

# TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD

ABOUT SEXUALITY AND  
GENDER IDENTITY



The Commission acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the various lands throughout Victoria and pays respect to Elders past and present. We support the Treaty process in Victoria and the realisation of self-determination of First Peoples across Australia.

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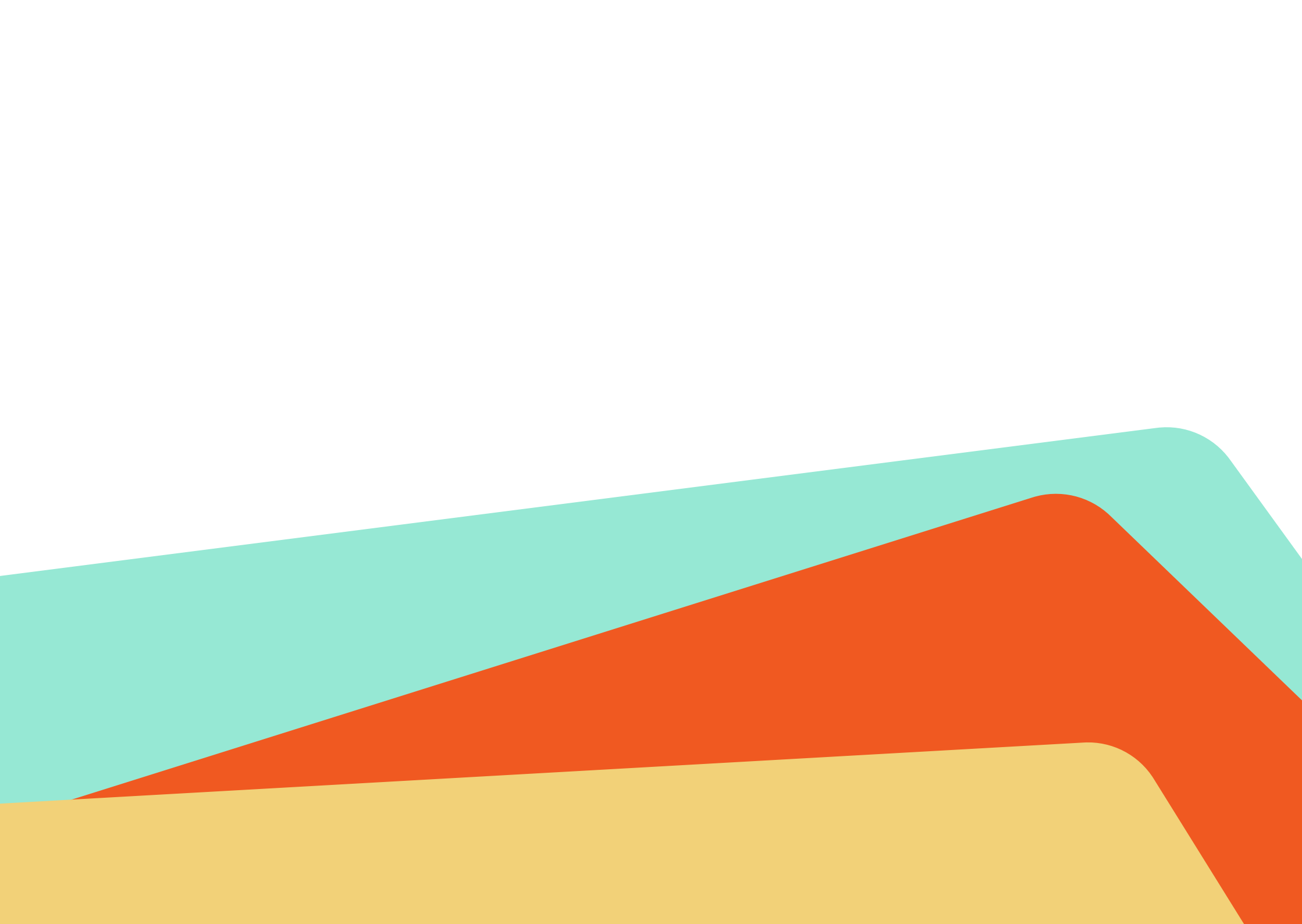


# TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD

## ABOUT SEXUALITY AND GENDER IDENTITY

### Contents

<b>Family support and why it's so important</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>What your child needs from you</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Tips for talking with your child</b>	<b>9</b>
1. Talk with your child	9
2. Listen to your child	10
3. Be mindful about how you react	11
4. Reassure your child. Let them know they are loved	11
<b>Getting support for your child</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Looking after yourself</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>What doesn't work</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>The CSP Act</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Defining gender identity and sexuality</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Useful resources</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Support lines and services</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Why this guide was developed</b>	<b>27</b>



## Family support and why it's so important

When a child is born, families may not think about the possibility that their child might be LGBTQA (these letters stand for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans or gender diverse, Queer and Asexual – you can look them up in the section on *Defining gender identity and sexuality*). They might assume that a child will grow up and have a partner of the opposite gender. They might also assume baby boys will grow up to be men and baby girls will grow up to be women.

But not all young people and adults are attracted to the opposite gender and not everyone identifies with the gender on their birth certificate. LGBTQA people have always existed and there are LGBTQA people in every country and across every culture and faith. In Australia, nearly 1 in 10 teenagers and young people identify as LGBTQA.

Some young LGBTQA people are open about their sexuality and gender identity. But others worry about how their loved ones might react. Sometimes young people feel they need to hide who they are to avoid conflict or being rejected by their family or community. Keeping their gender or their sexuality a secret can have a negative impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing.

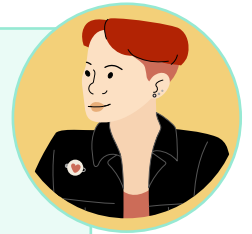
### What your child needs from you

Being accepted and supported by family is one of the most important things for young LGBTQA people's health and happiness. It boosts their wellbeing and can help prevent mental health problems and possible self-harm.

Having supportive and non-judgmental people around them helps all young people to thrive. And when young LGBTQA people are supported by their families and community, they're much more likely to be able to take part in school and community activities and to grow up to live happy, healthy and productive adult lives. Even having just one supportive adult in their lives, like a parent, aunt, uncle or grandparent they can talk to, can make a positive difference.



Having an adult in my life who I could rely on to be there for me and accept me for who I am, that meant everything." **Hamish, 16**



"For years I kept my sexuality a secret from my family, but eventually they figured it out and they have been great about it. Being able to speak freely with them, being my true self instead of pretending to be someone I'm not, is amazing. Knowing I have their support helps me to get through the hard times" **Johanna, 19**

### Tips for talking with your child

If your child is questioning their sexuality or gender identity, or identifies as LGBTQA, you can support your child by talking to them about what they're experiencing and listening to what's worrying them.



#### 1. Talk with your child

Here are tips:

- Set aside time each day to talk with your child. Ask your child open-ended questions and let them know that, if they do want to talk, you're happy to listen. This will help you stay connected with your child<sup>1</sup> and might help them feel more comfortable to come to you in future.
- Talk with your child about how gender and sexuality are portrayed in the media and online. Ask your child how what they see or hear online makes them feel.



- If you want to understand more about your child's gender identity, you could start by asking them how they like to describe themselves, or what makes them feel most like themselves.
- Ask your child questions to help you understand what they're experiencing. For example, you could ask how long they've been feeling this way or whether they've spoken to anyone else about it.
- Ask your child what pronouns and other language they would like you to use. This can help if you're worried that the words you're using are out of date or 'wrong'. And if you make a mistake – for example, if you use the wrong pronoun – apologise to your child and move on.
- Talk with your child about staying safe when they're out in public, especially if this is something you're worried about.

