

Talking about Rainbow Families Event Report

Saturday 28th October, 2017



Delivered by LGBT Health and Wellbeing (LGBT Health) as part of the Rainbow Families Project, Talking about Rainbow Families provided a confidential and supportive setting for participants to explore the benefits and challenges around talking to children about LGBTQ issues. The event is part of a rolling programme of events for LGBTQI parents, carers and parents-to-be.

Facilitated by Rainbow Families Project Development Worker, Jules Stapleton Barnes, and guest facilitator Tracy Duncan, the aim was to provide a safe, creative space for people to talk about the conversations they are having, and want to be having in future, with the children in their lives. The event was supported by and delivered as part of the [Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival](#).

To accompany this report, you can read a personal reflection by participant [Stella Hervey-Birrell on the SMHAF Website](#) and [facilitator Tracy Duncan](#), included below.

In this report

You will find key notes from the facilitated discussions, contributions and words of encouragement from participants, along with suggestions for relevant resources. Though much of the discussion was confidential, event participants agreed that there is value in sharing some experiences and key messages, in order to help us reflect upon and understand the current needs of LGBTQI families, and current gaps in support. Our learning through this event will help LGBT Health to identify gaps in service provision and help us to continue to explore how to meet these needs.

Safe space

25 people attended, the majority of whom identify as LGBTQI+, to share experiences, perspective and their own personal challenges. Talking about families and identity can be deeply personal and draw us into territory that can feel uncomfortable or make us feel vulnerable. To ensure we could explore the topic safely, within the limited timeframe we had, it required a strong commitment to a shared agreement of safe space. We agreed to: *respect each individuals' experience and identity, respect confidentiality, and commit to approaching conversations in a non-judgemental way and to try not to make assumptions.*

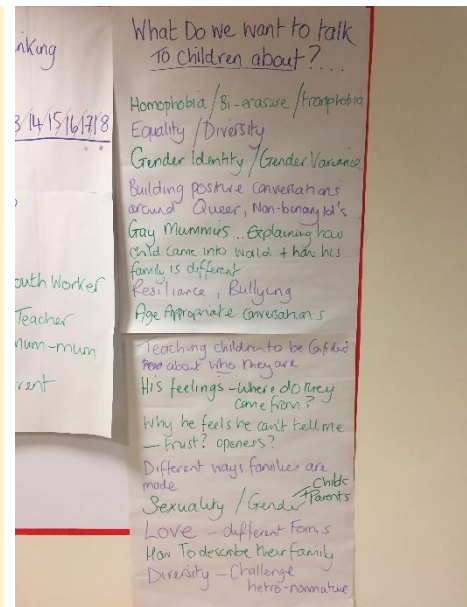
About Tracy Duncan

Tracy has used her Drama degree from Queen Margaret University and a keen interest in play, to create [One Red Elephant](#). For five years she has designed, planned, resourced and delivered entertainment for a wide range of events. Further to this, she is a PEEP practitioner and delivers parenting play sessions in venues around East and Mid Lothian through *Support from the Start* and the local councils.

Who are we?

We asked participants to write down how they are related to the children they are thinking about. Sharing these responses enabled us to reflect on a diverse range of roles, gender identities and families, whilst also draw attention to both our commonalities and differences of perspective.

- Birth parent
- Dad
- Parent
- Mother / Mum
- Youth worker
- Parent-to-be
- Someone considering parenthood
- Granny
- Step Mum
- 'Mum-Mum'
- Co-parent
- School friend Mum
- Teacher

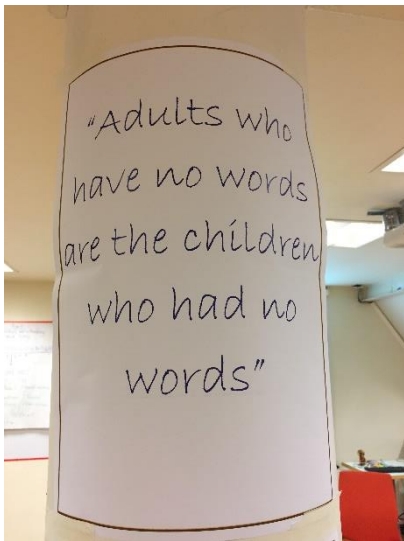


What do we want to talk to children about?

