

Parenting of LGBTQ+ Teens

A brief guide





*“You can never be
TOO supportive!”*

- anonymous BUHS Student

Introduction

Raising teens is hard. Caregivers whose teens identify as a different sexual orientation or gender identity than what is sometimes considered “normal” by our society face an additional set of challenges. We believe ALL caregivers can meet these challenges with compassion, understanding, and education.

To create this handout we spoke with almost two dozen students from the Queer Straight Alliances at **Brattleboro Union High School** and **Leland and Grey Union Middle and High School**. To protect their privacy no students are quoted directly (with the exception of the anonymous quote above), but the ideas and terms presented in this handout are those the students choose. We also received feedback from **Equity Solutions**, a training and consultancy group dedicated to addressing poverty and economic inequality through an equity lens.

For clarity, specific definitions are taken from a variety of sources including: **PFLAG**, **GLSEN**, **GenderSpectrum.org**, and the **UCF Social Justice and Advocacy group**.

Additional Resources

This is a huge topic. There is no way for us to put all of the information you might want into a reasonable handout. So we begin by offering this selection of free online resources, where you can learn and explore more. Search for the following terms or click these links:

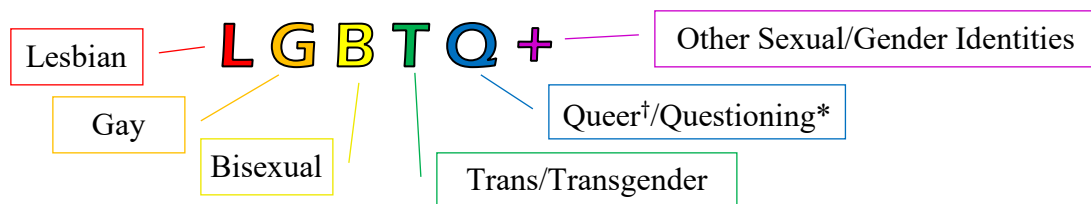
- The Trevor Project – Family and Friends
- Human Rights Campaign – Resources: Parenting
- PFLAG Booklet: Our Children
- The Trans* Ally Workbook
- Trans Student Education Resources - The Gender Unicorn
- Outright Vermont
- Out in the Open (formerly Green Mountain Crossroads) (Brattleboro, VT)

Understanding Terms

There is a large set of terms used in the LGBTQ+ community (even “LGBTQ+” itself is new for some of us). Below is an explanation of SOME of the terms we need to understand. Keep in mind that some of these terms may have slightly different interpretations depending on who you ask. And that's ok! We need to ASK how teens, and everyone, wants us to refer to them. We can't just assume!

It is also important to know that different people have different feelings about some of these terms, and some are still considered offensive or exclusionary by some people.

Let's start with the acronym. This is used as an umbrella term for people who have sexual orientations or gender identities that are different from heterosexual, cisgender*. There are MANY variations on this, but for this handout we will stick with:



This acronym is sometimes written longer to acknowledge identities such as: Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, Two Spirit, Allies, and more.

†Queer - An umbrella term that is also often used for people who have sexual orientations or gender identities that are different from the heterosexual, cisgender population.

- *Note that queer has been and is still used as an insult. Many people in the LGBTQ+ community are reclaiming the term and support its inclusivity. However many people still find it problematic.*
- *Ask your teen how they feel about this term!*

Three Important Terms

Biological Sex

This is how we categorize people's bodies based on bodily traits like anatomy and hormone levels.

There are more possibilities than we usually assume. Three are:

- Female
- Male
- Intersex*

Gender Identity

This is the gender that someone knows themselves to be. This does not have to match biological sex. Some possibilities are:

- Woman
- Man
- Genderqueer*
- Nonbinary*
- Genderfluid*
- Agender*

Gender Expression

This is how someone presents themselves through social cues (clothes, hair style, etc.) Sometimes it is not safe for teens to express their gender in the way that would feel right to them.

- Masculine
- Feminine
- Androgynous

*Defined on pages 4&5.

Terms About Gender Identity

Notice that many of these terms have similar or overlapping meanings. Always ask or mirror the terms a person uses for themselves.

