

Talking with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ Young People about Sexuality and Gender

A young person's sexuality and gender is a large part of their social emotional wellbeing (SEWB). Health professionals play an important role in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to discuss their sexual and gender identity. You may feel uncomfortable, unprepared, or worried about saying the wrong thing when talking with young people about sexual and gender diversity. You may also be worried about making sure you talk about sexual and gender diversity in ways that are culturally appropriate.

The purpose of this resource is to provide health and support workers tips on how to talk about sexual and gender diversity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescents and young adults. The information included in this resource was adapted from the 'Yarning Quiet Ways' resource developed by the WA Department of Health in partnership with Aboriginal parents (<https://gdhr.wa.gov.au/web/yarning-quiet-ways>), as well as findings from the Walkern Katatdjin: Rainbow Knowledge project (www.rainbowknowledge.org) and Trans Pathways project (<https://www.telethonkids.org.au/projects/trans-pathways/>). This resource should be used in conjunction with other resources on lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, asexual (LGBTQA+) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth health as well as further training (such as <https://blackrainbow.org.au/training/>).



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When to Yarn about Sexuality and Gender

- Talking about sexuality does not necessarily mean talking about sex. Sexuality is about who a young person is attracted to romantically and sexually, not necessarily who they have sex with.
- Some health professionals wonder whether talking about sexuality and gender is outside their scope of practice. However, young peoples' sexuality (who they are attracted to) and gender (a young person's sense of self as a boy, girl, or non-binary person and how they express this) can have a big impact on their SEWB. Therefore, it can be appropriate to talk with young people about sexuality and gender in settings where you are talking with them about their broader SEWB.
- Similar to yarning about sexuality and gender development with heterosexual and cisgender young people, it is important to "yarn early and yarn often" (<https://gdhr.wa.gov.au/web/yarning-quiet-ways>) with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ young people about gender and sexuality.
- Talking about gender and sexual diversity can have a positive impact on a young person's SEWB (e.g., feeling like they are being their true self). It can also help young people feel comfortable and proud expressing their gender and sexual identities. While it might appear to make some people feel a bit shame, showing that you are open to having a chat about sexuality and gender is a positive thing.
- Some health professionals worry that talking about sexuality and gender with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people is culturally inappropriate. Check with local Elders and community leaders – it is not always the case that being LGBTQA+ is frowned upon in the community. For example, some Elders in Perth are accepting of diverse genders and sexualities. Do not name young people when talking with Elders – it is important to allow them to 'come out' to Elders only when they are ready.

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- Using the word 'queer' can be offensive to some LGBTQA+ people and their family members, as this word has historically been used as an insult and is linked to feelings of hurt. However, some members of the LGBTQA+ community have reclaimed this word and use it to describe themselves. Only use the word queer when it is how a person prefers to describe themselves.
- Other aspects of talking about sexuality include: healthy relationships with friends, family and romantic partners, 'coming out', how sexuality can change over time, and how comfortable a young person might feel in their family and community.
- Some people experience romantic attraction without any sexual attraction (sometimes referred to as asexual) or never experience romantic attraction (sometimes referred to as aromantic) (<https://healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/learn/health-topics/sexual-health/sexuality/>). This is part of natural spectrum of sexuality.
- There is support for LGBTQA+ young people in the Whadjuk Noongar community. Elders we have spoken to as part of the Walkern Katatdjin project said that attitudes and behaviours change with time and that culture evolves. We want our young people to be happy, healthy and safe, regardless of their sexuality or gender.
- It can be tricky to know when or if to begin a conversation with a young person about sexuality and gender. But there are still things health services can do which help a young person identify them as a safe and inclusive place (see below).
- It might be helpful to know that a young person is LGBTQA+ because this may affect their relationships, housing, mental health and other aspects of their life. but you probably do not need to know about their sexual history unless you are discussing sexual health (e.g. if they may have contracted an STI).

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Making an Inclusive Space

There are several things that Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), as well as other health services that work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, can do to show support for LGBTQA+ people including:

- Not assuming that a young person is straight or cisgender.

In the GOANNA 2 STI and BBV Survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth (16-29 year), 5% of young people reported being gay or lesbian, 9% reported being bisexual, and 4% answered unsure/other

Almost 4% of participants in a national survey of trans and gender diverse young people (14-25 years) indicated they were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (<https://www.telethonkids.org.au/projects/trans-pathways/>). The prevalence rate of LGBTQA+ peoples within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander community is currently unknown.

