



[Safeguarding LGBTQ+ children and young people | NSPCC Learning](#)

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1. Introduction

1.1 Best practice for protecting LGBTQ+ children and young people

All children and young people have the right to be protected and kept safe from abuse and neglect.

LGBTQ+ children and young people face the same risks as all children and young people, but they are at greater risk of some types of abuse. For example, they might experience homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying or hate crime. They might also be more vulnerable to or at greater risk of sexual abuse, online abuse or sexual exploitation (Barnardo's and Fox, 2016; McGeeney et al, 2017; Xu and Zheng, 2014).

1.2 What does LGBTQ+ stand for?

LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning and more. This term covers a broad range of people who have different lived experiences and may be at different stages in exploring their identity. It includes people who are asexual or have differences in sex development (sometimes known as being intersex).

There are a wide variety of terms people might use to describe their sexuality (who they feel attracted to) or their gender identity (their personal, internal perception of their own gender). For example, someone who has a different gender identity from the sex that was registered at their birth might identify as trans or transgender. Other people whose gender identity doesn't sit comfortably with 'boy' or 'girl' might identify as non-binary, agender, gender fluid or genderqueer (Government Equalities Office, 2018).

Children and young people might identify as LGBTQ+ in more than one way, for example they could be gay and transgender. Children who are LGBTQ+ might also have other characteristics that mean they face additional challenges or need extra support, for example being in care, being disabled or being from a Black, Asian or minoritised ethnic group.

Adults who work with LGBTQ+ children and young people need to understand the challenges they might experience and know what action to take to support and help keep them safe.

2. Adversities

2.1 Adversities faced by LGBTQ+ children and young people

People's perceptions of, or ideas about, LGBTQ+ young people's identity can make children more vulnerable to negative experiences or interactions. These might include:

- experiencing homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (The Children’s Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs Council, 2018; LGBT Health & Wellbeing et al, 2018; McDermott, Hughes and Rawlings, 2018; Scottish Government, 2021)
- feeling the pressure of sexual and gender norms (McDermott, Hughes and Rawlings, 2018; Scottish Government, 2021)
- having to manage their sexual and gender identity across different life areas (for example, coming out at school but not at home) (McDermott, Hughes and Rawlings, 2018)
- feeling isolated or ‘different’ from their family and friends (The Children’s Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs Council, 2018; LGBT Health & Wellbeing et al, 2018)
- feeling like they can’t express their identity because they’re worried about people’s responses (LGBT Health & Wellbeing et al, 2018)
- having complicated or negative feelings about their gender identity or sexuality (McDermott, Hughes and Rawlings, 2018)
- experiencing gender dysphoria (NHS, 2021).

“I am transgender but it’s so hard living like this when there are so many ignorant people out there. It’s really stressing me out and sometimes I wish I wasn’t here. I wish people would just accept me for who I am and that I could feel normal”.

Childline counselling session with a child, age unknown.

These negative experiences and interactions can impact on all areas of a young person’s life.

2.2 Family relationships

Some young people who talk to Childline about gender and sexuality also talk about their family relationships. Topics discussed include:

- experiencing negative reactions from family members after coming out
- being afraid of not being accepted by their family
- worrying about not being able to be themselves at home.

“I came out to my parents recently and they were really shocked and shouted at me which really upset me. I feel uncomfortable and I don’t like being at home as I am having to constantly hide how I am feeling. I have been going to the LGBT club at school and find it really helpful. It provides a safe space for me to be who I am. I feel I can talk to the teacher who runs the club about my feelings as they are so supportive and understanding”

Childline counselling session with a 13-year-old child.

2.3 Homelessness

LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to become homeless than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. This might be because of:

- parental rejection
- being subject to physical, emotional or sexual abuse from family members
- family violence

(Albert Kennedy Trust (AKT), 2015).

If they are homeless, LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to experience targeted violence and be exposed to sexual exploitation. For example, perpetrators might offer a child a safe space to stay in order to sexually exploit or abuse them (The Children’s Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs’ Council, 2018).

2.4 Mental health

Puberty can be a distressing and sometimes traumatic time for LGBTQ+ children and young people as their body and hormones start to change. They might start to have new or confusing feelings about their gender or sexuality. This can be particularly distressing if young people don't have anyone to talk about things with or don't feel supported.

