

Glossary of Terms



The definitions offered here can help when navigating LGBTQ+ identities and working with LGBTQ+ youth. Please remember, however, that best practice is to reflect the language people use to describe themselves, it is never our job to label someone else's identity. Ask youth how they self-identify and ask about language that makes them feel safe. If they choose to avoid self-identifying terms, honor that – doing this will clearly indicate to youth their right to be themselves and to be seen in who they are.

Affirm: To acknowledge or assert as fact; here, to publicly or to openly acknowledge and publicly assert the rights and dignity of LGBTQ+ youth.

Agender: An identity under the umbrella of nonbinary terms. Some agender individuals experience no gender identity, although some experience this as having a gender identity that is neutral.

Ally: A person or organization that actively aligns and uses their resources to support individuals and communities. In this context, someone who is straight and/or cisgender, is committed to the well-being and autonomy of LGBTQ+ youth, and actively works to support them.

Androgynous: A gender expression that consistently has both masculine and feminine elements, or neither (i.e. gender neutral).

Anti-Gay Bias: Hatred of, discrimination against, or aversion to lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people, people perceived to be LGB, and/or those associated with persons who are LGB. Often referred to as "homophobia."

Anti-Transgender Bias: Hatred of, discrimination against, or aversion to transgender or gender variant people, people perceived to be, and/or those associated with persons who are transgender or gender variant. Often referred to as "transphobia."

Asexual: A person who experiences little to no primary romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction. This is the "A" sometimes seen in the LGBTQA+ acronym.

Bigender: A gender identity in which an individual experiences two or more genders. These can be any two+ genders and can be experienced in many different ways.

Binarism: Hatred of, aversion to, and/or discrimination against people whose identities exist outside of the stereotypical SOGIE binaries.

Binary: Consist of, indicating, involving, or exclusive to two.

Bisexual: A person who is attracted to people of two or more genders, not necessarily their own.

Cisgender: An adjective used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth in ways we might traditionally or stereotypically expect. “Cis” meaning “same” in Latin.

Cisgender Privilege: The implicit and explicit privileges that cisgender people experience and exercise. For example, these privileges include the ability to navigate the world (e.g. placement, school, etc.) without fear of verbal abuse, intimidation, or assault. The privileges also frequently include the absence of questions about one’s anatomy (often by strangers) and the lack of frequent misgendering. People with cisgender privilege also experience a presumed “validity” as a man/woman/human and which is not based on how well one “passes” as a man/woman, etc.

Coming Out: The process through which a person acknowledges and explains their SOGIE to themselves and others. Often incorrectly thought of to be a one-time event, this can be a lifelong and sometimes daily process.

Conversion Therapy: Also known as “reparative therapy,” conversion therapy is a range of dangerous and discredited practices that falsely claim to change a person’s SOGIE in order to align with binaries. These practices are unlawful in many jurisdictions, extremely harmful, and have been rejected by every mainstream medical and mental health organization.

Drag Queen/King: Someone who performs another gender for entertainment purposes; folks who do drag may or may not identify as transgender.

Feminine: A term used to describe the socially constructed and culturally specific gender expression (behaviors, dress, etc.) expected of women.

Gay: A term used to describe a person attracted to someone of the same gender. For example: a man who is attracted to another man; this term may also be used by women attracted to other women.

Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA): GSA clubs, or GSAs for short, are student-run organizations that unite LGBTQ+ and allied youth to build community and organize around issues impacting them in their schools and communities. GSAs have evolved beyond their traditional role to serve as safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth in middle schools and high schools, and have emerged as vehicles for deep social change related to racial, gender, and educational justice.

Gender-Affirming Care: Used as an adjective, this describes any form of care that supports and affirms the safety, wellbeing, and permanency of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) youth. In this case, a noun describing the qualified and affirming mental and physical health care a TGNC youth may access as a part of their transition.

Gender Binary: The idea that gender is strictly an either/or option of men who are masculine, or women who are feminine, based on the sex they were assigned at birth, rather than a continuum or spectrum of identities and expressions. The gender binary creates expectations, or gender roles, for everyone about how they should behave, what to wear, who they should be attracted to, etc.

Gender Conforming: An adjective to describe a person whose gender expression is perceived as being consistent with cultural norms expected for that gender identity. For example, according to these norms, boys/men are or should be masculine, and girls/women should be feminine.

