Key Concepts to Guide Professionals Working with LGBTQ+ Youth

This document briefly reviews gender and sexual identities and provides foundational knowledge and key terms specific to working with LGBTQ+ youth. We recommend that youth-supporting professionals review this information before reading the resource titled "Using Trauma-Responsive, LGBTQ+ Affirming Care to Connect Young People to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services." This product is not meant to be all-encompassing—there are many ways that people in the LGBTQ+ community, across cultures, relate to and understand gender and sexual identities. There is also a glossary along with additional resources and citations for more information.

LGBTQ+ affirming care is an approach to care that is respectful, supportive, empowering, and informed by the unique needs and experiences of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+,[1] a population that encompasses multiple expressions of gender and sexuality.

There are many different genders and ways in which people see and relate to their gender. **Gender** begins as an identifier assigned at birth that determines someone's social and legal status and determines how they are organized and treated in different settings, including but not limited to family, school, and doctors' offices. People are taught different behaviors and expectations based on their assigned gender very early on in life, which can make it difficult for them to disentangle their gender identity from their assigned gender.[2]

Gender identity is an internal sense of self that helps people situate themselves in a world with varying expectations for each gender. Someone's gender identity can align with a binary gender (man or woman), be outside the binary (non-binary), shift between different genders (genderfluid), or be something else altogether.[2] Gender identity is different from **sexual identity**, which refers to who someone is sexually and/or romantically attracted to.[2] Sexual identities may include identities like **lesbian**, **gay**, **bisexual**, **pansexual**, **queer**, and **asexual**. People with different gender expressions may have any sexual identity. You should avoid assuming all young people with whom you engage are straight, engage in particular types of sex, have the same sexual and reproductive health needs, or live their lives the same way.

Gender identity refers to how people understand their gender. **Gender expression** refers to how people show their gender to others through behavior and physical presentation (e.g., makeup, clothes, hair, voice). It is important to create spaces in which young people feel safe to express their gender.

Pronouns don't necessarily indicate someone's gender, but they can be an important part of gender expression. Always ask young people their pronouns and avoid assuming they want to be referred to in a particular way based on what you know or think about their gender expression. Everyone uses pronouns, even if they don't think about the pronouns they use.[3] People can use gendered pronouns (she/her or he/him), gender-neutral pronouns (they/them), or neopronouns (e.g., ze/hir). People may use more than one set of pronouns and have specific circumstances in which they use each set of pronouns, so you should always ask how a person wants to be addressed.[4] Some people may not feel ready for everyone to know their pronouns, so you should also ask them who they want to share their pronouns with in order to ensure that you don't accidentally out them. You should always create space for people to share their pronouns, but they should never be required to share their pronouns and only do so by choice.

People's **gender and sexual identities** can change over time. If a young person shares that they have changed how they identify, affirm and celebrate their new identity. Never tell a young person that they will change their mind about how they identify in the future or bring up their past.

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Glossary

Asexual (Ace)—People who experience little to no sexual attraction to people of any gender. Some asexual people experience romantic attraction to people of different genders and want to be in a romantic relationship, and other asexual people don't experience romantic attraction to people of any gender and prefer to be in non-romantic relationships. Asexuality is also an umbrella term that may include people who experience sexual attraction only in specific circumstances or under specific conditions—for example, only after a strong emotional bond has been formed.

Binder—A piece of clothing that flattens someone's chest.

Bisexual (Bi)—People who are attracted to people of the same and other genders. Bisexuality is a spectrum: Bisexual people can be attracted to people of any gender in different ways and be attracted to people of some genders more than others.

Cisgender—People who identify with their assigned gender at birth.

Gay—Historically defined as men who are attracted to other men. It can also be used as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ people, and people of all genders sometimes use this term.

Gender dysphoria—Feeling of discomfort when there is a misalignment between someone's gender identity and the gender they are treated as.

Gender questioning—People who are in the process of figuring out which gender feels right for them.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)—A medical process that alters someone's hormones to match their gender identity and results in a feminizing or masculinizing effect.

Intersex—This term encompasses any natural variation in sex characteristics that falls outside the binary definitions of male and female. There are over 40 recognized variations in sex characteristics, which include variations in external genitalia, hormones, internal reproductive organs, or a combination of any of these.

Lesbian—Historically defined as women who are attracted to other women. It can also include non-binary people and trans men if they choose to identify as lesbian.

Non-binary—Can be used as an umbrella term to include people whose gender identity is outside of the gender binary and as a specific identifier. Non-binary people can have different conceptions of their gender; some identities may be aligned with binary gender identities (man or woman) and others may be outside this binary. Identities like genderqueer and genderfluid are included under the non-binary umbrella.

