

Supporting Body Image with LGBTQIA+ young people

Information for Parents

This factsheet has been produced by Butterfly with the support of Minus18, an organisation that supports and empowers LGBTQIA+ young people in Australia through social inclusion, education, advocacy, and youth empowerment.

A Bit About Language

Inclusive and appropriate language is critical to ensuring people feel safe and respected.

The language used within this tip sheet reflects the current 'best practice'. LGBTQIA+ is an inclusive term to represent diverse sex, sexuality, and gender identities. The LGBTQIA+ acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, queer (or questioning) and asexual, with the + representing other identities that don't quite fit other labels, or identities that we don't quite have the language to describe yet.

While this tip sheet relates to LGBTQIA+ young people, it's important for parents and family members to recognise that each young person may hold multiple, intersecting identities. They may also be part of other marginalised groups, such as people living in larger bodies or with disabilities all of which can further influence their relationship with their body.

Body Image and LGBTQIA+ Young People

Body image refers to the thoughts, feelings and attitudes a person has about their body and appearance, which in turn drives what they do and the behaviours they engage in, including eating and movement. Many factors, such as a person's age, gender identity, sexuality, cultural background, ability, and neurodivergence all shape how they see themselves and how others see them.



Body image is deeply personal and complex, for everyone but particularly young people who are navigating puberty and adolescence, times of rapid and significant physical, cognitive, social and emotional change. Adolescence is also a critical time for identity formation, as young people explore their sense of self, personal values, and place in the world.

For LGBTQIA+ young people, body image can be strongly connected to identity, safety, and social belonging, and may be further shaped by experiences

of teasing and bullying, dysphoria, euphoria, social affirmation, or cultural pressure.

Further information is provided later in this factsheet exploring these challenges in more depth.

These experiences can shape how young people feel about and experience their bodies, how they see themselves, how they believe others see them, and the pressures they feel to change or hide parts of themselves.

The role of parents

Parents and other family members play a crucial role in supporting a young person's relationship with their body and identity, during childhood and adolescence. By role modelling positive attitudes, respectful language and behaviours they can create a safe and inclusive environment for their child's body to grow and develop, no matter their size, gender, or sexuality.

All parents will have their own unique relationship, beliefs and values around bodies and appearance shaped by their own upbringing, culture, religion, gender and sexuality. These experiences inform and guide how they support their own child's relationship with their body and identity.



Take a moment to reflect on:



How did you feel about your body growing up?



What messages did you receive about gender, bodies, weight, and health?



How does your gender and sexuality influence the relationship you have with your body (now, and as a child/teenager).

For cisgender or heterosexual parents this may involve acknowledging areas where your experiences as an adolescent differ from your child's and/or being open to learning alongside them and from other LGBTQIA+ perspectives.

Positively role model by:



Speaking kindly about your own body and all bodies.



Practicing self-compassion and self-care in a way that works for you.



Moving your own body for health and wellbeing, instead of weight, body shape or muscle size.



Celebrating non-appearance-based qualities and achievements in yourself and others.



Being aware of any weight and appearance biases and challenging these.



Using social media in a way you would like your own child to.



Reinforcing the message that every person and every body is worthy of respect and kindness.



Seeking help if you are struggling with your own relationship with your body. Doing so is a really positive step, for yourself and for your family.

Remember, as a parent you cannot be expected to get it right all the time. Do your best to learn and unlearn when it comes to the relationship between health, weight, body size and exercise.

Other Practical Ways to Support Your Child's Body Image

Use affirming and respectful language and respect pronouns

The words we use to talk about appearances, bodies, gender, relationships, and identity deeply influence a young person's sense of value and belonging.

- Respect their name, pronouns, and gender identity, understanding that they may use different ones in various settings such as at home, school, or family gatherings depending on their feeling of comfort and safety.
- Use gender-neutral terms whenever possible, such as "they" and "partner" instead of "boyfriend/girlfriend".
- Avoid making assumptions about the gender, sexuality, or relationships of their friends. If you unintentionally get it wrong, you can apologise and try again!

Validate internal identity

Your teen may not feel ready or able to openly express their gender, sexuality or share their intersex status. Regardless of their physical traits and experience, their internal identity is real, valid and worthy of respect even if it's not visible to others or hasn't been disclosed.

- Support them to connect with who they are and their body in ways that feel safe and affirming through creative expression, community or activities that reflect their internal self.

Support self-expression and body autonomy

Feeling seen and validated, even in subtle ways or in private can make a big difference to a young person's body image and wellbeing.

- Encourage them to express themselves through clothing, hairstyles, make-up and support their personal style without judgment.
- At the same time, and as for any child, you can nurture their self-esteem by helping them express themselves while dressing appropriately for the day ahead and in a way that demonstrates self-respect.

Explore different ways of relating to the body

Ideas around 'loving your body' or body acceptance can feel unrealistic or even alienating for many LGBTQIA+ young people.

