research in practice

Frontline Briefing

Supporting young people who identify as LGBTQ+

Dartington Trust

www.researchinpractice.org.uk

About this briefing

This briefing aims to help those reading it build their foundational knowledge and understanding, and encourage reflection - supporting them to ask questions of the people, services and organisations they work with. Throughout, there are references and links to resources to support conversations with young people, practitioners, foster carers and others.

By sharing messages from research, including what LGBTQ+ young people want from professionals and services, it is hoped we can contribute to more inclusive support for all children and young people. We are grateful for the input of our LGBTQ+ reference group of three young people and one adult who helped shape the content and tone of the briefing; their reflections and comments are cited throughout.

As with many issues that span societal attitudes and personal rights and freedoms, the public debate on this issue is sometimes fraught with conflict. This briefing does not seek to add to this often adversarial discourse, and instead aims to refocus attention on what matters to young people being supported by professionals.

This is an area where policy, best practice and language change at pace. As such, every effort has been made to ensure information is widely accepted as up to date, but professionals should always seek to refresh their knowledge and understanding over time.

Please note, while our briefing uses the acronym LGBTQ+, when referencing some specific pieces of research in the text below, we use the acronym LGBT as this was the term used in the research.

This briefing is divided in to the following sections:

- Introduction and terminology
- Professional considerations: The importance of an intersectional lens
- Young people's perspectives: Messages from research
- Connectivity online
- Coming out
- Conclusion
- Appendix: LGBTQ+ Life and the Law
- References

Introduction

Supporting health and wellbeing in relation to emerging sexual orientation and gender identity is a core aspect of working with adolescents. For many young people this journey includes the exploration of lesbian, gay or bisexual sexual identities, social worlds and intimate relationships.

Gay, lesbian and trans are some of the broad range of personal and social identities that are grouped together under the acronym LGBTQ+. As with all 'umbrella' terms, this is imperfect - as it conflates a diverse range of identities, and can mean that individual experiences are obscured. As the table below set out, there are many other variants of identification on sex, sexuality and gender covered by the '+'. Some young people may be confident, articulate and excited about taking on one or more of these identities. Others may be uncertain, confused or conflicted about feelings they have and may lack balanced, practical information to help them make sense of things.

There are many aspects of a practitioner's role that will be consistent in supporting adolescent development whoever they are working with – educating and raising awareness about online safety, sexual health and rights over our own bodies, for instance. With young people exploring LGBTQ+ identities, we also need to consider the social and cultural context in which they are navigating, reflect on our own identity and perspective on debates about LGBTQ+ rights and identity, and find the best way to stand beside them as an advocate and an ally.

> *Growing up strapped inside a cultural straight-jacket, a tight-fitting, one-sized restraint imposed on us at birth. That leaves no room to grow out-side of its narrow confines.*
>
> (Todd, 2016)

There is a lot to celebrate in the progress of LGBTQ+ rights over the past fifty years or so. At the same time, as this map on the **Human Dignity Trust website** shows, there are still many countries where LGBTQ+ people remain criminalised and, in some instances, this includes capital punishment. Here in the UK, long fought campaigns for basic rights, equality, visibility and representation have enabled more people to be 'out and proud' with family, friends and at work. There are same sex couples, marriages and parents within many family and friend networks and representations of LGBTQ+ identities are increasingly normalised in mainstream and social media.

It is also true that LGBTQ+ rights and identity remain highly contested aspects of our shared social and cultural experience. Legislative and cultural change in the UK is still relatively new - by no means fully accepted by everyone and actively resisted by some. For example, the recent inclusion of LGBTQ+ families and young people in the national curriculum was cause for national debate, contemplation and protest (Twocock, 2019).

In negotiating this complex space, LGBTQ+ young people may well have to cope with feelings of shame and potential rejection from their family and friends, as well as being at increased risk of bullying and social isolation at school and online (Stonewall, 2020a; Todd, 2016). Public deliberations about the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in society are frequently internalised as shame and stigma (Todd, 2016) and societal values in regards to sexual orientation and perceived gender norms can feel highly restricting for young people.

Experiences in the family home, in religious contexts, in educational settings and feelings of safety and social exclusion remain 'a major problem' in the UK and can impact on the mental health and wellbeing of LGBT children and young adults (Hudson-Sharpe & Metcalf, 2016; Government Equalities Office, 2018; Todd, 2016).

Sexual orientation and gender identity are different aspects of identity and should not be conflated. Neither of these may be the primary reason why you are working with a young person but these (and the environmental and societal responses experienced) may well be compounding factors in the complexities of their lives. How confident or well prepared are we as professionals and organisations to effectively respond? *The Speak Out Study* (CRCF, 2017) explored care-experienced LGBTQ young people's experiences of support and highlighted significant gaps in social work skills, confidence and knowledge. In relation to working with LGBTQ young people, it found the recording of LGBTQ identities in case notes was rare. The study found that only 38% of local authorities had a general in-care policy that was inclusive of LGBT young people and this reduced to just 5% when asked whether there was any specific LGBTQ policy in relation to children in care.

> *Being open, tolerant or accepting is not enough. It is not explicit enough. Advocacy is the term we should use.*
> (Young person – The reference group)

As captured in the quote above, for young people a stance of passive acceptance or tolerance is not enough; rather, the request is for active support, active care and advocacy. In order to respond, professionals in policy, management or practice need to create and use spaces that enable critical reflection on confidence and knowledge and exploration of the implicit and explicit biases. Professionals also need to acknowledge that the uncertainty and discomfort and, indeed, the prejudices that are present in wider society, may be present within their own teams, processes and organisations.