## 2. Listen to your child

If your child tells you that they're LGBTQA, or questioning their sexuality or gender, this is a good thing. It's a sign that they love and trust you. Your child is likely to have been thinking about this for some time and it might have taken them courage to talk to you.

It's important to listen to what your child has to say, even if it differs from your own understanding and beliefs, and you find it difficult.

Culture, religion, and community values play an important role in how families understand gender and sexuality. You can honour these values while also supporting your child's safety and dignity.

Here are tips:

- Give your child your full attention when they're talking. Listening can be more important than offering an opinion or advice.
- Try to listen to what your child has to say without interrupting or passing judgement.



## 3. Be mindful about how you react

There's no right or wrong way to feel if your child tells you they are, or might be, LGBTQA. You may feel relieved your child has opened up to you, especially if you've suspected it for a while.

Or the news may be unexpected and come as a bit of a shock. You might feel a range of emotions<sup>1</sup> like confusion, sadness, worry, or relief and that's OK.

How you react matters. Your child will be watching very closely for your reaction. It's important to respond to your child in a way that's sensitive and supportive and show your child that you love and value them.

Here are tips:

- Take a breath! If you're feeling strong emotions, it may be best to wait until you feel calm before continuing the conversation. Let your child know you want to talk and set a time.
- Your first response could be simply to thank your child for sharing. You might say, 'I'm really pleased that you've told me about this'.
- If you're feeling really worried, confused or upset, it's a good idea to work through these emotions with another adult, instead of talking about this in front of your child.

## 4. Reassure your child. Let them know they are loved

Sexuality and gender can change. Exploring sexuality and gender is a personal journey, and your child may still be discovering what feels right for them. One of the most supportive things you can do is help your child to feel safe to explore who they are.





There are many ways you can express support and show your child that you love them, even if you are confused or worried about them being LGBTQA.

Here are tips:

- Let your child know you're there for them – for example, you might say, 'I'm here for you and I will support you no matter what'. This could mean the world to your child and help them to feel safe.
- Ask your child what they need you to do to help them feel loved and supported. This shows your child that you care.
- Remind your child that you love them unconditionally. You might need to do this several times. This can help reassure your child, because young LGBTQA people often worry that they'll be rejected by their friends or family.

**"The best advice I got was to make sure my child knew it was OK to talk to me about how they were feeling. To let them know that I was there for them and would support them no matter what." (Meredith - parent)**



## Getting support for your child

### 1. Get support for bullying

Sometimes LGBTQA people are bullied or treated badly because others have a problem with people having a different sexuality or gender. This is never OK.

Bullying is serious. If your child is being bullied, they need support at home and also where the bullying is happening. Your child needs to know that you'll work with their school and other relevant organisations to stop it from happening.

Signs of bullying and harassment include physical injuries, anxiety and sadness.

If you're worried your child is being bullied, talk with them about what's going on. Let them know it's not their fault – for example, 'You deserve to be treated with respect no matter what'.

You can read more about how to support your child and if they're being bullied, and how to work with their school here<sup>1</sup>.



### 2. Get support if your child is distressed

Being LGBTQA is not a mental illness. But LGBTQA young people can experience mental health problems like anxiety<sup>2</sup>, depression<sup>3</sup> and self-harming<sup>4</sup>. This is usually because other people have treated them badly.

Sometimes young people might need additional support. Talking to your GP is a good place to start if your child is having mental health problems. Your GP can link you with services in your area that can help your child.

Your child might also find it helpful to talk with other LGBTQA young people. Let your child know that there are free helplines for young people<sup>5</sup>.



## Looking after yourself

Parents and family members need support too. Raising children is a big and important job. It's OK to feel worried, sad or confused and to not know all the answers. You are not alone and there are many supports available<sup>1</sup>.

- Reach out to the people you have in your life who are supportive and let them know if you're not doing well or just need to talk.
- Connect with other parents of LGBTQA young people – for example, you could contact a parent support group.
- Seek professional advice if you're finding things really hard. You could start by making an appointment with your GP. They can refer you to a mental health professional like a psychologist or a local counsellor.
- Be kind to yourself. Take some time out just for you, to do the things that help you feel well and supported. And acknowledge the efforts you're making to support your child.



