

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI)



Fact Sheet

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Key terms

This fact sheet is about Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) people and is aimed at teacher education students to help prepare them for their role in schools. It is important to note that while the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex are often used together they are quite different.

To start with we will explore each of these terms in more detail as well as explaining some of the other terminology used in this fact sheet.

Human gender and sexuality is complex and involves a number of components, including **biological sex** (e.g. male or female) and **gender identity** (the psychological sense of being male or female; note: male and female are not the only ways to describe biological sex or gender, these terms are more fluid). **Sexuality** includes how we feel about other people in terms of emotional, romantic, sexual or affectionate feelings. These feelings and how we behave in response to them are often described as sexual orientation. People may be attracted to people of their own gender, to people of the opposite gender, or to individuals of either gender.

Based on their sexual attraction some people may identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual, while others may prefer to use a different term or not use any label at all.

Same-sex attracted people have romantic and sexual attraction for people of the same gender. The term same-sex attracted includes lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

Heterosexual people are attracted to people of the opposite gender.

Lesbian refers to a woman who is primarily attracted to women.

Gay is a term that refers to a person who is primarily attracted to people of the same gender. It is often used to refer to men who are attracted to other men although some women also identify with this term.

Bisexual refers to a person who is attracted to individuals of their own gender as well as individuals of the opposite gender.

Transgender refers to a person whose gender identity, gender expression, or behaviour does not conform to that typically associated with their sex assigned at birth. While in some societies more than two genders are recognised, in Australia, people are classified at birth as female or male. Typically children classified as female are raised as girls while children classified as males are raised as boys. A person classified as female who identifies as a boy or man might describe himself as a trans man or simply as a man. Similarly, a person classified as male who identifies as a girl or woman might describe herself as a trans woman or simply as a woman. Some trans people identify trans as their gender (National LGBTI Health Alliance, 2013).

Intersex describes a broad range of physical, genetic and/or hormonal variations that lie between stereotypical male and female characteristics. This means intersex people have either reproductive organs, chromosomes or other physical sex characteristics, which are neither wholly male nor wholly female or are a combination of male and female. So biological sex is not binary (male or female) it includes a range of presentations, which includes intersex people. Intersex is not an identity but rather a description of biological diversity. So most intersex people will identify as male, female, gender diverse, gender non-binary or trans FTM (female to male) or trans MTF (male to female).

Heterosexism (Heterosexist, adjective or noun) is discrimination or prejudice against lesbian, gay or bisexual people based on the belief that being heterosexual is the 'right' or 'normal' way to be, and that anyone who is not heterosexual is inferior or bad.



Homophobic is showing contempt, hatred or aversion towards lesbian, gay or bisexual people.

Misgendering is a term for describing or addressing someone using language that does not match how that person identifies their own gender or body.

While we use the term LGBTI in this factsheet it is important to note that language in this space is still evolving and can be quite fluid. Many people who are same-sex attracted or gender diverse do not use the labels of LGBTI, this is particularly true for younger people who are still exploring their identity. Also identity is not indicative of behaviour and behaviour is not indicative of feelings.

Common experiences of young LGBTI people

Adolescence is a time when young people are establishing a sense of identity. There are often additional challenges for young people who are also facing issues of sexuality and gender as they begin to develop personal identities. Some young people may prefer to not assume a fixed identity around sexuality or gender.

Each individual is different but there may be some common experiences which affect the wellbeing of LGBTI young people. These include:

- Worrying about 'coming out' to family and friends;
- Being unsupported by family or friends;
- Fear of being rejected or ridiculed;
- Problems fitting in or coping at school;
- The experience of verbal or physical bullying or harassment; and
- Pressure to change or deny one's sexuality, gender expression or gender identity.

These experiences can add increased stress on top of the other issues in young people's lives that can be stressful such as:

- Managing school and study;
- Negotiating relationships;
- Puberty;
- Body image;

- Moving towards independence; and
- Trying to fit in.

For transgender (and some intersex) young people puberty can be particularly stressful as their body may change in ways they do not want and this can be particularly distressing. In addition, schools are binary gendered spaces (e.g. uniforms, toilets) which can present additional barriers for transgender young people to feel safe.

LGBTI and mental health

LGBTI people experience significantly higher incidence of mental ill-health than the general population. For example, 31.5% of same-sex attracted people experience anxiety disorders compared to 14.1% of the heterosexual population. The rates are also higher for affective disorders (e.g. depression or bipolar disorder) 19.2% versus 6% and substance use disorders 8.6% versus 5% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007).

Smith, et al. (2014) report the experience of mental illness is greater again for transgender and gender diverse young people. 45% of young people in their study indicated they had an anxiety disorder and 47% had a depressive disorder.

Self-harm is also higher in the LGBTI population compared to the non-LGBTI population. Studies have shown that the self-harm and attempted suicide rates are higher for those who have experienced verbal heterosexist abuse and higher again for those experiencing physical heterosexist abuse (Hillier, et al., 2010).

It is important to note that the higher rates of mental ill-health and suicide in the LGBTI population are not caused by being LGBTI but by the discrimination and exclusion experienced because of being LGBTI.

