

SOGIE Quick Tips

Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression

Sexual Orientation

- **Understand sexual orientation.** Sexual orientation is distinct from gender identity and gender expression. Sexual orientation is about attraction to other people.
- **Expect diverse sexual orientations.** Do not assume that everyone is straight/heterosexual. Expect that among the children, youth, and adults served, many will identify with different sexual orientations (e.g., a person may identify as asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian or something else).¹
- **Recognize that behaviors do not equal identity or orientation.** A person does not need to have had sexual experience to identify with a sexual orientation. Additionally, a person's sexual behaviors do not define their sexual orientation.²
- **Know the health and mental health effects of homophobia.** Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning youth emerge from adolescence as healthy adults, but the effects of homophobia and heterosexism can contribute to disparities in mental health with higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation, higher rates of substance abuse, and more sexually transmitted and HIV infections.³
- **Create safe and caring environments.** Research shows that the best protective factors for youth experiencing depression, suicidal ideation, or attempting suicide due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation include family connectedness, caring adults, and school safety.⁴
- **Intervene when others use gender-specific terms to bully.** Words like "sissy," "homo," "it," "bitch," "dyke," "he-she," or "freak" are incorrectly perceived as acceptable when they are said as insults without consequence. Service providers should correct this insulting language when they hear it.

Gender Identity

- **Understand gender identity.** Gender identity is a deep-seated sense of self that persists over time. While *gender expression* (how a person appears to others in terms of gender) can change over a person's life, gender identity is innate.
- **Do not assume you know someone's gender identity.** The only way to know a person's gender identity is if they tell you.
- **Expect diverse gender identities.** A person's gender identity may or may not fit neatly into the categories of "man/boy" or "woman/girl."
- **Affirm gender identity when disclosed.** When children, youth, or adults disclose their gender identity, respond in an affirming way. Do not react with skepticism or pressure them to identify differently. Support them in developing their understanding of their gender identity and direct them to resources that are affirming to transgender, gender non-conforming, and questioning youth.
- **Respect preferred names and pronouns.** Use the name and pronoun that a person (whether a child, youth, or adult) prefers and require that others do the same. Do not assume a person's preferred name or pronouns are in their case file or on their legal identification; ask people by what name and pronouns they prefer to be called.

- **Group children and youth in gender-neutral and/or mixed-gender ways.** Be mindful about the ways in which single-gender teams and groups (like girls-only and boys-only groups) can alienate transgender and gender non-conforming children and youth. Children and youth may express their gender identity through their social relationships, including the gender of their friends and the people they decide to imitate.
- **Avoid unnecessary gendered language.** Try to use gender neutral language in speech. For example, say “firefighter” rather than “fireman”.
- **Know the health and mental health effects of transphobia.** Many transgender and gender non-conforming youth emerge from adolescence as healthy adults, but the effects of transphobia can contribute to disparities in mental health with higher rates of depression and suicidal thoughts, and higher rates of substance abuse.
- **Allow the use of gendered facilities according to gender identity.** Pursuant to New York State Law, transgender and gender non-conforming people may use the facilities (including bathrooms) that align with their gender identity regardless of their assigned sex at birth.⁵

Gender Expression

- **Avoid perpetuating gender stereotypes.** Rather than force children into the mold of current or traditional gender expressions, help them fulfill their own unique potential. Don't be excessively concerned with whether children's interests and strengths coincide with the socially defined gender roles of the moment.
- **Keep an open mind.** Allow children and youth to express their gender expression through their clothing, hairstyle, accessories, voice, mannerisms, and other means.
- **Reflect on your reactions to diverse gender expressions.** Think carefully about the messages in everything you say, do, or teach about gender:
 - Do you compliment girls more often on their appearance, but compliment boys more often on their athleticism?
 - Do you ever imply there is something wrong with boys and men who behave in stereotypically feminine ways?
 - Do you discipline girls more harshly than you would otherwise if they seem masculine or “butch” to you?
 - Does your language ever equate gender identity with a person's anatomical sex, or otherwise imply that the gender identities of transgender people are not legitimate?⁶

¹ See *SOGIE Terms Desk Aid* for definitions of sexual orientation terms.

² Institute of Medicine Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health Issues and Research Gaps and Opportunities: *The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People: Building a Foundation for Better Understanding*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2011.

³ Committee on Adolescence (2013), *Office-Based Care for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth*. Illinois: American Academy of Pediatrics, 198-203, 2013.

⁴ Eisenberg, M.E., Resnick, M.D., *Suicidality Among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth*. *Suicide Life Threatening Behavior*, 39(5), 646-668, 2016.

⁵N.Y. Executive Law § 466.13.

⁶ Sylvia Rivera Law Project. (2012). *Fact Sheet: Transgender & Gender Nonconforming Youth in School*. New York: Author. <http://srlp.org/resources/fact-sheet-transgender-gender-nonconforming-youth-school/>.