

Grades 6–8

Category: Peer Relationships

Topic: Gender Issues

## Alike or Different? Can We Be Friends?

### Background

Most schools in the United States are co-educational, comprised of both female and male students. How do gender differences impact life at school? How do students this age cope with school in the midst of all the emotional, social, and physical developmental changes during adolescence? Students can benefit from the opportunity to think about these complex issues to better understand the experiences of their own and the opposite gender, and to dispel myths and stereotypes. Creating opportunities for enhanced awareness about similarities between girls and boys can build empathy and promote healthy friendships among all students.

### Learner Outcomes

By the end of this session, students will be able to

- identify strengths and characteristics of each gender, from the students' point of view
- discuss similarities between the genders
- describe what "stereotype" means in reference to gender
- discuss boy–girl friendships

### Materials Needed

- Chalkboard and chalk or dry erase board and markers
- Paper and pencils
- Coin

### Preparation Needed

- Prepare one list of questions for each gender group (see Opening Activity, step 4).

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## Class Meeting Outline

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### Opening Activity (15 minutes)

1. There are ways in which humans are alike, and ways in which we are different. One way we are different is by our gender. How do differences between boys and girls affect your life at school?
2. Define "gender," "masculine," and "feminine." Gender: whether you are male or female; masculine: having qualities attributed to males; feminine: having qualities attributed to females.
3. Divide the class into two groups, with boys in one group and girls in another. Allow space between the groups so discussions aren't overheard.
4. Hand each group its list of questions.
  - a. Have the girls discuss and write down answers to the following:
    - How would you describe girls?
    - What does it mean to behave like a girl or to be feminine?
    - Name the five greatest strengths of females.
    - What would you like boys to know about girls?
  - b. Have the boys discuss and write down answers to the following:
    - How would you describe boys?
    - What does it mean to behave like a boy or to be masculine?

- Name the five greatest strengths of males.
  - What would you like girls to know about boys?
5. Have the class come together, forming a circle.

### Discussion Questions (25 minutes)

1. Make two columns on the board: Boys and Girls. Ask for a volunteer from each group to write the five strengths responses for each group under the appropriate heading.
2. Flip a coin to see whether to begin with the boys or the girls. Start with that group, and then move to the other.
  - How did your group describe your gender? What does (masculinity/femininity) mean to your group?
  - Describe why you chose the strengths you did.
  - What would you like the opposite gender to know about you? What are some things you think they may not fully understand?
3. Ask students to think of things that boys and girls have in common. Have a new student volunteer list them on the board under Similarities. (Responses might include they both like having friends and fun, enjoy sports and hobbies, love their families, get tired and hungry, and want to be liked and appreciated by others.)
4. Earlier we talked about masculinity and femininity. What happens when boys or girls don't meet the traditional definitions of being masculine or feminine? How are students who seem different than others in their gender group often treated? Describe how this fits into our school's philosophy.
5. Whom do girls typically have for friends? What about boys? Think back to kindergarten; are things the same now or have boy-girl friendships changed as you've grown up?
6. What is it like for boys and girls to be friends in middle school (easy, difficult, common, uncommon)? Why can boy-girl friendships sometimes be awkward? If you have a friend of the opposite gender, how might others interpret that?
7. What can make it easier for boys and girls to be friends?

### Teacher Tips



- You may wish to extend this topic to another class meeting. Don't rush the discussion if it's productive and energizing!
- Be prepared to facilitate discussion that may be lively and somewhat competitive in nature. This class meeting is not designed to divide students or create friction between boys and girls, but to raise awareness and increase understanding. Promote this principle. Remind students to listen carefully to all points of view and to not be judgmental, but open-minded.

### Wrap-Up

1. Gender issues are a part of our everyday life here at school and almost everywhere we go. And as common as this subject is, it is interesting and complex not only during middle school years but also throughout our entire lives. The more we can try to learn about each other, the better we can understand each other in classes, in friendships, in our families, and even in the families that may be in our future. This really helps us to appreciate how we can be so different and so similar at the same time.
2. Encourage additional questions and comments.

### Curriculum Connections

**Vocabulary:** *feminine, gender, judgmental, masculine, stereotype*

**English:** Use age-appropriate literature selections to discuss roles of boys and girls, cultural expectations about gender, and the role of gender stereotypes in shaping student behavior and stereotypes.

**Social Studies:** Have students research human behavior related to certain gender stereotypes that have arisen during this session.

**History:** Have students explore how gender roles have changed over time. Some examples include voting rights for women and nontraditional careers for men and women (such as males as teachers, nurses, or stay-at-home dads; women as physicians, engineers, astronauts).

**Health:** Discuss the varying rates of physical and emotional development among youth in this age group.

# Girls Worksheet

**Directions:** Discuss and write down answers to the following questions.

1. How would you describe girls?
2. What does it mean to behave like a girl or to be feminine?
3. Name the five greatest strengths of females.
4. What would you like boys to know about girls?

# Boys Worksheet

**Directions:** Discuss and write down answers to the following questions.

1. How would you describe boys?
2. What does it mean to behave like a boy or to be masculine?
3. Name the five greatest strengths of males.
4. What would you like girls to know about boys?