

Our sexuality is a central part of what makes us uniquely who we are and is a major influence on our thoughts, feelings and actions. Sexuality is not just about sex. It covers a broad spectrum of things such as relationships, personal values, culture, attraction, thoughts, romantic feelings, sexual feelings, identity, expression and behaviours.

Sexuality isn't defined by who someone has sex with, it's about how someone feels and how they choose to identify themselves. This can include how someone is attracted to others – physically, emotionally, romantically, and sexually.

Some people may be attracted to women or to men or to both or to neither. People may have an emotional attraction to someone but not want to have sex with that person. People may have a physical attraction to someone but not want to have a relationship with them. How we are attracted to people and the strength of these attractions can change over time.

Everyone's sexuality is different and these differences form a normal part of the broad range of human relationships and experiences.

A large part of growing up is working out who we are, and finding our place in the world. So, like all other aspects of life, understanding sexuality can take some time for young people (and adults) to figure out.

As a child is growing up and going through puberty, they are already navigating complex changes to their body, their brain, their hormones and their relationships. They are exploring and managing strong feelings.

Learning to understand their sexuality can be exciting, confusing, intense, scary, confronting, relieving, overwhelming, difficult or easy.

Most people know from a very young age who they want to have relationships with but for others it can take some time to figure out.

Sexuality can be the same for some people all their life and for others it can be more fluid or change over time. The most important thing to remember is that sexuality is not a choice, it is a natural part of who someone is and everyone has the right to feel comfortable and accepted for who they are.

Some common sexuality terms

Sexual identity is complex and diverse. It is and is not necessarily as simple as being 'gay' or 'straight' but there are some common labels and definitions to help understand some aspects of sexuality.

Heterosexual

Attracted mostly to people of the opposite sex or gender (e.g. Women who are attracted to men or men that are attracted to women). This is sometimes referred to as being 'straight'.

Homosexual

Attracted mostly to people of the same sex or gender (e.g. men that are attracted to men or women that are attracted to women). This is sometimes referred to as being 'gay'. 'Lesbian' is a common term for women who are same-sex attracted. Between 5-10% of WA teens identify as gay or lesbian.

Bisexual

Attracted to both men and women. This does not mean that the attraction is evenly weighted, a person can have stronger feelings for one sex or gender. About 15 % of WA teens identify as bisexual.

Pansexual

Attracted to partners of any sex or gender.

Asexual

Not sexually attracted to anyone (or someone who has very little sexual attraction).

Fluid

Sexual attraction changes in different situations or over time.

Queer

Some people refer to themselves as 'queer' which can include a variety of sexual identities (and gender identities). Some people find this term offensive as it has previously been used to hurt and insult people. Most people are happy for you to ask what labels they prefer (if you need to use a label at all).

Questioning

Some people refer to themselves as 'questioning' if they are exploring their sexual identity and don't want to apply a label to themselves.

LGBTIQA+

The term or acronym LGBTIQA+ is used to refer collectively to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual

The use of labels to describe people can be problematic especially in using them to describe a sexual identity. It is important that people are able to choose what label they feel comfortable with. They might find the label they choose change over time or they might like to choose no label at all. Remembering and understanding all of these labels is not what is important.

The most important thing for teachers to ensure is that students are free to be themselves and that they are safe and supported in their school environment.

Discrimination

Homophobia

Homophobia is defined as the fear, hatred, discomfort with, or mistrust of people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual. This can take many forms - hurtful 'jokes', stereotyping, name-calling, isolating people, bullying, negative attitudes and beliefs, prejudice, discrimination, physical abuse.

Some people's homophobia may be rooted in conservative religious beliefs and some people may have learnt homophobic beliefs from parents and family.

Internalised homophobia

Sometimes people can have internalised homophobia when they are conflicted with their own same-sex attraction. This may mean that they never accept their same-sex attractions and they may feel the need to 'prove' they are straight by exhibiting very stereotypical behaviour of straight men and women, or they may bully, discriminate or abuse gay people.

Outing

Outing is the act of someone revealing someone else's sexual orientation without their permission. This may be done intentionally or accidentally (for example, sharing a post on social media that shows someone to be in a same-sex relationship). Some people 'out' others to be malicious and others may not realise the implications of 'outing' someone without their permission. Sharing someone's sexual identity without consent can make them embarrassed, upset, vulnerable and at risk of discrimination and violence.

Legal obligations

Teachers and schools need to be aware of their legal obligations in reference to discrimination and take responsibility in eliminating discrimination in their classrooms and schools.

Tips for dealing with discrimination

Dealing with homophobic attitudes from students can be difficult. It is essential that teachers address any inappropriate comments as they arise. Helpful strategies may include:

- Be as well informed as possible - do professional reading and attend training.
- Be prepared to respond to anti-gay, anti-lesbian or anti-bisexual slurs as would be done for racist or sexual slurs.
- Respect the person challenging you. Focus on challenging the negative opinions rather than the person.
- Avoid a debate or argument. Where a person has strongly held views, it may be more productive to discuss sexuality issues in terms of how a person is feeling.
- If students use derogatory terms like 'homo', 'that's so gay', 'leso', try the following approach:
 - name the use of the term as a problem
 - refer to the group agreement established in the class (e.g. no put-downs)
 - give the consequences that were established along with group agreement.
- If students are experiencing discrimination, refer them to services that can offer support (e.g. school counsellor)

Teaching tips

In general

- Be aware and respectful of potential sexual diversity within your students.
- It's important to understand and be aware of where your own values lie to avoid imposing them on students.
- If there is resistance by parents or the community to raising this topic in a classroom setting. Emphasise that learning activities focus on discrimination, and public and community health, not on moral judgement.
- It is particularly important to use inclusive language in sexual health education in order to avoid unknowingly discounting or discriminating against same-sex attracted people. (e.g. use the term 'partner' rather than boyfriend/girlfriend)

- Don't presume the gender of a person's partner. (e.g. That the man in the book you are reading has a wife)
- Explore issues such as conformity, individuality, discrimination and stereotyping.
- Choose books, videos and examples in lessons that include diverse relationships.
- Use gender neutral names when talking about couples so that students can bring their own meaning to scenarios. (e.g. Alex and Ali)
- Provide resources that students can take if they would like to know more on the subject.

External resources

[Freedom Centre](#)

For sexually diverse young people under 26 to support each other and their communities to be informed, happy and healthy about their sexuality, sex and gender.

[Living Proud](#)

Living Proud LGBTI Community Services of WA is a non-profit organisation which aims to promote the wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer and other sexuality, sex and gender diverse people in Western Australia.

[Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays \(PFLAG\) WA](#)

Parents, families and friends of lesbians and gays who provide a support system in an effort to understand and accept loved ones who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex.

[Sex and gender, Get the Facts](#)

WA health website with information for teens

[Families like mine, Beyondblue](#)

A guide for parent and families of young people who are LGBTI.

References

1. Fisher, C. M., Waling, A., Kerr, L., Bellamy, R., Ezer, P., Mikolajczak, G., Brown, G., Carman, M. & Lucke, J. 2019. 6th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2018, (ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 113), Bundoora: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University.

This Background Note relates to the following Learning Activities:

- [Puberty part 2](#)