Research suggests that LGBTQ+ children and young people might be at higher risk than their non-LGBTQ+ peers of:

- self-harm
- experiencing suicidal thoughts and feelings
- anxiety
- depression

(McDermott, Hughes and Rawlings, 2018; LGBT Health & Wellbeing, Scottish Trans, Equality Network, LGBT Youth Scotland and Stonewall Scotland, 2018; Becerra-Culqui, 2018).

2.5 Isolation or barriers to speaking out

There are some factors that might mean LGBTQ+ children and young people feel less able to speak out about any worries or negative experiences they're having.

Barriers include:

- worrying that telling someone will 'out' them before they're ready
- fearing that it will make the bullying or abuse worse
- thinking no one will believe them
- feeling they are to blame for what they're experiencing
- worrying that adults will think their gender identity or sexuality is to blame for their experience of abuse

(Bradlow et al, 2017; The Children's Society, Victim Support and National Police Chiefs Council, 2018; Stonewall and Childnet International, 2022).

Young people who are questioning or exploring their sexuality or gender identity might have confusing or difficult feelings. They might worry they will face discrimination if they come out or not feel able to talk to anyone about what they're going through. (Becerra-Culqui et al, 2018).

3. Risks of harm

Evidence suggests that LGBTQ+ children and young people might be at increased risk of some forms of harm.

3.1 Child sexual exploitation

LGBTQ+ relationships are underrepresented in educational resources and the media (Barnardo's and Fox, 2016). This means there are fewer examples of relevant, healthy relationships available to LGBTQ+ young people. If LGBTQ+ young people are not taught about healthy and unhealthy relationships, it might be easier for an abuser to groom them into believing an abusive relationship is normal.

If LGBTQ+ young people are unable to get information about sex and relationships from school or family, they might seek advice and support from people in adult spaces, such as gay clubs. This is particularly true of young people who live in rural areas or in communities where their gender identity or sexuality is not accepted. Adult spaces don't have the same

safeguarding and child protection measures in place as spaces specifically for children. Children might be pressured or coerced into doing something they don't want to do, particularly if they are already isolated and don't have anywhere else to turn for support (Barnardo's and Fox, 2016).

The adults around a child can sometimes assume that it's normal for LGBTQ+ young people to have sex at a younger age as part of exploring their identity. This means the adults might not consider being involved in underage sexual activity as a possible sign of abuse, and do not take appropriate action to protect the child. Similarly, professionals might not always consider the possibility that an adult woman is sexually exploiting a girl (Barnardo's and Fox, 2016).

3.2 Online abuse

The internet can be a great place of advice, support and community for young LGBTQ+ people. However, there are also risks associated with using the internet.

LGBTQ+ children might use adult dating apps to meet other LGBTQ+ people, especially if they can't find inclusive offline spaces or communities nearby. These apps are designed for adults and are not moderated in the same way as platforms designed specifically for children. This means the young people using them might encounter sexual content which could be harmful, and are likely to come into contact with adults who are looking for a sexual relationship (Internet Matters, 2021).

"I am really struggling with my emotions. I met someone online and we got on really well. We talked a lot and he knew I was desperate for money so offered to pay me for nudes. I trusted him and really needed the money, so I sent them. I immediately regretted it afterwards and got scared so I have blocked him and deleted everything to do with the account and images. I feel so disgusting and vile about it. I just want to be able to live with myself and not feel constantly guilty. I am ashamed and have learnt a lesson from it and will never let myself be manipulated like this again".

Childline counselling session with a 15-year-old boy

There is some evidence to suggest that LGBTQ+ children and young people are more likely to meet a partner or ask someone out online (McGeeney et al, 2017). The research suggests this could be because young people find it hard to meet other openly LGBTQ+ people in their community, or because they don't want to come out to people in their offline lives (McGeeney et al, 2017). This research also showed that gay and lesbian young people were significantly more likely to meet up with someone offline who they had first met online and who was not who they said they were (McGeeney et al, 2017).

Online grooming could happen to any child or young person. But if an LGBTQ+ child or young person hasn't come out, or feels that their gender identity or sexuality needs to be kept secret, perpetrators can take advantage of this to prevent the child from telling anyone about the relationship or to coerce them into meeting offline without telling anyone else.