Reflective supervision (either one-to-one or group) provides an essential space to explore beliefs, assumptions and gaps in knowledge through supported critical reflection. Working together in high support, high challenge teams enables constructive critique and discussion to challenge homophobic and transphobic attitudes that may be expressed in both explicit and subtle ways.

Terminology

The acronym LGBTQ+ is largely accepted as an inclusive way to refer to a diverse range of people grouped together by the common theme of gender-diversity and / or sexual orientation. As seen within the following table, there is a great deal of diversity beneath the acronym.

LGBTQ+ Glossary

Glossary and terminology (adapted from Stonewall)	
For a more detailed look at other terms used please visit: www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/faqs-and-glossary/glossary-terms or https://web.archive.org/web/20210801012040/https:/www.theproudtrust.org/resources/resource-downloads/glossary/	
Coming out	When a person first tells someone/others about their sexual orientation and / or gender identity. Click on this link for a brief history of the term: www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/10/213732/coming-out-meaning-history-origin
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning
Transgender/ Trans	Currently, this term is largely used as an umbrella term for all transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming identities. People who identify as trans may use one or more terms to describe their identity. This may include, but is not limited to: transgender, gender-queer (GQ), gender-fluid, non-binary, agender, nongender, trans man or trans woman. There are a range of glossaries online for further information. See, for instance: www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/articles/glossary-of-terms-1
Cis/Cisgender	The term 'cis' is used by some to describe people whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. Cis is a Latin prefix meaning 'on the same side as' and is therefore an antonym of 'trans' which is from the Latin for 'across from'.
Queer	Queer has multiple uses in the LGBTQ+ vernacular; it is often used as an umbrella term rejecting labels relating to heteronormative and gender-normative standards and theories. It can also be a rejection of the perceived norms of the LGBT community which can be conservative, racist, ablest, sexist and ageist. Some LGBT people may view this term as a slur, but it has been reclaimed by the queer community.
Homosexual	Homosexual is now considered to be an outdated term to describe same-sex attraction. The term has connotations of criminalisation, medicalisation and being Othered[1].

1 Othering is based on implicit and explicit assumptions that a certain identified group poses some sort of threat to the favoured group. Othering is mostly driven by politics, the media and society. Overwhelmingly, individuals do not know those that they are Othering (Powell, 2017).

Non-binary Gender diverse	Umbrella terms for people whose gender identity does not align with a binary construct of male or female. Non-binary identities are varied and can include people who identify with some aspects of binary identities, while others reject them entirely.
Pan/Pansexual	Refers to a person whose romantic/sexual attraction is not limited by sexual orientation, gender or gender identity.
Pronouns	The words used to refer to a person's gender identity in conversation. This can include, 'he' or 'she'. Some people prefer gender neutral terms such as 'they' and 'them'.
Straight	Commonly used to describe heterosexual orientation.
Transgender man/ Transgender woman	Terms used to describe someone who was assigned female/male at birth, but identifies and lives as a man/woman. This is sometimes abbreviated to trans man (FTM) or trans woman (MTF).

Reflective activity

Pause for a moment to reflect on your own personally held beliefs, assumptions and biases.

- When you hear the terms 'LGBTQ+' who or what (ideas, image(s)) initially comes to mind? Who does the term LGBTQ+ include and who does it exclude?
- What do these thoughts and images tell you about your own experiences of sexual orientation and gender identity?
- How might your experiences or perceptions influence your response to young people?

Resources

Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS is an acronym that describes aspects of personal and social identity which afford people different levels of power and privilege. This learning tool introduces a number of exercises and activities you can use in team and supervision discussions.

www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Social-GGRRAAACCEEESSS-and-the-LUUUTT-model.pdf

The importance of an intersectional lens

I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live.

(Lorde, 1984, p. 120)

Founded in Black feminism, the term 'intersectionality' was first coined by the academic Dr Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality refers to the insight that we all experience a kaleidoscope of identities - race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, ability, age and faith, to name a few – that intersect in changing formations throughout our lives. Grounding our understanding about gender identity and sexuality in intersectional thinking enables us to appreciate the diversity of LGBTQ+ identities and the issues of oppression, privilege, discrimination and racism that position young people differently in society.

Given the intense psycho-social development that characterises adolescence, gender and sexual identity may well come into particularly sharp focus at this time. This is not to assume that these are the primary issues in a LGBTQ+ young person's life at any given moment, but an intersectional lens enables us to think about a young person's experiences of sexual and / or gender identity in the context of other aspects of their lives and gain insight into how power and social and cultural factors intersect (Collins, 2019).

Questions for reflection

- How might a child and their families' religious faith intersect with their perspective on sexual orientation? Certain interpretations of faith-based beliefs forbid 'homosexual' acts, or where there are family narratives and cultural scripts about what it means to be 'manly' or 'womanly', how might these complicate an emerging sense of LGBTQ+ identity?

- How might your assumptions or biases regarding faith-based perspectives on sexual orientation or gender identity affect your understanding of a young person's world?

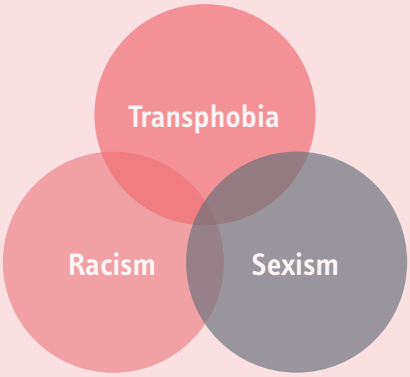
- We know that young people from Black and other ethnic minoritised backgrounds are at heightened risk of experiencing hate crimes (Hudson-Sharpe & Metcalf, 2016). In this light we might want to ask how a young person's ethnicity may compound experiences of homo/bi/trans phobia.

