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## WHAT IS MARRIAGE EQUALITY?

On June 26, 2015, in a 5-4 decision the Supreme Court of the United States held that that the 14th Amendment requires a state to license a marriage between two people of the same sex and to recognize marriages lawfully performed in other jurisdictions. This means that marriage equality is now the law of the land in all 50 states. Prior to this historic day, 37 states plus the District of Columbia had legalized marriage for same-sex couples. This lesson provides an opportunity for students to explore marriage equality, gain background information about it, and reflect on their own thoughts and feelings about marriage equality.

Prior to teaching this lesson, it will be helpful to read ADL's [Discussing Marriage of Same-Sex Couples with Students](#).

**Grade Level:** grades 4–8

**Common Core Anchor Standards:** Reading, Speaking and Listening

### Learning Objectives:

- Students will be able to define marriage equality
- Students will reflect on their opinions about marriage equality
- Students will learn about the different rights and privileges granted in marriage versus civil unions
- Students will write a persuasive essay on marriage equality

**Material:** *What Do You Know* video (2 mins., Welcoming Schools, [www.welcomingschools.org/what-do-you-know-the-film](http://www.welcomingschools.org/what-do-you-know-the-film)); “Winning the Freedom to Marry” chart ([www.freedomtomarry.org/states](http://www.freedomtomarry.org/states)); [Marriage Equality Fact Sheet](#); “Young New Yorkers Speak Out on Gay Marriage” (*New York Times*, July 21, 2011, [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/07/21/nyregion/20110720-gay-marriage-young-voices.html?ref=samesexmarriage&r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/07/21/nyregion/20110720-gay-marriage-young-voices.html?ref=samesexmarriage&r=1&)); chart paper, markers; Internet access

### Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL's [“Definitions Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity”](#) for additional vocabulary.)

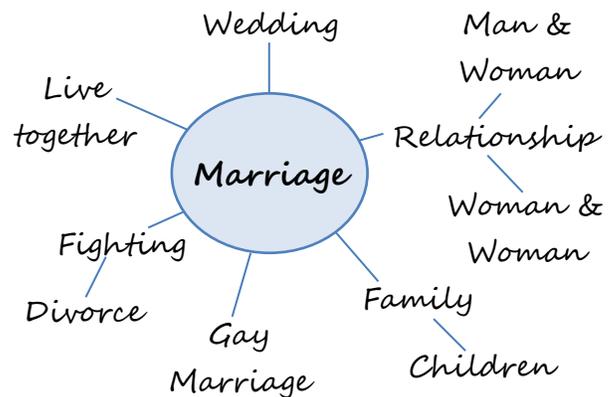
- Civil Union
- Equality
- Homophobia
- Legalize
- Majority
- Privileges
- Sexual Orientation

## WARM-UP: WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

Show the 2-minute video [What Do You Know?](#) Ask: *What was the point of the video? What different opinions did the kids? Was there something you strongly agreed or disagreed with?*

## WHAT IS MARRIAGE?

1. Create a semantic web with the word “marriage.” A semantic web is a visual way for students to brainstorm their thoughts, ideas, and feelings related to the topic (see illustration below for example). Related words can be grouped. Ask students: *What words, phrases and feelings come to mind when you hear the word marriage?* Create a semantic web by writing their responses that may look something like this:



2. After the web is complete, ask: *When you look at the words and phrases, what do you notice? Are there any commonalities? How do you feel looking at this list?*
3. Ask: *What do people who are married have in common?* Record their responses on the board, which may look something like this:

They live together.  
 They love each other.  
 They are a family.  
 They have children.  
 They share money and home responsibilities.

4. Ask: *What does equality mean? Then ask, what do you think “marriage equality” means? Have you heard the term before?*

## WHAT IS MARRIAGE EQUALITY?

**[NOTE TO TEACHER:** It is important to reflect on and consider that you may have children in your classroom with gay and lesbian parents or who identify as gay or lesbian themselves, so be sensitive to that and prepared. Further, it is possible that if the student has not shared this previously, she or he may disclose it during the course of the lesson. That information should only come from the student directly.]

1. Tell students that up until several years ago, marriage was generally defined (in the dictionary) as “the formal union of a man and a woman, typically recognized by law, by which they become husband and wife.”
2. Ask: *What do you think about this definition? Do you think marriage should only be between a man and a woman?*
3. Tell students that *The American Heritage Dictionary* updated their definition in 2009 to read as follows: “The legal union of a man and woman as husband and wife, and in some jurisdictions, between two persons of the same sex, usually entailing legal obligations of each person to the other.”

Ask: *What does that mean? What are legal obligations?*

4. Ask students to raise their hand if:

- They know couples who are gay or lesbian
- They know kids who have parents of the same sex (“two Moms” or “two Dads”)
- They know same-sex couples who are married.

Remind students to share at their level of comfort but encourage as much participation as possible.