Jules invited participants to share via post-it notes, what they wanted to talk about to the children in their lives. The responses were wide ranging and give a sense of not only the topics people were thinking about, but some of the issues they are facing:

- Homophobia
- Bi Erasure
- Transphobia
- Equality and Diversity
- Gender identity including gender variance
- Sexuality
- Building positive conversations around queer, non-binary identities
- Gay mummies... explaining how the children came in to the world
- Bullying
- Resilience
- Trust and openness: why a child might not be able to speak about things
- Different ways families are made
- Love: different forms
- How to challenge heteronormativity

Reasons why we don't talk to children



After naming the topics and issues that we want to talk to children about, it provided a reference point for looking at what the barriers are; why we don't currently talk to children about these issues at all, or as often and as comfortably as we would like.

By exploring in small groups, why we don't talk about things with children, it was our hope that we might help participants think more about their own feelings towards the topics below, and their own identities.

We asked participants to consider, *if you don't know why some topics make you feel uncomfortable, how can you learn to confidently address them with the children in your lives?*

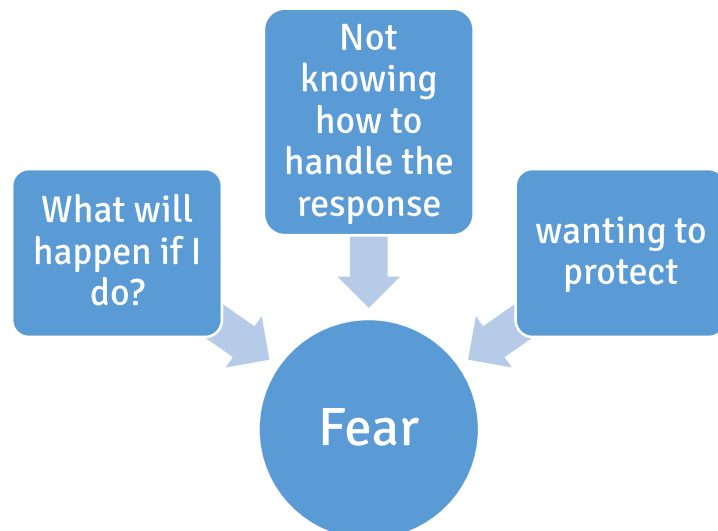
Fear

Fear was a prominent feeling, discussed by groups, and each recognised that fear can stop us talking openly.

When feeding back, there was a strong feeling in the room about the potential for the negative impact of certain conversations with children, and where they might lead. But from a place of expectation, rather than fact.

One participant expressed that they wanted to “**protect**”, and so we explored what we thought we might be protecting children from. This brought us closer to a collective sense of internalised fear; that LGBT identities are somehow harmful. We talked as a group about the impact of historical and present-day anti-LGBT law and legislation and societal attitudes.

Though positive change (such as Equality Act 2010 and Equal Marriage) was acknowledged, when it comes to our feelings of fear and how we feel about ourselves, we also heard that for some, there are lifetimes of internalised fears and phobias to overcome. One participant said,



“It’s hard to know which words to use and to be sure I can use them without worrying about what they mean.”

- Participant

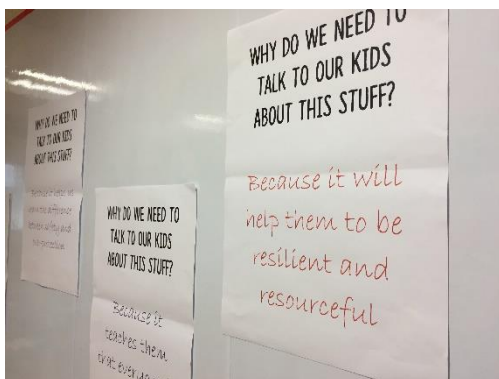
Bullying at school

There were a number of people sharing concerns about the impact of LGBT-related bullying at school. Some parents shared that their children had already experienced it, whilst others were worried about what could happen and this made them reticent about how much to discuss with them.

We noted [LGBT Youth Scotland's Schools Charter](#) and the work LGBTYS have been doing with secondary schools across Scotland, however the children in mind during the event, were of mainly primary school age and there were concerns raised about the level of understanding, inclusion and support in early years education settings.

