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NATIONAL CENTER FOR LESBIAN RIGHTS

A DVD AND RESOURCE CD

# Breaking the Silence:

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Foster Youth Tell Their Stories

*A Tool for Training Care Providers on Working Effectively with LGBTQ Youth*



## COMMON LGBT TERMS

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities, like other communities facing discrimination, have developed many words to refer to themselves over time. Different LGBT communities may use different words to describe themselves. This glossary provides an overview of some common terms used by many LGBT people, and is meant to be a general guide. It would be impossible to create a glossary that included every potential word people might use to describe themselves, especially since these terms are always evolving. For that reason, you should refer to any person – LGBT or not – using the terms and pronouns they prefer. Please also keep in mind that there are some words which are used within the LGBT community that are okay to use if you're a member of the community, but can sound offensive when someone outside the community uses them.

## USING LGBT TERMINOLOGY

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**Ally:** an individual who is not lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender who is supportive of the LGBT community. Allies challenge homophobic and heterosexist remarks and behaviors, and are willing to explore and understand those forms of bias within themselves.

**Androgynous:** having or displaying characteristics, feelings, or behaviors that are both feminine and masculine.

**Bisexual:** a person who is emotionally, romantically, and sexually attracted to both men and women.

**Butch:** a term some individuals use to describe their masculine gender identity or expression.

**Coming out:** the process of disclosing one's sexual orientation or gender identity to others. Because most people in our society are presumed to be heterosexual, coming out is not a discrete event, but a lifelong process. Heterosexual family members or allies of LGBT persons also experience "coming out" when they disclose to others that they have friends or relatives who are LGBT.

**Dyke:** a historically derogatory term for a lesbian, bisexual woman, or masculine woman. In some contexts, such as the motorcycle group Dykes on Bikes, the term *dyke* has been reclaimed by some lesbians and bisexuals as a positive identity when used among themselves.

**Faggot/fag:** a historically derogatory term for a gay, bisexual, or effeminate man. Some gay and bisexual men have reclaimed this term as a positive identity when used among themselves.

**Femme:** a term some individuals use to describe their feminine gender identity or expression.

**Gay:** a person whose emotional, romantic, and sexual attractions are primarily for individuals of the same sex, typically in reference to men. In some contexts, still used as a general term for gay men and lesbians.

**Gender expression:** a person's expression of their gender identity (see below), including their characteristics and behaviors such as appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interactions.

**Gender identity:** a person's internal, deeply felt sense of being male or female, or something other or in-between. Everyone has a gender identity.

**Gender non-conforming:** having or being perceived to have gender characteristics and/or behaviors that do not conform to traditional or societal expectations. Gender non-conforming people may or may not identify as LGBT.

**Genderqueer:** a term of self-identification for people who do not identify with the restrictive and binary terms that have traditionally described gender identity (for instance, male or female only). Also see *gender non-conforming*, *queer*, and *transgender*.

**Heterosexism:** a belief system that assumes that all people are heterosexual and that heterosexuality is inherently normal and superior.

**Heterosexual:** a person whose emotional, romantic, and sexual attractions are primarily for individuals of a different sex. Sometimes referred to as straight.

**Homophobia:** literally, “fear of homosexuals,” but in recent decades, broadened as a term for prejudice against LGBT people.

**Homosexual:** a term used to refer to a person based on his or her same-sex sexual orientation, identity, or behavior. Many LGBT people prefer not to use this term—especially as a noun—because of its historically negative use by the medical establishment.

**Intersex:** a term used to refer to an individual born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not conform exclusively to male or female norms in terms of physiological sex (this may include variations of genetics, genital or reproductive structures, or hormones). According to the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA)—an organization that advocates and educates about intersex concerns—about one in every 2,000 children are born intersex. Many intersex people prefer this term to the historically negative term hermaphrodite. An intersex person may or may not identify as LGBTQ.

**In the closet:** keeping one’s sexual orientation or gender identity secret.

**LGBT:** common acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender—persons that despite their differences are often discriminated against in similar ways. Sometimes written to include Q for Questioning and/or Queer, I for Intersex, and/or A for Ally. May also be written as GLBT.

