

FACT SHEET

GENDER DIVERSITY AND LANGUAGE

AT A GLANCE

This resource aims to:

- build understanding of the importance and impact of language in relation to gender diversity;
- develop an understanding of common terminology used to describe gender diversity and related concepts; and
- illustrate how correct terminology can be used in practice.

LANGUAGE RELATED TO IDENTITY IS CONSTANTLY EVOLVING

The language used in this resource has been informed by young people with lived expertise of gender diversity. Young people may use different language. Respect can be shown by using the language young people use for themselves. See our case study: [Collaborative development of gender diversity and youth mental health resources](#) for more information on how this resource was developed.

WHY IS LANGUAGE IMPORTANT?

Language impacts how we understand ourselves, others and the world. The language used to describe experiences of gender diversity, of diverse bodies, relationships and identities has developed both within gender diverse communities, and within the medical and mental health care professions.

Language can impact wellbeing and mental health. It can also maintain and reproduce dominant power structures, which privilege certain groups and contribute to the oppression of others.(1) This can be seen in the negative power of stigmatising language used on marginalised groups. However, language can also be used by marginalised groups, and others, as a form of resistance against dominant narratives and power structures.

The language that has evolved through trans and gender diverse communities has at times acted as a form of resistance against the medicalisation of trans and gender diverse bodies and identities,(2, 3) and against the use of reductive and offensive terminology. This is why using the right language is important – it demonstrates respect, support and allyship.





DIVERSITY IN LANGUAGE

Trans and gender diverse young people are not a homogenous group or community. Many trans and gender diverse young people have multiple social identities that may include culture, faith, ability or sexuality, and may identify with multiple communities. This diversity is reflected in the variety of the language used by trans and gender diverse young people. For example, some LGBTIQ+ young people may not identify with the terminology or practice of ‘coming out’ and may have other ways of understanding the practice of sharing their identity with important others, such as ‘inviting in’.(4)

USING THE LANGUAGE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE USE FOR THEMSELVES

When working with young people, first find out what language they use to describe themselves, their experiences and bodies. Check if they are happy for you to use the same language and terminology, or whether there is other language that they’d prefer you to use. There might be some situations where you use certain words and others where you use different language. Language can also change over time.

PRONOUNS

Pronouns are the words used when referring to someone but not using their name. In the English language, pronouns can be gendered, for example he/him/his, she/her/hers. Some people use gender neutral pronouns, for example they/them/theirs, including neopronouns such as ze/hir/hirs. Some people may use one set of pronouns and others may use multiple sets of pronouns interchangeably for example, they/them/theirs and she/her/hers, and some people use their name rather than pronouns.

It is important not to assume a person’s gender or pronouns. Mental health professionals should invite young people that they are working with to share their pronouns. This can be done through introducing themselves and sharing their own pronouns: “Hi I’m Katya, I use they/them pronouns. How should I refer to you?” As it might take time for some young people to feel comfortable sharing information about themselves, workers should respect the young person’s pace. If unsure about someone’s pronouns use gender neutral pronouns, such as they/them/theirs, until there is a chance to clarify.

GENDER DIVERSITY GLOSSARY

An understanding of common terminology will assist in having respectful conversations with young people. Trans and gender diverse young people will feel less burdened by having to explain concepts, and can instead focus on their care.

TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES OF HOW TO USE
BROTHERBOY OR BROTHABOY	<p>A term used by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to describe gender diverse people that have a male spirit and take on male roles within the community. Brotherboys have a strong sense of their cultural identity.</p> <p>Definition developed by Tekwabi Giz Working Group of the National LGBTI Health Alliance.(5)</p>	<p>I'm a Brotherboy.</p> <p>Joey is a Brotherboy.</p>
CISGENDER OR CIS	<p>Describes people whose gender identity corresponds with the gender that was presumed for them at birth. Someone who is not trans or gender diverse.</p>	<p>Gabby is cisgender.</p> <p>Gabby is a cis-woman.</p>
CISGENDERISM	<p>An ideology that invalidates or pathologises self-identified genders which differ from gender presumed at birth. Cisgenderism constructs a person's own gender identity as less valid than designations made by external authorities.(6)</p> <p>Cisgenderism manifests in individual, social and institutional attitudes, policies and practices.(7)</p>	<p>Cisgenderism has been present within mental health care and research, through the pathologising of gender identities other than cisgender individuals. The use of gender identity disorder is a historical example of this.</p>
CIS-NORMATIVITY	<p>An assumption that all people or nearly all people are cisgender. Cis-normativity can be seen in media representations, public spaces, for example bathrooms, healthcare, product marketing, politics and many other areas.</p>	<p>The assumption that only cis-women can get pregnant is an example of cis-normativity.</p>
COMING OUT	<p>The process through which an LGBTQIA+ person recognises and acknowledges their gender identity, sexuality or intersex status to themselves and shares this with others. Coming out is a recurring process of deciding if and when to come out, and to whom.</p> <p>The idea of coming out is sometimes seen as perpetuating a harmful power dynamic that puts pressure on LGBTQIA+ people to reveal or confess their identity to others. For this reason, the language of 'inviting in' is sometimes preferred.</p> <p>See inviting in and outing.</p>	<p>Peter was hesitant to come out to other students at school, as they were concerned they would be laughed at or rejected.</p>
FAMILY OF CHOICE	<p>A family that a person creates which does not exclusively align with a person's family of origin. This may include different relationships including friends, accepting family of origin members, partners and community members, especially if the person has experienced rejecting or harmful interactions with their family of origin.</p>	<p>Hiro's psychologist worked with their family of choice to strengthen Hiro's social support.</p>