Transgender (Trans) - when a person's gender identity does not line up with their biological sex in the way society expects.

Cisgender (Cis) - when a person's gender identity does line up with their biological sex.

- *Most cisgender people don't even realize they ARE cisgender because our society considers it the baseline or "normal" identity.*

Nonbinary - when a person's gender does not fit into either the "man" or "woman" category.

Genderqueer - an umbrella term for when a person's gender identity does not fit conventional identities or expectations.

Genderfluid - when a person's gender identity flows and changes, rather than being static.

Agender - when a person does not identify with any gender categories.

Intersex - a general term used for when a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male.

Misgender - To refer to someone with a word, especially a pronoun (like he, she, or it), that does not reflect their gender identity.

- *This might be done deliberately, like calling a genderqueer person "it" or a transwoman "he."*
- *However, even when done accidentally, misgendering can be very hurtful. Remember that small painful acts can add up quickly.*

The Gender Spectrum replaces **The Gender Binary**

The Gender Binary is the concept that everyone's gender fits neatly into the category of man or woman. While this is clearly not the case, it is still the most common way that people in our society think about gender.

The Gender Spectrum is the concept that someone's gender identity is not necessarily one or the other. Instead it may fit anywhere, or nowhere, on an infinite spectrum of possibilities depending both on HOW they identify their gender as well as HOW STRONGLY they identify their gender. (The **Gender Unicorn** is a good, visual explanation of this idea).

Questioning - when a person is unsure of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation.



This is a very important term, especially for teens in the LGBTQ+ community. For everyone, our teenage years are a critical time for discovering who we are and who we want to be. Even straight, cisgender teens are figuring out the kinds of people they are attracted to and what “being a man” or “being a woman” means to them. It is important that we recognize that this time of exploration and discovery is good and important.

If we tell teens that this is “just a phase” or that “you’ll grow out of it,” we are not giving them the respect they deserve as human beings who are discovering themselves. Instead we can show our support by saying things like:

- “I know that this is a big time of changes for you, so just know that I am here for you.”
- “I may never fully understand your experiences, but know that I love you and support you.”

Even if their gender identity or sexual orientation changes later, it is still true right now.

Pronouns

When people’s gender identities don’t fit into the man or woman categories, they may use any several pronouns for themselves. Some people even use more than one set of pronouns, as in “I use she/her OR they/them pronouns.” Using the pronouns your teen asks you to use, is one of the most important ways to support them. Here are some of the most common pronouns:

She/Her/Hers

- “Where is Jordan? I think this book belongs to **her**.”
“**She** is with **her** friend Terry. Yes, it is **hers**.”

He/Him/His

- “Where is Jordan? I think this book belongs to **him**?”
“**He** is with **his** friend Terry. Yes, it is **his**.”

They/Them/Their - Used as a singular gender-neutral pronoun

- “Where is Jordan? I think this book belongs to **them**?”
“**They** are with **their** friend Terry. Yes, it is **theirs**.”

Xe/Xem/Xyr (Ze/Zem/Zeir) - the x is pronounced like a z.

- “Where is Jordan? I think this book belongs to **xem**?”
“**Xe** is with **xyr** friend Terry. Yes, it is **xyrs**.”



Terms About Sexual and Romantic Orientation

Again, notice that many of these terms have similar or overlapping meanings. Always ask, or mirror the terms a person uses for themselves.

Lesbian - a woman who is sexually and/or romantically attracted to women

Gay - 1. an umbrella term for people who are sexually and/or romantically attracted to other people of the same gender, 2. specifically, men who are sexually attracted to men

Bisexual - a person who is sexually attracted to men and women (or all genders)

Pansexual - a person who is sexually attracted to people of any gender

Asexual - a person who does not experience sexual attraction

Demisexual - a person who does not experience sexual attraction until they have developed a strong emotional connection to a person

Sapiosexual - a person who is sexually attracted to intelligence, without regard to gender.

