

Basic Facts About Being LGBTQ

Big Brothers and Big Sisters work with an array of young people. Some young people may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning/queer (“LGBTQ”). As a mentor, it is your role to serve these youth with the same compassion and competence as you would a heterosexual youth. The first step toward competent and compassionate care is to understand the basic facts about LGBTQ people and the issues they face.

How Many People Are LGBTQ?

Approximately 5%–10% of the general population is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

LGBTQ adolescents are estimated to make up a disproportionate percentage of the homeless population, as well as the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. This is due, in large part, to the disapproval and overt rejection they are more likely to face from their families.

At What Age Do People Know They Are LGBTQ?

Many young people report being aware of their orientation as very young children, well before their first sexual experience. Others may not be aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity until they are older adults. Never assume that a person is either “too young” or “too old” to come out as LGBTQ.



What Does “LGBTQ” Mean?

In recent years it has become common to use the string of letters “LGBTQ” to be inclusive of all individuals and communities who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender or who are questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. There is no right or wrong way to order the letters (e.g., GLBTQ), and some people add additional letters, including “I” for intersex, “Q” for queer, and “A” for non-LGBTQ allies (e.g., LGBTQQIA). The following are some basic descriptions for these terms. Each individual may define their sexual orientation and gender identity differently, so please know this is not an exhaustive list.

Lesbian



A woman who is emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually attracted to other **women**.

Gay

A man or woman who is emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually attracted to the **same gender**; some use the term only to identify **gay men**. The word **gay** is preferred over the word **homosexual**, which has clinical overtones that some people find offensive.



Bisexual

Refers to a man or woman who is emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually attracted to **different genders**. Sometimes the attraction to each gender is equal, while for others there may be a preference for one gender over the other. Some individuals who are attracted to genders in addition to male and female refer to themselves as pansexual.



Transgender

An umbrella term used to describe a person whose **gender differs** from the gender traditionally associated with their **assigned sex at birth**. Transgender people may be **transsexual**, choosing to transition from one gender to another gender, or they may be **gender non-conforming**.

Transgender people may identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning.



Questioning

Refers to a person, often an adolescent, who has **questions** about his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. Some questioning people eventually come out as LGBT; some don't.



Queer

A term that is **inclusive** of people who are **not heterosexual**. Often used interchangeably with **LGBT**. Be mindful that the term may carry negative or derogatory connotations for some people; however, many younger people are comfortable using the term.

Intersex

Refers to persons who were born with **chromosomal and/or reproductive** differences.

They may have an extra or missing chromosome, have some elements of both male and female reproductive systems (for example, one testicle and one ovary), or have genitals that do not appear clearly as male or female at birth.

Ally

Person and/or institution that, while not a member of the sexual minority community, is **supportive** of those who are members of the sexual minority community.



How Will I Know If Someone Is LGBTQ?

Not all young people self-identify as such, and many conceal that they are LGBTQ out of concern for their safety or privacy. Conversely, some people who are perceived by others to be LGBTQ in fact are not. The only certain way to know if someone is LGBTQ is **if they tell you**. Until then, never rely on myths and stereotypes about LGBTQ people to make assumptions about a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

However, if you work with a young person who is being harassed and mistreated because he or she is perceived by others to be LGBTQ, it's imperative that you take immediate action **without** first attempting to determine if the youth is in fact LGBTQ. The goal is to be open and accepting of all people and to signal to those who may be LGBTQ that you are a safe person who will help protect them from discrimination and mistreatment and who will advocate for their needs.



Homosexuality Is Not a Mental Illness

Homosexuality is not a mental or physical disorder, and the mental health professions do not regard a same-sex orientation as harmful, undesirable, or requiring intervention or prevention. It's a core part of a person's identity, just as a heterosexual orientation is for a heterosexual person.

There was a time in this country when homosexuality mistakenly was classified as a mental illness. Extensive empirical research came to show that this assumption was wrong. Accordingly, in 1973 the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as an illness and removed it from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). All major mental health professional organizations, including the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Association of Social Workers, have long recognized that being lesbian or gay inherently poses no obstacle to leading a happy, healthy, and productive life, and that the vast majority of lesbian and gay people function well in the full array of social institutions and interpersonal relationships.



Coming Out

What Is Coming Out?

Coming out is the process of **self-identifying** as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ) or **disclosing** this self-identification to others.

Opening up to the possibility that your Little or loved one may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or even questioning means opening up to the idea that you're on a path that's your own. As an important factor in your youth's life it is important to be sensitive and appreciative of the courage it takes to come out. And if your youth does come, out it is equally important to expand your knowledge of LGBTQ issues as well as community resources. For many youth, coming out means familial rejection as well as social isolation; your support and advocacy is needed in their lives.

Finally, remember: coming out is a courageous act that takes bravery and also that coming out and living openly is a profoundly liberating experience.



*Developed from Fostering Transitions, a CWLA/Lambda Legal Joint Initiative
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About the LGBTQA Initiative

Members in the community gather and give input as to how **Big Brothers Big Sisters** can effectively recruit, retain, and sustain members of the **LGBTQA community**. In an effort to maximize the positive effects of mentoring and increase recruitment strategies, we seek ways of connecting with LGBTQA communities as allies and advocates.

For more information about BBBS's LGBTQ Initiative, contact **Jesse Gilliam** at jesse.gilliam@bbbsps.org or **206.763.9060 x203**



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