

Sexuality, Gender & Sexual Orientation

During adolescence, young people learn to relate to their peers as friends and potential romantic or sexual partners. This is a normal part of adolescent development. Some of these sexual thoughts can be intense or confusing, especially for young people experiencing sexual thoughts and feelings about someone of the same sex.

Common Terms

In order to talk to young people about sexuality, it's important to have a basic understanding of the following:

Sex refers to a person's biological status, like male, female or intersex. This is determined by a combination of sex chromosomes, gonads, reproductive organs and external genitalia.

Gender refers to the attitudes, feelings and behaviors that our culture associates with a person's biological sex. Behavior that matches cultural expectations is referred to as gender-normative; behaviors that don't match with these expectations are referred to as gender non-conformity.

Gender identity refers to one's sense of oneself or knowledge of their own gender. Most people have a gender identity that matches their assigned genders at birth. When someone's gender identity and biological sex don't match, this person may identify outside of traditional gender categories – or may simply identify as the gender they feel is who they really are.

Gender expression refers to how we show the world who we are, often through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, activities or mannerisms. Gender can be expressed anywhere along a spectrum from most masculine to most feminine. Three of the most common types of gender expression and communication of gender are:

- **Masculine:** expressing a set of qualities, characteristics or roles generally considered typical of, or appropriate to, a man. Examples of this can be: short hair, favoring jeans over skirts, suits, etc.
- **Feminine:** expressing a set of qualities, characteristics or roles generally considered typical of, or appropriate to, a woman. Examples of this can be: long hair, favoring skirts or dresses over jeans, jewelry and makeup, etc.
- **Gender neutral (gender non-conforming):** expressing a set of qualities, characteristics or roles in neither masculine nor feminine way. Examples of this can be: choosing clothing that is rarely assigned to one gender over another, choosing hair styles that are used by all genders and are non-specific, etc.

Sexual orientation refers to who we are romantically and physically attracted to. The categories below may be the most common, but research widely supports a wide spectrum of sexual orientation.

- **Straight:** A person who is attracted physically and emotionally to persons of the opposite gender.
- **Gay:** Commonly used to describe men, this term refers to people who form physical and emotional relationships with persons of the same gender.
- **Lesbian:** A woman who forms physical and emotional relationships with some women.
- **Bisexual:** A person who is attracted physically and emotionally to persons of the same and different genders.
- **Asexual:** A person who does not experience sexual attraction. Asexual people have the same emotional needs as everybody else and are just as capable of forming intimate relationships.²²

Coming out refers to the process in which one acknowledges and accepts one's own sexual orientation. It also includes the time in which one discloses one's sexual orientation to others. This is a very important time in one's life and a person needs the support of friends, family, co-workers and/or teachers.

Do People Choose Their Sexual Orientation?

Most medical professionals, including organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American Psychological Association (APA), believe that sexual orientation involves a complex mixture of biology, psychology and environmental factors. A person's genes and inborn hormonal factors may play a role as well. Sexual orientation is not a simple choice that people make.

There are a lot of opinions and stereotypes about sexual orientation. For example, having a more feminine appearance or interests does not mean that a male is gay, or having masculine interests doesn't mean a female is lesbian. As with most things, making assumptions based on looks can lead to incorrect conclusions.

It's likely that all the factors resulting in someone's sexual orientation are not completely understood. What is certain is people, no matter their sexual orientation, want to feel understood, respected and accepted – especially by their family.

At What Age Do They Know?

Knowing one's sexual orientation, straight, gay or somewhere along the spectrum, is often something that youth recognize with little doubt from a very young age. By middle school, many LGBTQ youth already recognize their sexual orientation, whether or not they have revealed it to anyone else. Those who didn't realize they were LGBTQ at first often say that they always felt different from their peers, but didn't exactly know why.

Becoming aware of and coming to terms with one's sexual orientation can take some time. Thinking sexually about both the same sex and the opposite sex is quite common as youth sort through their emerging sexual feelings. As youth explore their own sexuality they may experiment with members of the same sex. This does not necessarily mean that they are gay or straight. For many, these experiences are simply part of the process of sorting through their sexuality. And despite gender stereotypes, masculine and feminine traits do not necessarily predict whether someone is straight or gay.

Once aware of their sexual orientation some youth may be quite comfortable and accept their sexuality, while others might find it confusing or difficult to accept.