1



"To be honest, I was pretty upset when I found out. I felt like everything I knew about parenting was no longer valid. Talking to a psychologist really helped. I could say out loud the things I knew that I shouldn't say in front of my child, but really needed to work through." **(Yasmin – parent)**

## What doesn't work

Trying to hide or change your child's sexuality or gender doesn't work.

It's not possible to stop someone from being LGBTQA. People who are LGBTQA aren't sick or broken and don't need to be fixed. LGBTQA people are whole, capable, and deserving of dignity, just as they are. Trying to change who they are can harm your child's mental health and damage the trust in your relationship.

Things that can harm your child include:

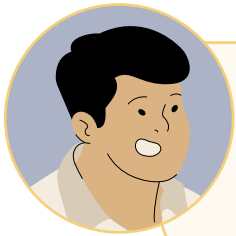
- telling your child that they're a bad person or they're sick because of their gender identity or sexuality
- punishing your child because they're LGBTQA
- stopping your child from accessing LGBTQA support services
- praying with your child for them to stop being LGBTQA
- sending your child to programs or therapies to try to convince them that they can stop being LGBTQA.

As a parent you have the right under the law to share your personal beliefs and values with your child, including your beliefs around sexuality and gender. There is no law in Australia that prevents you from sharing what's important to you with your child. However, there are laws against doing things that could harm your child.





Across many states in Australia, trying to change or suppress a person's sexuality or gender identity is illegal. This means that, in some Australian states, it may be against the law for a parent, or anyone else, to send their child to any kind of program, therapy or counselling designed to stop them from being LGBTQA – even if their child agrees or asks to go. In some states, it can also be against the law to place pressure on a child to change or hide their sexuality or gender. Practices like these can be harmful to the young person.



**“You can’t change who they are. You can’t stop your child from being trans or gay. If you want to protect them from harm, then the best thing you can do is accept them for being who they are.” (Paul – parent)**

### **The Victorian *Change & Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Act***



Change and suppression practices are deeply harmful practices which try to change or hide an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. They are sometimes referred to as conversion practices or 'conversion therapy'.

They can include teachings, counselling, spiritual care activities, or other psychological or medical interventions based on the idea that there is something wrong with being LGBTQA.

In Victoria, the *Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Act 2021 (CSP Act)*<sup>1</sup> outlines the situations in which these practices may be banned, depending on the circumstances.

They are banned because we now know they don't work and are deeply harmful. Trying to change or suppress a person's sexuality or gender identity can lead to long-term mental health issues and even suicide.

If your child, or someone you know, is the target of change or suppression practices, you can get more information or report this to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission<sup>2</sup>. If someone has been injured because of these practices, you can also report it to the Victorian Police<sup>3</sup>.

To find out more about this law, please visit the VEOHRC website<sup>1</sup>.



## Defining gender identity and sexuality

Not all young people and adults are attracted to the opposite sex and not everyone identifies with the gender on their birth certificate. LGBTQA people have always existed and there are LGBTQA people in every country and across every culture and faith.

Learning the language that young people use to talk about sexuality and gender can help you talk with your child about these topics.

