# OUR CHILDREN:

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, QUEER, AND QUESTIONING PEOPLE

PFLAG
pflag.org

**If you or a loved one needs immediate assistance, please turn to the inside back cover of this publication or visit pflag.org/hotlines for a list of crisis hotlines.**

# ABOUT PFLAG

PFLAG is the nation's first and largest organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people, their parents and families, and allies. PFLAG has nearly 400 chapters and 250,000 members and supporters crossing multiple generations of families in major urban centers, small cities, and rural areas across America. This vast grassroots network is cultivated, resourced, and supported by the PFLAG National office (located in Washington, DC), the National Board of Directors, and the Regional Directors Council.

**Our Vision.** PFLAG envisions a world where diversity is celebrated and all people are respected, valued, and affirmed inclusive of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

**Our Mission.** Our mission is to build on a foundation of loving families united with LGBTQ+ people and allies who support one another, and to educate ourselves and our communities to speak up as advocates until all hearts and minds respect, value and affirm LGBTQ+ people.

## About this publication:

This guide focuses on providing support for parents, caregivers, families, and friends of people who are LGBTQ+, with an emphasis on sexual orientation and gender expression. For detailed information specific to gender identity and people who are transgender, please visit **pflag.org/ourtranslovedones** to download a free copy of *Our Trans Loved Ones*.

Our experiences, expertise, knowledge, and resources are always evolving and, therefore, we encourage you to visit our website (**pflag.org**), as well as check with medical, behavioral health, social services, and other professional providers, or local support groups—including PFLAG chapters—for the most up-to-date information on LGBTQ+ experiences.



To order this publication, receive a complete listing of PFLAG publications, or obtain information about a PFLAG chapter in your area, visit our website at **pflag.org**.

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# WE'RE GLAD YOU FOUND PFLAG!

**You're likely reading this publication because your child (or a loved one—we'll use both terms throughout, interchangeably) has come out to you; that is, they've shared with you that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, nonbinary, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ+).** Some parents and caregivers are surprised to learn this information; others are perhaps ill prepared to hear about it from a friend, school counselor, neighbor, or online social networking site. Still others may already have an inkling that someone they love might be LGBTQ+ but aren't sure when, how, or if they should address it.

We believe we know our children better than anyone else does. So when a child comes out (reveals themselves to be LGBTQ+) and we hadn't a clue—or we knew and patiently waited for them to share the information, or denied it to ourselves—it can make us feel like we didn't know them as well as we thought we did…or perhaps didn't really know them at all.

Everyone has a vision or dream for their child's future, born of many things including personal experiences, family history, cultural or societal expectations, and more. When presented with your child's disclosure or coming out, it may be an adjustment to understand and realize that this future might now differ from that vision or dream.

Remember, this is not an end to your dreams for your child or loved one, nor is it the end of your relationship. On the contrary, your relationship can become even stronger, because you know more about them now than you did before. In fact, it is a likely sign that your child trusts you: If they are telling you, they are making a choice to share this most personal information about themselves.

Reactions vary, from "Now that I know, what can I do to support my child?" to "How will I ever handle this?" For some people, it's a combination of these two reactions

and more. There is no doubt that people have different and complex responses and feelings to a loved one coming out, but this is absolutely normal, given that you are receiving news that the path you and your loved one are now on is unknown, and likely different from one you expected or for which you had prepared.

Whatever your reaction, both PFLAG National and the PFLAG Chapter Network of nearly 400 chapters across the United States are here for you. PFLAG can provide the information you need to understand your reaction to the news and your child's sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. We are here to help you respond in a way that is supportive and loving. Our members—parents, caregivers, family members, allies, and LGBTQ+ people themselves—reside in communities in every state across the country, and represent a wide array of political, religious, and cultural perspectives. Simply put: All of us have either been, or are, exactly where you are now.

Before we delve more deeply into the issues, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- **You are not alone.** For decades, people have turned to PFLAG looking for support, resources, and answers to their questions. According to the Williams Institute, an LGBTQ+ research think tank, there are 13 million people ages 13 and older in the U.S. who identify as LGBT. Other research shows that eight in ten people in the U.S. personally know someone who is LGB, and one in three people know someone who is transgender. In other words, although it may not appear so, there are LGBTQ+ people everywhere, and there are supportive families and allies everywhere, too. You are not alone in this process.
- **Your reaction is valid.** There is no one right way to react to learning that your child or a loved one is LGBTQ+. Some feel happy that their child opened up to them, others feel relief that they know more about their child and can help them navigate the world with this information to guide them, while others feel joy that their child is confident in their self-awareness. Others may have more difficult or complex emotions, feeling fear for their loved one's safety, guilt thinking they may have somehow caused their loved one to be LGBTQ+, sadness that they did not know without being told, or anger that their child did not tell them sooner. These are all normal feelings… and you may experience some, or all of them, simultaneously.

- **You are on a journey.** Others have not only walked the path before you, many are traveling the same road right now, having a similar experience in their own family. Like every journey, this one will have its twists and turns. Addressing your reaction, responding to your child, learning about LGBTQ+ issues, sharing this information with your family and friends, all of these things take time. Know that it is okay to be okay immediately, or okay not to be okay overnight. Take the time you need to explore your feelings. You can emerge from this period with a stronger relationship with your child than you have had before, and arrive in a place that is better than where you started: Closer to your child, closer to your family, and closer to a vibrant community of people you might never have known existed.
- **You are important.** When you are with your loved one, it is important to put their needs first. But in order to be really focused on their well-being, self care is crucial.; you must put on your own oxygen mask before you can help your child with theirs. Even as you are learning how best to support your child or loved one, you must also find support for YOU! Whether you feel isolated or nervous—or interested and excited to connect with other families—it's important not only to find and talk to people who have gone through what you're going through, but to have information and resources at your fingertips—like those offered at **pflag.org**—right when you need them. This is especially true if your emotions are less positive, as you'll need a safe place to work through those feelings away from your child. PFLAG meetings are a positive and confidential way to find people who have gone through similar experiences, and those in attendance and leading the meetings can point you towards crucial resources such as books to read, telephone helplines to call, websites to visit, movies to watch, and more. Find a local chapter at **pflag.org/find**.

## The Basics: Sexual Orientation, Gender Expression, and Gender Identity

What is sexual orientation? What is gender expression? What is gender identity? And how are they all related? We know this can be confusing, so let's start at the beginning.

When a baby is born—and thanks to modern technology, often long before—a doctor takes a quick look at the baby's visible sex organs and assigns that baby a sex. From this assigned sex, we assume the baby's gender. (For more definitions of terms, visit **pflag.org/glossary**, or

see the abbreviated version of the PFLAG National glossary at the end of this book).