Thoughts & Emotions a LGBTQ Youth Might Face

LGBTQ youth may feel like there is something wrong with them because they perceive that everyone is expected to be straight. They are likely to face others who express stereotypes, prejudices and hatred towards any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality. Because of this, some LGBTQ teens may act and feel different from their peers when discussing romantic feelings, dating and sex, in order to fit in with peers. They might believe they need to deny their feelings, or that they have to hide parts of themselves. These feelings can lead LGBTQ young people to keep their sexual orientation secret, even from supportive friends and family members.

LGBTQ young people are at a higher risk for depression and suicide. Pay attention to any changes in your young person's behavior and mood. Don't hesitate to ask a youth how they are feeling, and even specifically, if they are considering harming themselves. LGBTQ youth plan and attempt suicide more often than heterosexual youth. And their attempts are more often successful or are more harmful and require hospitalization. If you think a youth is considering harming themselves, talk to them, tell them you care and assist them in getting the help they need.²³

More on Coming Out

Telling friends and family members about sexual orientation is often referred to as coming out. Many youth that come out to their friends, families and communities are fully accepted. They can feel comfortable about being openly attracted to someone of the same sex or gender, and they do not feel as anxious about it.

Not everyone feels safe coming out. Those who feel they need to hide because of rejection, discrimination or violence can be at greater risk for emotional issues like anxiety and depression. Some LGBTQ youth without support systems can be at higher risk than heterosexual youth for dropping out of school, living on the streets, using alcohol and drugs and attempting suicide.

With any young person, no matter what the circumstances, make sure to constantly tell them that you love them and care for their well-being. The knowledge that there are people who love and support them is essential to a young person's development.

LGBTQ Youth Sexual Health

All youth should have access to health care. Encourage your young person to talk to a trusted health care provider about all options for safer sex. Some things to consider for keeping youth sexually healthy:

- All sexually active teens should be routinely tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), also known as STDs (Appendix C).
- Anyone who has unprotected anal sex is at a high risk of STIs. Safer sex practices, such as using a condom and personal lubricants (which reduce tearing), help reduce the risk of other infections. Even heterosexual teens engage in anal sex.
- Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a viral infection spread through skin-to-skin sexual contact. HPV is a group of over 100 different viruses, with at least 30 strains known to cause different types of cancer. Youth between 9- and 13-years-old should get the HPV vaccine. To work best, the vaccine needs to be given before any sexual activity starts. Initially considered only for females, the HPV vaccine is approved for use in males as well.
- All females who have had sex (anal, vaginal, oral or through use of sex toys) should have a Pap test: Pap tests are recommended for females 21-year-olds and older, or three years after becoming sexually active. During a Pap test, cells are collected from the cervix and then examined to make sure they are normal and healthy. A sexually active lesbian who has not had sex with a male should still have a Pap test done in her early 20s.

How to Discuss

Let youth know that you love and care about them as a person. Some young people will talk to a sibling or friend before they talk with a parent or caregiver. It's important that you respect that youth will tell someone they feel comfortable with. Some tips for discussing sexual orientation are:

- Be available and open-minded if youth want to talk about sexual orientation, but don't force the issue.
- Consider talking about sexuality after watching a television show or reading a book with a LGBTQ theme. This is a helpful way to begin a discussion about you loving them no matter what sexual orientation. This lets a young person know that they can talk to you when they are ready.
- Encourage your young person to talk about sexual health with a pediatrician, health care provider or trusted adult. These people may also be helpful discussing peer pressure, harassment and bullying in other ways.
- Speak to a pediatrician, health care provider or sexual health educator yourself. Speaking with an expert and asking your questions can be a great way to be ready when youth is ready to talk to you.²⁴

Parental Acceptance & Support

Research from the Family Acceptance Project shows that behaviors which children experience as rejecting significantly increase their risk for negative health and mental health problems. These rejecting behaviors undermine a child's self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. It should not be surprising that many of the children who end up in the foster care system, run away, or become homeless are gender nonconforming and transgender.

Examples of Damaging Parenting Practices

- Physical/verbal abuse
- Exclusion from family activities
- Blocking access to gender nonconforming or gay or lesbian friends, activities or supports
- Blaming child for discrimination faced
- Denigration and ridicule
- Religious-based condemnation
- Distress, denial, and shame
- Silence and secrecy
- Pressure to enforce gender conformity²⁴