



Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

About 30 percent of youth in foster care identify as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning) or gender nonconforming.¹ LGBTQ+ youth enter foster care for many of the same reasons as non-LGBTQ+ youth in care, but many have also experienced the trauma of rejection or mistreatment because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. A parent or caregiver who supports an LGBTQ+ or gender-nonconforming adolescent can help them cope and thrive.



For more information on sexual orientation and gender identity, see module 5 in *Healthy Sexuality for Youth in Foster Care: An Online Training for Parents and Caregivers of Youth in Foster Care*, a resource for parents and caregivers of youth ages 10–19 from the Family and Youth Services Bureau and the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. The training and supporting materials are available at www.fosterparenttalk.org/home. Additional tip sheets related to the training cover communication, contraceptive options, and safety.

Learn about sexual orientation and gender identity

To support LGBTQ+ and gender-nonconforming adolescents, it is important to understand how they might identify. This can help you feel more prepared and comfortable to talk with them about sex and relationships. Keep in mind that our understanding of sexuality, attraction, and gender identity continues to evolve, so terms could shift over time.

Sexuality is a broad term that refers to sexual behavior and feelings, including how people feel about themselves and being with others, how they see their gender and sexual identity, and how they interact with other people. A person's sexual orientation is determined by who they are attracted to physically or romantically.

A person might be attracted to people of a different gender, people of the same gender, or people of more than one gender. Some people do not experience sexual attraction. There are a variety of terms to describe how youth may identify the way they are attracted to others. Youth may identify as asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, queer, questioning, or straight.

Gender identity is about how a person feels inside and how they express their gender through clothing, behavior, and personal appearance. It's a feeling that begins early in life. Most people feel they're either a man or a woman. Some people might consider themselves a masculine woman, and some might express themselves as a feminine man. Some individuals do not consider themselves male or female.

Sexuality:

Asexual. A person who does not experience sexual attraction. A person can also be aromantic, meaning they do not experience romantic attraction.

Bisexual. A person who is attracted to both people of their own gender and people of other genders.

Gay. A person who is attracted primarily to members of the same gender.

Lesbian. A woman who is primarily attracted to other women.

Pansexual. An individual who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction for people with all gender identities and expressions.

Queer. An umbrella term sometimes used to refer to the entire LGBTQ+ community. In the past, the word “queer” was (and sometimes still is) used to put down or disrespect LGBTQ+ people. The term recently has been reclaimed by the community, and some people use the word with pride to identify their gender identity or their sexual orientation. As with all labels, it’s best to check with someone to see which term they prefer.

Questioning. Used to describe people going through the process of exploring and discovering their own sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Straight or heterosexual. A man who is primarily attracted to women, or a woman who is primarily attracted to men.^{2,3}

As with sexuality, there are a variety of terms people might use to describe their gender identity. Youth may identify as nonbinary, cisgender, gender nonconforming, transgender, intersex, or two-spirit.

There are several ways youth express their gender identity, such as through physical appearance and behavior—hairstyle, how they dress, how they talk, or how they move.

Gender pronouns are another way youth can express themselves—for example, as “she/her,” “he/him,” or “they/them.”









Tip: If you’re unsure which pronoun someone prefers, ask with sensitivity rather than assuming.

Remember that sexual orientation and gender identity can be fluid

Parents and caregivers of LGBTQ+ or gender-nonconforming youth should be aware that sexual orientation and gender identity can be fluid, especially during adolescence.

Check your understanding

 <p>Sexuality can change.</p>	 <p>True! As youth grow and develop, their sexual feelings, thoughts, and behavior could change over time.</p>
 <p>Youth may go through a process of exploring and discovering their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.</p>	 <p>True! Understanding their sexuality, which may include experimentation, is a developmentally appropriate process that youth go through over time.</p>
 <p>A person with a self-identified sexual orientation can engage in sexual behavior that seems to conflict with that orientation.</p>	 <p>True! Some people who identify as heterosexual may have engaged in—or still might engage in—sexual acts with individuals of the same sex or gender. How youth feel (identity) and what they do (behavior) are part of a journey.</p>

Affirm LGBTQ+ and gender-nonconforming youth

Youth need support as they navigate their own sexual orientation and gender identity. When parents and caregivers accept and support them, it can go a long way toward creating positive health outcomes for youth. Parents can do the following to support youth in their care:

Gender Identity:

Nonbinary. A person who does not identify as either a man or woman.