- *Note that this term is seen as problematic by many people for reasons including being elitist, classist, and ableist to the fact that it is not about gender but about a trait. So while you may hear it, don't use it yourself.*

Romantic Orientation

Many people are recognizing that their romantic attraction to people and their sexual attraction to people do not 100% align. To show this, some people use the same beginnings as above, but with “romantic” as the root. (homoromantic, panromantic, heteroromantic, etc.)

- *“I am heterosexual, panromantic.” = I am usually sexually attracted only to people of a different gender, but I find myself romantically attracted to people of any gender.*

LGBTQ+ Youth and Suicide

While it is important to remember that the majority of LGBTQ+ youth do not become suicidal, the rates of suicidal thoughts, attempts, and death from suicide are significantly higher among LGBTQ+ youth than their heterosexual, cisgender peers. As parents our teens need us to understand the risk factors, warning signs, and ways that we can intervene.

Here are some of the important resources that are available for you:

- The Trevor Project - Preventing Suicide
- Talking About Suicide and LGBT Populations
- The Jason Foundation: Community Assistance Resource Line - **1-877-778-CARL(2275)**
- Talk with a professional 24/7 for concerns about a young person or situation. Confidential and free.

If your child is thinking about suicide, they deserve immediate help. They can call the Trevor Lifeline:

1-866-488-7386

The Voices of Our Teens

Teens need our Support

We can support our teen's sexual orientation and gender identity, even if we do not fully understand it. To do this we can:

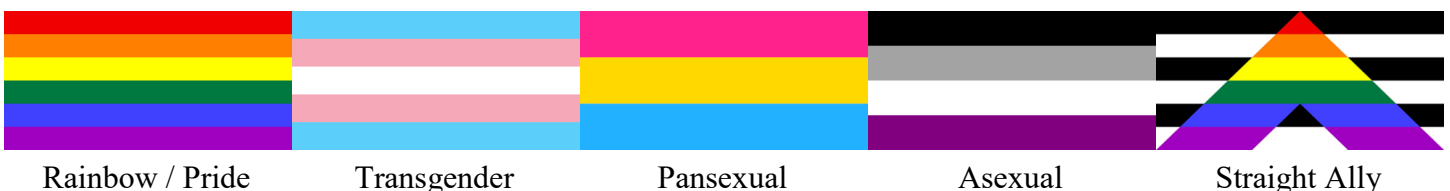
- Ask questions so we can understand, not to challenge.
- Use their chosen pronouns, whether they are around or not.
 - “Where is Jordan?” “**They** are at a movie.”
- Give them space to discover and be themselves, rather than demanding they be a certain way.
- Accept and embrace their identities, but still respect their privacy.

Teens need us to Work to Understand

We may never understand many of the choices teens make: the music they listen to, the clothes they wear, the books they read. But we must try to understand WHO they are.

- We will not always get it right, the fact that we are trying means a lot.
- Understanding is an ongoing process. We are not done after one good talk with our teen.
- Understand that there is no one to blame when a teen identifies as LGBTQ+. Blame implies that something is wrong, and there is nothing wrong.
 - *If you are scared that your teen might be targeted or hurt for being LGBTQ+, that is a great reason to start working to make your own actions, and your community, safe and accepting for all kids. Denying our teen's identity won't keep them safer!*
- Being LGBTQ+ doesn't completely change who a person is. This is just one aspect of who they are.

Just a few of the many pride flags, along with the straight ally flag.



Teens need us to Educate Ourselves

Life these days is very different from when we were in high school, especially if we are heterosexual and cisgender. We need to learn more about LGBTQ+ culture, discrimination, daily life, and more. This handout is a start, but it should not be the end.

- **Listen!** Listening to our teen is the best way to learn what their experience is like.
 - *We need to be careful not to dismiss their experiences, just because they are different from ours.*
- Check out the resources from the front page.



- Read books and articles, watch movies, and listen to music that is not only pro-LGBTQ+, but also created by members of the LGBTQ+ community. Ask your teen for suggestions.

Teens need us to know about Dating

There are many ways in which dating in the LGBTQ+ community is the same as it is for cisgender, heterosexual people, but there are some ways that it is different. Here are some things that are helpful for us to remember.



