

How to Support Someone Exploring Their Sexual Identity

- [FAQs](#)
- [Support tips](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [Takeaway](#)

Your encouragement and support can make a world of difference to a friend or loved one exploring their sexual identity.

People naturally come in an incredible variety of gender identities, expressions, sexualities, and romantic orientations.

Yet in many places, including the United States, people often face discrimination and even violence based on their sexual orientation and gender identity.

For young people exploring their sexual identity, [coming out](#) to their parents is often the biggest hurdle. On the flip side, gaining acceptance and support from the people they care about can be a source of great relief and strength.

Frequently asked questions about sexual orientation

Before you can provide support, it's key to do your research and find out some of the facts about sexual orientation.

Here are some answers to basic questions you may have.

What is sexual orientation?

Sexual orientation refers to the types of people a person is sexually, romantically, or emotionally attracted to. It's also called sexual identity.

It's not a choice. [Research](#) has found that sexual orientation likely has a genetic basis and is determined before a person is born, though hormones and environmental factors may play a role as well.

Many people are aware of their sexual orientation before they reach puberty.

There are many types of sexual orientations. A person can be attracted to one or multiple types of people, or may not be sexually attracted to anyone.

Many [sex researchers](#) believe sexual orientation is a continuum, with people who are only attracted to people of the same gender on one end and people who are only attracted to people of a different gender on the other. Many people fall somewhere in the middle.

The terminology around sexual identity is always changing to be more precise and inclusive.

For example, “gay” is an older term that some people still use for themselves to mean “attracted to someone of the same or a similar sex.” However, some people who are romantically, emotionally, or sexually attracted to someone of the same or a similar gender may not want to be called “gay.”

Many organizations use the term “LGBTQIA+” or a variation of it to refer to the many types of people with different combinations of sexual and gender identities and characteristics.

LGBTQIA+ stands for:

- **L**esbian
- **G**ay
- **B**isexual
- **T**rans or Transgender and Nonbinary
- **Q**ueer or Questioning
- **I**ntersex
- **A**sexual
- **plus** other identities beyond these descriptions

Here are some of the common sexual orientations a person may have, though there are [many more](#). Someone may use these to describe themselves, or may not wish to use labels at all.

The label a person uses, if any, is up to them. It’s important to listen to the person and use the words they prefer to use to describe themselves. If you’re not sure, you can ask them.

Asexual

[Asexual](#) people don’t often feel sexual attraction to other people, but most do want to have romantic relationships with others.

Bisexual

This term used to mean someone was attracted to both men and women, and some people may still use it this way.

However, today [bisexual](#) generally refers to people who are romantically, sexually, or emotionally attracted to people of many genders, including people with genders that are similar to and different than their own.

Demisexual

People who are [demisexual](#) only feel sexually or romantically attracted to people they feel a close connection with, such as someone with whom they’re in a relationship.

Gay

The term “gay” may refer to someone who is sexually, romantically, or emotionally attracted to someone of the same or a similar gender. People of any gender may call themselves gay.

The words “gay” and “homosexual” were often used interchangeably in the past. However, the latter term is outdated and sometimes considered offensive.

It's best to avoid the term "homosexual" entirely. Only refer to someone as "gay" if you know for sure that they use this label for themselves.

Heterosexual (straight)

"Heterosexual" refers to people who experience sexual, romantic, or emotional attraction to people of a different or "opposite" gender. Both [cisgender](#) and [transgender](#) people can be heterosexual.

Many heterosexual people refer to themselves as "straight."

Cisgender and transgender

"**Cisgender**" means someone whose sex assigned at birth matches their personal sense of self as represented through their gender identity and gender expression.

For example, a cisgender woman has female sexual organs and feels her female sex assigned at birth matches her personal sense of self.

A **transgender** person has a gender different from the one they were assigned at birth.

Lesbian

This term refers to a cisgender or transgender woman who is attracted to people of the same or a similar gender.

Some lesbians use this term for themselves, while others may prefer the terms "gay" or "queer."

Pansexual

A person who is [pansexual](#), or "pan," can be sexually, romantically, or emotionally attracted to several or all types of other people, no matter their gender or sex.

Queer

People sometimes use "queer" as a general term that refers to anyone who is not [straight or cisgender](#).

The term "queer" used to be a slur against members of LGBTQIA+ communities, so some people may find it offensive. It may be best to avoid using this term unless you know someone uses it to identify themselves.

Questioning

A person who's [not certain](#) of their own sexual orientation or gender identity may say they're "questioning" or "curious."

What's the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation?

Gender identity and sexual orientation are different and not related.

Sexual orientation defines the type of person someone is romantically, emotionally, or sexually attracted to — whether their attracted to someone of the same or a similar gender, people of the "opposite" gender, or people of many genders.

Gender identity is the gender a person feels they are. It's not related to sex or romantic or emotional relationships. Types of gender identity include:

- transgender
- cisgender
- [genderqueer](#)
- [nonbinary](#)

But there are [many more](#) gender identities.