Gender Dysphoria: The formal diagnosis in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM V), used by psychologists and physicians to indicate that a person meets the diagnostic criteria to engage in medical transition. In other words, the medical diagnosis for being transgender. This was previously referred to Gender Identity Disorder (GID), which is now considered outdated. The inclusion of Gender Dysphoria as a diagnosis in the DSM V is contentious because it implies that being transgender is a mental illness and upholds a medicalized gatekeeping model. On the other hand, since a formal diagnosis is generally required to receive or provide treatment in the US, it does provide access to gender affirming care for some people who might not otherwise be eligible to receive it.

Gender Expression: A person's gender presentation, comprised of things such as personal style, clothing, hairstyle, makeup (or no makeup), jewelry, vocal inflection, and body language. All people express gender(s) and it is not an indicator of sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex assigned at birth.

Gender Fluid: An individual whose gender identity fluctuates. People who are gender fluid may not operate within socially and culturally expected gender roles.

Gender Identity: One's internal sense of being a man/boy, woman/girl, neither of these, both, or other/additional gender(s). All people have a gender identity.

Gender Neutral: An adjective that describes something (e.g. a space, such as a bathroom, or an item, such as a piece of clothing) that is inclusive all genders. Words can also be gender neutral instead of gender specific (e.g. partner/date vs. boy/girlfriend).

Gender Nonconforming (GNC): An adjective to describe a gender expression which exists outside of the cultural norms of that person's gender identity. For example, a woman/girl whose gender expression is not feminine might describe themselves as gender nonconforming.

Gender Role: Culturally or socially determined sets of attitudes and behaviors that are expected of an individual based on their sex assigned at birth and/or gender identity, and/or perceived sex assigned at birth or gender identity.

Genderqueer (also gender queer): An umbrella term used to describe a gender identity which exists outside of or beyond the binary of man/boy or woman/girl.

Gender Variant: Expressing gender and/or having characteristics that do not conform to the expectations of society and culture. This may also be referred to as gender nonconforming, gender creative, or gender expansive.

Heterosexism: The dominant notion that everyone is heterosexual (or should be) and that heterosexuality is the natural and right way to experience attraction/sexual orientation.

Heterosexual: Feeling romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction to a person(s) of another gender; sometimes referred to as being "straight."

Heterosexual Privilege: The privileges that heterosexual people, or people perceived to be, experience because of heterosexism. Heterosexual privilege carries with it implicit and explicit benefits such as: inherent access to affirming placements; assumed validity of relationship status; and, access to services/providers who are knowledgeable about their identity.

Homosexual: Feeling attraction to a person(s) of the same gender with which one identifies. Although some individuals may identify with this term, it is now a dated term that has negative connotations, is often considered clinical, and/or derogatory.

Identity: What, how, and who one knows oneself to be; a multi-faceted component of self that may evolve throughout one's life span.

In the Closet/Closeted: The suppression of an LGBTQ+ person's SOGIE, which may be by choice, due to erasure, and/or due to fear of bias. Remaining closeted can cause isolation and disempowerment. LGBTQ+ people may be "out" in certain spaces and/or with certain parts of their identity, and closeted in others.

Intersectionality: A term coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, an American lawyer, civil rights advocate and a leading scholar of critical race theory. Intersectionality examines how our various identities including but not limited to race, class, ability, and SOGIE interact and contribute to multiple forms of discrimination and systematic social inequality.

Intersex: A term that describes variations that the medical community decided is not standard to be defined as "male" or "female" due to chromosomal, hormonal, internal reproductive organs, and/or external genitalia. People who are intersex used to be referred to as "hermaphrodite"; however, that term is dated and derogatory.

Lesbian: A term used to describe a woman who is attracted to another woman.

LGBTQ+: An acronym commonly used to refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning people, and the community at large (as in "LGBTQ+ community"). The "+" denotes the many identities which fall outside of SOGIE binaries.

Masculine: A term used to describe the socially constructed and culturally specific gender behaviors expected of men.

Misgender: To refer to another person using the incorrect pronouns and/or name with which they do not use. This could be done intentionally to cause emotional and psychological harm, unintentionally because of assumptions, or accidentally mis-stepping.

Non-binary: A gender identity term used to describe people who understand their gender to exist outside of the gender binary. Some folks who are non-binary consider themselves to be transgender, other people do not.

