



Brief Guidelines for Intersex Allies

Information to help you spread awareness about intersex people

Intersex Basics

Who are Intersex People?

Intersex people are born with a mix of anatomical sex traits (chromosomes, genitals, and/or reproductive organs) that do not fit typical definitions of male or female. This may be apparent at birth or become so later in life. Many forms of intersex exist; it is not a single category. Please see OII USA's website for a comprehensive list: <http://oii-usa.org/1124/intersex-variations-list/>

How many intersex individuals are there?

The most thorough existing research found intersex births to constitute 1.9% of the population*, making intersex individuals potentially as common as red-haired individuals (1-2% of the human population). However, given that only some intersex clinical patients' records are used as data, and some individuals that might be classified as intersex do not self-identify as intersex, the figure is likely to be substantially higher. * Fausto-Sterling, Anne (2000). *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books. ISBN 0-465-07713-7.

Do intersex individuals need "treatment" by clinicians?

Are they sick?

There are very few instances when a child's intersex variation poses health risks that require immediate medical attention. Rather, intersex people, like all people, sometimes have health issues. For example, being a female is not in and of itself a health problem, but there are health problems specific to being "female," such as ovarian cancer.

Does intersex have something to do with gender, sexual orientation, or sexual behavior?

Intersex is a biological reality, but it gets confused with gender, sexual orientation, and behavior because there is a socio-cultural relationship *between* one's body and all of these things. However, 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.

Why are intersex individuals subjected to medical treatment?

Since intersex bodies cannot be easily categorized into one sex or another, the assumptions about how they'll identify, express themselves, and who they'll be attracted to cannot be easily made, and the discomfort this gives some people drives recommendations for medically unnecessary treatment. However, on February 1st, 2013, the United Nations condemned these practices because evidence has shown that medically unnecessary "normalizing" procedures, such as irreversible genital surgeries, may be physically and psychologically harmful, and infants and young individuals cannot consent to them (info at oii-usa.org). Even adolescents have reported feeling pressured, as late as high school, by their parents' and/or doctors' recommendations, and often regret having succumbed to them.

Resources to Get Started

Websites

An extensive list of intersex organizations, information and updates, is available on OII-USA's website. <http://oii-usa.org>; <http://facebook.com/oiiusa>

Blogs

Full Frontal Activism: Intersex and Awesome
<http://fullfrontalactivism.blogspot.com/>

Intersex and Out
<http://intersexandout.tumblr.com>
www.hidaviloria.com

Intersex Roadshow
<http://intersexroadshow.blogspot.com>

Books

Golden Boy: A Novel. Abigail Tarttellen

Fixing Sex: Intersex, Medical Authority, and Lived Experience. Katrina Karkazis

Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex. Elizabeth Reis

Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the

Construction of Sexuality. Anne Fausto-Sterling

Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self. Sharon E. Preves

Documentaries

Intersexion (2012)

Orchids: My Intersex Adventure (2011)

XXY (2007)

One in 2000 (2006)

About the Organisation Intersex International (OII)

OII is the world's largest intersex advocacy organization, with branches on six continents, representing over ten languages. Founded in 2003 by and for intersex people, OII's mission is to attain human rights for intersex infants, children and adults, particularly the right to bodily integrity and self-determination.

About OII-USA

OII-USA was founded in February, 2011, sharing OII's mission. We provide peer support and advocacy for intersex people and their allies in the United States via email, phone, lecturing, publishing, lobbying, consultation, and social media. We also provide news updates and information regarding the intersex community.

Do all intersex individuals identify as either male or female?

It depends on the individual: some intersex individuals identify as male, female, men, women, intersex, intersex males, intersex females, intersex women, intersex men, or as none of these.

Are intersex individuals hermaphrodites?

Biologically speaking, hermaphrodites are beings (e.g., some fish) with both fully functioning sets of “male” and “female” sex organs, and this is impossible in humans. The word was originally used because of the cultural idea - originating from the Greek myth of Hermaphroditus, who was both male and female - of having elements of both sexes. While some intersex people self-identify as hermaphrodites under this conceptual definition, it is considered stigmatizing by some and should only be used by intersex people themselves.