- Just because someone has previously dated people of one gender doesn't mean that they will only date people of that gender.
 - *They might be bi/pansexual, exploring their sexuality, or finally coming out. Just ask!*
- We can use gender neutral language when asking about their romantic life.
 - *“Are you seeing anyone?” instead of “Do you have a boyfriend?”*
 - *“You’re going on a date this weekend? Great! What’s their name?”*
 - *This is great to use for heterosexual teens too. It shows we are not assuming anything!*
- Whatever term and pronouns our teen uses for the person they are dating, is the term we should use.
 - *“Jessica? **They** are Jane’s **partner**.”*
- Being set up on a date by an adult is embarrassing, no matter what the genders involved.
 - *This might be us trying to be TOO involved. Oops!*

Teens need us to know about School Life

Our teen's day to day experience at school is different than ours. Partly this is because school culture changes over time, but partly this is because LGBTQ+ people have a different experience than straight, cisgender people.

- School is not always a safe place for LGBTQ+ teens, physically or emotionally. They are assaulted and bullied at rates far higher than straight, cisgender teens.
 - *We can make our homes safe and supportive spaces for our teens.*
 - *You and your teen can learn about laws relating to LGBTQ issues in VT Schools at <https://sexetc.org/states/vermont> or at Lambda Legal.*
- Being bullied is never our child's fault. Just because our teen is "out" doesn't mean that it is their fault they are being bullied.
 - *Being out takes courage and integrity, our teens may need to build self-advocacy skills.*
- Not all teachers and staff are supportive. It might be anything from misgendering a student to ignoring homophobic/transphobic slurs (or in some cases even USING these slurs).
 - *We can stand up for our teens on these issues just as we would for any other issue.*
- LGBTQ+ people are rarely, if ever, represented in the lessons taught at school.
 - *We can help our teens find historical figures, events, and media that represent them. When we do, know that we inspire them and educate ourselves.*
 - *Here are a few list to get you started:*
 - *GLSEN - LGBTQ History*
 - *OutHistory*
 - *GLSEN - 10 Latinx LGBT Icons*
 - *GLAAD - GLAAD Celebrates Black History Month*
 - *Pride - 18 LGBT Role Models in Sports*
- Health classes are usually taught with the assumption that everyone is straight and cisgender.
 - *It may be embarrassing, but when we help our teens find sexual health information that fits who they are and what they are doing, we are helping them stay safe.*
 - *Here are some resources, aimed at teens, you can use and share:*
 - *Scarleteen*
 - *Sex, etc.*
 - *Trans Youth Sexual Health Booklet*
 - *Impact - Sex Ed.*



Teens still need us to Be Parents

When teens identify as LGBTQ+, it doesn't mean they stop being teenagers or human beings. They still need the protection, guidance, guidelines, and consequences that we would give to any teen.

- There are people in our lives who are harmful to LGBTQ+ people. Some of them are in our families. If someone is not going to respect our teen's identity, then we shouldn't force our teens to be around them, no matter what our relationship is with that person.
- We can still call them out for making bad decisions, without being judgmental about it.
 - *"I think person X is not a good person for you to date because of the way they treat you, NOT because of their gender. Let's talk about what makes a healthy relationship."*
 - *"It is crucial, that if you are going to have sex, you have safe sex. Just because you and your partner won't get pregnant, doesn't mean there aren't other risks involved. Let's talk about what you can do."*
- We can still set guidelines and consequences that are unconnected to their sexual orientation or gender identity.
 - *Coming home from a date after their curfew is a problem, no matter who they are on a date with.*

We can do this!

In raising our teens we will have moments of success, of frustration, of heartache, and of joy. So when our heads are whirling and our emotions are rising, at least remember the following:

- 1) *We treat youth with love and respect no matter what.*
- 2) *We ask, instead of assuming we know.*
- 3) *We are not perfect. When we make a mistake, we acknowledge it, we apologize, and we fix it.*

"Your kids require you most of all to love them for who they are, not to spend your whole time trying to correct them."

—Bill Ayers