For the vast majority of people, their gender identity—that is, their internal sense of being male, female, somewhere in between, or neither—matches the sex assigned to them at birth. For others, their gender identity does not correspond with that assignment, and those individuals often refer to themselves as transgender or nonbinary. For those individuals, there is a disconnect between how others perceive them based on outside physical characteristics and their internal sense of themselves.

> ***"For me, it was my son saying to me, 'Dad, I'm the same person I was before.' Now it's been six months, and I realize even more that really, nothing has changed in his life. It was my perception of him that changed."***
>
> ***— Anonymous, Father of a gay child***

This internal sense of gender identity happens at a very young age. Think back, for example, to when you first knew yourself to be the gender you are. It is likely that it was so early in your development that you may not even remember it. For some people who are transgender, this sense of gender identity also happens at a very young age, while for others it might happen well into their teens or tweens, or even well into adulthood.

There are also those who don't define themselves specifically as male or female: Perhaps they identify as both, or as neither, but they don't necessarily feel that their internal sense of self is at odds with their biological sex. They may refer to themselves as genderqueer or nonbinary. These are just a few of the terms used to describe gender identity.

Everyone demonstrates their gender—that is, communicates their gender identity in a manner that is comfortable for them—through clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms, or other outward presentations or behaviors. That is called gender expression. When one doesn't strictly adhere to societal norms of "masculine" or "feminine" in their gender expression—or their gender expression does not coincide with their assigned gender—we refer to that as an example of being gender nonconforming or gender creative. (For more on what it means to be gender nonconforming, turn to the expert opinion from Diane Ehrensaft later in this book).

As a child gets older, they will potentially become aware of feelings of attraction—physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, spiritual—towards other people. These multiple attractions describe their sexual orientation. It is important to note that sexual orientation is separate and distinct from gender identity and gender expression. In fact, people who are transgender can identify their sexual orientation as gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, or queer—meaning someone who defines their sexual orientation outside of the above definitions—just like a cisgender (meaning non-transgender) person can.

> ***"I waited until I was 26 to admit to myself I might be gay. I was so ashamed of it that I buried my sexuality down in the very deepest recesses of my mind and heart."***
>
> ***— Anonymous, 43, Seattle, WA***

Also separate and distinct from sexual orientation is sexual behavior. One may identify their sexual orientation—or to whom they are attracted—one way, but their behavior sometimes may not be in accordance with that orientation.

Sexual orientation. Gender identity. Gender expression.

Each one separate, each one distinct, and each of us has all of them!

[NOTE: If your loved one has come out to you as transgender, we encourage you to visit our website, **pflag.org/ourtranslovedones**, to download a free copy of our publication *Our Trans Loved Ones*, which focuses exclusively on how to support a transgender loved one.]

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## Why is my child gay (or bi or pan or queer or…)?

When something unexpected happens, our first thought is often, "Why?" This is true even for families that are completely accepting of their child's sexual orientation or gender identity; they might wonder, "Why did this happen?" It is okay to ask the question, and here is the answer: Nothing you or anyone else did made your child LGBTQ+. LGBTQ+ people come from all types of families—from faith-based to atheist families, conservative to liberal families, families of every ethnicity and every economic background and every type of ability or disability. They come from one-parent households, two-parent households, households with stepparents, and multi-generational and multi-ethnic households. They live in every kind of community, large and small, rural, suburban, and urban. There is no valid research from any mainstream or scientifically sound source that shows that parenting style affects a child's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. There is also no valid research that points conclusively to any one genetic or biological "cause" for a particular sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

The important thing to keep in mind is that your loved one is the same person they were before they came out to you. What has (perhaps) changed is your perception of your loved one, the hopes or goals you had for them them, or the understanding you thought you had of their inner world. For some, this unexpected journey or shift of perception is an easy transition, while for others it can be difficult. Either way, this can be a positive experience for both of you.

## How should I respond?

First and foremost, lead with love. For some, this will be the natural response. For others, long-held beliefs may get in the way of responding positively and supportively. As best as you can, however, remember this: No matter how easy or difficult learning about your child's sexual orientation or gender identity is for you, it was probably extremely difficult for them to come out to you, given the many fears and concerns that can arise.

And if your child or loved one was "outed" by someone else, it can make the situation even more difficult.

What fears and concerns? It is possible that your child or loved one will be worried about losing your love. They might be worried about your reaction and response, and may even be worried about losing their family and their home. Sadly, these things have happened and continue to happen in too many cases, with examples being shared in the media, in your community, or even previously in your own family. It is no wonder, then, that many people who are LGBTQ+ fear the response of their family members to their decision to come out.

> ***"I hope one day we no longer have to 'come out.' That it is a non event. Being gay is no different than having green eyes in my opinion."***
>
> ***— Josh G., 23, San Antonio, TX***

Although there is no one perfect way to react, your response to your child will make an impact on both your child's well-being and your relationship with them moving forward. Therefore, while it is sometimes challenging to control your initial response, feeling guilty or embarrassed about that response should never dissuade you from trying again and doing better; it is possible to apologize, change course, and then determine how you will respond more positively as you move forward.

If you are not in an immediate place of support and understanding—and as you work towards getting there—do your best to try and remember the following: Positive, supportive responses lead to healthier LGBTQ+ people. What does this mean for you? First and foremost, it means finding a place for yourself—away from your child or loved one—to share any feelings that might have a negative impact on your loved one. This allows you to be there for your loved one, as best you can, in a positive and supportive way, while at the same time giving yourself time and space to honor your own emotions as you work through them.

Dr. Caitlin Ryan of the Family Acceptance Project conducted research that followed families going through the coming-out process. The conclusions reached from this study highlight the powerful role family acceptance plays in the health of LGBTQ+ youth. Certain response behaviors reduce a child's risk for both physical and behavioral health problems. These include:

- **Speaking with—and listening to—your child about their LGBTQ+ identity.** Give your child ample opportunity to open up and share their thoughts and feelings.

Whether they want to talk about their hopes for the future, or a situation that happened in school or at work that day, the prospect for open discussion is endless. If you have a sense that your loved one might want to talk, but isn't doing so on their own, a gentle open-ended question, such as, "How did things go at school/work/church today" can open the door to dialogue. Don't push, and really listen when they talk. If you make a misstep in your response—whether accidentally using incorrect pronouns (see *Pronouns* in the glossary at the end of this publication) or asking a too-personal question—apologize; no one is perfect. It is in making the attempt that you show your love and support.