Oppression: Institutional and systemic devaluing, undermining, marginalizing, and disadvantaging of certain social identities in contrast to the privileged norm; when some people are denied something of value, while others have ready access. Oppression involves the use of power by one or more groups against another to push down, take advantage of, and use systems to make themselves the most powerful and well-off group in a society. Often, this use of power is covered up and is explained as "just the way things are."

Out: Openly acknowledging and disclosing one's LGBTQ+ SOGIE. This may be partial – that is, out to some people and not to others, or in specific settings. Sometimes referred to as being “out of the closet” in reference to “coming out.”

Outing: When someone else accidentally or deliberately reveals another person's LGBTQ+ SOGIE, usually without consent. LGBTQ+ youth are entitled to confidentiality around their SOGIE and self-determination in disclosure. Outing any LGBTQ+ person without their knowledge and consent can be dangerous and cause irreparable harm.

Pansexual: A sexual orientation characterized by the potential to experience attraction to a person regardless of gender identity.

Permanency: A holistic state including but not limited to physical, legal, mental, and emotional safety, stability, and wellbeing for youth. This includes lifelong connections with supportive adults, a sense of community, connection with peers, and access to resources one needs not only to survive but thrive.

Pride: In this context, events and programs in celebration of the ongoing fight for recognition and visibility of LGBTQ+ people. Typically celebrated in June, pride events can be an opportunity to increase feelings of community connectedness.

Pronouns: A pronoun is a word that takes the place of a noun, in this case someone's name. Common pronouns include she/her/hers/ella, he/him/his/ él, and they/them/theirs/ellx. Pronouns are not specific to someone's gender identity or expression. A person's pronouns may change, they may use multiple sets of pronouns, or they may simply use their name.

Queer: A self-identification, sometimes used as an umbrella term, that indicates not fitting cultural norms around SOGIE. Historically, this was a derogatory term used to refer to LGBTQ+ people. It is now a term of empowerment that some LGBTQ+ people are reclaiming and embracing, making it an in-group/out-group word. The “Q” in LGBTQ+ often stands for Queer.

Questioning: A person who is exploring or questioning one or more aspects of their SOGIE. The “Q” in LGBTQ+ sometimes stands for Questioning.

Safe/Brave Space: An inclusive environment where LGBTQ+ youth can relax and express themselves, without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, or unsafe on account of their identities including but not limited to: SOGIE, race/ethnicity, background, age, and/or physical/mental abilities. Creating and maintaining a safe/brave space requires consistent work.

Sex (also referred to Sex Assigned at Birth): In the United States, individuals are assigned “female” or “male” sex at birth, based on a physician or other medical professional’s perception of external anatomy.

SOGIE: An acronym that stands for sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

Sexism: The dominant, historical notion that cisgender men/boys, or those perceived to be, are superior and therefore afforded privileges not inherently afforded to those who are not men.

Sexual Behavior: The physical, intimate acts one may engage in. This is distinct from sexual orientation.

Sexual Orientation: Describes emotional, romantic, and physical feelings of attraction – usually over a period of time; it is distinct from sexual behavior. Some people do not experience primary attraction to anyone. There are many different terms used to describe one’s sexual orientation including but not limited to: straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, questioning, and asexual. All people have a sexual orientation.

Stealth: Describes a transgender person’s decision to keep their sex assigned at birth confidential. Also referred to as “going stealth” or “living in stealth mode.” This is an in-group/out-group word.

Transgender: An adjective used to describe a person whose sex assigned at birth does not align with their gender identity along the SOGIE binaries in a way society might not traditionally expect (e.g. a person assigned female at birth whose gender identity is man).

Transition: A transgender person’s process of aligning their gender expression with their gender identity. Transition can include but is not limited to: coming out to one’s family, friends, and/or providers; use of a different name and pronouns; socially and/or legally transitioning. Some transgender people may also access gender affirming care, which may include hormones and/or surgery. However, not all transgender people can or do undergo medical transition. Transitioning looks different for all people.

Two-Spirit (2S): A term some Indigenous people use to describe their identity possessing qualities or fulfilling multiple roles across SOGIE and spiritual identity. Sometimes seen represented in LGBTQ2S+ as “2S”.

RISE adapted this LGBTQ+ Glossary from the following sources:

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