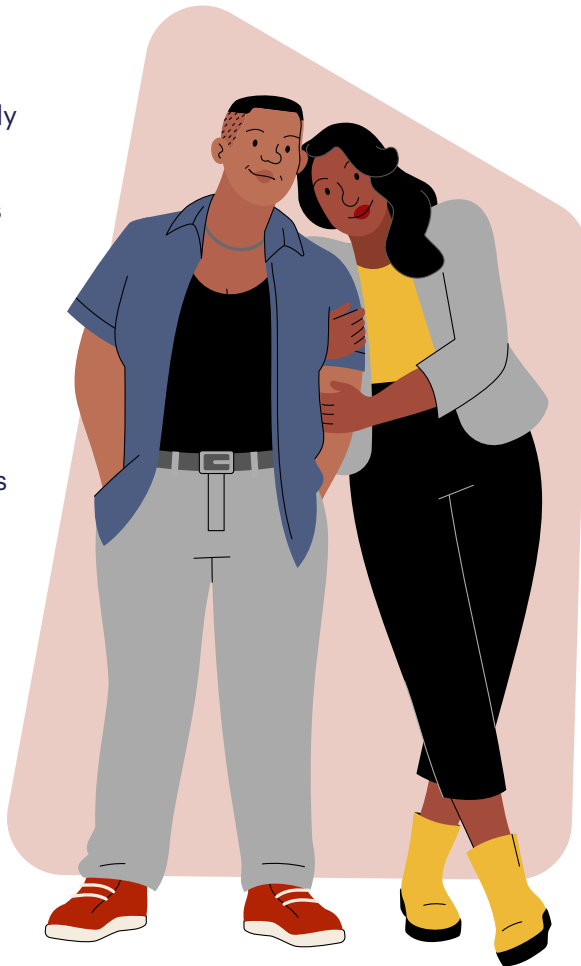
Let's take a closer look at some of the main ideas and terms, and what they mean.

### Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation is about who people are romantically or sexually attracted to.

There are natural variations in human sexuality and lots of different labels are used to describe these. Here are some of the more common ones:

- **Heterosexual, 'straight':** these terms refer to people who are romantically or sexually attracted to people of a different gender from their own – for example, men who are attracted to women and women who are attracted to men.



- **Homosexual, lesbian, gay:** these terms refer to people who are romantically or sexually attracted to the same gender as themselves. 'Gay' is usually used to describe people who identify as men and are sexually or romantically attracted to other people who identify as men. 'Lesbian' is usually used to describe people who identify as women and are sexually or romantically attracted to other people who identify as women.
- **Bisexual, pansexual:** these terms refer to people who are romantically or sexually attracted to more than one gender. Bisexual people are attracted to both men and women. Pansexual people are attracted to people regardless of their gender.
- **Asexual, ace:** these terms refer to people who don't feel sexual attraction to others but might still feel romantically attracted to them. Asexual people can be any gender or sexual orientation.
- **Queer:** this is an umbrella term for diverse genders or sexualities, or a label some people use for themselves instead of saying gay, lesbian or bisexual.

### Gender

When people refer to someone's 'sex', they're usually referring to the anatomical or biological aspects of a person. Gender is different from someone's biological sex. It's also different from their sexual orientation. Gender is about people's sense of self and identity, and how they present themselves to the world.



There are lots of terms used to describe gender, including:

- **Transgender, trans:** these terms are used when someone's gender is different to the biological sex recorded on their birth certificate – for example, where a child has been raised as a boy but feels more comfortable living as a girl and identifying as female.
- **Cisgender:** this term is used when someone's gender matches their biological sex. It is sometimes shortened to 'cis' (pronounced 'sis').
- **Non-binary:** this term describes people who feel they're not male or female. Or they might feel like a mix of genders or like they have no gender at all.
- **Gender diverse:** this is an umbrella term for a range of different genders.

## LGBTQA

The term 'LGBTQA' refers to people of diverse sexualities and genders. They are often grouped together under these initials because of their shared history of discrimination and their strength in facing challenges together. The letters stand for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans or gender diverse, Queer and Asexual.

In this guide, we talk about LGBTQA young people. In other places, you might also see or hear LGBTQIA+.

The 'I' in LGBTQIA+ stands for Intersex. This is when someone is born with sex characteristics that don't fit medical and social norms for female or male bodies. Some intersex variations can be picked up before birth, some are identified around puberty and some emerge in adulthood. The plus sign (+) is used to show that there are other terms used to describe identities not covered by these letters.

Some people with intersex variations are LGBTQA and some have been subject to forced medical interventions. Change and suppression practices do not include forced medical interventions on people with intersex variations.