- **Supporting your child's LGBTQ+ identity, including their gender expression, even though you may feel uncomfortable.** Despite your potential discomfort, your LGBTQ+ loved one needs your support. This support can take a wide variety of forms, from welcoming their LGBTQ+ friends into your home, to taking them shopping for that just-right piece of clothing they've been asking for, to helping provide access to age-appropriate resources, such as books and films. Imagine how supported your loved one will feel when you speak positively about an LGBTQ+ character you saw on television, or share a news article on a related issue. Showing an interest in their lives, inclusive of their whole selves, is a subtle but powerful way to show that you care.

- **Connecting your child with an LGBTQ+ role model.** If you come to support easily, it may be because your family or social circle already includes people who are openly LGBTQ+. If this is the case, connecting your newly out loved one with the other LGBTQ+ people in your life—or other positive LGBTQ+ role models found through friends or behavioral health professionals—offers the opportunity to see not only that you are comfortable connecting with and being close to people who are LGBTQ+ (a subtle message of support), but also gives youth the chance to see people who are LGBTQ+ living their lives positively, with friends and family who love them. Showing a young LGBTQ+ person that there are endless positive possibilities for their future offers hope and support in a significant and impactful way, which directly and positively affects their health and wellbeing.

- **Expressing your unconditional love for your child.** Saying "I love you" is, of course, one obvious way to express your love for your child. But it is true that actions speak louder than words, and taking any—or all—of the steps above will help assure your child that they have your love and support no matter what. And if you find yourself at a loss for words? A simple hug can be the best response.

No matter what, PFLAG is an essential resource, providing an outlet for thousands of people who are right where you are now. There are many ways to connect with PFLAG. PFLAG chapters have local in-person meetings and online meetings via our *PFLAG Connects* program. On social media, many of our chapters have groups on Facebook, chats via Twitter, and can be reached via direct message. Our chapters also offer non-crisis telephone helplines or can be reached via email or through their websites. PFLAG National holds national meetings via *PFLAG Connects: Communities*, for Asian/Asian-American/Pacific Islander families, Latino families, and Black/African-American families. To find your local chapter, or to connect with PFLAG National, visit **pflag.org** or contact PFLAG National via email at info@pflag.org.

## Can my negative feelings or responses harm my loved one?

Dr. Ryan's research demonstrated that LGBTQ+ youth are:

- Nearly six times as likely to report high levels of depression;
- More than eight times as likely to have attempted suicide;
- More than three times as likely to use illegal drugs; and
- More than three times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.

The statistics are staggering—but your actions can definitely mitigate negative outcomes.

Overt negative actions such as hitting your child, name-calling, bullying them, or kicking them out of the house are the most obvious negative responses to avoid, although it is worth noting that there are now-supportive parents and caretakers whose journeys started with one of these reactions, but were later able to make amends to their LGBTQ+ loved ones and move forward.
But even the most well-meaning parent or caretaker can act in ways that are subtly unsupportive or negative. Actions such as blocking access to LGBTQ+ friends, events or resources, making a child keep their LGBTQ+ identity a secret from other family members or friends and not letting them talk about it, or pressuring a child to conform to more stereotypical gender expression or behavior can cause harm.

There are also subtle communications that can hurt a loved one who is LGBTQ+, whether it's making or sharing a joke that seems innocuous to you, disparaging LGBTQ+ people you see in the media, or even telling an LGBTQ+ loved one that they are being too sensitive when you do one of the above. It may take time to break some old habits, but making your best effort—acknowledging and apologizing for unintentional missteps—is a real demonstration of love and thoughtfulness.

> ***"We laughed, we cried, we hugged and life has never skipped a beat. Andrew is the same wonderful, loveable son that he was the moment before he told us he was gay and our relationship as a family is stronger than ever."***
>
> ***— Susan H., 59, Sedona, AZ***

Try to express your fear, worry, anger, or any other feelings of distress away from your child. Remember, it is never too late to respond with love and support. Some parents come to a place of support and understanding early, and for others it takes time. The important thing is that you are working towards understanding and centering the needs of your loved one.

### My child is very young, but likes playing with toys and dressing in clothes I usually think of as being for a different gender. What does this mean?

It may mean they are LGBTQ+ or it may not. It may mean that your child is simply creatively exploring different ways of playing and expressing who they are…or it may not. Do your best to allow your child this time of exploration, and leave the door open for positive, honest conversation; by doing so, it is more likely they will continue to communicate with you as they begin to understand themselves more clearly, regardless of what they come to understand about themselves. (For more information on what it means to be—and to support someone who is—gender nonconforming, turn to the expert opinions, beginning on page 17).

### How can I keep my child safe?

They say "Home is where the heart is," and never is that more true—or necessary—than for a person who has just come out. If possible, home should be a safe haven for your child or loved one, a place for them to bring their whole authentic selves, to bring concerns and worries, and where YOU are their safe place to land. This may mean listening to your child or loved one talk about someone to whom they are attracted

or on whom they have a crush. Perhaps it means sharing affirming television, movies, and books between you or, for gender-creative kids, allowing them to explore the full range of that creativity, whether through clothes, toys, or even a change of name if that is where they are leading you.

Of course, it is possible you will still have conflicting feelings. These feelings should be shared, as much as possible, away from your child; this is exactly what PFLAG is here for, whether you attend an in-person meeting or connect with other PFLAGers online or by phone. Remember to visit **pflag.org/findachapter** to connect with a local chapter.

Your worries for your loved one's safety outside of the home are a very real, very valid source of concern. Those worries might make you feel that the best way to protect your loved one is to have them hide their sexual orientation, or avoid dressing in the way that makes them feel happiest and most comfortable. Every situation is different, and your intent to protect your child could be received by them as a subtle message that you don't support them and who they are. If you live in a community where coming out might not be safe—whether it's concern for their physical wellbeing or because there are no legal protections for LGBTQ+ people where you live—have that discussion with your loved one and share those concerns. Work together to make a decision that lets them know you support them and love them, and want what is best for them and for their safety. If together you assess that it is safe for them to be out when outside of the home, then do your best to advocate on their behalf, whether that means asking others to show respect if you hear them speaking negatively or being at your loved one's side if they should need you.

Concerns abound for many parents, caregivers, and loved ones, whether it's safety in school, workplace safety and discrimination, supporting a loved one in a faith community, or keeping LGBTQ+ loved ones safe in social situations. PFLAG National offers resources around all of these issues and more; visit **pflag.org** to find the resource that is best for you.

