



Parents and Carers of LGBTIQ+ Young People Information Sheet

Overview

Adolescence is a time when bodies, hearts and minds change, and when many young people start to discover their sexuality and gender identity. While this is a normal part of teenage life, it can also be a confusing time for young people and their families and carers.

This fact sheet provides initial guidance to help you to:

- Understand the basics of human sexuality, sex and gender
- Know what to expect if your child has questions about their sexuality, sex or gender identity
- Know what you can do to help your child
- Understand common terms.



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What you should know?

1. **Diversity in our bodies, our gender and our sexuality is natural¹.**
It's a normal part of human diversity; it's part of our biology. These things occur in all kinds of species, not just ours.
2. **Sexuality, Gender Identity and Intersex are not the same thing.**
Our gender identity, or our biology, do not determine who we are attracted to.
3. **It is okay for your child to take their time.**
Everyone comes to understand these aspects of themselves in their own time.

Offer unconditional love and support to your child. This is the most important determinant of health and wellbeing later in life. If you can, talk openly in your family about gender, sexuality and intersex variations. This helps your child know that it is okay to talk with you about these subjects.



1 Australian Psychological Society. (2013). Information sheet: Sexual identity and gender diversity.

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Topics your **child** may want to **talk** about.

Feeling confused/Who am I? (Questions of Gender Identity)

If your child is starting to feel like they don't fit with the gender they've grown up with, it may be a very confusing time for them about what it means to be a boy or a girl. As their body changes during adolescence, it might feel like their body itself is turning against them because the changes they're seeing and experiencing are running completely contrary to the way they see themselves. They may feel alone, particularly if this is a topic your family or their friends have never talked about.

It is okay for them to take time to explore who they are and what is comfortable for them. Give them time and support.

"From as far as I could remember I've always felt different. I couldn't put my finger on exactly what it was but I just didn't feel entirely like a boy. I was cross dressing at my earliest memories in my sister's clothes. I never told anyone how I felt... I wish I knew it was OK to be trans." Ashley, 25

Who they feel attracted to

Often young people are aware of their emerging attractions a lot earlier than anyone else, but they don't necessarily have the language and understanding to put it into words. When those attractions are to people of the same sex or gender, this may also be tied up with anxiety or denial because of how they fear others will react.

If someone is same-sex attracted, these feelings won't go away. Sometimes we think that if we don't talk about it, we are helping them avoid temptation and avoid bullying or rejection. The truth is, avoiding talk about same-sex attraction with you can make them feel alone and that their feelings are taboo. If you can, talk openly and supportively about people who are same-sex attracted so that they know early on that they can talk to you about what they are feeling.

"I knew I was gay from when I was about 12, maybe 13, but didn't tell anyone until two days after I turned 18. Those 5 years were really hard as I tried to understand who I was and what being gay meant... It's hard to tell anyone, you're always scared that they are going to hate you." Ryan, 18

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Understanding their body

There is a range of bodies that don't fit with the typical ideas people may have about what it means to be born a 'boy' or a 'girl'. Because of variations in chromosomes, hormones and responses to hormones, intersex people can have bodies that may be different at birth (sexual or reproductive organs) or they may develop differently as they age and go through puberty.

Intersex people have sometimes had operations in early infancy and throughout childhood to make their bodies appear more typical and this can sometimes affect their physical and mental health. Medical appointments may impact attendance and engagement at school, requiring additional support and flexibility. You can best support them by listening, being open and honest, affirming that diversity in human bodies is normal, and helping them to seek support and advice.

Telling others

Affirming our sexuality or gender identity, or telling someone that you are intersex, can be a very difficult process. By the time your child is a teenager, they'll know that some people don't like or accept people who are different. They may feel like they have to hide who they are or what they're feeling. They may feel guilt, shame or loneliness.

By telling someone, or 'coming out', they're taking the first steps in accepting themselves for who they are. It's often a very hard step for them to take because they're probably very worried they're going to be rejected.

Sharing their feelings and opening up to you, as well as knowing they have your support, will make the process of telling others easier for them.

If you think your child might be exploring their sexuality or gender, or be same-sex attracted and/or gender diverse, it is important that you make it clear that you are supportive and open to hearing about these topics. For example, talk about sexuality and gender diversity in the news.



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Bullying

Even though attitudes towards same-sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse people are changing, there is still a risk that someone will target your child because of their sexuality, intersex status or gender. Your child might be afraid of discrimination, rejection or violence that they think might happen.

Unfortunately, you cannot always be around to protect your child. But you can let them know they are supported and that they can come to you for help. If they feel supported and loved, they are more likely to grow up happy and confident.

