



SCREENING TIPS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL YOUTH

Straightlaced—How Gender's Got Us All Tied Up takes a powerful and intimate look at how popular pressures around gender and sexuality are shaping the lives of American teens. The film proudly showcases the diverse and unscripted voices of more than 50 high school students from a variety of different communities, all of whom speak with breathtaking honesty, insight, and humor about gender roles and their struggles to be who they really are.

The film covers a wide range of issues, including:

- appearance
- body image
- dating and relationships
- sexual pressures
- academics and school
- teen violence
- 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
- and more

As the youth in *Straightlaced* share their courageous stories, they model the possibility of dialogue and action, offering both teens and adults a springboard for exploring crucial safety, identity, and equity issues and for helping to build more inclusive and empowering schools and communities.

Following are some initial suggestions for using the film with your class or youth program. This guide is still in development, so please share your feedback with us!

SPECIAL GUIDELINES FOR USE WITH MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

Due to the more mature themes in later sections of this film (e.g. adolescent sexuality, violence, drug use, suicide), we strongly suggest focusing on the first 4 or 5 chapters of *Straightlaced* with middle school students. These excerpts hang together very well, and open many important (and age appropriate) gender-related topics for conversation, including:

- Appearance/dress
- Body image
- Media messages
- Gender roles and gendered activities
- Intersections of gender expectations with issues of race and culture
- Intersections of gender expectations with homophobia
- Gender boxes and gender identity

ESTABLISH GROUND RULES

Before showing the film, we strongly recommend establishing group agreements for discussion as a way to foster safe dialogue and mutual respect as participants talk about *Straightlaced*'s complex and sometimes emotional issues. You may already have a set of ground rules or agreements in your classroom or program; if so, we recommend reviewing them with the group and adding any needed pieces related to this particular activity. If you do not already have group agreements, we suggest creating a list to guide your viewing and discussing of *Straightlaced*.

Here are some suggested agreements:

- Be an active and respectful listener
- Assume the best intentions of everyone
- Disagree respectfully
- Use "I" statements, not generalizations
- Keep it confidential *and* in the room—don't take it outside
- Everyone has the right to pass or not answer a particular question
- Share the air—be mindful that everyone needs time to speak

PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITY

The purpose of this brief pre-screening activity is to establish a personal connection to the issues in *Straightlaced* and to begin an initial group conversation about the topics the film raises.

Activity: Messages You've Gotten About Gender – Pair Share or Individual Drawing/Collage/Writing

Question: What messages have you gotten growing up about how boys are supposed to be or how girls are supposed to be? From your family? Your culture? Other students? Other groups you are part of out of school? Your teachers? How do you feel about these messages?

Start with either pair-share or individual drawing/collage/writing – then short group debrief.

INTRODUCING THE FILM

Your introduction to the film should include the following elements:

- *Background on Straightlaced*, noting that it is a documentary featuring real youth sharing their perspectives and stories about gender – what it means to be male or female – and talking about how gender expectations intersect with issues of race, culture, class and sexuality.
- *Explanation of language used in the film*, preparing viewers for the fact that youth have been encouraged to discuss these issues in their own words, and that as a result there are a few instances where they use language that may be unfamiliar or that is not usually included in classrooms or youth programs. Discussing this ahead of time provides a context for critical discussion of noteworthy terms and comments; it also offers a chance to invite young people to “rise to the occasion” of seeing a film with language of a more mature nature.
- *Encouragement to listen with respect*
- *Explanation of what will happen after the film* (and/or explanation of how the screening will be held in segments over the course of multiple sessions)
- *Something to think about or do while watching Straightlaced*, such as (a) taking notes on “expectations for girls” or “expectations for boys” that are raised in the film, (b) looking for instances where gender messages connect with messages about race, culture and/or sexual orientation, or (c) identifying ways youth in the film resisted stereotypes or took action for change. It is helpful to provide a note-taking sheet or graphic organizer with clear instructions as participants watch the film.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

PLEASE NOTE: Immediately following the film, and before beginning an open group discussion, we strongly recommend providing a few minutes for quiet individual reflection or pair-share conversation so that everyone can collect their own thoughts and have a safe space to briefly process any personal feelings that came up. After your discussion is over, we recommend providing some type of closure – e.g. a few summary comments by the teacher or leader, suggested next steps or action ideas, a brief written reflection and/or assessment, or a closing “check out”.

Initial responses

Which youth in the film did you most closely identify with? Why?

Which students have had experiences that are really different from yours, and what did you learn from hearing their stories?

What did you see in the film that reminds you of things you see at your own school and in your group of friends?

What did you hear that made the strongest impression on you?

Exploring gender roles, expectations and pressures

According to the youth in the film, what are some of the rules or norms for what it means to be a girl? A boy? How are these norms communicated and enforced?

What did you hear about how some of the students were limited, forced to do something they didn't want to, or kept from doing something they did want to because of gender pressures or because they were afraid they'd be labeled as gay?

One youth in the film said: *"I come from Brazil and in Brazil it's just natural for guys to get their nails done and have fresh haircuts."* Were you surprised at all by this statement? Why? How does the place, community, or culture we come from affect how we learn about gender norms? Can you think of specific examples about gender and gender norms in your own community that may be different in other communities or cultures?

How do you think a person's race or ethnicity might be connected to expectations they face about how their gender is supposed to act?

Do you think there are certain stereotypes for males of certain races? Females? Why do you think that is?

Why do you think that stepping outside of gender norms is so often associated with being gay or lesbian?

Gender identity and stepping outside the box

Do you think gender is something we are *born with* or something that *society* places on us?

What were some of the reasons youth gave for stepping outside the box despite the consequences? What were some of the consequences they faced?

Do you believe gender norms are always negative? Are there ways in which you do things that you enjoy that also fit with gender norms?

Creating safe and inclusive spaces

In what ways do you think gender stereotyping exists at your school or youth program? What are you seeing or hearing that might be closed minded?

What can students/staff do to make schools and youth programs more accepting places where everyone can be who they are?

What ideas do you have for taking action in relation to the issues in *Straightlaced*?

Can you think of one thing that you can do personally? One thing you would like to see teachers or administrators at your school do differently?