There were 5 parents at the event (that shared openly) whose children had been directly affected by homophobic and/or transphobic bullying at their school and there were serious concerns among the parents, about the lack of support being provided.

One parent described how worried they feel sending their child to school,



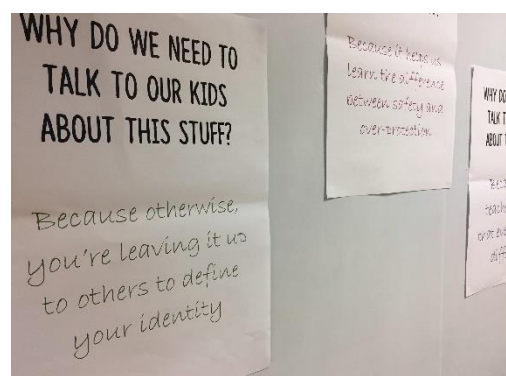
“Despite talking openly about LGBT issues at home, I have to send them to a school environment where different messages are being given.” - - Participant

We agreed that using words and information to build the resilience and confidence of children at home, can help empower them to respond to difficult situations and conversations at school, but some participants shared that they are facing resistance from both staff and school boards in relation to LGBT equalities issues, which can mean that negative experiences aren't being addressed and children aren't being fully supported when bullying or exclusion occurs.

Sex - we don't talk about it, so how can we openly discuss queer sex or sexualities?

One participant shared their perception, that in Britain, we don't talk about sex in a healthy way, let alone openly discuss queer sex. There was agreement from others, and a sense of familiarity with the idea that sex, is a taboo subject; not talked about in school, by parents or in friendship groups in an open, inclusive and healthy way.

This helped us to return to consider the importance of addressing our own feelings about LGBT/Queer issues, confront our feelings of shame and explore ways to help rid ourselves of harmful thoughts and associations.



Because it's not our place

Groups talked about the unpredictable nature of *when* LGBT issues come up... perhaps it's not just your children in the space, perhaps the issue you'd like to address involves other children who are not related to you, like bullying and discrimination for example. Through discussion we uncovered a strong concern with

“It's hard to know what other parents would want you to say” - - Participant

knowing *what* is appropriate to say in front of other people's children. We acknowledged that whatever you say to those children, you need to be prepared and able to talk about things with their family, which means facing other adult reactions. *What if their parents are religious and feel negatively towards LGBT people? What if their parents prevent their children from mixing with ours?*

It's another way in which fear creates a barrier to being open about LGBT identities, particularly with children.

Words of encouragement by participants

...for reasons to talk to children openly

“Consider the fear children experience when they don't know enough”

...for building relationships and allies

“Speak to the other parents, tell them what you'd like their children to know. You can gauge their feelings about it.”

...for when you are quiet, or when you don't challenge in the moment

“Explain to your child afterwards, the reasons why you haven't said what you would have liked to have said”

...for when you feel uncomfortable about certain words or labels

“Reflect, explore why you feel uncomfortable. If you aren't proud, if you feel shame, examine why & ask for support”

...for when you're planning to have a conversation

“Frame everything in pride”

Why DO We Need to Talk to Children about LGBT issues?

Because otherwise you're leaving up to others to define *your identity* & words

Because it will help them to be resilient and resourceful

Because it teaches them that everyone is different

Because it helps us to learn the difference between safety and over-protection

Frame everything
in pride

Because, otherwise LGBT issues become taboo - which creates a sense of shame

So they can ask for help when they need it

So that we can live an authentic life with them

Next Steps

During the last part of the afternoon's discussions, participants began to discuss the issues that mattered most to them, and the need for further support. Key themes arising from the conversations were around **coming out to children, supporting LGBT children and equality and inclusion in schools** and education settings.

Through the opportunity to connect with other parents and care-givers, people were able to highlight their frustrations, identify how issues were affecting their own and their family's wellbeing, identify the need for change and explore how to make it happen.

Jules and Tracy suggested collating contact details of anybody who would be interested in staying connected after the event and 15 participants shared their details. In response, Jules also talked about how LGBT Health could help to facilitate a space to further conversations about increasing visibility and inclusion of LGBT people and issues, at school and in education.