One of the most important things you can do to keep your loved one safe is to acknowledge their identity and understand that, while a person may choose to change their own sexual behavior or gender identity or expression, none of these things can be changed by so-called "reparative" or "conversion" therapy. **Every major mainstream medical and behavioral health association agrees that attempting to change one's sexual orientation or gender identity does not work and is damaging and dangerous, increasing the risk for depression, self-harm, substance abuse, and even death by suicide.**

# NEXT STEPS

The PFLAG National website, **pflag.org,** is the go-to hub for information, resources, and support. From there you can:

**Contact a PFLAG Chapter.** There are hundreds of PFLAG chapters across the United States, each of which provides peer-to-peer support for parents, families, and allies of the LGBTQ+ community as well as support for LGBTQ+ people themselves. This one-to-one connection can be a crucial part of your journey. Through PFLAG you will meet people who have either gone through what you are going through, or are currently going through the same thing, and are ready to share and listen. Whether you need support to move forward through difficult feelings about your loved one coming out—or are immediately accepting but need support and education from others about how you can support your loved one—you will find that help through PFLAG. Find your local chapter at **pflag.org/find**.

> ***"My mother's last words to me were that of acceptance and love at a time I was filled with fear and hate of the world. My mother will always have the best place in my heart for giving me that gift."***
>
> ***— Christopher M., 29, Washington, D.C.***

**Read Other PFLAG National Publications.** PFLAG National has additional publications on specific issues including Our Trans Loved Ones, written specifically for the loved ones of people who are transgender; Be Yourself, which is geared toward youth; Faith in Our Families, which talks about the ways families of faith can navigate the coming-out process with their loved ones; and a whole host of publications from our Straight for Equality™ project. Find all of our publications at **pflag.org/publications**.

**Do More Research.** There is a tremendous amount of information available about the LGBTQ+ community, parents with LGBTQ+ young and adult children, and anything else you might want to know. In addition to the PFLAG National website, you can connect with us on social media via Facebook (**facebook.com/pflag**), Twitter (**twitter.com/pflag**), and Instagram (**instagram.com/pflag**).

### A final thought.

After decades of working with parents and families, our experience tells us that the unconditional love you have for your child is the most important thing to remember, whether you came to PFLAG already affirming, strongly in denial, or anywhere in between.

The process of reacting and responding to your child or loved one's sexual orientation or gender identity disclosure is an opportunity to bring all of you closer. If you aren't at a point where you can come out loud and proud as the parent, caregiver, or loved one of a person who is LGBTQ+, there may very likely come a point where you can begin to do so. Be patient with yourself, patient with your loved one, and remember: You always have a home at PFLAG.

# EXPERT OPINIONS

**Diane Ehrensaft, Ph.D.,**
Director of Mental Health; Founding Member, Child and Adolescent Gender Center

What's the first thing a new parent typically gets asked about their baby or baby-to-be?

"Boy or girl?"

We are really asking about the baby's sex, based on observations of the baby's genitals and assumptions about the baby's chromosomes. But nobody yet knows about the baby's gender, who that little person will know themselves to be as male, female, nonbinary, or other, and how they want to "do" their gender—playing by their culture's rules for gender or making up their own as they go.

When it comes to gender, it is not for us to decide, but for the children to tell us who they are, if we give them the chance. And they are now telling us, in words and actions, that gender does not come in just two boxes, male and female, but in an infinite variety of shapes and sizes. We can think of it as a web, with each child, over time, spinning together threads of nature, nurture, and culture to arrive at their own unique gender web, the gender that feels most true and authentic. Their gender web will be made up of their gender identity—their sense of themselves as male, female, or other, and their gender expressions—the clothes they wear, the games they play, the children they play with, and so forth. Like fingerprints, no two children's gender webs will be the same. But unlike fingerprints, a child's gender web is not indelible. It can change and flow throughout that child's life.

Most children discover that the gender they know themselves to be is a match with the gender assigned to them on their birth certificate. But a few will let us know that we got it wrong—our youngest cohort of transgender people. And many will be resistant to their culture's rules and regulations for gender, especially if they are rigidly divided for boys and girls. They may be the boy in the pink tutu, the girl who trades her bikini for her cousin's swim trunks, the boy in the doll corner, the girl enthralled by all the

trucks. At the end of the day, we hope all these clothes and toys will become people things, rather than designated boy or girl things. In the meantime, they will remain the tools children may use to tell us who they are. These are the children we refer to as our gender nonconforming, gender independent, gender expansive, gender fluid children—accepting their assigned gender identities but tweaking their gender expressions. Some may take a short excursion in living in the opposite gender, but not stay there. A fair number, but not all, will explore their gender selves on the way to later discovering their gay selves. Yet it should always be remembered that gender and sexual identity are two separate developmental tracks, not to be confused with one another, like railroad tracks—parallel but crossing at certain junctures.

***"Like fingerprints, no two children's gender webs will be the same. But unlike fingerprints, a child's gender web is not indelible. It can change and flow throughout that child's life."***

Then there are some young children who re-arrange both—gender identities and gender expressions. They refuse to pin themselves down as either male or female—maybe they are a boy/girl, or a gender hybrid, or gender ambidextrous, moving freely between genders, living somewhere in-between, or creating their own mosaic of gender identity and expressions. As they grow older, they might identify themselves as agender, or gender neutral, or gender queer.

Each one of these children is exercising their gender creativity, and we can think of them as our gender creative children. In their youngest years, adults around them may make the mistake of saying, 'Oh, it's just a phase." In pediatric thinking, a phase almost always means something negative—like colic or terrible twos—that, to soothe a parent's anxiety, is guaranteed to disappear with time. That is exactly the negative message often sent to confused or curious parents when the pediatrician counsels them about their young child's gender nonconformity, "It's just a phase. Your child will outgrow it."

Indeed, a child may certainly move on from their present gender presentation as they spin together their gender web over time. But most gender-creative children are not going through a phase, and parents don't need reassurance that their child will move away from their gender creativity but rather encouragement and support them

to help their child stay with it to become the most gender healthy child they can be—the child who gets to be the gender that is "me" rather than the gender everyone around them might want or expect them to be.

A young gender creative child will need a psychological tool box and some resilience building to meet up with the challenges of going against the gender grain in a community that might not be ready to accept that child. Parents, siblings, and other relatives will need professional and community support to be the most accepting family they can be—that is a major ingredient for children's gender health.

To that end, parents will need constant reminders that any who have "blamed" them for their child's gender nonconformity will need help learning that parents don't make their children's gender, the children do. Some parents see so much else going on with their child that they are stymied—with all that "noise," how can they even tell if the "gender stuff" is real? That, too, is where a gender-sensitive mental health professional can be a tremendous support in sorting this out. And all of us will need to become allies and advocates for these young children, whether they be transgender, gender fluid, gender queer, agender, and so forth, to create a social world that reaches toward gender infinity rather than shrinking into gender restriction.

