Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation refers to someone's level of romantic and sexual attraction to others.

Sexual orientation isn't defined by who someone has sex with, it's about how someone feels about others. 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/sexual attraction to someone but not want to have a relationship with them. There is great variety in sexual orientation, and these differences form a normal part of the broad range of human relationships and experiences. Like all other aspects of life, understanding your sexual orientation can take some time for young people (and adults) to figure out. Learning about your own sexual orientation can be exciting, confusing, intense, scary, confronting, relieving, overwhelming, difficult or easy.

The most important thing to remember is that sexual orientation 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.

Image



Sexual orientation vs Sexual identity vs Sexuality

Sometimes you might hear or read other words like sexuality or sexual identity used to describe sexual orientation. GDHR uses **sexual orientation** as that is about how someone feels (romantically and sexually)

about other people, **sexual identity** is about the label someone chooses for themselves but that does not necessarily reflect someone's feelings or behaviours, and **sexuality** is a broad term covering relationships, personal values, culture, attraction, thoughts, romantic feelings, sexual feelings, identity, expression and behaviours.[1]

Some common sexual orientation terms

There are a range of terms people use to describe their sexual orientation. Here are some labels and definitions to help understand some more common sexual orientations.

Straight
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). Some people use the term heterosexual. The 7th National survey of secondary students and sexual health 2022 reported that 58.1% of participants identify as heterosexual or straight.[2]

Lesbian
Women who are attracted to other women. This is sometimes referred to as being 'gay'.

Gay
Usually used for men who are attracted to other men.

The 7th National survey of secondary students and sexual health 2022 reported that 6% of participants identify as gay or lesbian.[2]

Bisexual
Attracted to men, women and other genders. This does not mean that the attraction is evenly weighted, a person can have stronger feelings for one sex or gender. The 7th National survey of secondary students and sexual health 2022 reported that 23.3% of participants identify as bisexual.[2]

Pansexual
Attracted to partners of any sex or gender. It is similar to the term bisexual.

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 identifies). 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. The 7th National survey of secondary students and sexual health 2022 reported that 6.1% of participants are not sure of their sexual orientation.[2]

Same-sex attracted or Same-gender attracted
An umbrella term used to describe people who feel an attraction to people of the same-sex or gender.

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

For more information on transgender people or people with intersex variation please read the following Educator notes:

Intersex variations

Gender diversity

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.

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

When do young people work out their sexual orientation?

Australian research suggests that 10% of young people have always known they were attracted to people of the same sex or gender and that; 26% knew before 10 years-old; 60% knew by 13 years-old and 85% knew by 15 years-old.[3]

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.

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 be 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.

How common is homophobia in schools?

From *Writing Themselves In 4*, 63.7% of LGBTIQA+ secondary school students reported frequently hearing negative remarks about sexual orientation at secondary schools and a further 25.1% heard negative remarks sometimes.[4] When it came to experiences of bullying and assault, 28.1% of secondary school students had been verbal assaulted because of their sexual orientation or gender in the past 12 months at secondary school.

It was also reported 6.7% were physically harassed and 8.6% were sexually assaulted at their secondary school because of their sexual orientation or gender.

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 discrimination and slurs as would be done for racist or sexual slurs.
- 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', 'lezo', 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).
- Ensure your school's anti-bullying policy explicitly names homophobia (and other forms of discrimination) and this is widely communicated to the community. Many studies have found this to be a preventative factor for homophobia.[4]

Teaching tips

In general

- Be aware and respectful of potential 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. Have posters and artwork which show your support for diversity.
- 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 LGBTIQ+ 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 LGBTIQA+SB 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.

Sex and gender, Get the Facts

WA health website with information for teens

References

1. WHO (2025). Sexual health. Retrieved from: https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health#tab=tab_2

2. Power, J., Kauer, S., Fisher, C., Chapman-Bellamy, R., & Bourne, A. (2022). The 7th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2021 (ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 133). Melbourne: The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University. Retrieved from: https://opal.latrobe.edu.au/ndownloader/files/38618210

3. Hillier, L., Jones, T., Monagle, M., Overton, N., Gahan, L., Blackman, J. & Mitchell A. 2013. Writing Themselves In 3. Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University. Retrieved from: https://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/documents/arcshs-research-publications/WTi3.pdf

4. Hill A. O., Lyons A., Jones J., McGowan .I, Carman M., Parsons M., Power J., Bourne A. (2021) Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia. National report, monograph series number 124. Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University. Retrieved from: https://www.latrobe.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1198945/Writing-Themselves-In-4-National-report.pdf

This Background Note relates to the following Learning Activities:

- Puberty part 2

© 2023 Government of Western Australia Department of Health gdhr.wa.gov.au