

Straightlaced **Curriculum Guide**
Table of Contents

Introduction

1 A Message From the Director of *Straightlaced*
3 About the Film and Curriculum Guide
5 Where to Share *Straightlaced*
6 Background for Teachers and Facilitators: Key Themes and Messages

Getting Started

13 What You Should Do Before Showing *Straightlaced* to Students
15 Planning Your Unit
17 Special Considerations for Using *Straightlaced* at the Middle School Level

Pre-Screening Activities

21 Establishing Agreements for Discussion
23 Warming Up
28 Introducing the Film: Sample Script
30 Guide for Reflective Viewing

Viewing and Discussing Straightlaced

35 *Straightlaced* Discussion Options
36 Tips for Facilitating Dialogue
38 Discussion Guide #1: Watch and Discuss the Film in a Single Extended Session
41 Discussion Guide #2: Watch and Discuss the Film in Shorter Segments
47 Discussion Guide #3: Middle School Watch and Discuss the First Half of *Straightlaced* Only
49 First Responses Activity
51 Key Quotes

Going Deeper: Theme-Based Activities for Classrooms and Communities

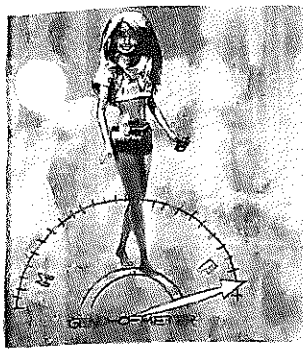
59 Overview of Activities
61 Act Like a Guy / Act Like a Girl
65 Selling Stereotypes: A Critical Look at Gender and Advertising
68 Connections: Race, Culture, Gender and Sexuality
77 Gender and Society Scavenger Hunt
84 Beyond the Gender Binary
88 Rules, Roles and Healthy Relationships
94 Got Your Back: Becoming Allies to LGBTQ Youth
107 The Changing Faces of Gender: A Community Research Project
112 Gender Stories / Gender Self-Portraits
117 Hot Topics!
122 School Climate Assessment
127 Personal Action Plan
128 School and Community Action Plan
130 Pulling It All Together

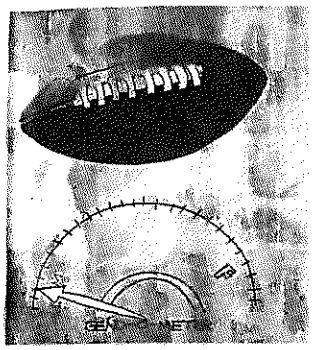
Action and Assessment

135 A Call to Action
137 Ten Things You Can Do to Make a Difference
139 Assessing Your *Straightlaced* Unit

Resources

145 Students Featured in *Straightlaced*
150 Chapter Descriptions
153 Key Organizations and Resources
157 Other Films From *The Respect For All Project*
159 Professional Development Workshops





About the Film and Curriculum Guide

Welcome to the powerful and complicated world of teens, gender and sexuality. From girls confronting media messages about culture and body image to boys who are sexually active just to prove they aren't gay, *Straightlaced–How Gender's Got Us All Tied Up* shows the many, many ways, large and small, that gender messages shape young people's daily decisions, and the toll that deeply held stereotypes and rigid gender expectations have on all our lives.

The film shares the engaging stories of more than 50 high school students from a variety of communities. With courage and candor, these young people open their lives to the camera: choosing between "male" and "female" deodorant, deciding whether to go along with anti-gay taunts in the locker room, having the courage to take ballet or show emotion, confronting eating disorders in their circle of friends, avoiding the restroom so they won't get beaten up, negotiating different "gender rules" in the US and their home countries, mourning the suicide of a classmate, finding the strength to stand up for someone who's being mistreated. As their experiences show, the stakes in dealing with pressures around gender, culture and sexuality are very high; there are often intense personal consequences, both for those who fit traditional norms and, especially profoundly, for those who don't.