  The following Venn diagrams demonstrate various intersecting identities.

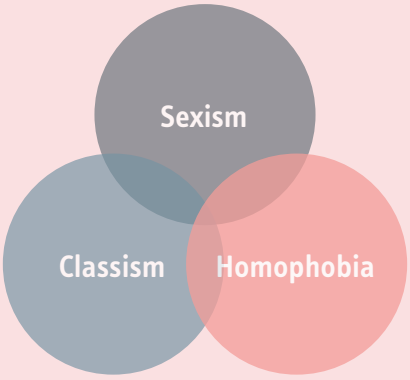
Figure One – Intersectional experiences of discrimination

Spend a moment reflecting on how an individual's intersecting identities may influence how they are perceived and interacted with.

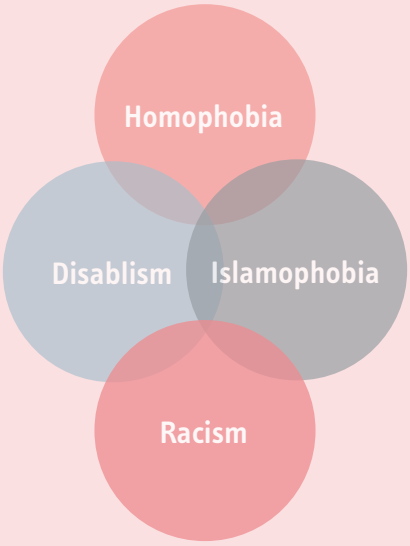
A Black, Trans Woman's Intersecting Experiences



A White, Working Class Lesbian's Intersecting Experiences



A Disabled Indian, Muslim, Gay Man's Intersecting Experiences



Care experienced young people and intersectionality

How might an intersectional lens be applied in thinking through placement options with a child or young person in care? The need to provide a home where they feel safe and accepted will be the overriding priority. In order to achieve this it is vital that time is taken to work alongside the young person to explore the 'matching' criteria that are important to them and their intersecting identities and experiences.

Some of the care experienced young people who took part in the University of East Anglia's 'Speak Out Study' (CRCF, 2017) shared that they had feared coming out to the professionals and carers in case it resulted in the breakdown of their placement. Others found being in local authority care provided an opportunity to explore their LGBTQ identity.

The perceptions, experiences, beliefs and expectations of any potential carers are clearly crucial here, and preparatory conversations between the social worker and carer need to be upfront and honest if the appropriate support is to be identified and provided. Lesbian, gay and bisexual young people involved in the Speakout study found it helpful when foster carers were accepting of their sexuality and reassured the young person of their commitment to them. They found it unhelpful when adults suggested their orientation was a phase or attributed their sexuality to a history of abuse (CRCF, 2017).

The Speak Out research indicated the need for robust reflection and assessment of suitability for professionals and carers. Learning and development should include an emphasis on what all young people require, as well as providing space for the exploration of conscious and unconscious biases relating to LGBTQ+ issues. This approach shifts the focus from individual children and young people and places attention on the adults' role in promoting their safety and wellbeing.

Emphasising the role of adults in creating safe contexts reinforces the message that it is not a young person's sexuality and / or gender identity that is the problem - the problem is with societal, institutional and individually held gender-normative and heteronormative expectations and standards.

Reflective activity

> Reflecting on what you have just read, how might you apply an intersectional lens in your relationship-based work with LGBTQ+ young people?

Practice points

1. Representation matters. Seeing yourself in words, pictures and positions of authority and power is vital for positive identity formation. Review your agency's literature and website to ensure they are inclusive. Look at the workforce, does it represent the communities you serve. If not, why?
2. Does your service or organisation have a care policy that explicitly includes the potential support needs of LGBTQ+ young people? If not, how can you advocate to ensure an appropriate policy is co-designed and implemented? Co-designed should include young people beyond those who identify as LGBTQ+ – 'An LGBTQ+ Inclusion Policy is there for everybody. The vast majority of LGBTQ+ community are not known' (Reference Group Participant).
3. Whilst recognising any safeguarding responsibilities, see the young person as the expert in their own lives. How can you support and guide them in your role?
4. Be conscious of language. Ask the young person what terms they would like you to use (he/she/they) and support them by using these pronouns.
5. Be an ally by listening to the lived experiences of those from the LGBTQ+ community and learning about what matters to them.
6. Advocate for the young person and challenge racism, homo/bi/trans phobia and discrimination where you encounter it.

(Adapted from Stonewall, 2020a, and Toft, 2018)

Resources

> Deaf Rainbow, a space for deaf LGBTQ+ people: **http://deaflgbtiqa.org.uk/articles**
> Identities YouTube clip: **https://youtu.be/QwqV7oXXM88**
> Disabled LGBT+ young people face a battle to be taken seriously: **https://theconversation.com/disabled-lgbt-young-people-face-a-battle-just-to-be-taken-seriously-101271**
> **www.ukblackpride.org.uk**

Supporting young people: Messages from research

When considering the support needs of young people, it is always best to directly ask them what they would find most helpful. With this in mind, below is a list of some of the common messages that LGBTQ+ young people have shared with regards to what they find most helpful from professionals (adapted from resources shared at **www.allsortsyouth.org.uk/resources**, **www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/resources** and the SpeakOut Study briefing (CRCF, 2017)).