Pansexual (Pan)—People who are attracted to people of all genders. Like bisexual people, pansexual people can be attracted to people of each gender in different ways and be attracted to people of some genders more than others. Gender is not as relevant for pansexual people as it is for bisexual people.

Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) —_A medication initiated within 24-72 hours after a potential exposure to HIV and is taken daily for one month to protect against contracting HIV.

Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP)—A daily medication that protects against HIV if taken consistently

Queer—Both a general descriptor of people who are not heterosexual as well as a specific identity. It can also be associated with a rejection of labels and gendered concepts like the gender binary. It has been used as a slur against LGBTQ+ people, so even though it has been reclaimed by the community it is important to be mindful when using the term.

Transgender (Trans)—An umbrella term used to describe people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Sometimes, the term trans is used to specifically talk about trans men and women, and sometimes it is used to talk about all people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Non-binary and genderqueer people are included in this definition, but not all non-binary and genderqueer people choose to also identify as trans.

Transfeminine—People assigned male at birth who identify with femininity in terms of gender identity or gender expression. This can include trans women and non-binary people.

Transmasculine—People assigned female at birth who identify with masculinity in terms of gender identity or gender expression. This can include trans men and non-binary people.

Two-Spirit—Used as an umbrella term to describe Indigenous people who conceptualize themselves outside of the dominant cisgender and heterosexual ways of identifying. This specific term was created as a pan-Native American identifier and has only been in use for a few decades, but the concept has deep and varied roots in Indigenous communities and should never be used by people outside of those communities. Additionally, just because someone is LGBTQ+ and Native American doesn't mean that they're Two-Spirit, and just because someone is Two-Spirit doesn't mean they identify as LGBTQ+.

Additional Resources for Youth-Supporting Professionals

1. [Activate Sexual and Reproductive Health Explorer](): An online resource explorer that covers a full range of SRH topics for professionals who work with youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, youth experiencing homelessness and opportunity youth

2. [Developmentally Appropriate Approaches to Discussing Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights with Foster Youth](): A guide for case managers that provides background information on adolescent development and suggested trauma-informed approaches when working with youth in foster care

3. [Supporting a Trauma-Informed Approach to Sexuality Education](): An appendix to an evidence-based sexual health program that provide quick tips on how to apply and integrate a trauma-informed approach

4. [A Trauma Informed Approach for Adolescent Sexual Health](): This document provides information on how to promote sexual health and well-being for youth impacted by trauma

5. [Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth](): A guide for foster parents caring for LGBTQ+ youth, including terms, how to create an affirming environment and key considerations for LGBTQ+ youth in the child welfare system.

6. [Tucking for gender diverse youth and young adults](): This handout explains tucking, how to do it safely, and the risks and benefits.

7. [Guidelines for the Primary and Gender-Affirming Care of Transgender and Gender Nonbinary People](): A guide for medical providers on the health care needs of transgender and non-binary patients and best practice for inclusive care.

8. [Resources for Adult Caregivers of LGBTQ Youth](): A collection of resources for adults who care for LGBTQ+ youth with experience in the child welfare system.

9. [Patient and Family Resources](): A collection of resources for gender-diverse young people and their families on supporting medical, social, and surgical transition.

10. [Sharing Our Lived Experiences](): A tip sheet for adults caring for Two-Spirit and Native LGBTQ+ youth in the child welfare system.

11. [Sexuality + Gender Identity](): A guide for young people on gender identity, sexuality, and coming out to family and peers.

12. [The Coming Out Handbook](): A guide for young people on gender and sexual identity, coming out, healthy relationships, and mental health resources.

13. [What is Outing and Why is it Harmful](): An article on what outing is, the negative effects, and how to avoid outing people.

Endnotes

1. Wang T, Ellison C, Ducheny K, Lytle O, Serke HV, Lackey S, et al. Assessing Need and Access to LGBTQ+ Affirming and Affordable Behavioral Healthcare in Chicago 2022:32.

2. Understanding Gender. Gend Spectr n.d. https://genderspectrum.org/articles/understanding-gender (accessed August 12, 2022).

3. What Are Pronouns? Why Do They Matter? Pronounsorg Resour Pers Pronouns n.d. https://pronouns.org/what-and-why (accessed August 12, 2022).

4. How Do I Use Your Pronouns Correctly? Pronounsorg Resour Pers Pronouns n.d. https://pronouns.org/how (accessed August 12, 2022).