



Being an Ally to a LGBTQ+ Adolescent

WORDS MATTER

Research has shown that LGBTQ+ youth who are not accepted by their families are at higher risk for severe mental health and physical health problems. Use of hurtful words or phrases can damage self-worth, diminish self-esteem, and may lead to increased symptoms of depression or anxiety. When those words are repeated over time or are heard at a particularly vulnerable moment, they can even play a role in contributing to self-harm or suicide.

HARMFUL WORDS AND PHRASES:

“It’s just a phase.” - Unfortunately, people say this a lot without realizing that they are dismissing the thoughts and feelings that a person may have been struggling to share for a while. When a person finally musters the courage to come out to a trusted individual, a phrase like this can destroy that trust by giving the impression that this is not a person who will understand.

“That’s so gay!” - This phrase is often used when someone is describing something they dislike or find boring. It also tends to be used when people feel irritated or frustrated about something. Though some may not think this phrase is offensive, by implying that “gay” is something less than, defective, or to be looked down upon, it perpetuates negative attitudes toward those who identify as gay or any other part of the LGBTQ+ community. It also evokes feelings of shame in a person who identifies as such.

“Being gay/lesbian/bisexual is a choice.” - If you are wondering why this would be offensive, consider the first time that you felt a genuine physical or emotional attraction to someone. Was it your “choice” that you were attracted to this person? Or was it something that you felt internally? A growing body of research shows that sexual orientation cannot be tied to a single explanation. It is more likely the result of a combination of several different biological and genetic factors that determine a person’s sexual orientation.



WHAT IS SEXUAL ORIENTATION? Sexual orientation refers to the physical, emotional, sexual, intellectual and/or spiritual attraction that someone feels toward others.

WHAT IS GENDER IDENTITY? A person’s gender identity is their internal sense of who they are and how that aligns with culturally prescribed definitions of what is typical for a male, female, or other category. One’s gender identity may or may not match the sex assigned to them at birth.

WHAT IS GENDER EXPRESSION? All of the elements of appearance and behavior that communicate one’s gender identity are collectively known as that person’s gender expression. These may include clothing, hair style, accessories, and even the roles they take on. The pronouns one uses can also be an important part of one’s gender expression.



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DOs AND DON'Ts of Being an Ally:

DON'T ever ask a person what genitals or “parts” they have. Talking about a person’s private body parts is generally considered intrusive and impolite. Also, there is more that defines who a person is than just which body parts they have.

DO talk about pronouns. Tell which pronouns you use. Ask which pronouns the person uses. Doing this demonstrates your respect for their identity without being invasive or impolite.

DON'T assume that heterosexual relationships (ones between a man and a woman) and cisgender identities (when a person’s identity matches the sex assigned at birth) are “normal” and everything else is “abnormal.”

DO normalize that there many types of healthy and loving relationships, and that identity is determined by more than anatomy.

DON'T refuse to use the name or pronouns that a person tells you they use. Don’t ask what their “real” name is, what their legal name is, or what their name was *before*. You wouldn’t ask these questions of anyone else, would you?

DO use the name and pronouns that the person uses. It isn’t about what you’re used to or what feels comfortable to you. It is about expressing respect and support for who that person is.

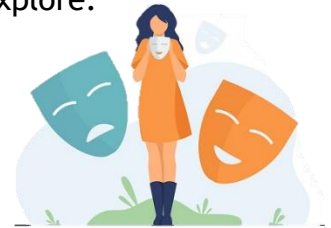
DON'T use words that assume the gender of a person. Examples of these include waitress, policeman, or “boys and girls.”

DO use words that are gender neutral. Examples of these include server, police officer or students. This conveys awareness that anyone could do these jobs or be in this role.

DO acknowledge mistakes, apologize when they happen and correct yourself. Anyone can say the wrong thing. Showing that you’re making an effort is respectful. If you aren’t sure what the correct word is, it is OK to ask.

IDENTITY EXPLORATION

Part of growing up is gaining a clearer, more nuanced understanding of who you are. Some people have a clear sense of who they are that stays relatively stable over time. For others it is necessary to go through a process of self-exploration and questioning. Young people may “try on” various identities and the ways they define who they are may evolve over time. It is important that adults support and respect this process, making it safe for young people to explore.



LGBTQ+ youth deserve to know that they are loved and valued, that they matter, and that they are not alone. By being a reliable adult ally to LGBTQ+ youth, you can help create experiences of safety and support young people in building healthy relationships.

- Safe Passage



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