Common messages

1. LGBT representation such as inclusive imagery and language, rainbow flags, badges and posters can signal to young people that they are in a safe and inclusive space (this should include representation of diverse LGBTQ+ young people). Relying on these things alone, however, is tokenistic and may even be counter-productive by allowing organisations to assume they are 'doing enough' to create safe spaces.
2. Young people do not find it helpful for adults to suggest, indicate or dismiss a young person's LGBTQ+ identity as a phase.
3. Adults should do everything they can to challenge stigma, bullying and hearing homophobia, biphobic and transphobic language.
4. Adults working with young people can contribute to a sense of belonging through trustworthy and positive representations of a wider LGBTQ+ community. This might include sharing or recommending links to films and programmes that positively depict LGBTQ+ life; or finding out about local and national groups and organisations, and supporting young people in making contact – should they wish.
5. It is not the role of any professional working with young people to encourage them to 'come out' to their parents/carers, friends or family, unless they have told you they want to. Pushing a young person to disclose before they are ready or it is safe to do so could be detrimental to their wellbeing and / or safety.
6. Professionals should treat young people's personal information regarding their gender identity or sexual orientation as confidential, and should not share it without the young person's consent - apart from in exceptionable circumstances where sharing such information with other professionals is essential to safeguarding efforts.
7. Foster carers, residential staff, key workers and LGBTQ+ youth organisations should be aware of the additional challenges facing LGBTQ+ young people growing up in care. This includes the institutional nature of written records about the young person, the numerous meetings where personal information is shared and the heteronormative and gender-normative structures, processes and tools LGBTQ+ young people are forced to frequently interact with.
8. Being in care can provide opportunities for LGBTQ+ young people. Social workers and foster carers have an important role in supporting young people with their identity development.
9. There is a role for leaving care services in supporting LGBT young people who may only feel safe to explore their sexuality and / or gender identity in late adolescence. This may be particularly true for trans young people (CRCF, 2017).

This material is invaluable. However, it is not always possible to know how inclusive these resources are of the experiences of young people from ethnic minoritised backgrounds and / or young people with disabilities.

Supporting trans young people

Though the above messages include all LGBTQ+ young people, the following messages specifically relate to supporting young trans people:

1. Trans young people can be called by their chosen pronouns and they do not need permissions or documentation to enable this.
2. Trans young people have the right to be referred to a gender identity clinic of their choosing without the need to go through local mental health services.
3. Trans young people have the right to up-to-date and accurate information from their GP and the professionals around them.
   (Points 1-3 are drawn from material on 'trans rights in healthcare', produced by **www.theproudtrust.org**. As they underline, the information is intended as a general statement of the law and was true at the time of writing. Specific advice on a particular problem should always be sought from a qualified source.)
4. Exploring identity, reflecting on how we fit in to society and how we relate to others is part of growing up. However, if a young person is identifying as the opposite gender and they appear to be experiencing significant distress, or you are worried about them, you should speak to the young person with sensitivity and care to explore what advice and support options are open to them. This may start with accessing recognised and specialist online support networks (see links below) or speaking to other professionals involved in the young person's life, such as their GP.
5. The age and understanding of the young person will determine how to approach such conversations and support. Acknowledge the young person's feelings and wishes, and keep conversations open, caring and free from judgement – even, or especially if, the professional advice received is contrary to what the young person wants.
6. Seek support and advice, access training, read and contact reputable networks and groups as sources of support and guidance to the young person.

Practice points

Some ideas on how to embed non-heteronormative and non-gender-normative assumptions into your practice:

- Ask gender neutral questions - for instance, instead of asking about boyfriends or girlfriends, frame such enquires as "Are you seeing someone?" , "What are they like?", etc.
- Listen carefully to how a young person describes themselves. If they use non-gendered language, mirror the language they use. If you are unsure, ask them how they prefer to be referred to and use these terms.
- Address a group of young people as folks, people or in the inclusive 'we'. How are 'we' doing today? Do 'we' understand what I have just shared?
- Do not share a young person's sexuality and / or gender identify without explicit permission, unless their safety depends on such information being shared with another professional. This includes writing it down on forms, assessments or any other paperwork.
- If a young person's 'cues' raise questions about their sexuality and / or gender identity, take care not to communicate any expectation that they should 'come out' to those close to them or the professionals working with them. Although the intention may be to show support, it could be experienced as pressure.

Resources

- This film was made as part of the SpeakOut research study (CRCF, 2017): **https://vimeo.com/269619322**
- More information available here: **uea.ac.uk/speakout**
- An introduction to supporting LGBT young people (Stonewall): **www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/cymru_introduction_to_supporting_lgbt_young_people_english.pdf**
- Young Stonewall: **www.youngstonewall.org.uk**
- The Proud Trust resource page: **https://web.archive.org/web/20210801013006/https:/www.theproudtrust.org/resources/**

Resources for trans and gender non-conforming young people and professionals supporting them

- The Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS): **https://gids.nhs.uk/young-people**
- TranzWiki is a comprehensive directory of the groups campaigning for, supporting or assisting trans and gender non-conforming individuals: **www.tranzwiki.net**
- NHS advice and guidance for young trans people: **www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/trans-teenager/?tabname=self-help-tips**
- The Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS): **https://gids.nhs.uk/professionals**

Connectivity online

The increasing importance and influence of peer relationships in adolescence is well documented (see for example Coleman, 2014). Feeling able to connect, identify and relate to one's peers is part of healthy adolescent development (Briggs, 2008) and this is no different for LGBTQ+ young people. However, as a marginalised group, and a group that is frequently hidden - during adolescence and in school (Stonewall, 2020a) - being able to openly meet with other young people who may have shared experiences or similar feelings may be challenging or even risky, because of bullying or where there is a culture of homophobia or transphobia.

