

Language Guide for Transgender and Intersex People

Created in February 2024 by interACT and the National Center for Trans Equality

What does it mean to be intersex?

Intersex is an umbrella term that refers to having innate variations in physical traits that differ from typical expectations for male or female bodies regarding the development, appearance, or function of sex-related characteristics. This includes variations in one or more traits such as genitals, gonads and other reproductive organs, hormone production or response, or chromosome patterns, which may present at birth or may occur naturally at a later time.

Intersex people are about 2% of the population. People who are not intersex are called “endosex.” Some intersex variations are noticeable at birth, such as visible differences in genital appearance. Others become outwardly apparent at puberty due to unexpected hormone changes (such as facial and body hair or breast/chest growth). Some variations may never be outwardly visible.

Infants are not generally assigned intersex at birth: they are assigned male or female and are raised in either male or female gender roles. Some are still subjected in birth or early childhood to intersex genital mutilation: medically unnecessary and nonconsensual surgeries to make a child’s body look more “typical” to a male or female appearance.

How do I talk about intersex people?

- Avoid pathologizing terms. Instead, use community terms.
 - Instead of “intersex conditions,” use “intersex variations”
 - Instead of “abnormalities,” use “intersex traits”
 - Instead of “disorders of sex development,” use “intersex people” or “people with variations in their sex traits”
- The language used in most bills and among legislators is “DSD” or “disorders of sex development.” Some people self-identify with DSD language (commonly defined as “differences of sex development” instead) but most in the community prefer the term “intersex.”
- See interACT’s [style guides on intersex-inclusive language](#).

What does it mean to be transgender? How do I talk about it?

Transgender is a broad term that can be used to describe people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were thought to be when they were born. “Trans” is often used as shorthand for transgender.

When understanding the transgender community, it's important to note that an individual does not need to medically transition to be trans. Medical transition refers to any number of medical treatments or procedures some transgender people may choose to undergo in order to more align their physical appearance with their unique gender identity. Each person's gender, and the ways they choose to outwardly represent their gender, is personal and unique to the individual. Some transgender people identify as neither a man nor a woman, or as a combination of male and female, and may use terms like **nonbinary** or **genderqueer** to describe their gender identity.

Respecting transgender people means treating them according to their gender identity, not their sex assigned at birth.

It is important to use respectful terminology, and treat transgender people as you would treat any other person. This includes referring to the person using the name and pronouns they ask you to use. If you aren't sure how to refer to someone, **just ask politely**.

What's the difference between intersex and transgender?

A person's intersex status is separate from their gender identity. But intersex and transgender people both challenge the common myth that gender is dependent on body parts.

Transgender is a broad term that can be used to describe people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were thought to be when they were born. **Intersex** refers to people who were born with differences in their external or internal anatomy, compared to the two ways that bodies usually develop.

Many intersex people grow up with a gender identity that aligns with what they were assigned at birth—intersex and cisgender. Other intersex people may realize the gender they were raised as was wrong for them—meaning they may be both intersex and transgender, or nonbinary.

Intersex is not a third sex, and it is not the same as being nonbinary. Intersex is a word that describes a spectrum of physical traits and the different ways that bodies can develop. Nonbinary usually describes a person's experience with gender.