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**Lisa Kenney,** Executive Director; Gender Spectrum

What do you do when your son announces to you that they are "changing their gender," uses a term you've never heard of to describe himself (neutrois, agender, non-binary, genderqueer, androgyne…), and when you didn't know what he meant, he left the room and now won't speak to you about it? Or perhaps your daughter has begun wearing what seem to be men's clothing, binding her breasts to appear more flat-chested, and recently asked you not to use gendered pronouns when referring to 'her' anymore, preferring that you use "they." You're left wondering if this is just a phase, or if there's something more that you need to understand about your child.

Traditional ideas about clothing, accessories and other expressions of gender are changing. This has always been true as gender norms change over time. However, changes have tended to be slower and more modest. Today's questioning of gender asks that many things taken for granted be given closer examination; conformity is not a given. So what do we do when our child begins to express their gender in new ways, or

comes to us and tells us something new about their gender?

There is a generational divide in our understandings of gender. The two genders, man and woman, that most of us grew up with have given way to richer, more complex ways of thinking and talking about gender. For the first time, polls conducted with people in their 30s and younger indicate that they see gender as a spectrum, rather than a binary concept with only two pre-assigned categories. You're not alone if you feel a bit out of touch with what's going on with gender now, or if new pronouns and gender terms seem like a foreign language.

*"You're not alone if you feel a bit out of touch with what's going on with gender now, or if new pronouns and gender terms seem like a foreign language."*

As you already know, parenting is an improvisation; we figure it out the best we can as we go along, and what seems initially difficult and overwhelming ultimately becomes manageable. This parenting challenge is no different in that regard. There are no simple, one-size-fits-all answers, but there are strategies you can use as you find your way with your child.

## Reassure Your Child

Sharing who we are with another person is an act of trust and love. It also leaves us vulnerable. Your child took a risk in sharing their gender with you in the hope that you would see them as they see themself. They will be paying particular attention to what you say—and do—after their disclosure. Be mindful they will be observing you and interpreting your actions so be sure to let them know that you understand the importance of what they told you. Communicate your love and respect for them, reassuring them that what they have shared doesn't change that in any way.

## Listen

Resist the urge to talk more than listen when your child tells you about their gender. Sometimes as parents we can fall into the trap of thinking we know our children better than they know themselves. When they tell us something about themselves that doesn't fit the picture we have—or want to have—of our child, we may try to deny it. But listen to what your child is trying to tell you—in all likelihood they had been thinking about this for a long time before they decided to share it with you.

## Ask Questions

Language around gender is evolving and the exact same terms can mean different things to different people, so it's important to ask your child what the terms they use mean to them. Asking "What does this word mean to you?" or "What language would you like me to use when referring to your gender?" helps you understand important information about your child and how they see themself, while also letting them know you are curious and wanting to understand who they are.

## If Needed, Ask Forgiveness and Try Again

If you felt knocked off balance, confused, afraid or even angry when your child shared with you about their gender, please know you are not alone and that other parents have felt the same way. If your initial response to your child was negative, poorly received, or simply didn't sufficiently communicate your love and commitment to your child, you can change your approach to one that feels better for you and also supports them. It is never too late to make that shift.

## Get Support for Yourself

It is incredibly important for you to have a place that is safe to learn and explore issues related to gender. Connecting with parents who are going through the same process can be a lifeline and an invaluable resource. Go to a local support group or PFLAG meeting in your area, or an online parent support group if that's not possible. Gender Spectrum and other organizations offer workshops and conferences for parents and other family members where you can learn more about gender and connect with others. You're not alone in this process and you'll gain strength in talking with parents from all walks of life who are also navigating this journey.

(This is adapted from *The Transgender Teen: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals Supporting Transgender and Non-Binary Teens* by Stephanie Brill and Lisa Kenney.)

# FIRST-PERSON STORIES

**Lori Duron, parent of a gender-creative son**

When our son, C.J., was a toddler and started playing with dolls, wearing dresses and drawing himself as a girl, my husband and I became consumed with feelings of confusion, sadness, worry and constant panic to "figure out" our son who seemed to be a girl at heart.

Six years later, C.J.'s penchant for all things pink, glittery and fabulous hasn't changed; but we have—for the better. I wish I could go back in time, give myself a hug and tell myself that things do, in fact, get better.

I'd tell myself to chill out and give things some time. The only way to tell if something is a phase or has some deeper meaning is to wait it out and patiently observe it.

I'd tell myself to search out resources and get educated. Before C.J., I didn't even know the differences between sex, gender and sexuality. This unique parenting journey doesn't have to feel lonely; support, information and a sense of camaraderie are out there waiting to be found.

***"C.J. and our family aren't weird, we're just different and if everybody were the same this world would be a very boring place. We paint nails, braid hair, tap dance and smile big. People like C.J. give the world color. We enjoy the rainbow."***

I'd tell myself to gather a stellar supporting cast. We'd be lost without our family, friends, pediatrician, therapist and child advocate. It takes more than one or two people to healthily launch a differently gendered child into adulthood.

I'd tell myself to show C.J. examples of other kids like him. Before we were lucky enough to be a part of a gender nonconforming playgroup, we read lots of books about kids who are gender nonconforming or different from the norms of society. Our favorites are *The Boy Who Cried Fabulous*, *A Fire Engine for Ruthie*

and anything else by Leslea Newman. Todd Parr books are great, too.

Most of all, I'd tell myself to enjoy the path less traveled. C.J. and our family aren't weird, we're just different and if everybody were the same this world would be a very boring place. We paint nails, braid hair, tap dance and smile big. People like C.J. give the world color. We enjoy the rainbow.

Our family and its support system have evolved over the last several years. We know that we are here to love our child, not change him. He's absolutely free to be who he was created to be while knowing that we love him no matter what.

Parenting is hard as hell. We used to stop every once in a while and dreamily imagine what life would be like if C.J. conformed to traditional gender norms. Now we wouldn't change our experiences or our son for anything in the world. We are blessed beyond comprehension to have a gender-nonconforming son. It's easy to feel blessed when you get what you expect. But can you feel that way and still be thankful when things turn out not as expected? When things are more different than normal, more challenging than easy? Yes, you can. That is what C.J. taught us.

## Don Rogers, parent of a gay son

My wife, Gena, and I have been married 48 years. We live in Texas and have three sons and five grandchildren. Our youngest son, Josh, is gay.

When Josh was 14, he told the youth minister at our church that he thought he was gay. The youth minister called Gena in and said that he did not think Josh was gay but simply going through a phase. They basically shut down any effort by Josh to come out; Gena didn't even tell me about the conversation, and simply ignored it. She told me later that it was incomprehensible to her; she thought it couldn't be true.