- Do not assume someone's sexuality or gender. Using gender neutral language can help LGBTQA+ young people feel included. When asking about a young person about people in their life, use terms such as 'partners', 'someone special to you' instead of girlfriend/boyfriend or having a man/woman.

"...they just automatically assume I have a boyfriend or when anyone is just like, "Oh, I'm in a relationship," they're just like, "Oh, who is he?" instead of thinking of, "Oh, they might be gay."" (Walkern Katatdjin study participant).

- Explain confidentiality upfront to every young person you work with. Confidentiality is a major concern for many young people and can be a barrier to accessing healthcare. In order to create an environment that feels safe, let them know that what they say is confidential and clearly explain mandatory reporting requirements.

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Making an Inclusive Space

- Young people are very aware of the physical environment of services. Acceptance for LGBTQA+ peoples can also be seen through body language.

“Some people, they don't say that they care, but they still act standoffish about it.” (Walkern Katatdjin study participant).

“With acceptance, someone greets you with a smile, they're happy, you know that you're being accepted straightaway.” (Walkern Katatdjin study participant).

- Avoid using slurs about LGBTQA+ people or making homophobic or transphobic jokes between staff members (even when you think young people cannot hear you) – e.g., making a derogatory joke about an LGBTQA+ celebrity or community member. Young people are very tuned in to what people around them are saying and use this as a guide to figure out whether it is safe to talk about their gender and/or sexuality.
- Being vocal and discussing your support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ people can help young people feel safe.



“I told a couple of my best friends who we'd had conversations where they were like, “Isn't it horrendous how that person was discriminated against for being gay,” or things like that. So then by them saying those sorts of things...if they were saying it, then they probably weren't against gay people, so I can probably trust them.” (Walkern Katatdjin study participant).

“Except if, specifically, the topic of anything gay comes up, that'd be pretty easy to tell, based on their reaction, how okay with it they are.” (Walkern Katatdjin study participant).

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Promoting an accepting and inclusive environment throughout your service can look like:

- Telling young people your pronouns. For example: “Kaya/Hello, my name is....my pronouns are she/her. You can also let me know your pronouns if you feel comfortable, and I will make sure to use them.” A helpful guide on using pronouns can be found here <https://www.minus18.org.au/articles/what-are-pronouns-and-why-are-they-important>.
- Keep informed about events of interest in the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ space (e.g., finding out when Pride is celebrated in your community and if there is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in Pride events). Pride is usually celebrated in Perth in November, which marks a month-long celebration of the strength of LGBTQA+ peoples, although there are LGBTQA+ celebrations held in WA throughout the year (e.g., Broom Pride Mardi Gras Festival <https://www.broompride.com/>; Busselton Mardi Gras <http://busseltonmardigras.com.au/>; Albany Pride <https://albanypride.com.au/calendar/>)
- Your service could develop a calendar of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ events (e.g., <https://www.emhaws.org.au/2020-calendar>).
- Post supportive content on your organisation’s social media. While you might get some negative backlash, it is important to be visible in your support for LGBTQA+ members of our communities.
- Use visual signs in your service to show that you are accepting of LGBTQA+ people.
- For example, pinning up posters that celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ people, such as <https://www.emhaws.org.au/first-nations-lgbti-posters>, <https://www.emhaws.org.au/lgbtisbqa-rainbow-heart-poster> at your service.

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Promoting an accepting and inclusive environment throughout your service can look like:

- Advertise your health service at local LGBTQA+ events that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ young people might be attending e.g., PrideFest.
- Ensure bullying/anti-discrimination policy is in place at your organisation. Young people are perceptive to the way your staff are being treated.
- On intake forms, asking people “what is your gender” instead of having a Male/Female/Other option is a better approach.

“So it was nice to know that I can go then, just talk about it and stuff like that, whereas I’d just be going there for a script, and they’ll be like, “Oh, what’s your gender?” because it’s hard to tick female/male.” (Walkern Katatdjín study participant).

Each of the above actions help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ young people come to know you as inclusive service and will help them feel more comfortable in discussing any concerns they have around their sexuality or gender without fear of rejection or misunderstanding.

What to do when a young person shares with you that they are LGBTQA+

There are several things you can do if a young person ‘comes out’ to you or brings up questions about their sexual or gender identity. Use the helper skills you already have and follow their cues. A young person who is already happy and comfortable may not need support, and probing into how things are going for them could be intrusive. If a young person is clearly anxious or upset, there are many things you can do.

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What to do when a young person shares with you that they are LGBTQA+

These include:

- Thank them for sharing this with you.
- Reassure them that what they say is confidential if they are worried about being 'outed' (i.e., someone telling other people that they are LGBTQA+ without their permission).
- It may be useful to find out who else they have 'come out' to.
- If someone comes out as trans, check about name/pronouns and when to use them (e.g., it may be inappropriate to use their chosen name around people they are not 'out' to).

