

## Column: Michael Sam offers a teachable moment

A decade ago, it would have been almost inconceivable for a promising college football player to “come out” as gay to his teammates, much less to the world at large just prior to the NFL draft. But University of Missouri defensive end Michael Sam’s announcement isn’t so much shocking as heartening, a sign perhaps that the culture of bias against gay people in American team athletics is waning. Sam potentially could become the first openly gay player in NFL history.

Sam’s teammates all seemed to know and be relatively comfortable with Sam’s declaration, and other teams voiced support, as did his school and many NFL players and officials. He will undoubtedly suffer repercussions from the older generation of managers and administrators – his draft stock apparently has fallen already – and he is dealing with what surely must be painful disapproval from his father. But hopefully this is mitigated by what must be enormous relief at presenting his true self to the world.

Sam’s honesty and bravery in blazing a trail along what will undoubtedly be a very bumpy road offers an ideal opportunity for talking to adolescents about the nature of personal identity and the history of bigotry. Many kids, especially football enthusiasts, have already heard about Sam’s story and may be trying to process what they think. For those who haven’t, bringing it up in conversation can provide an excellent teachable moment about how the world works – and how it could work if we continue to fight discrimination. Leading questions can provide excellent entrees to discussion about understanding differences, about values like acceptance, tolerance, human equality.

- Why do you think he made this admission?
- What is your understanding of what “gay” means?
- Have you ever felt like that?
- How do you think he feels now that everybody knows?
- Do you think this changed the way his teammates feel about him?
- How do you think you would feel if someone you knew told you they were gay?
- Do you think this could change anything in the culture of team sports?

Change doesn’t always come from the top. It most powerfully comes from within, and our children’s attitudes and actions will shape how our country continues to develop. Michael Sam has given us a gift by putting a personal face on an issue that is surely far more common than any of us know. And by putting his story in front of the public eye, he has prompted not just reaction, but reflection and hopefully the courage for other young people to unashamedly embrace their true nature. Take the opportunity to examine your own feelings, then find a moment to chat with your children. They may surprise you...

For more information on talking to adolescents about LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi, transgender, questioning) visit the “Healthy Relationships/LGBTQ” page of [www.B-PEN.org](http://www.B-PEN.org).

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