Cisgender. A person whose current gender identity is the same as the gender they were assigned at birth.

Gender nonconforming.

A person whose behavior does not conform to the traditional expectations for people of their gender, or whose gender expression does not fit neatly into a category.

Transgender. A person whose gender identity or expression (masculine, feminine, other) is different from the sex (male, female) they were assigned at birth.

Intersex. A term used to describe people with differences in reproductive anatomy, chromosomes, or hormones that don't fit typical definitions of male and female.

Two-spirit. Used by some Indigenous individuals to describe their sexual, gender, and/or spiritual identity. Two-spirit refers to a person who has both a masculine and a feminine spirit.^{2,3}

1. Make it clear that slurs or jokes about how someone expresses their gender or who they are attracted to are not tolerated in your home. Express your disapproval of these types of jokes or slurs when you encounter them in the community or media.
2. Use gender-neutral language when asking about relationships. For example, instead of asking, "**Do you have a girlfriend?**" ask, "**Is there anyone special in your life?**"
3. Allow them to participate in activities that interest them, regardless of whether these activities are traditionally limited to men or women.
4. Support youth in how they express themselves through clothing, jewelry, hairstyle, friends, and room decoration.
5. Educate yourself about LGBTQ+ history, issues, and resources, and help address stereotypes and misinformation in your community.
6. Watch movies or shows together that positively portray LGBTQ+ characters and situations and create opportunities for discussion.
7. Listen carefully in the presence of friends, family, and community organizations to ensure they are using neutral and inclusive language when they talk about the LGBTQ+ community.



Tip: Look for school or community groups for LGBTQ+ youth and their families, such as PFLAG (formerly known as "Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.")

Talk to youth about their sexuality

It might not come naturally to talk with youth about sexuality. Even if you're not sure what to say, it is important to communicate acceptance and support. If you don't know what to say in response to anything they share about their sexuality, you can practice saying a simple statement like "**I am here for you,**" or "**I support you.**"

Another great communication tool is the S.A.F.E. method. See the tip sheet on parent-child communication www.fosterparenttalk.org/home for more on S.A.F.E. communication.



Tip: Use door openers (simple statements that keep communication flowing) while you think about how to respond. Phrases like "**That's a good question,**" "**Go on,**" or "**Tell me more**" can keep the conversation going in a nonjudgmental way while giving a parent or caregiver time to think about what to say.

Use additional resources

These topics can be challenging to discuss for several reasons, including your own attitudes, beliefs, and values. It may take some time to feel comfortable having conversations about the topics covered in this tip sheet.

We recommend reviewing these additional resources for parents and caregivers and for sharing with youth:

For parents and caregivers	For parents, caregivers, and youth
<p>Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth. A Guide for Foster Parents: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides tips and guidance for supporting LGBTQ+ youth in foster care.</p>	<p>Information and resources for LGBT youth in foster care. Youth.gov provides information on the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in foster care and resources for supporting them.</p>
<p>Video: How to Be an LGBTQ+ Ally. AMAZE provides tips on how to support LGBTQ+ friends and loved ones.</p>	<p>Resources for LGBTQ+ Youth by State. Lambda Legal provides resources on direct service providers for LGBTQ+ youth in each state.</p>
<p>Video: Sexual Orientation. AMAZE provides information on sexual orientation.</p>	<p>Video: Sexual Orientations Explained. AMAZE provides information on sexual orientation.</p>
	<p>Video: What Are Pronouns? AMAZE provides information on gender pronouns.</p>
	<p>Video: Gender Identity: Being female, male, transgender, or gender fluid. AMAZE provides information on gender identity and gender expression</p>
	<p>PFLAG. Provides confidential peer support, education, and advocacy to LGBTQ+ people, their parents and families, and allies.</p>
	<p>The Trevor Project. Provides LGBTQ+ youth with 24/7 crisis counseling via phone, text, and chat.</p>
	<p>GLAAD. Works through entertainment, news, and digital media to share stories from the LGBTQ community that promote acceptance.</p>

Endnotes

- ¹ Child Welfare Information Gateway. "Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth: A Guide for Foster Parents." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2021. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/LGBTQyouth.pdf>.
- ² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Adolescent and School Health. Terminology." December 18, 2019. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/terminology/sexual-and-gender-identity-terms.htm>.
- ³ Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs. "Key Terms and Concepts." n.d. <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/lgbtq-youth/key-terms-and-concepts>.

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