- Offer alternative ways of thinking about the body such as body neutrality (not having to love or hate your body) or functionality-based approaches which help people to see their body as valuable for what it can do and the experiences it enables.

For example,

"Your lungs allow you to breathe deeply, to help keep you calm and focused."

"Your feet allow you to walk and be connected to country."

"Your hands allow you to create, whether through art, music, or writing."

Butterfly support for body image has a key focus on encouraging people to be kind to their own body and all bodies. Being BodyKind includes how we speak about all bodies and how we nurture, nourish and move our own. Encouraging young people to show their body just a little more kindness can be helpful.

Validate their feelings

Knowing what to say or do as a parent when your child expresses negativity towards themselves, or their appearance is incredibly challenging.

- It's important to acknowledge their feelings and listen without judgment.
- Reassure them that they are loved and you are a safe person for them.
- Help them to recognise and appreciate the aspects of their body and physical self that feel affirming, such as a deeper voice, stronger posture, or a different way of dressing.
- If being bullied by others, be compassionate and let them know that the behaviour is not acceptable.
- Remind them that their body and identity is for them to define, not society or others.
- Take a firm stance against appearance-based teasing and banter within your home, amongst all family members.
- If they are being teased or bullied at school or in another sport/dance/youth environment, bring the behaviour to the attention of the leaders to advocate for the safety of your child.

Explore the influence of appearance ideals

Use media and social media content as a tool to talk with your teen about narrow, stereotypical or rigid messaging and beliefs about gender, bodies, appearances and health, to support their critical thinking skills.

For some trans and gender diverse young people conforming to a gender identity can be very important for their relationship with their body.

- Support them to decide what feels right for them.
- Discourage them from being inspired by appearance ideals which focus on perfection or achieving a certain weight or body size as this can be harmful for their body image.

Encourage media literacy

- Help them to introduce diverse representation into their feeds by following LGBTQIA+ influencers, activists, and media that promote a wide range of body types, gender expressions and sexual identities, as well as content that has nothing to do with appearance.
- Encourage them to notice how appearance-based content affects their mood and body image.
- Ensure they know how to use in-built tools in platforms to manage feeds and time spent online, as well as safeguarding and reporting functions if they experience toxic behaviour online.

Find Community and Support for You and Your Child

Positive body image is supported when young people feel seen, accepted and affirmed.

- Connect your young person with LGBTQIA+ youth groups, mentorship programs, or supportive online spaces to reduce potential isolation, provide them with role models, shared language and the opportunity to explore identity in a safe way.
- For yourself, seek out resources to help you understand the unique challenges your child may be facing and consider online/offline support groups or forums.

// I didn't have the language or representation growing up to understand that my struggles with body image were tied to my gender and sexuality. I'm not saying every kid is queer—but every kid deserves to know that if they are, they're safe, seen, and not alone. That kind of support might have helped me hate my body less as it changed, or even just feel less disconnected from it."

Chantel Le Cross, Lived Experience Advocate



LGBTQIA+ young people thrive when they feel seen, supported, and valued.

You don't need to have all the answers, but being a safe and affirming presence in their life can make all the difference.

Specific body image challenges for LGBTQIA+ young people include:

Pressure to conform to appearance ideals

LGBTQIA+ young people may feel pressure to conform to the narrow appearance ideals that exist in society for all people, as well as specific LGBTQIA+ community ideals where different and sometimes conflicting expectations exist around appearance. Navigating multiple appearance ideals and pressures can be confusing and make it hard for young people to feel good about their bodies.



Social Exclusion, Stigma, and Discrimination

LGBTQIA+ young people may experience teasing, bullying, exclusion, or marginalisation because of who they are. These experiences can erode their sense of self, safety and belonging, leading to low self-esteem and emotional distress. This can cause young people to feel disconnected from, ashamed of or critical of their bodies.

Minority Stress

Being LGBTQIA+ is not in itself a risk factor for poor mental or physical health, however experiences such as discrimination, exclusion, fear of rejection or pressure to hide who they are or conform to societal expectations can have a serious impact. These experiences can lead to chronic stress and body dissatisfaction which increase the risk of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders.

Lack of Positive Representation

Mainstream media promotes narrow appearance ideals usually based on straight, cisgender standards. Even within LGBTQIA+ representation, physical portrayals can be limited or stereotypical. When young people don't see people like themselves positively represented, they may feel further unseen and like their bodies are not valid, desirable, or worthy.



Pressure to 'Pass'

Trans and gender diverse young people may feel additional pressure to "pass" to be seen and recognised as their affirmed gender to avoid being misgendered, invalidated, or harmed. For non-binary young people, this can be especially painful, as in a binary society it may feel impossible to be recognised or respected as their gender at all. The distress of not being recognised as their gender can lead to disordered eating or other attempts to alter their body, in the hope of passing more consistently.

'Gender Distress' / Gender Incongruence

Trans and gender diverse young people may experience significant distress and body dissatisfaction when their body does not align with their gender identity, at any time, but is often heightened during puberty. This may lead to poor mental health and harmful and extreme behaviours in attempt to stop physical development or alter the body. This may precede a clinical experience of Gender Dysphoria, though not all trans and gender diverse people experience Gender Dysphoria.