5. Tell students that we are going to discuss marriage equality or marriage for same-sex couples.

## HERE I STAND

1. Explain to students that they will listen to some statements and decide to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement. They will be indicating their opinion about each topic by positioning themselves along an imaginary line, depending upon how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement.
2. Select a large open space and indicate the position of an imaginary line with the farthest right point representing a STRONGLY AGREE response and the farthest left point a STRONGLY DISAGREE response. In between, place AGREE, IN BETWEEN/NOT SURE, AND DISAGREE along the continuum. Create signs with these words and hang them up on the wall.
3. Read each statement below, requesting students to take a few minutes to decide where they stand in the continuum and have them walk silently to that place and observe where others choose to stand. After everyone has chosen their spot, have students spend 3–5 minutes talking amongst themselves about why they are standing where they are.
  - Kids our age should be able to have cell phones.
  - Girls and boys are treated equally at this school.
  - The majority of people in the United States think marriage should be legal for same-sex and opposite-sex couples.
  - Two-mom families and two-dad families work just like any other family.
  - Same sex couples should have some rights as marriage, but should not be able to get married.
  - Same sex couples should be allowed to get married.
  - Homophobia causes people to be against same-sex marriage.
4. Lead a whole group discussion, using the following questions:
  - Was it easy or difficult to decide where to stand? Were some statements easier to decide and some more difficult?
  - How did it feel when most people had the same response as you?
  - If there was a time when you were alone in where you chose to stand, how did it feel?
  - Did you ever feel you needed to explain where you chose to stand? If so, why did you feel this way?
  - Did you ever decide to change your position when you saw you did not agree with a majority of the group, or after hearing others’ points of view?

## READING ACTIVITY

1. Ask students: *How many states do you think allow same-sex couples to legally marry?* After calling their responses out, tell students that as of June 26, 2015, all states permit same-sex couples to marry. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to allow same-sex couples to marry and in January 2015, Florida became the 36<sup>th</sup> state.
2. Distribute the [Marriage Equality Fact Sheet](#) to each student. Give students 10 minutes to read it silently. Discuss with the whole group by asking the following questions:
  - What did you not know before that you know now?
  - What other questions do you have? (Record these for later study.)
  - What do you think about marriage vs. civil unions? Is it fair?
  - Do you have a different opinion after reading this fact sheet?
  - Why do you think some people are against marriage equality?
  - What do you think about marriage equality?

## CLOSING

Read aloud some of the short statements compiled in "[Young New Yorkers Speak Out On Gay Marriage.](#)" Then ask for students to come up with one sentence that they would add to the list with their own thoughts about marriage equality. Share them aloud.

## ADDITIONAL READING

- [Books Inclusive of Gay Family Members and Characters](#)
- "[‘Kids React to Gay Marriage’ In New Video from the Fine Brothers](#)" (*Huffington Post*, November 4, 2013)
- [Freedom to Marry](#) website
- [Gays & Lesbians in Books for Children](#)
- "[5 Things Your Child Should Know About Gay Marriage](#)" (*Psychology Today*, January 24, 2013)
- "[When Kids Bring Up Same Sex Marriage](#)" (CNN.com, August 23, 2011)

## COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

## MARRIAGE EQUALITY FACT SHEET

- On June 26, 2015, in a 5-4 decision the Supreme Court of the United States held that that the 14th Amendment requires a state to license a marriage between two people of the same sex and to recognize marriages lawfully performed in other jurisdictions. This means that marriage equality is now the law of the land in all 50 states. Prior to this historic day, 37 states plus the District of Columbia had legalized marriage for same-sex couples. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage.
- In the past, some states have passed laws granting gay and lesbian people civil unions (or domestic partnerships), but not marriage. It is important to know that married couples have 1,138 federal rights, protections and responsibilities such as: (1) social security benefits upon death, disability or retirement of spouse, as well as benefits for minor children, (2) family and medical leave protections to care for a new child or a sick or injured family member, (3) workers' compensation protections for the family of a worker injured on the job, (4) exemptions from federal income taxes on spouse's health insurance, (5) the right to visit a sick or injured loved one, have a say in life and death matters during hospitalization and many more. The protections and responsibilities for civil unions/domestic partnerships do not extend beyond the border of the states in which the civil union was entered and no federal protections are included with a civil union.
- In 1996, the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was signed into law. This was a federal law recognizing lawful marriages as only between a man and woman. Among other things, the law defines marriage as the union of a man and woman. That denied many federal benefits—including Social Security survivors' benefits, insurance benefits for government employees and estate taxes—to same-sex couples, even those granted the right to marry in another country or any of the states and the District of Columbia that recognize those marriages marriage. In July 2013, the Supreme Court struck down Section 2 of this law.
- The majority of people in the United States are in favor of marriage equality. According to a Washington Post-ABC News poll in April 2015, 61% of people believe that gay men and lesbians should be able to marry and 78% of those under the age of 30 support marriage equality. Thirty-five percent are opposed. (See [Poll: Gay Marriage Support at Record High](#))
- President Obama has stated that marriage for same-sex couples should be legal. In May 2012, he said "I think same-sex couples should be able to get married." (See "[President Obama Supports Same-Sex Marriage](#)" by Josh Earnest, May 10, 2012, White House Blog.)