Any young person might become involved in sending or receiving sexual photos or messages online. They might do this consensually, or they could feel pressured by their peers or adults. Once an image is shared online, young people have no control over how other people might use it. Some adults online might target LGBTQ+ young people to groom or blackmail them into sending explicit images or videos of themselves (Internet Matters, 2021). [> Find out more about sexting](#)

Children and young people might also encounter non-sexual harmful content on the internet. They might seek information about a range of LGBTQ+ issues online, particularly if they don't have any other sources of information. While doing so, they might come across inaccurate material, hate comments or content that isn't age appropriate. All of these can cause children distress (Government Equalities Office, 2018; Ofsted and Brown, 2021). Children might see anti-LGBTQ+ posts or homophobic, biphobic and transphobic comments even if they aren't specifically looking for information about LGBTQ+ issues. These can be distressing whether or not the child or young person is directly being targeted (Internet Matters, 2021).

3.3 Bullying

Homophobic, biphobic and transphobic (HBT) bullying is based on prejudice or negative attitudes about gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people. This can include name calling, using offensive language and negative stereotyping. Bullying can happen anywhere, including at home, at school or online (cyberbullying).

HBT bullying can affect children who have come out as LGBTQ+, who are questioning their gender identity or sexuality or who don't conform to gender stereotypes and are seen as 'different' (Scottish Government, 2021). It might also affect children and young people who have LGBTQ+ family members.

"People in my school bully me. They push me around, hit me and spit at me and call me names. I go to the LGBTQ+ club at school to avoid them, but they follow me and keep shouting names at me. I feel stressed and annoyed and like I am not part of the school or welcomed anymore. I am too scared to tell on the bullies because last time I reported them it made the bullying worse."

Childline counselling session with a 13-year-old child

Some children have reported experiencing HBT bullying, verbal assault and physical assault in school because of their gender identity or sexuality. This can leave them feeling unsafe in school environments (Government Equalities Office, 2018; Ofsted, 2021; Scottish Government, 2021).

Children and young people who experience HBT bullying can be more likely to have suicidal thoughts and feelings, or self-harm (McDermott, Hughes and Rawlings, 2017).

4. Intersectionality

Taking an intersectional approach

LGBTQ+ children, like all children, have diverse identities. As well as experiencing prejudice or bias related to their gender identity or sexuality, they might experience challenges relating to other parts of their identity, such as:

- ethnicity
- disability
- mental health
- having been in care
- where they live, how much money they have and how much access they have to education.

The way these challenges interact is known as intersectionality.

For example, a child may be growing up in a culture which does not accept their sexuality or gender identity. It can be difficult for children to cope with this and it can have a negative impact on their welfare.

"I'm upset because I came out to my family as transgender and they're refusing to support me. My family are from Pakistan and don't want me to dress in girl's clothes because they say it will bring shame to the family. I've been self-harming and recently the pressure from my family has been so much that I'm feeling suicidal again, I don't know what to do"

Childline counselling session with a transgender girl aged 16.

Learning for practitioners: understanding the child

When you're working with a child, consider all the factors that might influence their safety and wellbeing. Take the time to get to know them, understand their lived experience and how they might face risks due to how other might perceive their identity.

You could consider creating safe spaces for children who have similar identities and come from the same community. This might help them talk about their experiences and get peer support.

Find out more about:

> [Safeguarding children who come from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities](#)

> [Safeguarding d/Deaf and disabled children and young people](#)

> [Safeguarding children with special educational needs and disabilities \(SEND\)](#)

> [Looked after children](#)

> [Child mental health](#)

5. Creating policies and procedures

5.1 LGBTQ+ inclusive policies

Your organisation's policies and procedures should set out how you will create a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for all children and young people.

You should ensure that LGBTQ+ children and young people are fully represented in all your policies and procedures as part of your work to ensure your organisation is fully inclusive.

Think about how you can work collaboratively and make sure you include the views of people in the LGBTQ+ community. How can you engage with the LGBTQ+ adults and children in your organisation so that they feel comfortable?