How can professionals support opportunities to socialise and connect with LGBTQ+ peers?
As suggested above, this can include finding out about local and national LGBTQ+ groups and organisations, and supporting young people in making contact – should they wish. It can also include supporting and guiding young people to access online LGBTQ+ friendly spaces. Both methods should be considered, as being able to connect with peers can be a positive source of reassurance, empowerment and confidence, and open doors to new worlds.

> *The internet and social media sites have helped me accept and embrace my sexuality.*
>
> Amelia, 16, sixth form college (Wales) (Stonewall, 2020b)

Online platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and Omegle can provide spaces for LGBTQ+ young people to connect with others socially and romantically, particularly for those from other minoritised communities or who live in locations with small or invisible LGBT populations (Lucero, 2017). The internet and social media can be an important source of information and a sanctuary where young people can feel free to be themselves (Stonewall, 2020b).

At the same time, online interaction comes with well reported risks for all users. Hanckel et al (2019) explore the rewards and risks that social media platforms hold specifically for LGTBQ+ young people.

Having pictures shared without consent at a LGBTQ+ venue or event, or sharing LGBTQ+-related posts, can easily and inadvertently 'out' a young person. In addition, when using the internet and social media platforms, LGBTQ+ young people are likely to have to navigate and interact with heteronormative and homophobic, biphobic and transphobic content and abuse. For example, one study found that three in ten young LBGT people report having been bullied online with comments, messages, videos or pictures that were mean, untrue, secret or embarrassing (Stonewall, 2020b).

A further risk for young people seeking connections and information online is that they may not be able to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate (even damaging) information. Professionals can and should talk to young people about how to appraise information, and help them to think about why some sources might have particular perspectives - and how these could influence the information being provided.

Grooming and online exploitation

All children and young people are potentially at risk of online grooming and exploitation, and all need support with digital literacy and safer use of social media. **There may be additional risks for young people who are exploring their gender identity and / or sexual orientation:**

- Young people may use adult websites with content unsuitable for their age as they may think it is an easier way to explore their sexuality, remain anonymous or feel accepted and not-judged.
- When someone feels the need to hide their sexuality and / or gender identity this is a vulnerability that may be exploited.
- Young people may be particularly susceptible to online exploitation due to feeling socially isolated and wanting to fit in, or to please new or established 'friendships'. In some cases, these virtual connections can lead to an increased risk of exploitation, including the sharing of indecent images (Stonewall, 2020b).
- Young people might be at risk of being 'outed' through the content they share or use, or someone could use the threat of 'outing' them as a means of exploiting them.

Practitioners may find the following advice useful:

- Regularly review privacy settings on social media accounts with young people (especially in relation to being unintentionally 'outed' via photos and locations).
- Support young people in reporting inappropriate or offensive content.
- Encourage young people to block, unfriend and unfollow social media contacts where those connections are making the young person feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
- Talk to young people about the use of pseudonyms and avatars to protect anonymity.
- Openly discuss and explore issues of online bullying and abuse.
- Be aware that a young person's sexual orientation and / or gender identity may act as a barrier to help-seeking should they need it. As such, keep conversations about online safety ongoing, positive and judgement free.

(Adapted from Hanckel et al., 2019, and Stonewall, 2020b)

Case study - Jake

Jake is a 15-year-old boy who thinks he might be gay. Jake does not feel like he can talk to his friends at school about it and, since he's often heard his parents make derogatory comments about gay people on TV, Jake feels isolated, confused and scared.

Recently, Jake has met someone he really likes online. He is called Josh, he says he is also 15 years old and they have been speaking online for nearly three months. They haven't been able to use video calling as Josh lives in the countryside and his internet connection is unstable. They are planning to meet soon.

Josh and Jake have sent pictures to each other. At first this was pictures of their faces and bodies. Josh is handsome and he has a 'six pack' from gymnastics. Jake has sent more explicit pictures too.

Recently Josh is asking Jake to film himself in the shower. Jake feels uncomfortable with this, but Josh has said this is what boyfriends do when they cannot be together. Jake wants to keep Josh happy as he is the only person he feels truly understands him. Josh keeps on pressuring Jake for more and more videos and pictures. Josh has joked that if Jake doesn't send them he will leak the ones he has online. Jake doesn't know if he is serious and doesn't know what to do. Jake feels that he cannot talk to anyone about this as he doesn't want them to find to know he is gay. Jake feels more isolated, confused and scared than ever before.

Reflective questions

- How might feelings of internalised homophobia, or the discriminatory attitudes of those around him, influence Jake in terms of how he can seek help?
- What actions can professionals take to ensure young people like Jake feel they can talk to someone?
- How can you ensure young people open to your service know what to do should they find themselves in similar exploitative positions?

Coming out

Even the whole term 'come out' needs to be rubbed off for me. I hate it. I don't need to come out. Come out from where? I've not been hiding!
(Young person – The reference group)

Many people think there is a common coming out experience, but it's individual.
(Young person – The reference group)

As the first quote above suggests, the idea of 'coming out' may sound a bit outdated. For others, grappling with emerging sexual orientation or gender identity can be very stressful. These feelings of pressure are either compounded or alleviated by the ways in which those around them respond, the extent of support they have in their family and friends' network, the school they attend or previous or anticipated experiences of homophobia, biphobia and / or transphobia.