**Lesbian:** a woman whose emotional, romantic, and sexual attractions are primarily for other women.

**Queer:** a historically derogatory term for a gay man, lesbian, or gender-nonconforming person. The term has been widely reclaimed, especially by younger LGBT people, as a positive social and political identity. It is sometimes used as an inclusive, or umbrella, term for all LGBT people. More recently, *queer* has become common as a term of self-identification for people who do not identify with the restrictive and binary terms that have traditionally described sexual orientation (for instance, gay, lesbian, or bisexual only). Some LGBT community members still find *queer* an offensive or problematic term. Also see *genderqueer*.

**Questioning:** an active process in which a person explores their own sexual orientation and/or gender identity and questions the cultural assumptions that they are heterosexual and/or gender conforming. Many LGBT people go through this process before "coming out." Not all people who question their identities end up self-identifying as LGBT.

**Sexual orientation:** a term describing a person's emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction, whether it is for members of the same sex or a different sex. More appropriate than "sexual preference."

**Straight:** see *heterosexual*.

**Stud:** a term that some masculine women use to describe themselves in regards to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Most prevalent in urban youth-of-color communities.

**Transgender:** an umbrella term that can be used to describe people whose gender expression is non-conforming and/or whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex at birth. This term can include transsexuals, genderqueers, cross-dressers, and others whose gender expression varies from traditional gender norms.

**Transition:** The time period when a transgender person starts living as the gender they identify as. Often includes a change in style of dress, selection of new name, a request that people use the correct pronoun, and possibly hormone therapy and/or surgery.

**Transsexual:** a term for someone who transitions from one physical sex to another in order to bring their body more in line with their innate sense of their gender identity. It includes those who were born male but whose gender identity is female, and those who were born female but whose gender identity is male, as well as people who may not clearly identify as either male or female. Transsexual people have the same range of gender identities and gender expression as non-transsexual people. Many transsexual people refer to themselves as transgender.

# KEY CONCEPTS FOR UNDERSTANDING GENDER IDENTITY & SEXUAL ORIENTATION

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When talking about issues of gender identity and sexual orientation, it's useful to distinguish among the following four concepts: sex/gender, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation.

Many people assume that a person's sex, gender, and sexual orientation are "either-or" categories that "naturally" match up in a certain way. For example, people who are born with a male body are expected to identify psychologically as male; to act in characteristically masculine ways; and to be attracted exclusively to women. These assumptions are harmful when they are used to negate the existence of LGBT lives and relationships. The most current thinking by reputable scientists, psychologists, sociologists, and cultural experts is that a person's sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation do not automatically and permanently line up in just one way. Contemporary thinkers understand that cultures across history and around the world view gender roles and sexuality in many different ways, and that, within our own contemporary culture, these are more fluid and flexible categories than was once thought. Especially when dealing with young people who are coming to terms with their identities, it is important to avoid forcing youth into rigid labels or binary categories.

## SEX/GENDER

Refers to:	characteristics of male or female, most often based on genital and reproductive anatomy and/or genetic makeup.
Typical binary:	male OR female
Beyond the binary:	intersex, transsexual

## GENDER IDENTITY

Refers to:	the innate and deeply felt sense of one's self as being male, female, or something other or in-between.
Typical binary:	male OR female
Beyond the binary:	transgender, genderqueer

## GENDER EXPRESSION

Refers to:	outward characteristics, social/cultural expectations, and roles that have typically been associated with either male or female persons.
Typical binary:	masculine OR feminine
Beyond the binary:	butch, femme; transgender, genderqueer or non-conforming; queer

## SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Refers to:	primary romantic, sexual, or affectional attraction to people of a particular sex
Typical binary:	gay/lesbian OR heterosexual
Beyond the binary:	bisexual, queer

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**THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR LESBIAN RIGHTS—**

**YOUTH PROJECT** has been advocating for LGBTQ youth in schools, foster care, juvenile justice settings, and the mental health system since 1993. The Project provides direct, free legal information to youth, legal advocates, and activists through a toll-free line; advocates for policies that protect and support LGBTQ youth in these different arenas; and litigates cases that are creating new legal protections for youth in schools, foster care, juvenile justice, and other settings.

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