GENDER	A social construct that varies across time and culture. Gender refers to characteristics and norms ascribed to particular groups of people. Gender is conceptualised as a spectrum rather than being underpinned by the binary categorisation into man or woman.	How would you describe your gender?
GENDER AFFIRMATION	<p>The process or processes trans and gender diverse people might take for themselves to live as their defined gender and have this recognised by society. This can include social or legal processes and/or gender-affirming medical interventions.</p> <p>For more information on social affirmation, legal affirmation and gender-affirming medical interventions, see Gender diversity and youth mental health 101 training module.</p>	<p>Yassine attended her initial appointment with Dr Kai to discuss gender affirming medical interventions.</p> <p>Would you like to talk about ways to socially affirm your gender?</p>
GENDER-AFFIRMING CARE	<p>Holistic health care which attends to a person’s physical, mental and social health needs, while their gender identity is respectfully recognised and affirmed.(8)</p> <p>The terms gender-affirming and trans-affirming can be used to describe care that is inclusive and affirming of trans and gender diverse experiences, however the process of gender affirmation is something trans and gender diverse people can engage in to live and flourish as their true gendered self.</p> <p>See gender affirmation.</p>	A whole of service approach is needed to provide gender-affirming care to young people.
GENDER DIVERSE	<p>An overarching term used to describe a range of gender identities within and outside of the binary category of male or female, including non-binary, gender conforming identities, trans men and trans women.</p> <p>See Trans, Sistergirls, Brotherboys.</p>	Marc is a gender diverse young person and identifies as non-binary.
GENDER DYSPHORIA	<p>Feelings of distress or discomfort related to gender incongruence can be triggered by a variety of experiences, which will be different for different people. For example, being misgendered, having conversations about bodies, genitals, intimacy and wearing certain clothing.</p> <p>Gender dysphoria is a diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. For more information on the history of this diagnosis. See clinical practice point: Gender-affirming mental health care.</p>	You mentioned that you feel uncomfortable when you have to wear certain clothes, can you tell me what that’s like?
GENDER EUPHORIA	A sense of comfort or joy associated with a person’s gender and sense of self, pride related to feeling affirmed.	Hassan experienced gender euphoria when they applied make-up before going out for dinner.
GENDER EXPRESSION	The external expressions of gender, which are often ascribed with masculinity or femininity but can also include expressions of androgyny. This can include a person’s haircut, clothing, physical behaviour and/or mannerisms, voice, interests and more.	My gender expression changes day by day. One day I might be feeling more feminine and decide to express this through wearing more femme clothes and makeup.
GENDER IDENTITY	Describes how someone experiences their gender, a person’s deeply felt, internal and individual sense of gender and their perception of themselves.	Fabian had a really clear sense of their gender identity from an early age.

GENDER INCONGRUENCE	<p>A medicalised term for when a person’s gender identity does not align with their gender as presumed for them at birth.</p> <p>Gender incongruence is a diagnosis in the International Classification of Disease, listed under a chapter on sexual health rather than mental health.</p>	<p>Renata has had experiences of gender incongruence since they were twelve.</p> <p>Have you ever had experiences of gender incongruence? This might be where you’ve felt that your gender didn’t completely line up with one or more characteristics of your body or your gender presumed at birth.</p>
GENDER PRESUMED AT BIRTH	<p>Gender presumed when someone is born, typically assumed from sex on their original birth certificate. This presumption impacts the way a person is socialised.</p> <p>See sex assigned at birth.</p>	<p>Gemma was socialised as a boy until she was nine years old.</p>
INTERSEX	<p>Intersex people have innate sex characteristics that don’t fit medical and social norms for female or male bodies, and that creates risks or experiences of stigma, discrimination and harm.(9)</p>	<p>Tama was born with an intersex variation.</p> <p>Tama is an intersex young person.</p>
INVITING IN	<p>The process through which an LGBTQIA+ person recognises and acknowledges their gender identity, sexuality, or intersex status to themselves and others. Inviting in involves deciding who to invite in and when to invite them in, if ever.</p> <p>See coming out and outing.</p>	<p>I’m not ready to invite my mum in yet.</p>
MICRO-AGGRESSION	<p>The use of subtle, hidden, and seemingly harmless verbal and non-verbal behaviours which are specifically used to position one group of people as inherently inferior to the dominant group. This can be expressed in multiple ways including unwarranted intrusive questioning, body language, tone of voice, jokes, and exclusion from social conversation.</p>	<p>Clay reported a number of microaggressions from colleagues to hir manager, including a colleague rolling her eyes when Clay introduced hir pronouns.</p>
MISGENDERING	<p>The accidental or purposeful mis-characterisation of a person’s gender identity.</p>	<p>Hiro described being misgendered during interschool sports.</p> <p>Liza recommended using gender neutral language when addressing groups of students to avoid misgendering trans and gender diverse students.</p>
MISNAMING OR PAST-NAMING	<p>Using a former name, birth name or legal name instead of a person’s affirmed name. This can happen by accident or deliberately, but both can be experienced as harmful by trans and gender diverse young people. This can also be known as deadnaming.</p>	<p>Peter reported that he was frequently misnamed at school after sharing the name he would like to be referred to with the teachers and students.</p> <p>What feelings come up for you when your grandparents past-name you?</p>
NAME	<p>The name that a person would like to be referred to which aligns with their gender identity. This is sometimes referred to as their affirmed name.</p>	<p>Nikhil felt supported and respected when his teammates used his name and corrected others who past-named him.</p>