Transgender young people may identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual and so 'coming out' decisions may relate to both gender and sexuality. For LGBTQ+ young people from ethnically minoritised backgrounds, disabled young people or those from some religious backgrounds (or a combination of these intersecting identities), additional barriers and experiences may also influence their confidence or capacity to tell someone about their sexual orientation and / or gender identity.

LGBTQ+ people make decisions about coming out multiple times every day and throughout their life, and coming out is not a one-off event. For example, for young people this might include when starting a new school or college, meeting new people, making new friends, meeting new foster carers or completing forms which ask for personal data. It is always important for professionals to bear in mind that, even if a young person is openly sharing personal information about their sexuality and / or gender identity with you, this does not automatically mean this information is for sharing. Unless there is a specific reason (for example an immediate threat to safety that requires other protective adults to understand a young person's sexual orientation or gender identity), professionals should always ask the young person for their explicit permission each time before sharing their information.

On the following page, Jamie's coming out story illustrates how coming out can be a long and emotional experience for some young people.

A coming out story - Jamie

I always knew I was different. I liked many of the things I was told I shouldn't - this included dolls, dancing and makeup. I also liked lots of things that appeared more acceptable to my family and friends, this included reading, sports and music. I hated liking the things that others told me not to like, so I would secretly play, wear makeup and dance in the bathroom, hidden behind the locked door.

Throughout primary school and secondary school, I did my best to fit in, outside of my antics in the bathroom; though most days I would still be called at least one homophobic or transphobic slur. Most of the time this seemed to bounce off me and have no effect at all, but sometimes this would deeply upset me - especially when I was alone in my bedroom. When alone I would beg and plead with myself to be normal.

By the time I was 10 or 11 years old I started to become aware that I was attracted to boys and this filled me with feelings of dread and despair. These feelings stayed with me for years. As I entered puberty and my body started to develop and change, with hairs growing on my chest and legs and my voice beginning to break, my body and I were becoming strangers occupying the same space but completely alien and separate to one another. My bouts of anxiety, confusion and loneliness often came out as anger and aggression. This eventually tore my relationship with me and my mum apart. I moved to foster care when I was nearly 14 years old.

Between the ages of 14 and 16 years old I was living two lives, one visible to the outside world and the other invisible playing out in my head. I felt completely alone and misunderstood for such a long time. Then one day, what felt like out of the blue, my foster carer asked me what was going on and whether I wanted a hug. At that moment I felt that she was speaking directly to the invisible me. I instantly told her how I had been feeling about my body, about my voice and about my latest secret crush, a boy in college.

My foster carer held me in her arms and said "I am here for you and we will get through this together." That's all I needed to hear, that I was not alone and that someone would be there for me. Since that day I have never looked back.

Intersectionality and coming out

> *Coming out was never black and white. I'm not a lesbian, I'm pansexual. I'm not trans in a traditional sense but I have a complex relationship with gender. I'm not disabled visibly or disabled all the time, but I experience disability. I'm not an immigrant but I'm brown.*
>
> (Umber Ghauri, 2018)

As highlighted above, understanding the context and influences on LGBTQ+ young people's experiences of coming out requires consideration through an intersectional lens. The experiences of LGBTQ+ young people will be shaped and influenced by how others perceive and frame them, both inside and outside of their perceived communities.

Young disabled LGBTQ+ people

Recent publications by Toft et al. (2020) and Toft (2018) highlight the experiences of some young people with disabilities of 'resistance' to them identifying as 'LGBT+', in the form of adults dismissing their sexual orientation or gender identity as 'a phase' they will 'grow out of' or their sexuality being 'blamed' on their disability. This framing presents 'anything other than heterosexuality as being flawed and suggests that there is something undesirable about being LGBT+' (Toft, 2018).

While comments of this kind may not be limited to young people with disabilities, they will have more of a direct impact if their disability means they are reliant on others to support their social interactions. It is important that professionals do not add to these misconceptions and instead advocate for LGBTQ+ young people's rights and freedom to express themselves - and not make assumptions about disability, sexuality or gender identity.

Black, Asian and ethnically minoritised LGBTQ+ young people

LGBTQ+ young people from ethnically minoritised backgrounds can face racism both inside and outside of the LGBTQ+ community, and it is important to be aware that their experiences are likely to be more difficult than their white peers. More than half of Black, Asian and ethnically minoritised LGBT people have experienced discrimination or poor treatment from others in their local LGBT community because of their ethnicity. This number rises to three in five Black LGBT people (Stonewall, 2018).

Homelessness

LGBTQ+ young people are at a heightened risk of homelessness when coming out to their parents, carers and family networks, and research indicates that 'LGB&T people from some minority ethnic groups were identified to be at particular risk' during this time (Hudson-Sharpe & Metcalf, 2016). The Albert Kennedy Trust, a charity established to support LGBTQ people facing or experiencing homelessness, estimates that 24% of youth homeless in the UK identify as LGBTQ+. Once homeless, LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to face violence and discrimination (**www.akt.org.uk**).

Cultural and religious beliefs

Though not all LGBTQ+ people who follow an organised religion or faith experience conflict between their belief systems and their sexuality or gender identity, many may experience such conflict. Young people growing up in communities in which LGBTQ+ is actively condemned by culture, faith or religion face a particularly difficult time. This perspective persists across a broad range of fundamentalist or religious communities and can result in significant damage to an individual's psychological and emotional wellbeing (Brenda et al., 2015).

