to maintain a separation between religion and the state; that is, religions should not influence the laws that are made (particularly when different religions and the people within them have different views!). Also, a change in marriage laws will not mean that churches and ministers of faith have to change their practices.
- Another misconception is that some people worry that children will be harmed in same-sex families, and believe that children do better when they have both a mother and father. This is not true, but also irrelevant to the marriage equality debate. Marriage equality is about the fairness of same-sex attracted people being allowed to legally marry. It's got nothing to do with whether they should be parents. Many LGBTQI+ people are already parents, and children are already growing up in same-sex parented households. Preventing same-sex couples from marrying won't change this. And the research shows that children growing up with same-sex parents do at least as well as children with heterosexual parents on a range of psychological, social and educational measures. What's important is to have a family that loves and cares for you (regardless of their gender or sexual orientation).

**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 your child'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 your child 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 your child 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/](http://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/](http://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 your children to do the same. You and your children don't have to watch every ad or read every news story. You can walk away from conversations that make you feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Switch off and do something you love.





### Talk about how to treat others

The marriage equality debate is a chance to have discussions 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”.

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 undecided.

### 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 during the marriage law postal vote debates. An APS psychologist may be able to assist with how to communicate effectively around marriage equality issues, explore personal issues and feelings that may arise during this time and provide an affirming and supportive response to LGBTQI+ families.

*With Compliments...*



**It's good to talk**

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[www.liferesolutions.com.au/Huntingdale](http://www.liferesolutions.com.au/Huntingdale)

[www.facebook.com/LifeResolutionsHuntingdalePsychologist](https://www.facebook.com/LifeResolutionsHuntingdalePsychologist)

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