For a few years after that, Josh tried to be straight. He dated girls and tried his best to be someone he wasn't. Then at the age of 19, he came out to Gena and me.

I was devastated. I was a fourth-generation Southern Baptist and a fourth-generation Texan. Everything I had known, everything I had been taught, was that homosexuality was a sin and could not be accepted. This was something that had been ingrained in me, and something I had never questioned. So Josh's declaration that he was gay shook the very foundation of my beliefs. It took a long time for us to assimilate what had happened, and each of us dealt with it in our own way.

My way was to turn to research and books. I was a schoolteacher, having

taught for 34 years. So I began reading everything I could, starting with the history of Christianity and homosexuality in the church. I researched online, and I read books from both perspectives. Ultimately, I realized that I could reconcile my son and my faith. I came to see that Josh was born this way, and he cannot change who he is. Understanding this changed me completely, and it changed the way I look at other people.

***"Ultimately, I realized that I could reconcile my son and my faith… Understanding this changed me completely, and it changed the way I look at other people."***

It probably took longer for Gena to accept that Josh was gay. She grieved hard. She never said "Leave" or "I do not love you," but it was incredibly difficult for her. She prayed for a miracle—for God to change Josh so he would not think he was gay anymore.

But then she realized her grieving was about her. It was about her grief that Josh would not bring home a daughter-in-law or give her grandchildren. She prayed a lot, and she started to see that God couldn't change Josh, but he could change her heart. She could love Josh for who he is and not for whom she wanted him to be.

Looking back, I am stunned by Josh's courage. He had a difficult time growing up because kids bullied him. I suppose we should have known that Josh was gay, but for Gena and me, that was not something we even considered. We were confirmed Southern Baptists, I served as a deacon in a very large church, and Josh himself was raised in that church. But Josh had the courage to be honest with himself about who he is.

For the past 10 years, Josh has been in a committed relationship with David. When we were first introduced to David, Gena was still grieving and struggling to accept that her son was gay. She still worries that she was standoffish to David for about a year, maybe more. But now, 10 years later, we both love David and consider him every bit as part of our family. We are so proud of the two of them, both as individuals and as a couple.

In July of last year, Josh and David were married. They first had a ceremony in Fort Worth on a Saturday night, celebrating with their families and friends. It was an absolutely beautiful ceremony and reception — we never felt more love than we did that night. Josh surprised David by singing "When You Say You Love Me." There was not a dry eye in the place.

After the ceremony, Josh and David flew to New York to make

their marriage legal the following Monday, as this was before marriage equality became the law of the land. It was painful to us that Josh and David were not able to lawfully marry in their home state where they were both born and raised, but we are thrilled that other families will now not have to endure that pain.

## Amelia, mother of a young gay son

Parenting young LGBTQ+ kids is hard. But mostly, that's because parenting is really hard. (Anyone who claims it is easy is lying or selling something.)

I love my kid. I love every single little part of him. I love that he's such a fierce protector and guardian of his younger brothers. I love that he thinks having bangs that flop into his face is the absolute height of fashion. I love how excited he got when he found out that the "Toads" in Nintendo have no gender. I love how he seems incapable of putting his laundry into the hamper. (Okay, I don't really love that, but it comes with the package.) And I love that he is gay. Because I am his mom, and I love all the things that make up who he is, and this is part of him.

There is nothing wrong with my son. There is nothing wrong with being gay. But his orientation is something that causes me concern. I don't want to change my kid, or for him to be anything other than himself. My concern stems from how the rest of the world is going to react to him, my out-and-proud elementary school student, who has never seen the need for a closet.

So, as the parent of this incredible kid, who I love to distraction, I could use some help. I need help knowing how to be the best mom for him. I need help knowing how to talk to schools about how they are going to protect and celebrate my son for who he is. I need help knowing how to talk to other parents, who think orientation is just about sex acts, and get freaked out when my prepubescent kid tells them he is gay. I need help knowing how to talk to and deal with grandparents and homophobic relatives about my kid. I need help so I can support him and love him and celebrate him for the incredible, rapidly growing kiddo he is. I need this help so that he can grow up into a confident, loving, and wonderful adult gay man. And there is no manual for this. There is no parenting book called, "My Seven Year Old is Gay. Now What?"

Parents like me—parents who love their kids, parents who see their child's orientation as something to celebrate, but who also know that the world is a scary place—need PFLAG, too, because we want to be the best parents we can be… we need PFLAG's help to figure out how to do that.

# PFLAG NATIONAL GLOSSARY OF TERMS

*Please note: This is a significantly abbreviated version of the PFLAG National Glossary on our website at **pflag.org/glossary**; we update the longer, online version with more frequency.*

The power of language to shape our perceptions of other people is immense. Precise use of terms in regards to gender and sexual orientation can have a significant impact on demystifying many of the misperceptions associated with these concepts. However, the vocabulary of both continues to evolve, and there is not universal agreement about the definitions of many terms. A good best practice is to ask people what the words they use to describe themselves mean for them and how they would like you to use language when talking with or about them.

This glossary includes terms that concern areas of sensitivity for some LGBTQ+ people. When discussing any element of this glossary with others, particularly LGBTQ+ people, use caution to prevent any harm that may arise from the discussion. Be sensitive when discussing some of these terms, as these words describe personal experiences that should not be broached lightly. Do not take any definition as legal or medical counsel.

**Ally**: A term relating generally to individuals who support marginalized groups. In the LGBTQ+ community, this term describes someone who is supportive of LGBTQ+ individuals and the community, either personally or as an advocate. Allies include both heterosexual and cisgender people who advocate for equality in partnership with LGBTQ+ people, as well as people within the LGBTQ+ community who advocate for others in the community. "Ally" is not an identity; allyship is an ongoing process of learning that includes action.

**Aromantic**: Sometimes abbreviated as *aro* (pronounced ā-row), the term refers to an individual who does not experience romantic attraction. Aromantic people exist on a spectrum of romantic attraction and can use terms such as *gray aromantic* or *grayromantic* to describe their place within that spectrum. Aromantic people can experience sexual attraction.

**Asexual**: Sometimes abbreviated as *ace*, the term refers to an individual who does not experience sexual attraction. Each asexual person

experiences relationships, attraction, and arousal differently. Asexuality is distinct from chosen behavior such as celibacy or sexual abstinence; asexuality is a sexual orientation that does not necessarily entail specific chosen behaviors. Asexual people exist on a spectrum of sexual attraction and can use terms such as *gray asexual* or *gray ace* to describe themselves.

**Assigned Sex**: The sex assigned to an infant at birth based on the child's visible sex organs, including genitalia and other physical characteristics.

