

Talking Body Image with LGBTQIA+ young people

A resource for educators and professionals working with young people.

This factsheet has been produced by Butterfly with the support of Minus18, an organisation that improves the lives of LGBTQIA+ youth through life affirming events and programs, education and awareness campaigns.

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), intersex, 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 factsheet refers to LGBTQIA+ young people, it's important to recognise that each young person holds multiple, intersecting identities and may also be part of other marginalised groups, such as people living in larger bodies or with disabilities.

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 the behaviours they engage in. 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.

Within the LGBTQIA+ community itself there are also different pressures, barriers, and discrimination relating to sexuality and gender identity.



In Butterfly's BodyKind Youth Survey,

trans and gender diverse and LGB+ young people report higher rates of body dissatisfaction than their cisgender, heterosexual peers.

[Further information here](#)

Understanding the specific challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ young people

is essential to creating an inclusive and affirming environment. These challenges can shape how young people experience their bodies, including how they see themselves, how they believe others see them, and what they feel pressured to change or hide and include:

Pressure to conform to appearance ideals

Appearance ideals and stereotypes are narrow for all young people and often tied to binary gender norms. LGBTQIA+ young people may feel pressure to conform to these ideals as well as specific LGBTQIA+ community ideals, where different and sometimes conflicting expectations around appearance exist. Navigating multiple appearance ideals and pressures can be confusing and make it harder 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-worth and emotional distress. This can cause young people to feel disconnected from or critical of their bodies, especially if their appearance is the focus of the bullying or exclusion.

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, portrayals can be limited or stereotypical. When young people don't see people like themselves positively represented, they may feel that their bodies are not valid, desirable, or worthy of care.



Pressure to 'Pass'

Trans and gender diverse young people may feel 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.

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.

Lack of Affirming Support

A lack of understanding from family, friends, educators or health care professionals can leave young people feeling isolated. Without affirmation of their gender, body, or identity, LGBTQIA+ young people may begin to internalise negative beliefs about themselves, which can manifest as body dissatisfaction or shame.

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.

Body image pressures can be distressing for all young people but for LGBTQIA+ young people it can also be tied to physical and emotional safety.

Practical Tips for Supporting Body Image in LGBTQIA+ young people

Understand and acknowledge the unique experiences of LGBTQIA+ young people.

Seek to learn and understand by consulting with LGBTQIA+ individuals and organisations and engage in professional development that can help to challenge unconscious and internalised biases. Actively listening and learning helps create spaces where all young people feel seen, respected, and safe.



Explore the influence of appearance ideals.

Body image education often explores appearance ideals, gender norms and expectations of what a 'real/ideal' man or woman 'should' look like, and the limiting aspects of these stereotypes. While for some young people conforming to a gender identity can be comforting and empowering, they can become harmful if people feel pressured to conform in order to be accepted, affirmed, or seen as valid.

- Support young people to critically reflect on gendered appearance ideals and decide what feels comfortable, and meaningful for them. Encourage them to build a sense of identity and body image that is self-directed, rather than shaped by external expectations.
- Discourage them from being inspired to achieve a certain weight or body size or striving for perfection as this can be harmful for their body image.

Use inclusive and respectful language.

Inclusive language helps create space for all young people to feel seen and respected.

- Use gender-neutral terms wherever possible, such as everyone, people, young people, students, or folks when referring to groups, and terms like partner instead of boyfriend or girlfriend, or parent or caregiver instead of mum and dad when referring to relationships and family roles.
- Avoid making assumptions about gender, family structures, relationships, or whether certain body shapes and sizes are healthy or unhealthy.

Create an inclusive environment.

Seeing diverse bodies and identities reflected helps young people feel that they belong.

- Ensure posters, learning materials, digital content, and visual cues reflect a broad range of body types, gender identities, and expressions across both youth and staff spaces.
- Actively challenge discrimination, microaggressions, and subtle forms of exclusion, including microinsults and invalidation, and recognise that staying silent can contribute to the normalisation of oppression.
- Speak up, model inclusive behaviour, and foster a culture where all young people feel seen and respected.
- Ensure anti-bullying policies also include weight and appearance-based teasing.

Respect gender identities and pronouns.

Sharing your own pronouns, when introducing yourself or in places like email signatures and online platforms, helps model respect and signals awareness of gender diversity.

- Avoid making assumptions about a young person's gender based on how they look, sound, or present.
- Respect that they may use different names or pronouns in different settings, depending on who is present and whether it's safe to be out.
- Check in with the young person about what language is appropriate to use in different contexts.

Strengthen media and social media literacy skills.

