



Gender & Sexual Identity

As young people define who they are and where they belong, they are also forming their sexual and gender identities. We can support youth by providing a safe space for them to explore their identities and express themselves.

SEX TRAITS

Biological make-up

GENDER

Roles & social expectations

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Patterns of attraction

SEX TRAITS

Sex traits refers to sexual anatomy. There are six known parts of anatomy with sexual functions:

- Chromosomes: X and Y chromosomes
- Gonads: testes and ovaries
- Gametes : sperm and egg cells
- Primary sex characteristics: internal and external genitalia
- Secondary sex characteristics: features developing during puberty, including body shape, facial and body hair, and voice timbre
- Brain: hormone regulation

sex traits can develop and function differently for everyone and do not determine how someone feels about their body and their gender. Genitals are not the sole predictor of a person's gender.

Sex Assigned at Birth is a label given at birth by a medical professional based on sex traits, often external genitalia. The assignment of a sex may or may not align with what's going on with a person's body or with their internal sense of gender.

- Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB)
- Assigned Male at Birth (AMAB)
- Intersex: A term for someone whose sex traits do not fit typical definitions for the binary categories of female or male

Talking About Anatomy

Use language that describes the anatomy itself without equating it with a gender identity. Rather than using gendered language (such as "boys' or girls' bodies"), choose language that focuses on anatomy and physiology (such as "people with a uterus," "bodies with penises," "chest develop," "facial hair grows").



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GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION

Gender includes a person’s gender identity, expression, and societal roles. Every society has gender role expectations, such as “girls love pink” and “boys like race cars.” Expectations about how a person should feel, act, speak, dress, and conduct themselves are typically based on that person’s assigned sex. However, sex and gender are not the same and gender is not restricted to the binary of being either a man or a woman.

- **Gender Identity:** Our internal sense of self as male, female, a blend of both, neither, or something else. By age four, most children have a stable sense of their gender identity; however, the words someone uses to communicate their gender identity may change over time (American Academy of Pediatrics).
 - Gender identities include woman, man, non-binary, two spirit, genderqueer, and others. People may identify with more than one gender, or no gender at all.
- **Gender Expression:** How a person communicates their gender through their appearance, voice, and actions. Gender expression may be impacted by how safe and accepted a person feels in their environment.
- **Cisgender** describes a person whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth (such as someone who was assigned female at birth and identifies as a woman).
- **Transgender** describes a person whose gender is different from their sex assigned at birth (such as someone who was assigned female at birth and identifies as a man). Transgender identities can be binary (trans woman or trans man) or non-binary.

Asking About Pronouns

You cannot know what a person’s gender identity is unless they tell you. One way to support youth of all genders is to ask young people what pronouns they want you to use to describe themselves, such as he/him, they/them, she/her, and ze/hir. Don’t assume you know someone’s pronouns— ask and respect the pronouns youth share. Check out [GLSEN’s pronoun guide](#) for more information.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND ATTRACTION

Sexual orientation describes a person’s sexual and romantic attraction to other people. How a person chooses to describe their sexual orientation and identity can stay the same throughout their life or vary over time.

The terms below represent some common identities but do not encompass every sexual orientation.

- **Gay:** someone who experiences attraction to people of the same gender identity. “Gay” often refers to men, but can also be used by people of any gender identity.
- **Lesbian:** a woman who experiences attraction to other women.
- **Bisexual:** someone who experiences attraction to their own and other genders.



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- **Queer:** an umbrella term describing sexual and gender identities other than heterosexual and cisgender. This term was historically used as a slur. While some people still consider it offensive, others have reclaimed it to express their identity.
- **Asexual:** someone who experiences limited, infrequent, or no sexual attraction or desire for sexual activity.
- **Heterosexual or Straight:** someone who experiences attraction to a different gender (e.g., men who only experience attraction to women and women who only experience attraction to men).

Using Inclusive Terms for Relationships

You can respect diverse sexual identities and avoid assumptions about young people's sexual orientation by using inclusive terms like "partner" or "spouse" instead of gendered words like "boyfriend," "girlfriend," "husband," or "wife." Another example is asking a young person, "Are you interested in dating anyone?" instead of, "Are you interested in any boys?"



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<https://pflag.org/>

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) is a national organization with local chapters across the country. This grassroots network builds awareness, knowledge, and skills around affirming and supporting the LGBTQ+ people in your life.

<https://www.hrc.org/>

The Human Rights Campaign is a national organization advocating for equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community. Through stories, data, toolkits, and calls-to-action, they create awareness around the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people and provide solutions against harmful laws.

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

The Trevor Project is a national organization that provides crisis support, education, and resources to young LGBTQ+ people. This includes hotlines, handbooks, and more.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/LGBTQyouth/>

The Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth: A Guide for Foster Parents factsheet helps caregivers learn about LGBTQ+ youth in the child welfare system, the unique risks they face, and the important role that foster parents can play in reducing those risks.