**Assumed Gender**: The gender assumed about an individual, based on their assigned sex as well as apparent societal gender markers and expectations, such as physical attributes and expressed characteristics. Examples of assuming a person's gender include using pronouns for a person before learning what pronouns they use, or referring to a person as a man or a woman without knowing their gender.

**Binary**: Refers to someone who fits into the gender binary (see *Gender Binary*).

**Biological Sex**: Refers to anatomical, physiological, genetic, or physical attributes that determine if a person is male, female, or intersex. These include both primary and secondary sex characteristics, including genitalia, gonads, hormone levels, hormone receptors, chromosomes, and genes. Often also referred to as *sex*, *physical sex*, *anatomical sex*, or *sex assigned at birth*. Biological sex is often conflated or interchanged with *gender*, which is more societal than biological, and involves personal identity factors.

**Bisexual**: Commonly referred to as *bi* or *bi+*. According to bi+ educator and advocate Robyn Ochs, the term refers to a person who acknowledges in themselves the potential to be attracted—romantically, emotionally and/or sexually—to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree. The "bi" in bisexual can refer to attraction to genders similar to and different from one's own. People who identify as bisexual need not have had equal sexual or romantic experience—or equal levels of attraction—with people across genders, nor any experience at all; attraction and self-identification determines orientation.

**Cisgender** (pronounced sis-gender): A term used to refer to an individual whose gender identity (see *Gender Identity*) aligns with the one associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. The prefix cis- comes from the Latin word for "on the same side as." People who are both cisgender and heterosexual are sometimes referred to as *cishet* (pronounced "cis-het") individuals. The term cisgender is not a slur. People who are not trans should avoid calling themselves "normal" and instead refer to themselves as *cisgender* or *cis*.

**Closeted**: Describes a person who is not open about their sexual

orientation or gender identity. A closeted person may be referred to as being "in the closet." There are many degrees to being out/closeted; closeted individuals may be out (see *Out*) to just themselves, close friends, or to their larger network, or not publically open about their status as LGBTQ+ people.

**Coming Out**: For LGBTQ+ people, coming out is the process of self-identifying and self-acceptance that entails the sharing of their identity with others. Sometimes referred to as disclosing (see *Disclosure*). Individuals often recognize their sexual orientation and/or gender identity within themselves first, and then might choose to reveal it to others. There are many different degrees of being out, and coming out is a lifelong process. Coming out can be an incredibly personal and transformative experience. It is critical to respect where each person is within their process of self-identification, and it is up to each person, individually, to decide if and when and to whom to come out or disclose.

**Deadnaming**: Occurs when an individual, intentionally or not, refers to the name that a transgender individual used at a different time in their life. Avoid this practice, as it can cause trauma, stress, embarrassment, and even danger. Some may prefer the terms *birth name*, *given name*, or *old name*.

**Disclosure**: A word that some people use to describe the act or process of revealing one's transgender or nonbinary identity to another person in a specific instance. Some find the term offensive, implying the need to disclose something shameful, and prefer to use the term *coming out*, whereas others find the term *coming out* offensive, and prefer to use disclosure.

**Gay**: A term used to describe people who are emotionally, romantically, and/or physically attracted to people of the same gender (e.g., gay man, gay people). In contemporary contexts, *lesbian* is often a preferred term for women, though many women use the term *gay* to describe themselves. People who are gay need not have had any sexual experience. Attraction and self-identification determines sexual orientation, not the gender or sexual orientation of one's partner. The term should not be used as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ people, e.g. "the gay community," because it excludes other sexual orientations and genders. Avoid using gay in a disparaging manner, e.g. "that's so gay," as a synonym for bad.

**Gender**: Broadly, gender is a set of socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate.

**Gender Binary**: The disproven concept that there are only two genders and that everyone must be one or the other. Also often misused to assert that gender is biologically determined. This concept also reinforces the idea that men and women are opposites and have different roles in society.

**Gender Expression**: The manner in which a person communicates about gender to others through external means such as clothing, appearance, or mannerisms. This communication may be conscious or subconscious and may or may not reflect their gender identity or sexual orientation. While most people's understandings of gender expressions relate to masculinity and femininity, there are countless combinations that may incorporate both masculine and feminine expressions—or neither—through androgynous expressions. An individual's gender expression does not automatically imply their gender identity. All people have gender expressions.

**Gender Identity**: A person's deeply held core sense of self in relation to gender (see *Gender*). Gender identity does not always correspond to biological sex. People become aware of their gender identity at many different stages of life, from as early as 18 months and into adulthood. According to Gender Spectrum, one study showed that "... the average age of self-realization for the child that they were transgender or non-binary was 7.9 years old, but the average age when they disclosed their understanding of their gender was 15.5 years old." Gender identity is a separate concept from sexuality (see *Sexual Orientation*) and gender expression (see *Gender Expression*).

**Gender Nonconforming (GNC)**: A term for those who do not follow gender stereotypes, or who expand ideas of gender expression or gender identity. Though fairly uncommon, some people view the term as derogatory, so they may use other terms including *gender expansive*, *differently gendered*, *gender creative*, *gender variant*, *genderqueer*, *nonbinary*, *agender*, *genderfluid*, *gender neutral*, *bigender*, *androgynous*, or *gender diverse*. It is important to respect and use the terms people use for themselves, regardless of any prior associations or ideas about those terms.

**Genderqueer**: Refers to individuals who blur preconceived boundaries of gender in relation to the gender binary; they can also reject commonly held ideas of static gender identities. Sometimes used as an umbrella term in much the same way that the term *queer* is used, but only refers to gender, and thus should only be used when self-identifying or quoting someone who uses the term *genderqueer* for themselves.

**Gender Spectrum**: The concept that gender exists beyond a simple man/woman binary model (see *Gender Binary*), but instead exists on a continuum. Some people fall towards more masculine or feminine aspects, some people move fluidly along the spectrum, and some exist off the spectrum entirely.

**Homosexual**: An older term to describe gay, lesbian, or queer people which may be offensive depending on the speaker. Originally used as a scientific or clinical term to describe LGBTQ+ people, the word has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community and may be colloquially used by an LGBTQ+ person to

reference themselves or another member of the community. Non-LGBTQ+ people should avoid using the term.

**Intersex**: Intersex is the current term used to refer to people who are biologically between the medically expected definitions of male and female. This can be through variations in hormones, chromosomes, internal or external genitalia, or any combination of any or all primary and/or secondary sex characteristics. While many intersex people are noticed as intersex at birth, many are not. As intersex is about biological sex, it is distinct from gender identity and sexual orientation. An intersex person can be of any gender identity and can also be of any sexual orientation and any romantic orientation. The Intersex Society of North America opposes the practice of genital mutilation on infants and children who are intersex, as does PFLAG National. Formerly, the medical terms *hermaphrodite* and *pseudohermaphrodite* were used; these terms are now considered neither acceptable nor scientifically accurate.

