



RESEARCH

Intersex status and parenting: Organisation Intersex International

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Intersex status is a human variation that occurs at about the same frequency in society as people having red hair.

There is very little information available on the experiences of intersex people and parenting and little research has been undertaken in this area. Many – but not all – of the conditions that fall under the term ‘intersex’ result in infertility. However, intersex people may be actively involved in parenting as co-parents or foster parents.

Definitions

The term ‘intersex’ is an umbrella term for a number of different conditions where a person may have biological attributes of both sexes, or lack some of the biological attributes considered necessary to be defined as one or

the other sex. A simple working definition used by Organisation Intersex International (OII) Australia is:

Intersex people are born with physical, hormonal or genetic features that are neither wholly female nor wholly male; or a combination of female and male; or neither female nor male.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights uses the following definition:

An intersex person is born with sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, and/or chromosome patterns that do not fit the typical definition of male or female. This may be apparent at birth or become so later in life. An intersex person may identify as male or female or as neither. Intersex status is not about sexual orientation or gender identity:

intersex people experience the same range of sexual orientations and gender identities as non-intersex people.

Service providers

The following information is from OII and offers some guidance on good practice for service providers:

Respectful assistance is the key to intersex-friendly service. Creating a safe and welcoming environment will build honesty and trust and ensure better service delivery. It is important for services to provide clear messages that allow intersex clients to disclose their intersex history or status if and when they want to and on their own terms.

Before you ask for client information, ask yourself if this information is actually relevant. Intake forms could ask: "Are you intersex?" with a simple yes or no answer required. If you are unsure about what pronoun or title to use, politely ask the client.

Intersex is a biological state rather than a sexual orientation or gender identity. Being inclusive of intersex people may mean changing your language and frame of reference.

Intersex people typically discover their intersex status when told by their parents or doctor. This is a different experience to the LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) concept of 'coming out' to family and friends.

Intersex people should not be presumed to be part of a lesbian, gay or bisexual community or collectively labelled as 'queer' as many intersex people are heterosexual. Being straight or heterosexual is therefore not the

opposite of LGBTI. When discussing outcomes/experiences of LGBTI people, consider using the term 'non- LGBTI' to represent people who do not identify as LGBTI.

Terms to avoid include pathologising language such as 'disorders of sex development'. The word 'hermaphrodite' is also regarded as stigmatising by some intersex people. Use the word 'intersex', or refer to intersex traits, variations or characteristics.

Most intersex people are not transgender or gender diverse. Avoid making assumptions that intersex people have, want to, or need to, transition.

Families where a parent or parents are intersex may experience isolation and secrecy and may not be comfortable to disclose the struggles they experience in starting a family.

Although many intersex people are heterosexual, some have formed strong alliances with LGBT communities because they face similar experiences of stigma and social exclusion based on assumptions and expectations about gender, sex and the body. Like LGBT people, intersex people often find they do not see their experiences reflected in the resources, language or stories around them. Anything that service providers can do to increase their understanding of intersex status will help to validate and normalise the lived experience of intersex people.

Further information is available at www.oii.org.au.



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- Rainbow families and primary school
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- Teasing, name-calling, and bullying
- Older kids and adolescents
- Rainbow families in rural and regional areas
- Educating the community
- Rainbow families: The challenges
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- Child health and wellbeing in same-sex parent families: The evidence from Australia
- Work, love, play: Understanding resilience in same-sex parented families
- Transgender men and women and parenting
- Intersex status and parenting: Organisation Intersex International

Case studies

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- Frances and her mums: Transgender parenting