Discrimination, harassment and violence for LGBTI young people

As indicated the experience of verbal or physical abuse is detrimental to LGBTI people's mental health, leading to increased self-harm and attempted suicide rates. In



Australia, almost two-thirds of the young LGBTI people surveyed had experienced homophobia and/or transphobia, with 64% of young LGBTI people experiencing verbal abuse and 18% experiencing physical abuse (Robinson, Bansel, Denson, Ovenden & Davies, 2014).

School is the most likely place that LGBTI young people will experience homophobic abuse. Hillier, et al. (2010) reported that 80% of homophobia experienced by LGBTI young people occurred in school settings. Robinson, et al. (2014) also found the majority of experiences of harassment, homophobia and transphobia occurred at school. The school setting was where the majority of experiences of social exclusion (59%), rumours being spread about them (78%), graffiti (69%), written abuse (66%) and being humiliated (51%) occurred (Robinson, et al., 2014).

This is important because teachers have a role in shaping the school environment and can help to create a safe and supportive environment for LGBTI students. Research has shown that schools implementing policies and practices which recognise and value gender and sexual diversity resulted in LGBTI young people feeling safer and reduced rates of self-harm and attempted suicide (Hillier, et al., 2010).

What can teachers and schools do?

Supportive relationships and a sense of belonging are protective factors for mental health, meaning they can help buffer against the impact of negative life events or risk factors which may contribute to mental ill-health. Protective factors also serve to promote or increase people's mental health and wellbeing.

Having a safe and supportive environment free from discrimination and abuse is very important to promote mental health and wellbeing of all children and young people.

While the prevalence of heterosexist attitudes can be challenging for schools and teachers they also present important opportunities for advocating for diversity and

creating safe and supportive environments for LGBTI students.

"The most important thing a school can do is provide an inclusive environment for all students and families - one that is geared towards supporting individuals to develop their strengths, a positive self-concept and identity" (MindMatters, 2014, p. 17).

Here are some suggestions for how you can achieve this in your school:

- Have policies that require staff not to discriminate against any minority group, including LGBTI youth.
- Encourage a climate of inclusion and acceptance which extends to everyone in the school community, including those with a disability, people from all cultural backgrounds, different religious faiths and those who identify as LGBTI.
- Use inclusive language. This includes not misgendering people (see the National LGBTI Health Alliance, Inclusive Language Guide, for tips).
- Enforce policies and procedures against bullying and harassment for any reason, including homophobia and transphobia.
- Challenge the inappropriate use of language that contributes to a culture of discrimination, such as labels about sexuality, gender, cultural background or appearance.
- Include information on LGBTI, sexuality and gender identity in discussions about sexuality, relationships, diversity and social issues; take opportunities to discuss this in an inclusive way through the use of films, books or other media.
- Support students to create a 'gay-straight' alliance group which is inclusive of all LGBTI students.
- Ensure that members of staff are aware of sexually inclusive language - when discussing personal and social issues in class, try to make it clear that you do



not assume that students have only heterosexual relationships.

- Provide information on counselling and support services which are inclusive of all members of the school community, including those who identify as LGBTI.
- Provide professional development for staff regarding contemporary issues which affect young people, including same-sex attraction and gender diversity.
- Promote resilience generally through caring relationships, having positive expectations of young people and by providing opportunities for genuine participation.
- Schools can join the coalition in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory and the remaining states and territories by mid-2015. Safe Schools Coalition AUS www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au
- Using school based programs such as Safe Schools Coalition Victoria. This website contains curriculum/lesson plans, resources, information for parents and families, research, student resources and example policies (such as: 'Gender is not uniform: Inclusive School Uniform Guidelines') safeschoolscoalitionvictoria.org.au

Support services & websites

There are a number of support services, phone lines and websites that provide counselling and useful information, including:

- QLife - National Counselling and Referral Service: 1800 184 527 (5.30pm-10.30pm daily) www qlife.org.au
- Twenty10, NSW service: www.twenty10.org.au

- Open Doors Youth Service, QLD: www.opendoors.net.au/new
- Minus 18, VIC: minus18.org.au
- Expanded Horizons – QSPACE, QLD: qspace.net.au
- Working it Out Tasmania: www.workingitout.org.au
- GLCS – Gay and lesbian community services SA/NT: www.glcssa.org.au
- Diversity ACT, ACT: www.diversityact.org.au
- Living Proud, WA: www.livingproud.org.au
- The Gender Centre, Sydney NSW: www.gendercentre.org.au
- It Gets Better Project: www.itgetsbetter.org
- OII Australia: oii.org.au
- Rainbow Network, VIC: www.rainbownetwork.com.au
- Freedom Centre, Perth WA: www.freedom.org.au
- headspace: www.headspace.org.au
- Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 (ages 5-25)
- Lifeline: 13 11 14
- ReachOut.com: www.reachout.com
- beyondblue - Youth website: www.youthbeyondblue.com
- beyondblue: www.beyondblue.org.au
- PFLAG – Parents, families and friends of lesbians and gays: www.pflagaustralia.org.au



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Safe Schools Coalition Victoria:
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