**Lesbian**: Refers to a woman who is emotionally, romantically, and/or physically attracted to other women. People who are lesbians need not have had any sexual experience: Attraction and self-identification determines orientation, not the gender or sexual orientation of one's partner.

**LGBTQ+**: An acronym that collectively refers to individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, sometimes stated as *LGBT* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) or, historically, *GLBT* (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender). The addition of the Q for *queer* is a more recently preferred version of the acronym as cultural opinions of the term *queer* focus increasingly on its positive, reclaimed definition (see *Queer*). The Q can also stand for questioning, referring to those who are still exploring their own sexuality and/or gender. Many organizations now also include the letter "I" for *Intersex*. The "+" represents those who are part of the community, but for whom *LGBTQ+* does not accurately capture or reflect their identity.

**Lifestyle**: A previously used and offensive term to describe LGBTQ+ people's sexual orientation and gender expression/identity as a "choice."

**Misgender**: To refer to someone using a word—especially a pronoun or form of address—which does not correctly reflect their gender. This may be unintentional and without ill intent or can be a maliciously employed expression of bias. Regardless of intent, misgendering has a harmful impact.

**Nonbinary**: Refers to people who do not subscribe to the gender binary. They might exist between or beyond the man-woman binary. Some use the term exclusively, while others may use it interchangeably with terms like *genderqueer* (see *Genderqueer*), *gender nonconforming* (see *Gender Nonconforming*), *gender diverse*, or *gender expansive*. It can also be combined with other descriptors e.g. nonbinary woman. Language

is imperfect, so it's important to trust and respect the words that nonbinary people use to describe their genders and experiences. Nonbinary people may understand their identity as falling under the transgender umbrella, and may thus be transgender as well. Sometimes abbreviated as *NB* or *enby*, the term *NB* has historically been used to mean non-Black, so those referring to non-binary people should avoid using *NB*.

**Out**: A term which describes people who openly self-identify as LGBTQ+ in their private, public, and/or professional lives. There are many states of being out; individuals can be out only to themselves, to close friends, or to everyone.

**Outing**: The deliberate or accidental sharing of another person's sexual orientation or gender identity without their explicit consent. Outing is disrespectful and presents a danger for many LGBTQ+ individuals.

**Passing**: With sexuality, the act of presenting as straight. With gender, the act of presenting as cisgender or gender-typical, which is generally accomplished through conforming to gender roles. People may try to pass in anti-LGBTQ+ environments to ensure their safety. People who pass as straight or cisgender have the choice to either talk about their LGBTQ+ experience or to "fit in" to a cis- and hetero-normative world. Passing is not required for LGBTQ+ people to deserve respect and love.

**Pansexual**: Refers to a person whose emotional, romantic and/or physical attraction is to people inclusive of all genders. People who are pansexual need not have had any sexual experience: It is the attraction and self-identification that determine the orientation. Pansexuality and bisexuality are different; pansexuality includes all genders equally, whereas bisexuality can favor some genders over others (see *Bisexual*).

**Pronouns**: The words used to refer to a person other than their name. Common pronouns are *they/them*, *he/him*, and *she/her*. Neopronouns are pronouns created to be specifically gender-neutral including *xe/xem*, *ze/zir* and *fae/faer*. Pronouns are sometimes called *Personal Gender Pronouns*, or *PGPs*. For those who use pronouns—and not all people do—they are not preferred, they are essential.

**Queer**: A term used by some LGBTQ+ people to describe themselves and/or their community. Reclaimed from its earlier negative use—and valued by some for its defiance—the term is also considered by some to be inclusive of the entire community, and by others who find it to be an appropriate term to describe their more fluid identities. Traditionally a negative or pejorative term for people who are LGBTQ+, some people within the community dislike the term. Due to its varying meanings, use this word only when self-identifying or quoting someone who self-identifies as queer (i.e. "My cousin identifies as queer" or "My cousin is a queer person").

**Questioning**: Describes those who are in a process of discovery and exploration about their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or a combination thereof. Questioning people can be of any age, so for many reasons, this may happen later in life. Questioning is a profoundly important process, and one that does not imply that someone is choosing to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer.

**Sexual Orientation**: Emotional, romantic, or sexual feelings toward other people or no people (see *Asexual*). While sexual activity involves the choices one makes regarding behavior, one's sexual activity does not define one's sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is part of the human condition, and all people have one. Typically, it is attraction that helps determine orientation.

**Stealth**: A term used to describe transgender or gender-nonconforming individuals who do not disclose their gender identity in their public or private lives (or certain aspects of their public and private lives). For example, a person might go stealth in a job interview. Increasingly considered offensive by some, as to them it implies an element of deception. Some use the phrase maintaining privacy instead, while others use both terms interchangeably. Additionally, *passing* is an alternative term that, for some, has fewer negative connotations.

**Transgender**: Often shortened to trans, from the Latin prefix for "on a different side as." A term describing a person's gender identity that does not necessarily match their assigned sex at birth. Transgender people may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically to match their gender identity. This word is also used as an umbrella term to describe groups of people who transcend conventional expectations of gender identity or expression—such groups include, but are not limited to, people who identify as transsexual, genderqueer, gender variant, gender diverse, and androgynous.

**Transition**: A term used to refer to the process—social, legal, and/or medical—one goes through to affirm one's gender identity. This might, but does not always, include taking hormones; having surgeries; and changing names, pronouns, identification documents, and more. Many individuals choose not to or are unable to transition for a wide range of reasons both within and beyond their control. The validity of an individual's gender identity does not depend on any social, legal, and/or medical transition; the self-identification itself is what validates the gender identity.

We encourage you to seek out help immediately if you or a loved one needs it, especially if you or they have thought about self-harm in any way.

## Helplines

**The Trevor Project (for LGBTQ+ youth up to age 24):**
(866) 488-7386
Text START to 678-678
Online chat: hetrevorproject.org/get-help/

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:**
(800) 273-8255

**Crisis Text Line:**
Text START to 741-741

**Trans Lifeline:**
(877) 565-8860

**The National Runaway Safeline:**
(800) RUNAWAY (800-786-2929)

**National AIDS Hotline:**
(800) 342-AIDS
(800) 344-7432 (Spanish)
(800) 243-7889 (TDD)

**U.S. National Domestic Violence Hotline:**
(800) 799-7233 (English and Spanish)
(800) 787-3224 (TTY)

**Rape Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN):**
(800) 656-HOPE
(800) 810-7440 (TTY)


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