- Help them to question and unpack the narrow appearance ideals and gender representations that exist, including within LGBTQIA+ spaces without criticising them for wishing to conform. Instead, focus on building awareness and resilience to help young people make informed choices about the content they consume.
- Help young people curate online spaces that reflect their values, interests, and identity, and that support their sense of safety and belonging.
- Encourage them to notice how appearance-based content affects their mood and body image, and to balance their feed by following accounts that focus on creativity, humour, activism, or positive LGBTQIA+ representation.
- Bullying and toxic behaviour can occur in online environments, so it's important that young people know how to use safeguarding tools and reporting features.

Explore different ways of relating to the body.

Mainstream approaches to body image often emphasise body acceptance or 'body love' but for many LGBTQIA+ young people, this may feel unrealistic or even alienating.

- Instead, offer alternative ways of thinking about the body, such as body neutrality (not having to love or hate your body), or comfortable embodiment (fostering a sense of safety, ease, or control within your body, even if it's not always a positive experience).
- Functionality-focused approaches, exploring what your body allows you to do and experience, are more helpful than those which focus on how the body functions as for some trans and gender diverse young people there is significant distress related to reproductive functions.
- Affirm that there's no one "right" way to feel about your body and that you can build a relationship with it on your own terms.

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 internal identity.

Some young people may not be able to openly express their gender or sexuality or share their intersex status.

- Help young people realise that regardless of their physical traits and appearance, 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 in ways that feel safe and affirming through creative expression, community, or activities that reflect their internal sense of self.
- Feeling seen and validated, even in private or subtle ways such as clothing, hair or make-up, can make a meaningful difference to their wellbeing and body image.

Talk to the changing nature of body image.

As body image is influenced by both internal and external factors, it's something that can evolve. For LGBTQIA+ young people, it may shift as they navigate things like puberty, coming out, social acceptance or rejection, or access to gender-affirming care. These experiences can influence whether a young person feels connected to, proud of, uncomfortable in, or disconnected from their body.

- Support young people to explore new ways of relating to their body that feel safer, more affirming, or more aligned with who they are.

Connect body image to wellbeing and mental health.

- Help young people to find strategies that support their overall wellbeing and mental health, which is connected to how they feel about their body.
- Introduce and encourage the practice of self-compassion and self-care activities that work for them.



Provide help-seeking resources and information:

Asking for help can be challenging for any young person but it is important that resources and referral information is inclusive of LGBTQIA+ youth organisations who have experience and expertise in supporting of LGBTQIA+ youth.

Encourage community connection.

Positive body image is supported when young people feel seen, accepted, and affirmed. LGBTQIA+ communities, especially peer spaces (online and offline), can help reduce isolation and provide young people with role models, shared language, and the opportunity to explore identity in a safe environment and be their authentic self.

Be OK with saying the 'wrong thing' and learn from this.

Encouraging open conversations means that sometimes we and the young people we are working with might make mistakes.

- By creating a culture of learning rather than fear of 'getting it wrong' everyone can grow in their understanding.
- Acknowledging that a mistake was made and apologising and/or rectifying the language or comment, demonstrates respect to the person and also the LGBTQIA+ community.

"When I was a teenager, I really wish my school counsellor and other health professionals knew more about how gender identity, body image, and eating disorders intersect. It would've helped me get the right support and care when I needed it. I thought my only option was to control my eating in unhealthy ways"

Ryan, Lived Experience Advocate



In settings where LGBTQIA+ issues may not be openly discussed, it is important to use inclusive language and signpost young people to LGBTQIA+ friendly organisations and support.



If you are worried about a young person, the relationship they have with their body, their eating and exercise behaviours or their mental health, it is always better to seek support sooner rather than later.



Further Information and Resources

Body Image and Eating Disorders

Butterfly

Helpline

Call, email or webchat with a qualified counsellor.

Butterfly

Referral Database

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

Mental Health First Aid

Guidelines for Eating Disorders

Factsheet on warning signs and early intervention.

Butterfly

Are You At Risk Screening Tool (14+)

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

Butterfly

Guidance for schools

Guidance on early identification, intervention and supporting recovery.

Dove Self Esteem Project

Proud to be Me

Body image program for LGBTQIA+ youth and allies (11 – 14yrs)

Butterfly

BodyKind Schools

Body image awareness activities, education and resources for secondary schools and support with creating a BodyKind environment.

Butterfly

Body Pride Resource Hub

Videos, lived experience insights, podcasts and more.

Butterfly

BodyKind Online Education

E-learning program for Australian secondary schools to address social media and body image.

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.

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 gender 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.