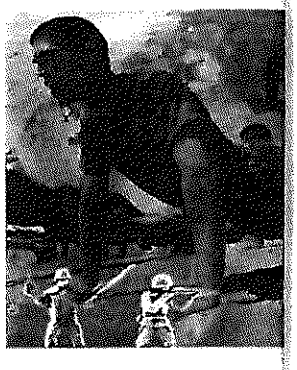
Consider just a few of the many sobering realities young people are dealing with:

- Epidemic levels of bullying and harassment related to gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity and gender identity in our nation's schools
- Eating disorders and negative body image affecting millions of youth in the US—including young people of all genders, ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic positions
- Frequent pressures to engage in early and/or unsafe sexual activity to prove one's manhood, womanhood or heterosexuality, too often leading to sexually transmitted infections or unplanned pregnancies
- High levels of teen dating/relationship violence, often strongly correlated with a belief in traditional stereotypes of masculine toughness, aggression and romantic prowess and with stereotypes of feminine beauty, vulnerability and compliance
- Widespread victimization, exclusion and violence toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and gender nonconforming youth, resulting in disproportionate rates of truancy, school failure, depression, substance abuse and even suicide in these groups
- Strong gender-based pressures to "dumb down" intellectually, along with stereotypical attitudes about race, gender and academic success, which keep large numbers of youth from reaching their full educational and social potential

In addition to these and other personal consequences, the stories in *Straightlaced* offer a window for understanding larger social dynamics related to gender inequality, homophobia, racial bias, power and equity. But along with the challenges they raise, these accounts also provide models of great hope—for expanded conversation, increased understanding, creativity, collaboration, ally-building and empowerment.

Straightlaced includes the perspectives of teens who self-identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning and represent a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as all points along the gender spectrum. Their experiences highlight the profound connections among gender-role expectations, attitudes toward women and attitudes toward gay and lesbian people—and illustrate many intricate threads linking gender, culture, race and class.





The film covers a wide range of topics, including:

- Appearance
- Body image
- Dating and relationships
- Sexual pressures
- Academics and school
- Family expectations
- Gender roles and stereotypes
- Meanings of masculinity and femininity
- Identity questions
- Gender, race and culture
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender experiences
- Homophobia
- Gender-based violence
- Media messages
- Activity and career choices
- School and community safety
- Being an ally
- And more

We invite you to use *Straightlaced* to open critically needed dialogue on these and other issues—and to inspire both youth and adults to stand up against bias and help create school and community climates that are fully inclusive and respectful for everyone.

The Straightlaced **Curriculum**

We have designed the *Straightlaced* curriculum guide as a companion to the film—to support you in opening important conversations and creating change in your classroom, school, program, agency or community. The guide includes:

- Critical background information on a wide range of issues related to teens, gender and sexuality—and the ways these issues connect with race, culture and class
- Preparation tips for bringing *Straightlaced* to your school or community
- Youth-friendly warm-up activities to help introduce the film
- Strategies and questions for creating dynamic *Straightlaced* discussions with middle and high school students
- A variety of theme-based activities to extend and deepen the conversation on specific topics, such as: media messages, gender identity, stereotypes and social disparities, gay and lesbian experience, gender and race, and healthy relationships
- Engaging tools for assessing school climate and taking action
- Additional resources to help you continue the dialogue

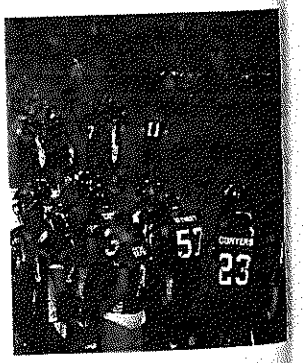
Background for Teachers and Facilitators: Straightlaced Key Themes and Messages

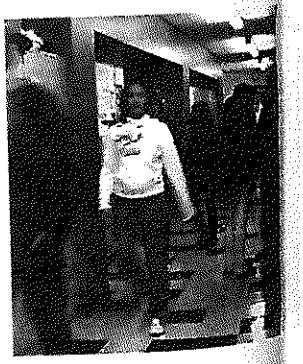
Straightlaced raises many powerful issues and touches on a wide range of intersecting themes. We offer the following background on several of the film's key messages to help you prepare for sharing *Straightlaced* with students, colleagues, friends, families and community members.