## Language changes

The language that LGBTQA people use to describe themselves is always changing, particularly among young people. This means there's a high chance that the definitions provided here will change over time too.



## Useful resources

**Raising Children Network** provides free, reliable, up-to-date and independent information to help your family grow and thrive together. Funded by the Australian Government, reviewed by experts and non-commercial, and designed for busy families.

[www.raisingchildren.net.au/](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/)

**Helpful information** (referenced in this guide)

- Staying connected with pre-teens and teenagers  
[www.raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/communicating-relationships/family-relationships/staying-connected-you-your-teen](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/communicating-relationships/family-relationships/staying-connected-you-your-teen)
- Anxiety and how to manage it: pre-teens and teenagers  
[www.raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/mental-health-physical-health/stress-anxiety-depression/anxiety](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/mental-health-physical-health/stress-anxiety-depression/anxiety)
- Depression: pre-teens and teenagers  
[www.raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/mental-health-physical-health/stress-anxiety-depression/depression](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/mental-health-physical-health/stress-anxiety-depression/depression)
- When your child is trans or gender diverse: family feelings  
[www.raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/development/pre-teens-gender-diversity-and-gender-dysphoria/when-your-child-is-gender-diverse-family-feelings](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/development/pre-teens-gender-diversity-and-gender-dysphoria/when-your-child-is-gender-diverse-family-feelings)
- Teenage bullying: how to help  
[www.raisingchildren.net.au/teens/behaviour/bullying/teen-bullying](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/teens/behaviour/bullying/teen-bullying)
- Self-harm and teenagers  
[www.raisingchildren.net.au/teens/mental-health-physical-health/mental-health-disorders-concerns/self-harm](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/teens/mental-health-physical-health/mental-health-disorders-concerns/self-harm)



## Support lines and services

### Parenting hotlines

[www.raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/services-support/services-families/helplines](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/services-support/services-families/helplines)

**Beyond Blue** is a free mental health line and online brief counselling service is open 24/7 for everyone in Australia. Contact: 1300 224 636.

[www.beyondblue.org.au/](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/)

**eheadspace** provides information and support about mental health and wellbeing to young people 12–25 and their families and friends. Contact: 1800 650 890.

[www.headspace.org.au/online-and-phone-support/](http://www.headspace.org.au/online-and-phone-support/)

**13YARN** (For all ages – Available 24/7) Free and confidential telephone support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in crisis.

[www.13yarn.org.au/](http://www.13yarn.org.au/)

### Gender and sexuality support services for families

#### LGBTIQ+ families: services

[www.raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/family-diversity/LGBTIQ-families/LGBTIQ-families-services](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/family-diversity/LGBTIQ-families/LGBTIQ-families-services)

**The Royal Children's Hospital** (RCH) Gender Service aims to improve the physical and mental health outcomes of children and adolescents who are trans or gender diverse

[www.rch.org.au/adolescent-medicine/gender-service/](http://www.rch.org.au/adolescent-medicine/gender-service/)

**Transcend Australia** supports Australian families and their trans, gender diverse and non-binary children and young people.

[www.transcend.org.au/](http://www.transcend.org.au/)



**Parents of Gender Diverse Children** offers support to parents of transgender or gender diverse children, in the form of small groups, support for parents only, support for your child and siblings amongst other things.

[www.pgdc.org.au/](http://www.pgdc.org.au/)

**QLife** provides anonymous and free LGBTIQ+ peer support and referral for people in Australia wanting to talk about sexuality, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships.

[www.qlife.org.au/](http://www.qlife.org.au/)

**Rainbow Door** is a free specialist LGBTIQ+ helpline providing information, support, and referral to all LGBTIQ+ Victorians, their family, and friends.