For example, you should consider how you can support transgender and non-binary children and young people to wear the clothes (e.g uniform or sports kit) and use the toilets and changing rooms that they feel comfortable with. Your policies should reflect that decisions need to be made on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration all children's safety. You should discuss options with the young person and their parents or carers (as long as this does not put the young person at risk of harm) (Scottish Government, 2021). It's important to use appropriate language when talking to and about children and young people. You should ask LGBTQ+ children and young people what language they use to describe themselves, and use these terms in your policies and procedures.

You could also create a dedicated policy outlining how you will support LGBTQ+ children and young people specifically.

> [Learn more about peer-on-peer sexual abuse](#)

> [Read our blog about contextual safeguarding.](#)

5.2 Safeguarding and child protection policy and procedures

All organisations that work with children and young people need to have a safeguarding and child protection policy and procedures. This should include your commitment to protect all children regardless of their age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation. You should make sure that your safeguarding and child protection policy recognises the additional risks and vulnerability factors for LGBTQ+ children and young people.

You should complete risk assessments for specific contexts, such as changing rooms, taking into account all safeguarding risks that might be present and taking appropriate action to keep all children safe (Scottish Government, 2021).

> [Read more about safeguarding considerations for getting changed at school](#)

> [Find out more about writing a safeguarding and child protection policy and procedures](#)

5.3 Recognising and responding to child protection concerns

All your staff and volunteers should know how to recognise and respond to concerns about children and young people's safety and welfare.

Concerns about LGBTQ+ children and young people should be dealt with sensitively, taking into consideration any complicated feelings they might have about their sexuality or gender identity. For example, if a child has been using adult dating apps you need to take immediate steps to keep them safe. But you should also consider the reasons why they might be using those apps.

Make sure children know they can talk to you about anything that's worrying them. Make sure children also know about Childline and how they can contact them for confidential advice and support. Calls to 0800 1111 are free and children can also get support and advice via the [Childline website](#).

Young people under 18 who are worried that a sexual image or video of them may have been shared online can use Childline and IWF's [Report Remove tool](#) to see if it can be taken down.

> [Learn more about recognising and responding to abuse](#)

> [Find out more about how to respond to a disclosure of abuse](#)

5.4 Information sharing

If you are worried about a child or young person's safety and welfare you should share this information promptly, following your organisation's safeguarding and child protection procedures.

However, you should be mindful that LGBTQ+ children and young people might not want to come out to everyone in their life. Sharing a child or young person's gender identity or sexuality might put them at extra risk if the person you tell is not supportive.

You could also break a child or young person's trust if you share information about their gender identity or sexuality without their permission, or without letting them know first.

You should only share information about a child or young person's sexuality or gender identity if they give you permission, or if it's relevant to a child protection concern.

For example, you might have to tell someone about a young person's sexuality or gender identity if:

- they are experiencing homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying

- they are using adult dating apps
- there is a concern they might have been groomed or coerced into a sexual relationship
- there is a concern they might be experiencing sexual abuse or exploitation
- they are experiencing or are at risk of homelessness because their family are unsupportive of their gender identity or sexuality

(Stonewall, 2022).

[> Learn more about when to share information about a child](#)

[> Learn more about gaining a child's consent to share information](#)

5.5 Supporting children and young people

There are a range of ways you can help support and protect the LGBTQ+ children, young people and families you work with.

5.6 Understanding a child's lived experience

It's important to remember that any child or young person you're working with could be LGBTQ+, whether or not they have told you about their identity. You should aim to understand the lived experience of every child, the risks that might be present and how that interacts with their life and identity.

Make it clear to the children and young people you work with that you're someone they can talk to about their identity and feel safe with. Be open minded and don't make assumptions about a child's sexuality or gender identity. Always consider how gender identity or sexuality could impact on their life and any risks they might face.

You could ask children and young people their pronouns, chosen name and how they would like to be referred to.

[> See our Helplines insight briefing on the challenges young people are facing around sexuality and gender identity](#)

5.7 Relationships and sex education

Some young people who are exploring or questioning their sexuality or identity might struggle to accept themselves if they have insufficient knowledge about being LGBTQ+. This can contribute to low wellbeing or mental health issues (Ofsted and Brown, 2021).