Gender pressures and expectations are everywhere, and they limit all youth from being their fullest, truest selves. As the stories in *Straightlaced* show us, young people are constantly bombarded by messages about how they are supposed to be as girls and boys, men and women. These expectations—sometimes contradictory—come from family, friends, culture, school and the media. They influence students' decisions about what to wear, how to carry themselves, and what hobbies to pursue. They also shape young people's feelings about basic issues in their lives: how to navigate the world of relationships and sexuality, how deeply to engage in school, how they feel about themselves, and what expectations to hold for their future. All youth are limited by gender pressures, both those who fit traditional norms and, perhaps especially powerfully, those who don't.

Gender expectations exist across cultures and are expressed differently in different contexts. Our feelings about gender and sexuality are profoundly shaped by the cultures we live in. Every community—ethnic, racial, religious, regional, linguistic, socioeconomic—has deeply held attitudes and traditions about gender, rooted in shared values, beliefs and history. Young people internalize these traditions as they grow up. Every group also has questions and struggles about gender and sexuality. Some gender norms and values are shared across cultures, while others are culturally specific. In thinking about *Straightlaced*, it is important to be mindful of all this and to find ways to help students simultaneously *respect* and *critically engage* their own cultures. It is also important to recognize that many youth struggle to navigate two or more different sets of gender expectations—because they come from culturally mixed backgrounds and/or because there are differences between their home cultures and the dominant culture.

We all have multiple dimensions to our identities. Young people's experiences of gender are intimately connected to their experiences of race, class, culture, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, language and ability/disability. There is no generic "female" or "male" experience; instead we walk through the world with more complex identities—as an African-American boy or an Asian-American girl, a middle-class lesbian or a straight guy whose family is on welfare, an immigrant Latino or a US-born white teen questioning her gender identity. Sometimes people may feel that certain dimensions of themselves are more primary than others. Other times, the dimensions may all feel equally important. And all of these dimensions of identity exist within a larger context of power and privilege. Throughout our lives, our multiple identities affect the way we think and feel about gender and sexuality—the pressures and limitations we face, and also our hopes and opportunities.









Gender stereotypes often intersect with stereotypes based on other dimensions of identity. Consider, for example, the way society constructs images of female beauty. As some of the youth in *Straightlaced* note, these images not only reflect stereotypical ideas about gender and body type—"You're supposed to be curvaceous, with big boobs, a big butt and a skinny little waist"—but also reflect racial stereotypes: beauty is "blond and blue-eyed." Women's beauty is also highly sexualized. Images of women tend to present them as objects of male attraction and therefore as symbols of heterosexuality. Male stereotypes also often involve stereotypes about race and sexual orientation, as when a boy who likes the arts is called "feminine" and then presumed to be gay, or when a guy who wears tight clothes is considered both "unmanly" and "un-Mexican."

Rigid gender expectations are frequently held in place by both anti-gay attitudes and a devaluation of female experience. In most middle and high schools today, anyone who doesn't act enough like their gender risks being labeled gay, and then ostracized, harassed or tormented. This is true not only for youth who truly *are* gay or lesbian but also for those who are not. Because of the enormous social stigma around lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sexuality, the mere threat of being thought to be gay is often enough to keep students following rigid gender rules. This limits all young people's dreams and opportunities. Young men face additional challenges because most people, sometimes unconsciously, see females as less valuable than males. If guys show any characteristics traditionally associated with girls and women, such as sensitivity, emotion or a nurturing spirit, they are frequently considered weak and are ridiculed—either through gender-related taunts ("Don't be such a girl!") or through a combination of gender insults, homophobic remarks and racist comments. To avoid being judged as less powerful, guys will often limit their options by adhering to strict codes of masculinity. For girls, the devaluation of women puts them in a different kind of bind. Like boys, they are pushed to follow strict gender codes by the pressure to avoid homophobic harassment. But then, by following traditional "feminine" expectations, girls may end up finding themselves stuck in a box with less social power, rather than more.