[www.rainbowdoor.org.au/](http://www.rainbowdoor.org.au/)

### **Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC)**

You can get more information on 'conversion' practices, or change or suppression practices (CSPS) here:

- Change or suppression (conversion) practices prohibition Act (2021) (the CSP Act)

[www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/  
change-or-suppression-practices](http://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/change-or-suppression-practices)

- For families and friends

[www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/  
change-or-suppression-practices/  
for-families-and-friends/](http://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/change-or-suppression-practices/for-families-and-friends/)

- For people of faith, professionals and other communities

[www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/  
change-or-suppression-practices/  
for-professionals-institutions-and-communities/](http://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/change-or-suppression-practices/for-professionals-institutions-and-communities/)



### **To report 'conversion' practices**

If your child, or someone you know, is the target of 'conversion' practices, or CSPs, you can report this to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission here:

[www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/  
change-or-suppression-practices/reporting-practices/](http://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/change-or-suppression-practices/reporting-practices/)

If someone has been injured because of these practices, you can also report it to the police in your state. (e.g. Victoria Police, [www.police.vic.gov.au/report-change-or-suppression-conversion-practice](http://www.police.vic.gov.au/report-change-or-suppression-conversion-practice) )

### **References**

These can be found on the VEOHRC website at:

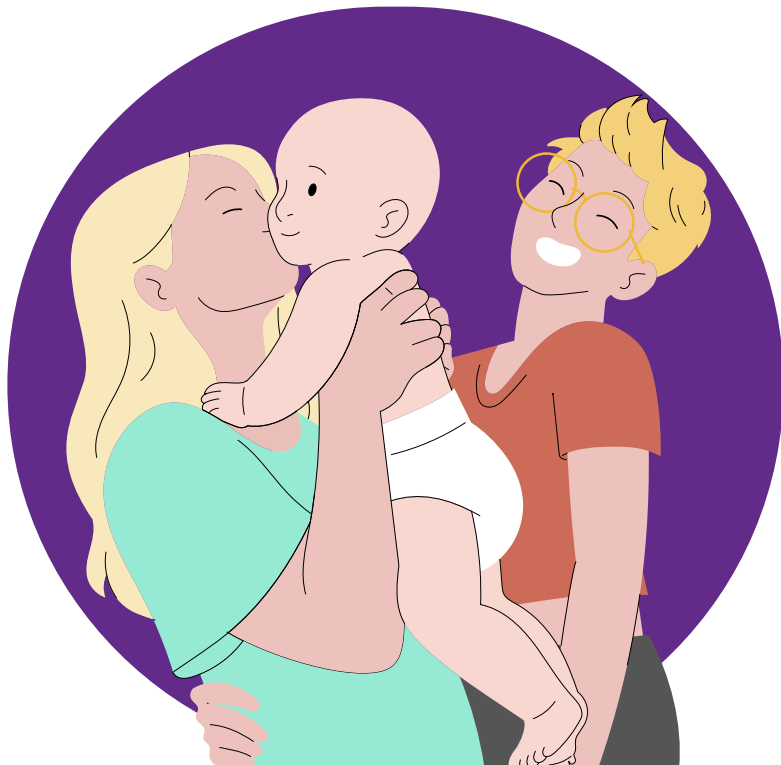
[www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources](http://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources)



## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many individuals and organisations that contributed to this project, including staff from The Royal Children's Hospital Gender Service, the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society - La Trobe University, Transfamily, and Transcend Australia.

Above all we acknowledge the families, support workers and health professionals who participated in the research, for sharing their stories and offering honest and thoughtful views on the kinds of information and resources needed.



## Why this guide was developed

Parents and family members want what's best for the young people in their lives. But they don't always know what to say or do if they know, or think, that their child might be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or asexual (LGBTQA).

This guide supports parents and caregivers to have good conversations with teens and young adults about topics like gender and sexuality, and how they can support them to be happy, healthy and safe.

This guide is based on academic research from Australia and around the world. It also draws on consultations with a cross-section of families and health professionals about their information and support needs, including a research project by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission that involved consultations with parents and health professionals to find out how to explain the *Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Act 2021 (the CSP Act)*\* to families and carers.



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