If your child is being bullied, first and foremost it's important that you let them know that you are there to support them. You can also take action to ensure that they get the support they need - this may include talking to the school principal or seeking support from counselling, mental health services or relevant authorities.

What can you do?

It's normal to feel different things when you learn your child is same-sex attracted, gender diverse, questioning their sexuality or gender, or they have an intersex variation. Some parents feel guilt, shame, embarrassment, denial, doubt or worry. Others feel acceptance, joy or happiness.

There is no right or wrong way to feel, but it's important to think about what you're feeling and why. These feelings may include:

- Relief because your child is able to share their experiences with you and they feel comfortable talking to you
- Pride because your child is able to be open about who they are
- Fear for your child's safety, or how they'll be treated by others
- A sense of loss because your child isn't the person you thought they were
- Burdened by the weight of helping them deal with their feelings
- Discomfort because you don't understand it and you were brought up to think it was wrong



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“When Jacob first told me he wanted to live as a male I was outwardly supportive but inwardly grieving. I grieved for the daughter I was losing and even for the grandchildren she wouldn’t give me – at least not in the same way as I’d always expected. Another parent of a transgender person told me that grief is a fine place to visit but we can’t live there. Like every parent everywhere, I soon realised that Jacob’s life is not about me, and as I saw him get happier and happier I realised this was the best decision for him. I couldn’t possibly love him any more than I do, or be prouder than I am.”

Mel

If you have concerns

Your child is likely to be feeling vulnerable. You may feel ill -equipped to deal with these subjects. That’s okay!

Nobody expects you to know everything! If you’re unsure how to support your child, or if talking about same-sex attraction, gender diversity or intersex isn’t comfortable for you, it is important to talk with professionals who are familiar with these topics. You can find some recommended services on the last page of this information sheet.

What you can do to help

Your relationship with your child is likely to involve support and learning together. This can be a healthy process and can deepen your bond with them.

“I never thought I would tell my father... I said to him I didn’t wanna get married and he kept on pressing the issue. Then we went for a drive and he actually brought up people in history who were same-sex attracted and mentioned some movie star who, you know, he was so good at playing a straight character, but he was actually gay. And he said to me “always remember that I love you, always remember that” and it made me feel a lot lighter.”

Helen, 17

Tips:

- Be open and approachable
- Show a genuine interest in how they see themselves, what they think, and what they’re experiencing
- Offer to practice how to respond to negative comments, or how to approach telling other people
- Ask questions and listen
- Empathise with them and be there for them
- Show them you are supportive and that you will love them whatever their sexuality, intersex status, gender or however they express themselves
- Encourage them to keep talking to you about how they feel and what they want to do about it
- Tell them you’re happy to help them look for more information or to talk to others on their behalf if they want you to
- Access available supports through organisations like QLife and ReachOut!
- Think about getting in touch with their school to find out what other support might be available in your local area.

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Provide a supportive family environment

Making your home a safe place of support and affirmation will promote lifelong wellbeing for your child.

Things you can do:

- Make home a place where they can be who they are, express themselves, and dress or act how they need to without fear of judgment
- Express your love and support for them often
- Discuss gender and sexuality openly as it relates to all people. If siblings act out, explore whether they are feeling excluded or pressured.

Supporting your child to affirm their identity

If your child is trans or gender diverse, they may want to start making changes to their appearance so that they feel more comfortable in their body. For example, they may want to dress differently or make changes to their hairstyle.

How people refer to us influences how we feel. Most transitions will also involve the use of a new name and pronouns (he, she, they etc). It's okay if you and your family make mistakes, as long as your intention to affirm their identity is clear.

Ask your child to agree to talk about their experience at school, and to talk with you about anything positive or negative that happens. If you have concerns, or want to know more about how to support your child to affirm their identity, you can talk to your GP or specialist support services such as QLife at www.qlife.org.au.

Talking to others

The golden rule is don't tell anyone your child doesn't want you to. Other family members may have questions, but your child's trust in you depends on you being considerate of their feelings and privacy and their right to control how they come out to others.

Ask your child who they want to tell and how they want to do it, and how you can help. If they want you to talk to others on their behalf, consider these tips:

- Remember that everyone is at a different place in their understanding of these subjects. Have patience, and let them know they are welcome to ask you anything in private, but not in front of your child
- Let them know that you are fully supportive of your child. Make it clear that regardless of their personal feelings you expect them to be kind and respectful
- Share articles that explain so that you don't have to be the expert.