A person can have any combination of gender identity and sexual orientation.

Both a person's sexual orientation and their gender identity are a natural part of who they are. Neither can be changed with persuasion, therapy, or medical treatment.

What is romantic orientation?

Romantic orientation is who you have romantic feelings for and want a romantic relationship with. It doesn't indicate the type of people you want to have sex with.

There are many types of romantic orientation, including:

- [biromantic](#)
- heteroromantic
- homoromantic

Sexual orientation, gender identity, and romantic orientation come together to make many combinations of people.

For example, a biromantic, asexual woman is a cisgender or transgender woman who wants to have a romantic relationship with people with either a gender similar or different than her own.

Because she's asexual, she's not generally interested in having sex with that romantic partner.

Other words people use to describe different kinds of romantic orientations include:

- [aromantic](#)
- polyromantic
- grayromantic

There are [many more](#).

Is it just a phase?

Sexual orientation isn't a phase; it's the way that person is.

Likewise, someone can't be "turned gay." If they're romantically, emotionally, or sexually attracted to someone of the same or a similar gender or to many genders, it's an innate aspect of them that's been part of them since before they were born.

A person who's questioning their sexuality or gender identity may go through a period of experimentation and discovery as they learn about themselves. This can happen to people at any time of life.

Over the course of their lives, people may choose to use different words to describe their sexuality, gender, or romantic orientation.

Tips for parents, family, and friends of LGBTQIA+ folx

Here's how to support a person who may be exploring their sexual orientation.

Manage your own emotions first

Be aware of your implicit views and feelings around people with different sexual, romantic, or gender identities.

If you need help working through negative emotions, consider talking with an [experienced psychologist](#) or counselor. To support your friend or family member, you'll need to let go of your own biases and come to them ready to listen and accept.

If you predict that talking with your loved one will bring up difficult emotions for you, prepare for that and think about what you can do and say to stay supportive.

Express your unconditional care

Let your friend or loved one know you'll be there for them no matter what, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

This may be the strongest, most supportive message you can give them.

Develop open lines of communication

Talk with your loved one about everyday things, ask their opinion, and invite them to contribute to conversations that aren't about sexuality on an everyday basis. [Really listen](#) to them and respect what they have to say.

The more they feel they have an open, [respectful dialogue](#) with you, the more likely they'll be comfortable confiding in you over time about more private topics, like sexuality, emotions, and relationships.

Don't try to change them

No amount of treatments, therapies, or arguments will change a person's sexual orientation. You must accept the person the way they are.

In fact, trying to change them could backfire, sending the message that you don't accept them and that they can't confide in you.

You have the power to positively influence how they feel about themselves. Choose to do this instead.

Encourage dating and healthy relationships

It's normal for teens and young adults to experiment with dating, romantic relationships, and sex.

Instead of turning a blind eye or discouraging dating, encourage the young person to date and have [safe and healthy relationships](#).

By openly welcoming LGBTQIA+ relationships in your life, you're sending the person a powerful message that they're accepted.

Discuss sex-related concerns separately

If you feel you need to talk about sex-related concerns, such as the importance of using condoms or another barrier method during sex, don't bring them up in a conversation in which the person is confiding in you about their sexuality.

In a conversation like this, your job is to listen and offer unconditional care and support.

Save potential worries you may have about sex for a separate, matter-of-fact conversation. You can share your ideas and concerns and ask what they think then.

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Resources for LGBTQIA+ folx, their parents, family, and friends

It can really help someone who is questioning and discovering their sexual orientation to talk with others. This will give them a chance to explore their own feelings and find support for [bullying](#) or other discrimination they may be facing.

Look for LGBTQIA+ groups in your community. Many have programs especially for youth. A person may also want to talk with their family doctor, trained counselors, or a psychologist, who can provide confidential, expert information and support.

Here are some further resources to get you started:

- **Q Chat Space.** [Q Chat Space](#) is an online chat community for youth. The service creates safe spaces to chat online by verifying members and using facilitators to actively moderate conversations.
- **GSA Network.** [Here](#) you can search for a local student-run organization for LGBTQIA+ and allied youth.

- **PFLAG.** [PFLAG](#) is an international organization with local chapters that offer advocacy and other supports for LGBTQIA+ communities and allies.
- **CDC.** The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)Trusted Source](#) offers a list of resources for LGBTQIA+ youth and their families to learn more.

What's next?

Exploring your sexual identity and sharing it with friends and loved ones can be a challenging journey, but experiencing encouragement and support from the people you're closest to can make a world of difference.

To be a supportive ally to someone exploring their sexual identity, express your unconditional care and develop open lines of communication. Encourage dating and healthy relationships.

Most importantly, don't try to change them.

If you need further guidance — for yourself or your loved one — check in with local or online LGBTQIA+ support groups, or browse the resources mentioned above.