Through LGBT Health's LGBT families work and Trans Support Programmes, we can explore how best to respond to the needs that have arisen from this event, and the ongoing engagement LGBT Health encounters with LGBT families.

Feedback

Evaluation forms were completed by the majority of participants at the end of the event. The outcomes will help to shape future events, improve events going forward and demonstrate the needs of the community.

Key learning from the event

- The majority of participants experience fear in talking about LGBT issues with children
- A number of primary schools in Edinburgh and the Lothians are not providing adequate support for LGBT children and children of LGBT parents/carers
- Participants feel that better support in schools would include,
 - less gendered activities / spaces / language
 - more engagement with LGBT families
 - more open discussion about transgender identities
 - more LGBT visibility
- Participants want more opportunity to engage with other parents / caregivers
- Participants want more opportunities to discuss experiences in relation to LGBT equality and inclusion in schools

“Exploring a topic I haven't had language for, and no-one has approached with me in a long time”

“Meeting other parents, learning about resources, exposing the fear”

“Having a space to discuss LGBTQI+ issues & Children, where the starting point isn't cis-heteronormative”

Useful resources

Book for children exploring mental health and wellbeing

The Red Tree by Shaun Tan

A beautifully illustrated book with few words. It summons the feelings of isolation and despair often experienced in poor mental health. This story ends with hope and change – the desired outcome of any breakdown! This is a useful book when holding children through their own anxieties or for the adult wishing to share insight into poor mental health experiences with a child.

Books for children exploring gender

My princess Boy by Cheryl Kilodavis

Dyson loves the colour pink and sparkly things. Sometimes he wears dresses and sometimes he wears jeans. He likes to wear his princess tiara, even when climbing trees. He's a Princess Boy, and his family loves him exactly the way he is.

10,000 Dresses, by Marcus Ewert

Every night, Bailey dreams about magical dresses

Be Who You Are by Jennifer Carr

This is a delightful little book about Nick; a young child assigned a male gender at birth who sees himself as a girl. For ages up to 12.

When Kathy is Keith by Wallace Wong

A sensitive portrayal of a young girl who identifies as a boy.

Muffy Was Fluffy by Rikki Marie-Josee DuBois

How does one explain to a young child, that their father is changing their gender to become their second mother? How does one explain to a young child why their loved one is changing their gender? Muffy was Fluffy was written to show young children how a beloved pet, Fluffy, is not comfortable with the way she was born, and that in order to be truly happy, she must change into Muffy, the type of pet she was meant to be.

Luna by Julie-Ann Peters (for teens)

Story of a teenage transgirl (MtF) as told by her sister

Meet Polkadot by Talcott Broadhead

Polkadot feels not like a boy or a girl but they are a person. They decide that with the help of allies they will teach the truth about the gender binary and why assumptions based on sex are harmful and hurtful. This book asserts the value and equality of LGBTQI people as a visual feast.

Who are you? The kids guide to gender identity Brook Pessin-Whedbee

An ethnically diverse gender non-conforming discussion about what is gender. This is an affirmative and empowering book sending the message that children know themselves. A great read for all children.

Books for children exploring LGBTQI identities, equality, rights and discrimination

You Be You! Explaining Gender, Love & Family: Volume 1 (Diversity & Social Justice for Kids) by Jonathan Robert Branfman

"You Be You!" makes gender identity, romantic orientation, and family diversity easy to explain to kids. We also cover discrimination, privilege, and how to stand up for what's right.

And Tango Makes Three by Justin Richardson

The heart-warming true story of two penguins who create a non-traditional family.

Mommy, Mama and ME by Leslea Newman

From hide-and-seek to dress-up, then bath time and a kiss goodnight, there's no limit to what a loving family can do together. Shares the loving bond between same-sex parents and their children.

The Different Dragon by Jennifer Bryan

This bedtime story about bedtime stories shows how the wonderful curiosity and care of a little boy, with some help from one of his moms, can lead to magical and unexpected places.

The world belongs to you by Riccardo Bozzi illustrated by Olimpia Zagnoli

Filled with interesting shapes and patterns I have returned to this book on several occasions. I read it as a tale on 'fitting in'; a place for every shape. I also read it as a digestible affirmation of human rights. This book is a good tool for empowerment.