Our society is organized around a simple *binary*—male versus female—idea of gender. However, this idea does not do justice to the complexity of young people's lives. One of the deepest and most powerful aspects of traditional gender socialization in our society is the way most of us are taught to understand gender as an "either-or" phenomenon: You're either *male* or *female*, *masculine* or *feminine*. We are taught to believe that gender comes in two neat boxes, with clear edges and strict rules, and that things outside the boxes are scary, strange or just plain "wrong." As many of the stories in *Straightlaced* teach us, however, young people's identities do not always fit into traditional boxes. Some youth talk about having both strongly masculine and strongly feminine qualities or being somewhere in the middle on a gender "spectrum." Others express the feeling that, although their bodies fall in one category (male or female), their true identities fall in the other. Still more challenge the categories entirely, noting a desire to move, not just among genders, but "beyond gender" altogether. To be inclusive of all students' experiences, we need to learn to think beyond a binary understanding of gender and embrace all of these complexities. To say: There are lots of different ways to be a guy or girl, and all of them are OK. And also to say: Not everyone feels like they fit into the box of "male" or "female," and that's OK too.

Gender codes and stereotypes take a heavy toll on individuals. Dealing with gender pressures is hard. And the stakes are high. Whether or not young people fit traditional expectations, they may struggle with a range of challenges. Their attempts to conform may cut them off from important parts of themselves—or from their friends, family members, and cultures or communities. They may suffer health problems, such as eating disorders, steroid side effects, and depression. Pressures not to seem too intelligent, along with lowered academic expectations for many girls and many students of color, can mean limited school success and career options. And trying to live up to stereotypes about sex and sexuality can lead to teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and dating or relationship violence. Youth who don't fit traditional norms may also face bullying or violence in school or in their communities, and girls in particular are often vulnerable to sexual harassment. In some cases, gender-related pressures and challenges—sometime compounded by racial or other biases—become so great that young people turn to drugs and alcohol, cutting, or even suicide. These dynamics affect all youth, but not in the same ways. The impacts often differ by gender, gender conformity, sexual orientation, race, culture, nationality, religion and so on.

Gender expectations and related stereotypes help to maintain larger systems of power and inequality. Along with their impacts on young people's personal lives, gender roles and stereotypes also have important societal results. By weaving through social attitudes, policies and institutional practices, stereotypes help to maintain systems that give power and privilege to men over women, heterosexual over LGBTQ people, white communities over communities of color, US-born people over immigrants, and those with greater socioeconomic status over those with less. For instance, a belief that men are smarter than women can lead to limited academic and professional opportunities for women, reduced skills, lower-level jobs, less economic power and less political power—all of which then turn around and feed back into a sense that women are less capable than men. In another example, stereotypes of young black males as "violent" often contribute to a lack of respect in schools, disproportionate school discipline and dropout rates, disproportionate incarceration, lower economic prospects, and a perpetuation of poverty and racial fear in some communities. In these and many other ways, gender stereotypes support the status quo of power.

We all have the capacity—and the responsibility—to create climates of respect, inclusion and equity. A key message of *Straightlaced* is that, although there are many ways gender pressures limit young people's lives, adults and youth alike also have much room for creativity, self-expression and expansive change. Building an inclusive and equitable climate takes dialogue and support, along with both personal and systemic transformation. It requires an effort from everyone—students, educators, administrators, program leaders, parents/guardians and community members. But change is possible, and there are lots of ways, large and small, that each of us can make a difference.