Check in with how things are going and ask:

- How are they feeling about themselves?
- If they can express themselves the way they want to.
- If their family's response to their sexuality/gender impacting their relationship with them?
Do they feel safe at home?
- Do they have accepting friends?
- How things are going at school?

Explore what support they need.

- Do they want more information about being LGBTQA+?
- Support the young person through any negative reaction from family members. The majority of participants in the Walkern KatatdjIn study reported mostly positive reactions from their family when they told them they were LGBTQA+, although this is not always the case (Hill et al., 2020).
- Help them to identify supportive people they feel comfortable talking with about their sexuality/gender. A LGBTQA+ family member or community member may be a great help
- Help them to identify Aboriginal LGBTQA+ events in the community they may want to attend.
- Remind the young person that you are there to support them.

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What to do when a young person shares with you that they are LGBTQA+

General tips.

- Reflect the language they use to talk about themselves, e.g., if they say that they are gay, continue to use the word 'gay' when talking about them, instead of substituting in other words to like 'homosexual', 'queer', or 'LGBT'.
- It is helpful to discuss things that are specific to being LGBTQA+, but young people do not want you to treat them differently when you find out that they are LGBTQA+. Be aware of your attitude towards the young person, to make sure that it does not change after they come out to you.

How to start conversations about sexuality and gender

When working individually or in small groups with young people, you do not need to know a young person's sexual or gender identity to be able to show signs of acceptance. You can use TV shows, videos, and articles that feature Aboriginal LGBTQA+ people or LGBTQA+ issues to start a yarn about sexuality and gender.

Some content you might want to watch include:

(These videos can be found on YouTube)

- Supporting our LGBTIQ Youth - Young Deadly Free
- Brotherboys Yarnin' Up - Trans Health Australia
- Brotherboy: - Multiculture Vic
- Taz's Story - Headspace Australia
- Taz's Story: LGBTIQ+ and Aboriginal Communities - Headspace Australia
- Simone and Rosalina's story - Beyond Blue Official
- Open Doors: Perspectives on Working with LGBTIQAP+ Sistergirl & Brotherboy Young People - Dovetail QLD

Articles and webpages:

- ATSI Rainbow Archive: <https://indigblackgold.wordpress.com/>
- Journey of love, acceptance: The Kimberley Echo

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How to start conversations about sexuality and gender

You might feel worried about saying the wrong thing and causing offense – it's ok to make mistakes sometimes! It helps if your intention is good, and you take a generally curious and non-judgemental stance. For example, saying to a young person: "I may not know all the facts, but I am very willing to learn and want to understand your experiences"

"When I grew up this wasn't something that people talked about so I feel like I have a lot to learn." (Yarning Quiet Ways, p.33).

- If you are going to talk about gender differences, do not assume that gender is only male or female (i.e. that it is binary) or that gender is fixed (i.e. it is the same for someone's entire life).
- When asking a young person questions about their sexuality and gender it can be helpful to explain why you are asking to avoid seeming too intrusive, e.g., "Many young LGBTQA+ people experience bullying that makes it hard to go to school, so it might help to talk about if anything like that has ever happened to you."
- Some cultural practices are divided on gender lines. Find out if there is there a cultural authority you can talk with about this. You may have to consult Elders on how a non-binary or trans Aboriginal young person can navigate law or cultural practices, and how other young people have navigated these situations.
- Pay attention to what your non-verbal responses are showing. Are you unconsciously reacting negatively to hearing about diverse gender or sexuality?
- Gender and sexuality are fluid across the lifespan. It is okay if young people identify a certain way at one point in time and then change their 'label' (how they identify). This does not take away from the legitimacy of how they identified then or now.

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How to start conversations about sexuality and gender

- Some young people know they are LGBTQA+ from a very young age and others might not know they are LGBTQA+ until they are much older. It is okay to give young people time to explore their sexual or gender identity. This is not the same as thinking that being LGBTQA+ is 'just a phase'. Overwhelming, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQA+ young people in the Walkern KatatdjIn study told us that they want to be accepted for their true and authentic self at any point in time.



"So I think having something – a service that's openly like, "We're here for LGBTQI+ people in Aboriginal community," and is specifically targeting us is the best thing because like you can go down to [ACCHO], you can go to a GP, but it's just general like it's not for you, it's for everyone. And you don't know what you're walking into" - (Walkern KatatdjIn study participant).