NON-BINARY	This is an umbrella term for any number of gender identities that sit within, outside of, across or between the spectrum of the male and female binary. A non-binary person might identify as gender fluid, trans masculine, trans feminine, agender or bigender.(10)	Skye is a non-binary person who identifies as gender fluid.
OUTING	Exposing someone's LGBTQIA+ identity to others without the person's permission, either accidentally or purposefully. Outing someone can have serious impacts on mental health, wellbeing, and safety.	I'm worried I might've outed Harry by using their name in front of their parents.
PRONOUNS	The pronouns that align with a person's gender identity, she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs, ze/hir/hirs). This is sometimes referred to as affirmed pronouns.	In the meeting today Clay shared hir pronouns, they are ze/hir/hirs.
QUEER	Queer is often used as an umbrella term for diverse genders or sexualities. For some people, especially older LGBTQIA+ people, queer has negative connotations, because in the past it was used as a derogatory term.	Zachary introduced themselves as a queer person.
QUESTIONING	A process of discovery and exploration about sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or a combination thereof.	Zachary reported that he was questioning his gender identity.
SEX	<p>Sex is a biological concept that relates to a person's physical characteristics and features, including reproductive anatomy, chromosomes and hormones. These features may align with male or female or a person may have intersex variations.</p> <p>Sex markers on birth certificates are assigned following the examination of these sex characteristics at birth by a medical professional.</p>	Hassan explained to their friends that they have known they were a trans woman for a long time and their gender identity never aligned with the gender presumed at birth.
SEX ASSIGNED AT BIRTH	<p>A designation made by a medical professional, which determines the sex marker recorded on a person's birth certificate and registered with legal and governmental systems, for example the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages.</p> <p>This terminology is used primarily in legal affirmation processes that involve changing sex markers on documentation. When talking about someone's experience of gender, it is recommended to use the language of gender presumed at birth.</p> <p>See gender presumed at birth.</p>	Nikita is applying to change the sex recorded on her birth certificate.
SEXUALITY	A part of a person's identity that relates to patterns of sexual and romantic attraction to other people, for example, gay, pansexual, straight and asexual.	When asked about his sexuality, Nikhil reported that he identifies as gay.

SISTERGIRL OR SISTAGIRL	<p>A term used by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to describe gender diverse people that have a female spirit and take on female roles within the community, including looking after children and family. Many Sistergirls live a traditional lifestyle and have strong cultural backgrounds.</p> <p>Definition developed by Tekwabi Giz Working Group of the National LGBTI Health Alliance. (5)</p>	<p>Kylie is a Sistergirl.</p>
TRANS OR TRANSGENDER	<p>Describes people whose gender differs from the gender that was presumed for them at birth.</p> <p>See also Gender diverse, Sistergirl, Brotherboy.</p>	<p>Nikhil is a trans young person. Nikhil is a trans man.</p>
TRANSPHOBIA	<p>A range of negative thoughts, attitudes, feelings and behaviours towards trans and gender diverse people, including implicit and explicit prejudice. The term transphobia is sometimes also used in relation to negative thoughts, attitudes, feelings and behaviours towards gender diverse people who do not identify as trans or transgender.</p>	<p>Peter reported transphobic bullying at his high school.</p>



RELATED RESOURCES

- Orygen suite of resources: [Trans and gender diverse young people](#)

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Minus18 [Pronouns](#)
- TransHub [Language](#)
- TransHub [What are pronouns](#)
- TransHub [Trans Mob](#)
- TransHub [Clinical trans-affirming clinical language](#) – relates to sexual health
- Cohealth [A practical guide to trans, gender diverse and non-binary inclusion](#)

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