



Supporting children who are exploring/questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity

Why is this important?

Child sexual abuse affects children of all sexual orientations and levels of gender conformity. Those who are or think they may be lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB), or who are questioning their gender identity, may face additional barriers to recognising abuse, telling someone about it, and accessing appropriate support.

These barriers may include fear of being 'outed', confusion about whether their experiences are connected to their orientation/identity, lack of trusted adults who they feel will understand, and concern that they will face prejudice or disbelief. People who sexually abuse children may take advantage of this, deliberately targeting children who are LGB or gender-questioning in order to exploit their isolation, their desire for acceptance or their lack of trusted adults to confide in.

Understanding these barriers helps us create environments where all children feel safe to seek help.

1. What barriers may these children face?

Fear of being outed: A child who has not disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity may fear that by telling someone about their abuse they will also reveal information they are not ready to share. This can be a powerful barrier to seeking help, particularly if the abuse occurred in a context associated with their orientation/identity.

Isolation and limited support networks: Children who are exploring/questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity may have fewer trusted adults in their lives, particularly if they have experienced rejection from family or peers. This isolation can be exploited by people who seek to abuse them, and can also reduce their opportunities to tell others what is happening.

Confusion about experiences: A child may go online to find information, connection and community related to sexual orientation or gender identity. This can expose them to adults who appear supportive but whose intentions are harmful; the child may not initially recognise this as grooming or abuse.

Shame and self-blame: The child may already carry feelings of shame related to their sexual orientation or gender identity, particularly if they have experienced rejection or prejudice. These feelings can be compounded by sexual abuse, making it harder to seek help or to believe they deserve support.

Fear of prejudice from professionals: The child may worry that professionals will be judgemental about their sexual orientation or gender identity, will not understand their experiences, or will blame them for what has happened. Previous negative experiences with services can reinforce this fear.

Myths about abuse and sex/sexual orientation: Boys may face particular barriers to telling, because of a belief that males cannot be victims of sexual abuse, or fears that being abused by a male perpetrator reflects on their own sexual orientation. Girls who are abused by women may not recognise their experiences as abuse.

2. How can you help children to tell you when something is wrong?

- Make your environment visibly inclusive. Posters, resources and language that acknowledge diversity signal that all children are welcome and will be treated with respect, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Ensure that learning opportunities, including those in Relationship and Sex Education, reflect experiences that children can relate to – in scenarios and case studies, for example.
- Do not make assumptions about a child's sexual orientation or gender identity based on their appearance, behaviour or who they spend time with.
- If a child tells you about sexual abuse that occurred in a context associated with their sexual orientation/gender identity, focus on the harm that was done, not on their identity or how they came to be in that context.
- Be clear that abuse is never the victim's fault, regardless of the circumstances in which it occurred.
- Reassure the child that you are there to help them, not to judge them.

3. Avoid making assumptions

- **Don't** assume that a child's concerning behaviours or relationships are explained by their exploration/questioning of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- **Don't** assume that same-sex abuse is less serious or less harmful.
- **Don't** assume that, if they are exploring/questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, a child is more likely to have invited or consented to sexual abuse – or to make a false allegation of sexual abuse.
- **Don't** assume that support services will automatically be appropriate to and inclusive of children who are exploring/questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity.

4. Important reminders

- Children who are exploring/questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity are at increased risk of being targeted for sexual abuse, because of the isolation and vulnerability that prejudice can create.
- Sexual abuse by someone of the same sex does not determine or reflect a child's sexual orientation.
- Children who have been sexually abused while exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity may carry additional shame and confusion. They need clear messages that what happened was not their fault.
- These children may have very few trusted adults. You may be the first safe person they have encountered. How you respond matters.
- If you have concerns, act on them. A young person's sexual orientation or gender identity should never be a reason to delay safeguarding them.