

# LGBT YOUTH: KEY TERMS & CONCEPTS

Currently, there is no universally accepted acronym for the community or communities of youth who are not heterosexual and express their gender in diverse ways. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth each represent distinct populations with particular and sometimes unique experiences.<sup>1</sup> FindYouthInfo.gov uses “LGBT” as an umbrella term, a commonly used acronym for talking about nonheterosexual and gender-variant youth, but it is important to keep in mind that other sexual and gender identities are not fully captured with the LGBT acronym. Also, it is important to remember that sexual orientation and gender identity intersect with cultural and other aspects of a young person’s identity, such as faith/spirituality and race and ethnicity, and can also change over time.

# TERMINOLOGY

**SEX** Genetic and anatomical characteristics with which youth are born, typically labeled “male” or “female.” Some youth are born with a reproductive/sexual anatomy that does not fit typical definitions of “male” or “female.” This is sometimes referred to as “intersex.” Many medical and some advocacy communities now use the term “differences of sex development” (DSD).<sup>2</sup>

**SEXUAL ORIENTATION** A youth’s emotional, sexual, and/or relational attraction to others.<sup>3</sup> For some, this attraction is to people of the opposite sex/gender (heterosexual), the same sex/gender (gay/lesbian), or both sexes/genders (bisexual) or to people in general independent of their sex/gender (pansexual or omnisexual). The term can also refer to low or non-existent attraction to any sex/gender (asexual).

**GENDER IDENTITY** Our internal sense of being male, female, or some other identity. Because gender identity is internal, it is not necessarily visible to others.<sup>4</sup> “Cisgender” describes youth whose gender identity/expression does not differ from that typically associated with their assigned sex at birth. For example, a young person who was born as male and identifies as a man may be considered cisgender. In contrast, “transgender” (or “trans”) describes youth whose gender identity/expression is different from that typically associated with their assigned sex at birth. Research shows that children as young as two years old can identify a person’s sex based on how they present their gender, that by age three they can begin to see themselves as either male or female, and that around age nine they understand gender roles.<sup>5</sup> For most youth, internal gender identity is reinforced by the reactions that others have to our gender expression.<sup>6</sup> Other terms are sometimes used to describe one’s gender. For example, “gender fluid” or “gender creative” reflect a more flexible range of gender expression.

**GENDER EXPRESSION** How youth represent their gender to others. For example, youth may express their gender through mannerisms, clothes, and personal interests. Our understanding of gender and what it means to be “masculine” and “feminine” is influenced by how we were socialized. For example, families, schools, and the media influence our understanding of gender. A relatively small percentage of gender-variant children develop an adult transgender identity—but the majority of adolescents with a gender-variant identity develop an adult transgender identity.<sup>7</sup>

**QUESTIONING** A term used to describe young people who are unsure about their sexual and/or gender identity.<sup>8</sup>

**TRANSITIONING** Transgender youth “transition” to express their gender identity through various changes, such as wearing clothes and adopting a physical appearance that align with their internal sense of gender. Transition may or may not include medical or surgical treatment and depends on a variety of factors, including age, access to and affordability of services, overall health, and personal choice. For transgender youth, transitioning is an important part of affirming their identity.<sup>9</sup>

**TWO-SPIRIT** An inclusive term created specifically by and used by some Native American communities. It refers to American Indian/Alaskan Native individuals who express their gender, sexual orientation, and/or sex/gender roles in Indigenous, non-Western ways, using tribal terms and concepts, and/or who define themselves as LGBT, questioning, and intersex in a Native context. Often a person’s spiritual experiences or cultural beliefs are core to the formation of their two-spirit identity.<sup>10</sup>

**COMING OUT** The process through which youth identify, acknowledge, express, and share with others information about their sexual orientation and gender identity. This experience can be an affirming one, resulting in a sense of belonging—but it can also create stress in the life of youth and put them at risk for negative outcomes as a result of LGBT-related stigma and the responses and behaviors of others. This process includes coming out over time to oneself, to friends and other peers, at school, to family, at work, and in one’s community.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Medicine, 2011

<sup>2</sup> Malouf & Baratz, 2012; Poirier, Fisher, Hunt, & Barse, 2014; Many medical and some advocacy communities use the term “disorder” of sex development to distinguish between such medical conditions and a person’s self-label or identity.

<sup>3</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012

<sup>4</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012

<sup>5</sup> Lev & Alie, 2012

<sup>6</sup> Poirier et al., 2014

<sup>7</sup> Institute of Medicine, 2011

<sup>8</sup> Institute of Medicine, 2011

<sup>9</sup> Poirier et al., 2014

<sup>10</sup> Barse, 2012; Poirier et al., 2014

<sup>11</sup> Poirier et al., 2014

Source:

<http://www.youth.gov/youth-topics/lgbtq-youth/key-terms-and-concepts>

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