

Basic Facts About Being LGBTQ

If you work with young people in child welfare systems, you work with young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity (LGBTQ). Child welfare professionals and caregivers have the duty to serve these young people in their care with competence and compassion. Unfounded myths and stereotypes about LGBTQ people have no place in the child welfare profession. The first step toward competent care is to understand basic facts about LGBTQ people and the issues they face.

WHAT DOES “LGBTQ” MEAN?

In recent years it has become common to use the string of letters “LGBTQ” to be inclusive of all individuals and communities who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender or who are questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. There is no right or wrong way to order the letters (*e.g.*, GLBTQ), and some people add additional letters, including “I” for intersex (or what used to be called hermaphroditism), “Q” for queer, and “A” for non-LGBTQ allies (*e.g.*, LGBTQQIA).

Lesbian A woman who is emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to other women.

Gay A man or woman who is emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to the same gender; some use the term only to identify gay men. The word *gay* is preferred over the word *homosexual*, which has clinical overtones that some people find offensive.

Bisexual A man or woman who is emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to both genders. Sometimes the attraction to each gender is equal, while for others there may be a preference for one gender over the other.

Transgender An umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity, one’s

inner sense of being male or female, differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. **Gender-nonconforming** people are people whose gender expression, the outward communication of gender through behavior or appearance, differs from expectations associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. **Transgender girls** are people who were assigned the sex of male at birth but identify as female. **Transgender boys** are people who were assigned the sex of female at birth but identify as male. Everyone has both a sexual orientation and a gender identity. Gender identity is different from sexual orientation. Transgender people may identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning.

Transgender people may need specialized health care to assist with their gender transition. For more information, please see Lambda Legal’s factsheet about transition-related healthcare, available for download at www.lambdalegal.org/publications/trans-toolkit/trt_transition-related-health-care.html.

Questioning A person, often an adolescent, who has questions about his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. Some questioning people eventually come out as LGBT; some don’t.

FOSTERING TRANSITIONS

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HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE LGBTQ?

Approximately 5–10% of the general population is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. LGBTQ adolescents are estimated to make up a higher, disproportionate share of the foster care and delinquency pools. Because many LGBTQ young people face disapproval and overt rejection from their families, they are more likely to be forced from their homes into the foster care and homeless populations. Once in foster care, bias against them may make it harder to find permanent placements for them, prolonging their stay in child welfare systems.

AT WHAT AGE DO PEOPLE KNOW THEY ARE LGBTQ?

Many LGBTQ people report being aware of their orientations as very young children, well before their first sexual experiences. Others may not be aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity until they are older adults. Never assume that a person is either “too young” or “too old” to come out as LGBTQ.

HOW WILL I KNOW IF SOMEONE IS LGBTQ?

Not all LGBTQ young people identify as such, and many conceal that they are LGBTQ out of concern for their safety or privacy. Conversely, some people who are perceived by others to be LGBTQ in fact are not. The only certain way to know if someone is LGBTQ is if the person tells you. Until then, never rely on myths and stereotypes about LGBTQ people to make assumptions about a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity. However, if you work with a young person who is being harassed and mistreated because he or she is perceived by others to be LGBTQ, it’s imperative that you take immediate corrective action without first attempting to determine if the youth is in fact LGBTQ. The goal is to be open and accepting of all people and to signal to those who may be LGBTQ that you are a safe person who will help protect them from discrimination and mistreatment.

WHAT CAUSES A PERSON TO BECOME LGBTQ?

The reasons why some people are LGBTQ and others aren’t are not yet well understood. What is known is that sexual orientation and gender identity have proved to be generally impervious to interventions to change them. Indeed, so-called reparative or conversion therapies intended to change a same-sex sexual orientation have been criticized by all major mental health organizations as ineffective and potentially harmful. Moreover, it is incorrect to assume that all LGBTQ people have been traumatized or abused, or that coming out as LGBTQ is a form of acting out behavior. LGBTQ people exist around the world and have throughout time, although the concepts of identifying as LGBTQ, and LGBTQ communities, developed more recently.

HOMOSEXUALITY IS NOT A MENTAL ILLNESS.

Homosexuality is not a mental or physical disorder, and the mental health professions do not regard a same-sex orientation as harmful, undesirable or requiring intervention or prevention. It’s a core part of a person’s identity, just as a heterosexual orientation is for a heterosexual person. There was a time in this country when homosexuality was mistakenly classified as a mental illness. Extensive empirical research came to show that this assumption was wrong. Accordingly, in 1973 the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as an illness and removed it from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). All major mental health professional organizations, including the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association and the National Association of Social Workers, have long recognized that being lesbian or gay inherently poses no obstacle to leading a happy, healthy and productive life, and that the vast majority of lesbian and gay people function well in the full array of social institutions and interpersonal relationships.

GENDER IDENTITY DISORDER IS A DIAGNOSABLE MEDICAL CONDITION.

Some transgender people are eligible for a diagnosis of gender identity disorder, or GID. In order to meet the diagnostic criteria in the DSM-IV, an individual must show evidence of a strong and persistent cross-gender identification, a persistent discomfort about one’s sex assigned at birth and clinically significant distress or impairment in important areas of functioning. Because GID is a recognized medical condition, some transgender people have successfully argued that state nondiscrimination laws that require reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities apply, and that denying transgender people the right to dress in ways that are consistent with their gender identities is discrimination based on disability. Some transgender people would prefer that GID be declassified as an illness in the same way that homosexuality was. It is important to understand that once transgender people are able to express their gender identities they are able to go on to lead happy, fulfilled lives.

For more information about the rights of LGBTQ people, visit www.lambdalegal.org.

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