Gender: Welcome to the Rainbow

DESCRIPTION:
A 15-minute activity for students, teachers, co-workers, congregants, or any other group interested in exploring and talking about gender.

KEY WORDS: Gender binary, non-binary, gender expression, gender identity.

Purpose:
- Provide a way to experience what it feels like to know—or not know—where you belong
- Inspire conversation about the complexity and individuality of gender
- Invite participants to reflect on their assumptions about gender identity and expression
- Motivate participants to use gender-neutral, non-binary language (make room for orange!)

Materials:
One color “paint chip” per participant in these colors: greens, blues, teals and a few oranges. NOTE: make sure no two are alike by getting all paint chips from a single color sample book or from different color sample sheets at a paint store.

Instructions:
Find a private, linear space to gather such as a hallway, corridor, aisle or space along a wall.

1. Explain that you are going to do an activity about gender but first you must divide the group in two. Make participation optional.
2. Hand each person a color chip UPSIDE DOWN, so they can’t see the color. Allow everyone to cluster together in front of you.
3. Tell the group, “On the count of 3, please look at the paper in your hand. All the greens will go to this side of the room (point); all the blues will go to that side (point).” Repeat this message twice. Then say, “1,2,3, GO” and watch what happens.
4. After a couple of minutes, you will likely see two clusters at either end and several people somewhere in the middle.

Discussion:
1. Point out that there do NOT seem to be two distinct groups.
2. Ask someone in the middle to show everyone their color—it will probably be teal or orange.

3. Invite that person—if they are willing—to tell everyone how they FELT when they turned over their color chip and saw neither blue nor green. “What did that moment feel like?”

   NOTE: As a facilitator, understand this moment can feel very vulnerable for some. Speak in a calm, understanding tone and explain that you very much appreciate their honest reflections.

4. About now, the group will catch on that this IS the activity about gender.

5. Keep asking individuals in the middle how they felt when they saw their color. Listen to their responses.

6. Invite everyone to relate these moments to gender. The text in smaller, gray font are excerpts from my personal interviews with members of the LGBTQ community who are reflecting on their experiences.

   a. If those in authority always divide groups of children by boys and girls, how does that affect the boy who prefers to be with girls and vice versa?

      In school, whenever the class formed lines to go to lunch or gym, the teacher would say, “Ok, boys line up here; girls over there.” This common act of segregating the children by gender made Brett feel he was always in the wrong group, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. He wondered why he couldn’t just be with his friends.

   b. If a teacher always addresses a class by saying “boys and girls,” what if there is a child who doesn’t quite feel exactly like one or the other?

      “I never really labeled myself as a child; I just knew that I liked what I liked….Looking back, it could have been traumatic growing up if my parents hadn’t been so accepting.” Rick

   c. If we always say/hear “moms and dads,” what about the child with parents of the same gender?

      “My two-year-old was perched on my lap at a park district class and the leader said ‘Okay kids, hop down from Mom and Dad’s laps and come dance with me!’ My son just sat there smiling and waiting. Since he has two moms, he didn’t seem to perceive that the leader was actually talking to him.” Theresa

   d. If we always talk about gender in terms of two polar opposites, what about the girl who loves tools and the boy who loves dress up?

      “I didn’t want to be a boy, I just felt comfortable with them. I liked the way they dressed; I didn’t want to wear lace, stockings, shoes, bows, bras. Boys had more simple clothes; jeans and a t-shirt. I just wanted to be simple. I just wanted to do what the boys were doing. I didn’t see it as boy or girl thing. What was the big deal that I wanted to play basketball and not Double Dutch?” Renee

7. Next, ask people at the ends of the room/hallway how they felt when they saw their colors, which were probably easily identified, as green or blue. They may have wondered why others were taking so long to find a place. Some may share that they were uncomfortable because they could see that folks in the middle were struggling.

8. Lastly, “Before we go, on the count of 3, find your exact match.” Say, “1,2,3, GO!” It will take a minute but folks will quickly see there are no exact matches. This is another great analogy for gender—no two people are exactly alike!

   Reminder: make sure no two are alike by getting paint chips from one color sample book or from different color sheets at a paint store.
Facilitation Tips, Definitions, Resources

✔ I’ve made the mistake of saying this is a fun, simple game but I’ve learned it can bring up difficult childhood memories, no matter your gender expression or sexuality. For example, one man with an orange card said, “Great, I feel like I don’t fit in all over again.”

✔ I was doing the activity with 15 preschool teachers. I knew there were two orange color chips in the group but only one person was standing in the middle. I asked her to show her card to the group and talk about how she felt when she saw it was orange. She said, “I thought there was something wrong with your game.” (I loved her confidence!) I gently asked the other orange cardholder to identify themselves. A woman quietly stepped forward and said, “When I saw my card was orange, I thought there was something wrong with me; that I had done something wrong or misunderstood. So I decided to pick a side and pretend.” This prompted the whole group to talk about the importance of “making room for the oranges!”

✔ What do the colors represent? On the surface, the colors can simply represent individuality in gender expression and/or sexual orientation. Joanna Sit, CCM’s 2017 LGBTQ Access & Inclusion intern, interprets it this way: “The green and blue chips might represent binary gender expression (male/female) and being straight. The teal chips could represent those who sometimes fit into one category but aren’t always sure or maybe fit into both. The orange chips represent LGBTQIA+ people and anyone who is mixing/protesting/fluid/considering/omitting/don’t care/thinking+ about the gender binary and/or their sexuality or lack thereof.”

✔ What do the words non-binary and gender non-conforming mean? “Non-binary or gender nonconforming people are just that. They express gender in their own individual way. They know that there are more than two gender expressions, not just woman and man. They don’t believe that there is any one way to express any one gender or that expressing your gender in a particular way means that you are a specific gender. They know that sex and gender are two different things and that both are complicated parts of life that we as humans are constantly learning more about each day.”

—Joanna Sit, identifies as non-binary, uses they/them pronouns, CCM’s 2017 LGBTQ Access & Inclusion Intern

For more on gender and The Genderbread Person (left), visit www.ItsPronouncedMetrosexual.Com. It’s clever, funny and accessible. Enjoy!
Let's talk!
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Additional Gender Resources

https://www.glsen.org/

Championing LGBTQ issues in K-12 education since 1990. “Our mission is to create safe and affirming schools for all, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.”

http://www.rainbowyouthalliancemd.org/

Rainbow Youth Alliance (RYA) provides twice monthly, adult-facilitated, peer-to-peer support group meetings for high school youth ages 13-18.

http://www.genderodyssey.org/

Gender Odyssey is an international conference focused on the needs and interests of transgender and gender diverse people, their loved ones, and professionals who serve them. Packed with thought-provoking workshops, professional training opportunities, discussion groups, networking, and social events, this one-of-a-kind annual gathering attracts people from all over the world for an uplifting weekend of skill sharing and community.

https://www.pflag.org/

Uniting people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) with families, friends, and allies, PFLAG is committed to advancing equality through its mission of support, education, and advocacy.

https://www.genderspectrum.org/

Gender Spectrum helps to create gender sensitive and inclusive environments for all children and teens.

http://www.bgdblog.org/

Amplifying the voices of queer and trans people of color.