Young people living in such communities - and often within their family home - may experience particular difficulty around 'coming out' because of the fear and potential reality of losing acceptance. Professionals also need to be alert to a possible increase in safeguarding risks or homelessness at this time.

Support for LGBTQ+ young people who may be experiencing conflict between their sexual orientation and / or gender identity and faith should be young person centred and needs-led. A young person's rights to self-expression should also include their rights to have their religion and faith maintained and respected, should they so wish. There are faith groups, organisations and networks that can reconnect LGBTQ+ people to their faith in supportive and inclusive environments (see following resource list for more details).

For professionals and foster carers whose religious and cultural beliefs conflict with the rights of LGBTQ+ young people, it is important to remember that *The Equality Act 2010* provides protection for LGBT people from 'discrimination, harassment and victimisation' throughout Britain. Where personal feelings of conflict arise for the professional, the use of supervision and critical reflection can be helpful tools to ensure the rights of the child are upheld.

Useful resources

Brown, trans, queer, Muslim and proud - Sabah Choudrey, TEDxBrixton:
https://youtu.be/w6hxrZW6l9I

15 things LGBTQ people of colour want you to know (Stonewall):
www.stonewallscotland.org.uk/about-us/news/15-things-lgbtq-people-colour-want-you-know#racism

akt:
www.akt.org.uk

Resources for LGBTQ+ people of faith:
www.stonewall.org.uk/resources-lgbt-people-faith

A 'coming out' conversation guide

The following is a potential conversation guide, should a young person choose you to come out to:

Young person:
I think I might be lesbian/gay/bisexual/trans.

Professional:
Okay. I am glad you have come to talk to me. How do you feel?

I feel scared, alone. I don't know anyone else who is like me (gay/lesbian/bi and / or trans).

Well, you are not alone anymore, I am here for you. Lots of people are gay/lesbian/bi and / or trans or are questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity. Have you discussed this with your parents or carers?

1. No, they won't accept me / I am scared of their reaction.
2. No, but I plan to tell them soon.
3. Yes, but they are not talking to me now.

1. Well let's discuss this and try and find a way you can talk to someone safe in your family/household. If that's not an option, we can find someone who is experienced in supporting young people who are having similar experiences to you.
2. Good, most parents/carers would want to know something like this. Have you thought about what you're going to say? Have you thought about how they might react?
3. Ok, that sounds upsetting. Do you want to talk about it? Is there anyone else in your family/household or network you can speak to? I can put you in touch with organisations for you to speak to someone. Is this something you might be interested in?

(Adapted from Stonewall, 2020a)

Practice points

The following are overarching outcomes of a successful coming out conversation:

- The young person now knows they have someone they can talk to, judgement free.
- The young person feels cared for, valued and listened to.
- The young person feels confident that what they have told you is not going to be shared without their consent.
- The young person feels that they are in charge of the conversation and any actions taken.
- The young person knows what is going to happen next and that they can speak to you or a relevant organisation again if needed.
- You and the young person will check in on each other at some point.

Coming out resources

- Coming out stories and helpline phone number:
  https://lgbt.foundation/comingout

- Advice and support:
  www.youngstonewall.org.uk/get-support/coming-out-lgbt

- A coming out guide for trans people – LGBT Youth Scotland:
  https://sayit.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Coming-out-trans-scot.pdf

Conclusion

As explored throughout this briefing, LGBTQ+ young people are not a homogenous group and everyone's experiences and needs are unique. All aspects of a young person's intersecting identities are important and it is vital not to assume a young person's sexual orientation and / or gender is the single most important aspect of their identity.

The work you do alongside LGBTQ+ young people should be agreed with them on an individual basis, on their terms and using their terminology. The messages from research are clear and simple, LGBTQ+ young people do not want special treatment. They want what all young people want and deserve - to be listened to, to be valued and to be protected and cared for.

...be inclusive from the get go.
(Young person – The reference group)

Appendix - Key legal frameworks

There are several key pieces of legislation that provide protection for LGBT young people. The following is a brief overview of the *Equality Act 2010* and the *Gender Recognition Act 2004*.

The Equality Act 2010

The *Equality Act 2010* provides protection for LGBT people from 'discrimination, harassment and victimisation' throughout Britain. Under the *Equality Act 2010* individuals are protected from discrimination:

- In the workplace (including work experience placements)
- When using public services such as local authority services, schools, colleges, the police and the NHS
- When interacting with businesses such as shops, restaurants, and cinemas
- When using buses, trains and other modes of public transport
- When joining a club or an association.

Protected characteristics

There are nine characteristics protected by the *Equality Act 2010*.

It is against the law to discriminate against someone because of:

1. sexual orientation
2. gender reassignment
3. race
4. sex
5. disability
6. religion or belief
7. age
8. marriage and civil partnerships
9. pregnancy and maternity.

Under the *Equality Act 2010* trans people can use services matching their gender, except in very restricted individual circumstances.

The *Equality Act 2010* and public bodies

Public Sector Equality Duty

The *Equality Act 2010* also requires public bodies (such as local councils, school, police and hospitals) to consider how their decisions and policies affect LGBT people. The public body should also be able to evidence how they have done this.