When I coloured in the world by Ahmadreza Ahmadi

A child takes an eraser and box of crayons and draws the world just the way they want it to be. A story of expression, individuality, belonging, change and protest, unity and peace.

Facebook page For teens / young adults

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Read-the-Rainbow-A-Discussion-of-LGBT-Young-Adult-Literature/196568187053965>

Resources for tackling bullying at school

Time for Inclusive Education (TIE):

Scottish campaign group - founded in June 2015 - which has one very simple aim: to combat homophobia, biphobia and transphobia with inclusive education:

<https://www.tiecampaing.co.uk/>

Scottish Government - LGBTI Inclusive Education Working Group:

<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/HLivi/sex-education/LGBTIWG>

Stonewall Scotland's Different Families resources:

https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/including_different_families_lo.pdf

LGBT Youth Scotland resources:

https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/files/documents/Addressing_Inclusion.pdf

<https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/pro-resources-education>

<https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/news/resources-for-teachers-anti-bullying-week-2017>

Families / relationship support organisations

Relationship Scotland:

<https://www.relationships-scotland.org.uk/> / 0345 119 2020

One Parent Families Scotland:

<http://www.opfs.org.uk/> / 0131 556 3899

Lone Parent Helpline: 0808 801 0323

Dad's Rock:

<http://www.dadsrock.org.uk/> / 0131 442 4662

Information support for LGBTQI parents / caregivers

Information and 1:1 support - Rainbow Families Project (Edinburgh or Glasgow)
Meet and chat with staff from the Rainbow Families Project, to ask for information, a confidential chat about your situation or for a supportive space for emotional support.

Jules Stapleton Barnes (Edinburgh)

E: jules@lgbthealth.org.uk T: 0131 523 1104

Benn Benjamin (Glasgow)

E: benn@lgbthealth.org.uk T: 0141 271 2330

Information for teachers looking to support LGBTQI pupils

Class Room Lesson Plans

For training materials, GIRES have put together some lesson plans for teachers of young children around gender identity issues:

<http://gires.org.uk/education/classroom-lesson-plans>

Trans Inclusion Schools Toolkit – Supporting transgender and gender questioning children and young people in East Sussex schools and colleges

<http://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/assets/media/East%20Sussex%20schools%20transgender%20toolkit.pdf>

Resources for teachers: Anti-Bullying Week 2017

<https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/news/resources-for-teachers-anti-bullying-week-2017>

Facilitator reflections: Talking about Rainbow Families Event by Tracy Duncan

“I came to this event as a children’s entertainer and adult tutor working from the basis that childhood is a period of astonishing growth. When children are protected in childhood the basis for a good life is in place. Play happens when a child feels secure – the perfect hotbed for creativity, learning, discovery, modelling, growth, laughter and happiness.

I am also a Mum to a transgender child. Talking to my child about LGBT+ people happened at a young age because it was essential to his well-being that he understood he was not alone in the world. This awareness of diversity has given my child a layer of protection from those who do not understand. I have wrapped this child in Pride. He has learnt that we have laws which protect the freedoms of LGBT+ people. He is growing up with an awareness that transgender people have always been here, they have a rich history found in many cultures. He has learnt that there is an enduring biological underpinning to gender identity. In other words trans is a gender just like male/female. However these truths must be taught by Jack to his friends to achieve acceptance among his peers.

Sometimes when finding his voice he meets opposing, ridiculing, insensitive and uninformed views on the school playground. Sometimes he explains to his curious friend and he thinks they now understand but that can change the following day. He relies on the adult teachers to always have his back. But I ask myself regularly, is this enough? If Jack is tolerated why does he not feel included? Even when he is loved and accepted in his home life, his self-confidence and healthy development are undermined by a simple lack of knowledge and careful planning.

Why is it important that we teach children about LGBT+ people?

When health and education professionals assess the well-being of a child they ask is this child safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, responsible, respected and included? For children of transgender parents, same sex couples or children who are themselves transgender, non-binary, intersex the answer to the question, “Is this child respected and included?”, is No. Even with policy and guidance in place teachers often lack the time, skills, resources and support to implement the policy and affect meaningful change to the minority child in the classroom. This child suffers, their educational attainment and social standing is affected and the child may then require added support. A dominant heteronormative culture falls down on the child as a personal problem. In time it can threaten their lives. Discrimination is a systemic problem. It impacts the child for the rest of their life, it will affect their mental health and access to opportunity. It can only be remedied with change; honest and open conversation about equality and compassion. It starts with our children, all children. Everyone will benefit from inclusive education and visible representation of LGBT+ achievement, value and history.

