gdhr | Growing & developing healthy relationships

Key messages

- People with intersex variations have **innate sex characteristics that don't fit medical and social norms for female or male bodies.**
- People with intersex variations are often grouped together with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, but **they have unique experiences** from these communities which need highlighting.

What are intersex variations

Just as people have variations in height, eye colour and skin colour, they also have natural variations in hormones, chromosomes and sexual organs. People who are intersex are born with **physical** sex characteristics that do not fit the stereotypical and medical definitions for female and male bodies. The term 'intersex' is an umbrella term for many forms of intersex that exist; at least 40 variations are known.[1]

Some people with intersex variations that may be apparent at birth (e.g. if the baby's external genitals do not appear to be typically male or female) and some may be diagnosed prenatally.

Many people with intersex variations, do not find out until they start to go through puberty (or do not start puberty) and this can be very challenging for young people in a school setting particularly if RSE lessons do not acknowledge this kind of diversity.

Some people do not discover they have intersex variations until they try to have children, some find out through random chance, and some never find out.

It is estimated that around 1.7% of the population have intersex characteristics which means in a school of 1000, approximately 17 students may have intersex variations.[2]

What is the difference between intersex and transgender

The term 'intersex' is different to the term 'transgender' or 'gender diverse'.

Being transgender or gender diverse is when someone's gender is different from the sex they were assigned at birth (see Gender Diversity). Being intersex is about your physical body's innate sex characteristics and is not about someone's gender.



Appropriate language

Terminology to describe intersex variations has changed over time.

Many people are familiar with the term hermaphrodite. This is considered inappropriate language as it refers to an organism which has all male and all female reproductive systems which is fully functioning.[3] While this term is accurate for some animals, this is not accurate for people with intersex variations as they do not have all the male and all the female reproductive systems.

Medical terms such as Disorders of Sex Development (DSD) are also not considered appropriate, as it implies that intersex variations are a disorder - something bad, something to treat or fix. Many people with intersex variation do not feel this way and it does not recognise intersex variations as a natural, healthy variation.[4]

The terminology a person with intersex variations chooses to use is entirely individual. Teachers need to be aware of the sensitive nature of the terms used and seek to use affirming language by the individual concerned.[4,5]

Discrimination

People with intersex variations may experience discrimination and stigmatisation in many settings – medical, social, legal, educational.[6] Research shows that school is a place that LGBTIQA+ young people are likely to experience harassment and discrimination[5], but this research often focuses on young people who are same-sex attracted or transgender and does not accurately reflect the specific challenges and experiences of young people with intersex variations.

The types of harassment and discrimination that LGBTIQA+ young people may experience at school include discriminatory language; social exclusion; deliberate use of the wrong pronouns; humiliation; rumours; online bullying; written abuse; graffiti; verbal abuse; and physical abuse.[5] The impact of this discrimination at school can lead to:

- inability to focus in class;
- truancy;
- poor academic performance;
- self-isolation during break times for personal protection;
- missing days at school; and complete disengagement with the school system.[5,7,8]

Stigma and discrimination can have a significant impact on mental wellbeing. All school staff need to ensure that they are providing a safe environment for all of their students. Awareness and education are fundamental to ensuring intersex human rights.

Teaching tips

- Be aware and respectful of the potential diversity within your class/school. Be mindful that just because you don't know of any intersex young people in your school/class, does not mean that there are not any. It may be that they do not feel safe to share this at school. It is also likely that students may not they have an intersex variation - so talking about diverse bodies and intersex variations in positive ways will help support people later in life if they find out themselves, or someone they know, has an intersex variation.
- Because of natural variations in chromosomes, hormones and responses to hormones, people with intersex variations can have bodies that may be different at birth or they may develop differently as they age and go through puberty. Be mindful and acknowledge this kind of diversity in lessons on reproductive systems and puberty. Be aware that some topics may be triggers for young people and ensure that you have created a safe space with a group agreement in place.
- Try to use inclusive language. Using words that are not absolute can go a long way to helping all people to feel more included (not just people who have intersex variations). Use words like 'most', 'many' and 'some' instead of 'all' or 'everyone'. Say words like 'typical' instead of 'normal' sex development. Regular reminders that there is a wide range of 'normal' helps too. For example,
    - 'Most people with a uterus will get their period during puberty'.
    - 'Puberty can start as young as 8 for some people, for some it may not start until 16. Most people start puberty around 10 or 11.'
    - 'Most people will then be able to make a baby.'
    - 'Women typically have XX sex chromosomes'.
- People with intersex variations may have had operations in early infancy and throughout childhood which can affect their physical and mental health. Medical appointments may impact attendance and engagement in school – they may require additional support and allowance for flexibility.
- Be aware that bullying, teasing and physical abuse for children and adolescents who have intersex variations can occur at schools. It is imperative that schools provide a supportive environment for these students and develop and implement policies and practices which do not tolerate teasing and bullying. Equal Opportunities Commission (Guidelines for Supporting Sexual and Gender Diversity in Schools) offer support and guidelines for this.
- Ensure that your students are aware of mental health and sexual health services that can support them:
    - school counsellor or school nurse
    - Intersex Peer Support Australia
    - Reachout
    - Freedom Centre

There are a number of videos, books and resources listed below that offer personal stories and perspectives of intersex young people. Educators should preview all texts and videos prior to presenting them to students to determine the suitability for their students (Department of Education Policy: Use of texts in education settings). These videos should only be used by educators who know their class well and have the skills to facilitate safe and sensitive discussions and activities. Resources such as these can bring up issues for some viewers. Teachers and other staff members in the room need to be aware of protective interrupting techniques, how to deal with disclosures, and be familiar with school procedures/policies on how to refer young people who require further support.

Other resources

Fact sheets/booklets/videos

- You're not alone - Info for lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex, queer and questioning young people, Freedom Centre
- Phoebe's story – 8.17 min video of a young person who has intersex variations.
- You can't ask that: Intersex (external site) 27min video from ABC (M-rating).
- Let's talk about intersex (external site) 3.32 min animation
- InterAction - Advocacy and human rights for people with intersex variations (external site)
- Teaching intersex issues: a guide for teachers in women's, gender and queer studies (external site)
- The needs of students with intersex variations (external site) - academic paper by Tiffany Jones
- 9 young people onhow they found out they are intersex (external site) - TeenVogue article
- The way we think about biological sex is wrong (external site) - Ted talk by Emily Quinn (12min 22sec)
- A guide to IDAHOBIT for teachers

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