Useful resources

For more information watch these YouTube clips by the Equality and Human Rights Commission:

Gender reassignment discrimination
https://youtu.be/HHzBoQJgHoc

Sexual orientation discrimination
https://youtu.be/GktlFUgMbNo

Race discrimination
https://youtu.be/NFhPNz_PaZo

Religion or belief discrimination
https://youtu.be/Aj_3wH1Mew

Sex discrimination
https://youtu.be/tZYilgRFPkU

Disability discrimination
https://youtu.be/-2XZmjzP0HM

Or visit their website:
www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/equality-act

Gender Recognition Act (GRA) 2004

The GRA covers England and Wales and was passed to uphold the rights of trans people to have their gender identity legally and officially recognised. This includes correcting birth certificates, passports and other official documentation. Under the current Act, trans people have to go through a series of medical assessments with psychiatrists to gain a formal diagnosis of 'gender dysphoria', live in their 'acquired gender' for two years and provide evidence of these to a gender recognition panel who will approve or deny their application.

In 2018 the GRA was put to public consultation, with amendments proposed that would have made it easier for trans people in England and Wales to have their gender legally recognised without a medical diagnosis. Though the consultation found support amongst those responding, ministers ruled out changes in 2020 and plans for legislative amendments were ceased.

References

Beagan, B L. & Hattie. B. (2015) Religion, Spirituality, and LGBTQ Identity Integration *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, 9:2*, 92

Briggs, S (2008) *Working with Adolescents and Young Adults: A Contemporary Psychodynamic Approach.* Palgrave MacMillan. London.

Centre for research on children and families (CRCF, 2017). *Speakout: A study of the experiences and identity development of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and questioning young people in care - and the support they receive.* Norwich: UEA.
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ff85c71dd4cdc650b25d90d/t/6006b95a19c6141b352f9105/1611053402592/UEA+research+briefing.pdf

Coleman, J (2014) 'Why Won't My Teenager Talk To Me?' Routledge. London.

Collins, P.H. (2019). *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory.* Duke University Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1)*, 139–168.

Ghauri, U (2018). Queer, disabled people like me are excluded from LGBTQ+ spaces – it is dividing our community. *The Independent.*
www.independent.co.uk/voices/coming-out-lgbt-gay-queer-disabled-disability-twice-sexuality-open-family-friends-a8212431.html Accessed November 16th 2020

Government Equalities Office (2018) *LGBT Action Plan.* Government Equalities Office.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/721367/GEO-LGBT-Action-Plan.pdf

Hanckel, B. et al. (2019). 'That's not necessarily for them': LGBTIQ+ young people, social media platform affordances and identity curation. *Media, Culture & Society, 41(8)*, 1261–1278.

Hicks, S. (2008). Thinking through Sexuality. *Journal of Social Work, 8(1)*, 65–82.

Hudson-Sharpe, N., & Metcalf, H. (2016). *Inequality among lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender groups in the UK: A review of evidence.* National Institute of Economic and Social Research.
www.gov.uk/government/publications/inequality-among-lgbt-groups-in-the-uk-a-review-of-evidence

LGBTQ+ Youth in Care
www.lgbtyouthincare.com

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.* Crossing Press.

Lucero, L. (2017). Safe spaces in online places: Social media and LGBTQ youth. *Multicultural Education Review, 9:2*, 117-128.

National LGBT Survey (2017).
https://government-equalities-office.shinyapps.io/lgbt-survey-2017

Powell, J. (2017) Us vs them: the sinister techniques of 'Othering' – and how to avoid them. The Guardian.
www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/nov/08/us-vs-them-the-sinister-techniques-of-othering-and-how-to-avoid-them

Stonewall (2018). *LGBT in Britain: Home and Communities.* Stonewall.
www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/lgbt_in_britain_home_and_communities.pdf

Stonewall (2020a). *An Introduction to Supporting LGBT Children and Young People. A guide for schools, colleges and settings.* Stonewall.
www.stonewall.org.uk/resources/introduction-supporting-lgbt-children-and-young-people

Stonewall (2020b). *Staying Safe Online: Practical strategies to best support all children and young people online, including those who identify as LGBT.* Stonewall.
https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/a4_toolkit_staying_safe_online_2021-update.pdf

The Proud Trust (No year). *Trans? Under 25? Know your rights at your GP surgery.*
www.theproudtrust.org/contentpopup/trans-rights-in-healthcare/

Todd, M. (2016) *Straight Jacket.* Bantam Press.

Toft, A., Franklin, A., & Langley, E. (2020). 'You're not sure that you are gay yet': The perpetuation of the 'phase' in the lives of young disabled LGBT+people. *Sexualities, 23(4),* 516–529.

Toft, A. (2018). *Disabled LGBT+ young people face a battle just to be taken seriously.* The Conversation.
https://theconversation.com/disabled-lgbt-young-people-face-a-battle-just-to-be-taken-seriously-101271

Twocock, P. (2019). At last, a generation of schoolchildren will grow up knowing it's OK to be LGBT. *The Guardian.*
www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/05/schools-teach-lgbt-september-2020-new-regulations

Research in Practice
The Granary Dartington Hall
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE
tel 01803 869753
email ask@researchinpractice.org.uk

www.researchinpractice.org.uk

Author: Nicholas Marsh, Listen Up - **www.listenupresearch.org**

Cover photo: MStudioImages

With grateful thanks to: Charlotte Andrew, Eric Banks, Christine Cocker, Stephen Hicks, David Sheard and Jacob Sibley

Research in Practice is a programme of
The Dartington Hall Trust which is a company
limited by guarantee and a registered charity.
Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756 VAT No. 402196875

Registered Office:
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall, Totnes TQ9 6EL

ISBN 978-1-911638-80-3