As parents and carers we are a child's sense of security. We are their first and most important teachers. We act as models to them and from us the child can stretch their secure attachment, free to explore and learn then return to a warm home filled with love and encouragement. If only it was as easy to write the last sentence as it was to be responsible for raising a child. We carry our experiences with us. Fear, shame, anxiety and anger impact our relationships and communication. Only by addressing these oppressive emotions can we start to live and teach from a place of pride. We cannot do this alone, it takes a village. As a teacher we are in a contract of trust with a child. Our children will experience the best and the worst of our nature. We cannot wear a mask with our children, we must relax and be our most authentic self. Then we must connect with our village and act with anti-oppressive practice and values in hand with the sole goal of equality and peace between people.

How do we use resources?

PRIDE. We can use pride to challenge the status quo. We can be proud of who we are and the others we represent in a minority. We can be loud about equality. We can undermine outdated attitudes by insisting upon our voice. We can be a voice for others whose circumstances are unheard and unseen. We can rely on the protection of our allies who know just as much about the history and value of LGBT+ people as we do ourselves. Because the education we have all been given will be equal and delivered in a safe space.

When teaching we should be mindful that gender stereotyping is limiting to all children. Inanimate things are just objects without a gender. It seems so obvious. There are no boys' toys and girls' toys, only toys! There are no boys' interests and girls' interests, only activities that can benefit anyone who wants to participate. When we teach this we should be reminded that social pressure to conform to these norms contributes enormously to gender dysphoria, a condition which endangers a gender queer child before their 16th birthday. Let us start with the obvious, let us laugh at how ridiculous gendered products are and dispel it in nursery schools where the divide begins. Boys are not more gifted at grasping tricky concepts and girls are not more gifted in emotional expression. We were merely taught this long ago. Now we listen to and encourage the heart's desire. As babies we began to learn with our senses. How we feel, what we feel is how we learn and then what we share.

What did guests share about their needs?

They and their children are struggling to participate fully in society without inclusivity and visibility of LGBT+ identity. Many people were accessing/trying to access mental health support for themselves or for a child. Feedback from the day reflected how relieved people were to come together and share the burden of universal disadvantage. A dialogue began and it became clear that a need for greater understanding from other families/non LGBT+ people in their community. A new network was formed and people opted to stay in touch. Organic support was found that day. As facilitator I was mindful to help only as a sign-post to other meaningful

support. I could only offer empathy and promises to continue to highlight the predicament that change is needed and to try offering solutions that had helped my family. LGBT+ people are not the problem, lack of inclusive education is.

What are the next steps?

Talking to children about rainbow families is essential. PRIDE has helped to overcome so much. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZg1VxeZ-hM>

We know now that when gender queer children are supported in all aspects of their life their mental health is on a par with their cis peers. Meaningful outcomes of changing the culture of education and communication are far reaching as we know that girls attainment thrives when they are assured they are just as capable at all things as boys. They will experience equality of opportunity and be reassured of it in the main stream attitude that envelopes them. There is no place for embarrassment or fear of getting it wrong when we act for equality of all children.

It became apparent that there was willingness to teach children about diversity from a young age in the room. But there was also a fear that to do so is to challenge the status quo and that is frightening when we already carry experiences of rejection and isolation. Society needs to fly its rainbow flag as an ally. It needs to be transparent and whole hearted in its welcome. Perhaps by asking the question to non LGBT+ people "*Why do we NOT talk to children about LGBT+ people?*" will we be able to dispel myth and move beyond tolerance into visibility and equality.

Example of beginning diversity conversation:

"There are boys and girls and there are trans boys and girls. And some lucky people feel they are both a boy and a girl. They call themselves a person just like me and you. Everyone likes to give and receive kindness and the best kindness you can give to a rainbow person is to accept that person knows their own gender.

Some people tell you to like something or to not like something based on who you are. You can tell them this - *There are no girls toys or boy toys, there are only toys. Only people have a gender and only they can tell you what it is for them.*"

Contact Tracy:

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