Lack of Affirming Support

A lack of acknowledgement and understanding from family members (immediate and/or extended), friends, peers, educators or health care professionals can leave young people, particularly trans and gender diverse young people, feeling unsupported and isolated and may internalise negative beliefs and shame about themselves and their body.

Trauma and Non-Consensual Interventions

Intersex young people may have had or be at risk of having non-consensual medical procedures during childhood or adolescence to align their bodies with societal norms around male and female. While often done with good intentions these procedures can have lasting effects – physical and emotional, potentially leading to feelings of disempowerment, shame or a lack of ownership over their body.

Stigma, Shame, and Secrecy

Societal discomfort with bodies that fall outside binary norms means intersex young people are often taught, directly or indirectly, that their bodies are wrong, abnormal, or should be hidden. This can foster internalised shame, secrecy, and disconnection from their bodies.

What to Do If You're Concerned About Your Child's Body Image, Eating Behaviours or Mental Health

Recognising the unique challenges LGBTQIA+ young people face, helps us to understand why eating disorders are more common among people in the LGBTQIA+ community.

How an eating disorder develops is different for everyone but if you are concerned that your child may be developing or experiencing serious body image and eating issues it is important to trust your instincts, learn more and seek help.



Further Information Eating Disorders and Early Intervention

Butterfly - Helpline

Call, email or webchat with a qualified counsellor for body image and eating disorders information and support.

Butterfly - Referral Database

Find LGBTQIA+ friendly body image and eating disorder professionals and services.

Butterfly - Are You At Risk Screening Tool (14+)

Screening tool to identify if a person is at risk of an eating disorder

Mental Health First Aid - Guidelines for Eating Disorders

Factsheet on warning signs and early intervention.

Reach Out and Recover

Tool to help identify problems and guide on next steps

Eating Disorders Families Australia

Support for carers and families impacted by eating disorders.



Young LGBTQIA+ young people are also at increased risk of Gender Dysphoria and Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)

Further Information and Resources

Body Image

Butterfly

BodyKind Families

Body image education and resources for families of teens.

Butterfly

BodyKind Online Education

Student e-learning program with supporting family resources.

Butterfly

Body Pride Resource Hub

Videos, lived experience insights, podcasts and more.

LGBTQIA+ Youth Focused Organisations and Supports

Minus18

Australia's charity improving the lives of LGBTQIA+ young people. Offers life affirming events and programs for LGBTQIA+ youth, education and training for schools and workplaces, online resources and more.

Rainbow Door

A free specialist LGBTQIA+ helpline providing information, support and referral to all LGBTQIA+ Victorians, their friends and family.

 1800 729 367  0480 017 246

10AM - 5PM, 7 days per week

Switchboard

Provides peer-driven support services for LGBTQIA+ families, allies and communities.

Transgender Victoria

Victoria's leading body for transgender, gender diverse and non-binary (TGD) people.

Queerspace

Provides low or no-cost confidential counselling services to support LGBTIQ+ communities and their families.

 03 9663 6733

QLife

A free and anonymous service that provides phone and webchat support.

 1800 184 527  [Chat](#)

3PM - 12AM, 7 days per week

Interaction for Health and Human Rights Australia

The leading national body by and for people with innate variations of sex characteristics, bringing together Intersex Peer Support Australia and Intersex Human Rights Australia.

Transhub

ACON's digital information and resource platform for all trans and gender diverse (TGD) people in NSW, our loved ones, allies and health providers.

PFLAG Australia

Parents in pride. Support for parents, caregivers and friends to support their LGBTQIA+ family members and loved ones.



Glossary

Cisgender A person whose gender identity corresponds to the gender that was presumed for them at birth.

Cisnormative The assumption that being cisgender (where a person's gender identity aligns with the gender presumed for them at birth) is the norm.

Heterosexual A person who is only attracted to people with a different gender to their own.

Intersex People with innate genetic, hormonal, chromosomal or physical characteristics that do not conform to medical norms for male or female bodies.

Gender Diverse People who do not fall within traditional binary notions of sex and gender (male and female).

Gender Expression The way a person expresses their gender. This expression may vary in different context.

Gender Identity The gender someone identifies with.

Gender Dysphoria Psychological distress that occurs when a person's gender identity does not align with the sex that was presumed for them at birth, often leading to significant emotional, social, or physical discomfort.

Gender Euphoria A sense of joy, comfort, or affirmation experienced when one's gender identity is recognized and validated, often occurring when a person is able to express themselves authentically.

Minority Stress The experience of stress because of direct or perceived stigma and discrimination based on belonging to a particular group.

Sexuality A person's sexual and romantic attraction to other people.

Social affirmation The process of recognizing and validating a person's gender identity through the use of their chosen name, pronouns, and gender expression in social settings.

Transgender A person who identifies as a gender that is different to the one that was presumed for them at birth.