LGBTQ+ people and families should be reflected throughout the curriculum to help LGBTQ+ children feel safe and included (Scottish Government, 2021). It is important that children and young people are taught about all kinds of relationships, including LGBTQ+ relationships. When having discussions about relationships, make it clear to children and young people that same sex relationships and different gender identities are valid and should be respected. Talk to them about what a healthy relationship looks like, and make sure they know who to talk to if they are ever worried about anything.

Each nation in the UK has guidance on how schools should deliver relationships and sex education. [> Learn more about promoting healthy relationships in school](#)

Children and young people can learn more about [gender identity](#) and [sexuality](#) on the Childline website.

5.8 Mental health

Adults in your organisation should know how to recognise and respond to concerns about children and young people's mental health.

[> Find out more about how to recognise and respond to children's mental health issues](#)

Think about how your organisation can support LGBTQ+ children and young people who are struggling with their mental health and promote good emotional wellbeing.

> [Learn more about how to promote good mental health and wellbeing](#)

LGBTQ+ children and young people may also experience loneliness. Our Building Connections online service provides support from a trained befriender for young people aged up to 19.

> [Find out more about Building Connections](#)

There's lots of advice, tips and information about mental health for children and young people on the [Childline website](#). The [NSPCC website](#) has information for parents and carers on how to recognise if a child is struggling with their mental health and how to support them.

5.9 Online safety

Your organisation should have an [online safety policy](#) that takes into account the additional risks LGBTQ+ children and young people might face online. Staff and volunteers should be able to recognise and respond to any child protection concerns about LGBTQ+ children and young people online.

> [Find out more about online safety](#)

> [View our e-safety resources for schools](#)

Parents and carers can find [tips on what they can do to keep children safe online and how to talk to their children about online safety](#) on the NSPCC website.

Young people under 18 who are worried that a sexual image or video of them may have been shared online can use Childline and IWF's [Report Remove tool](#) to see if it can be taken down. The [Childline website](#) has lots of advice and information for children and young people about online safety.

5.10 Bullying

Creating an inclusive and safe environment in your organisation can help children and young people learn to respect everyone's identity and reduce bullying.

Using resources that show different types of families can help improve children and young people's behaviour and reduce homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying (Ofsted and Brown, 2021). You should have an [anti-bullying statement](#) which sets out your commitment to preventing and tackling bullying and how you will respond to incidents.

Staff and volunteers should challenge gender stereotypes and any kind of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic language. Your [organisation's behaviour codes](#) should outline your expectations that everyone is treated with respect, both on- and offline.

Make sure children and young people know who in the organisation they can talk to if they are experiencing bullying. The [NSPCC website](#) has advice for parents and carers on how to keep children safe from bullying. Children and young people can find help on the [Childline website](#) if they're being bullied.

6. Legislation on safeguarding LGBTQ+ children and young people

Statutory guidance across the **UK** highlights the responsibility of those in education, community and care sectors to safeguard all children from all forms of abuse and neglect. Find out more about the child protection system in:

- [England](#)
- [Northern Ireland](#)
- [Scotland](#)
- [Wales](#)
- [Safeguarding and child protection legislation and guidance for schools](#)

LGBTQ+ children and young people in the **UK** are protected under equality legislation. > [Read more about children's rights.](#)

Guidance on supporting LGBTQ+ children and young people in schools

Across the **UK** there is guidance and best practice information on supporting LGBTQ+ children and young people in schools. Organisations in other sectors might also find this helpful.

The House of Commons Library has published a [briefing](#) on bullying in schools in the **UK**, which provides information and signposts guidance on how schools can tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic (HBT) bullying (House of Commons Library, 2020a).

The House of Commons Library has also published a [briefing](#) giving an overview of provisions to support transgender children and young people in schools across the **UK**. It covers the Equality Act 2010, toilet facilities and changing rooms, sports, school uniforms, the curriculum and bullying (House of Commons Library, 2020).

In **England**, the Department for Education (DfE) has published [non-statutory guidance for schools on the Equality Act 2010](#). This provides guidance on how schools should ensure that children and young people aren't discriminated against because of their sexual orientation or gender reassignment (DfE, 2014).

Ofsted has published [a research commentary on teaching about sex, sexual orientation and gender reassignment](#). This shares examples of good practice and covers school culture, the curriculum, teaching about sexuality and gender and engaging with parents. It also includes good practice examples from faith schools (Ofsted and Brown, 2021).

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