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Information and Support

If you have concerns about the wellbeing of your child or if you need further support, there are a number of peer groups and resources available to you. Talk to your child's school and find out what other support might be available in your area.

ReachOut Parents

ReachOut Parents is a free online service for parents that provides evidence-based practical support and tips that encourage effective communication and relationships between parents and teenagers. It includes easy-to-read information on a range of mental health and wellbeing issues relevant to parents of teenagers including how to create a supportive family environment, how to support your teenager through the coming out process, as well as stories and discussions with parents who have been through this before.

<https://parents.au.reachout.com/skills-to-build/wellbeing/sexuality-gender-identity-and-teenagers>

QLife

QLife provides phone and online counselling for same-sex attracted, gender diverse and intersex people and their family and friends (all ages). Phone: 1800 184 527
Online counselling support: [www.qlife.org.au](http://www qlife.org.au)

Freedom Centre

Freedom Centre is a drop-in centre for young people to hang out, have fun, meet other LGBTIQ young people and get peer-support and information. Sessions for young people include:

Junior Freespace: 2nd Monday of every month 5-8pm, for all LGBTIQ+ young people 18 & under and their families

Junior aGender: last Monday of every month 5-8pm, for trans and gender questioning young people 18 & under and their families. www.freedom.org.au



Common Terms

It is important to remember that language changes with time. It is always best to ask your child or their friends about what language they prefer when talking about these topics.

Cisgender

A term for people who have a gender identity that matches the sex that they were assigned at birth.



Coming out / inviting in

This term describes the process of same-sex attracted or gender diverse people telling others about their identity. It is often a process that continues over time and it is not necessarily a one-off event.

Gender Diverse

A broad term that can refer to all forms of gender identity and gender expression and includes people who may identify as, for example, trans, transgender, genderqueer or gender questioning. It refers to people whose gender expression or identity differs from the gender identity associated with the sex assigned to them at birth or society's common ideas and beliefs about being masculine or feminine.

Gender Identity

Gender identity refers to a person's sense of being masculine or feminine, or both or neither. Gender identity does not necessarily relate to the sex a person is assigned at birth. Rather, a person's gender expression is made up of the outward signs they present to the world around them. This could include their choice of name and preferred pronoun (which may include using no pronoun), their style of dress and appearance, and/or their mannerisms.

Intersex

This is a broad term describing people who are born with natural variations in genital, chromosomal or other physical characteristics that differ from stereotypical ideas about what it means to be born female or male. Intersex refers to biology rather than sexual orientation or gender identity. Intersex people have the same range of sexual orientations and gender identities as non-intersex people. Most identify with the gender they were raised as either male or female.

Intersex is often associated with a medical diagnosis of differences of sex development (DSD). Some intersex people may prefer to be described as a 'person with an intersex variation' or be identified by their specific variation.

Many intersex people first discover they are intersex from a doctor or a parent. As such, 'coming out' does not usually fit with their experience. A more accurate way to describe this is to say they have learned they are intersex.

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Pronouns

Pronouns are words like 'she', 'his' and 'them'. It's ok to ask people about their preferred use of pronouns. Where possible, ask privately. Some people use gender neutral pronouns such as 'they' (singular) or 'ze', while others use no pronoun or wish to be referred to by their name only. It is important not to make assumptions about people's gender identity and to be respectful when using pronouns.

Same-sex attracted

This term is used to describe people who experience feelings of sexual and/or emotional attraction to others of the same-sex or gender. This includes people who may identify in ways such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual or heterosexual, who are questioning their sexuality or who are not wanting to label themselves. Some people prefer to use the term 'same gender attracted'.

Sexuality

Sexuality describes who people are attracted to and how they express this attraction. Human sexuality is diverse. It includes:

- people who are only attracted to those of the opposite sex (heterosexual)
- people who are only attracted to members of their own sex (e.g. same-sex attracted, gay, lesbian)
- people who are attracted to more than one gender (e.g. bisexual or pansexual)
- people who are attracted to no sex or gender (asexual).

Sistergirls and Brotherboys

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use varying terminology to describe or identify a person assigned female or male at birth and identifying or living partly or fully as another gender. Some communities may use terms such as 'Sistergirl' or 'Brotherboy', or they may use alternative words relevant within local language. Use and spelling of the terms may vary across different groups and communities, and other cultures will use different terms to describe gender diversity.

Transgender (also trans)

An umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned to them at birth. An example is a child who is assigned a male sex at birth but actually feels more comfortable living as a girl and identifies as female.

Visit

www.inclusiveedwa.com.au for a list of WA support services and resources.



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Pronouns: She/Her/Hers

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