What is DSD? Is this the same as intersex?

In 2006, the medical community replaced the term intersex with “disorders of sexual development” (DSD). DSD is problematic because it reinforces the idea that intersex is a medical condition in need of correction. Using DSD, individuals that identify as intersex have no choice but to identify as “disordered,” even though our natural bodies are most often healthy. Today, some intersex people, especially those taught DSD by their parents and/or doctors since the term’s inception, use the label. We respect these individuals’ choice to do so, just as we respect that individuals attracted to the same sex may not identify as gay or lesbian, but instead view their sexual orientation as a psychological disorder. However, using stigmatizing labels does not help attain civil rights. Thus, we recommend using “intersex” for promoting equality for those born with atypical sex anatomy.

What are intersex activists’ goals?

Intersex activists want to attain human rights, particularly the right to bodily integrity, for intersex people. We do so by raising awareness that intersex is a naturally occurring variation, that medically unnecessary, non-consensual cosmetic genital surgeries have been shown to be harmful, and that intersex individuals must be able to choose what is done to their bodies (excluding situations where medical health risks are involved).

Does the existence of intersex individuals invalidate the gender binary?

While some intersex individuals may agree that sex and gender are not binary concepts, the goals of intersex activists are to raise awareness and to gain the right to consent to what is and is not done to our bodies. Intersex activists are not explicitly trying to bring down the binary.

Are intersex individuals part of the queer community?

Like all people, some intersex individuals are LGBTQ and others are not. However, OII supports adding the “I” to acronym since LGBT activism has fought for rights of people who fall outside expected binary sex and gender norms – which is in line with the goals of intersex activism and the reasons for discrimination against us. As trans* inclusion demonstrates, regardless of sexual orientation, everyone benefits from an alliance that challenges and promotes an end to the particular discrimination one faces. In addition, just as Latinos, for example, are not required to, and do not always, identify as “people of color,” despite their inclusion in the umbrella term, intersex people do not have to identify as “LGBTQIA.”

How to be a Good Ally

How can I raise awareness about intersex people, even if I’m not intersex?

1) Start conversations based on these guidelines.

- Remember that most Intersex individuals prioritize discussing how to combat human rights abuses rather than being used as examples to explore concepts in sex and gender theory.

2) Be Intersex-inclusive = LGBTI or LGBTQIA

- Use the LGBTI or LGBTQIA acronyms, which include the “I” for intersex, whenever possible in your speech, writing, and/or at your university or organization.

3) Make intersex more visible.

- “Like” an intersex organization on Facebook, such as OII-USA
- Share an article, blog post, book, documentary, movie, YouTube clip, or these Brief Guidelines
- Spread information using other resources, such as tumblr, blogs, etc.

4) Learn about intersex from intersex people.

- Intersex people are the experts on our experiences and needs
- Contact an intersex educator for speaking engagements (OII-USA has available speakers; contact us at oii-usa.org.)
- If unable to meet intersex people, view documentaries, etc., featuring intersex people telling their own story.

5) When speaking to intersex individuals:

- Remember that being intersex may or may not be a part of their identity
- Do not assume that it is their duty to discuss intersex at any time, or that they will be comfortable discussing all aspects: ask if it’s okay first
- Phrase questions to understand intersex broadly, not in ways that are too personal and thus invasive
 - e.g., You meet someone who has never heard of underwear before. “What kinds of underwear do people wear?” helps them broadly understand what underwear is. “What color underwear are you wearing right now?” does not help them broadly understand underwear, and may make the askee uncomfortable.
- Ensure questions do not serve to stigmatize or fetishize intersex individuals
- If intersex individuals are not comfortable discussing certain topics:
 - They may wish to have this conversation another time
 - They may wish to have this conversation, but not publicly
 - They may wish to have a conversation about intersex broadly, not personally
 - They may wish to have this conversation, but aren’t knowledgeable about all intersex issues and might point you toward good resources
 - They may not wish to have this conversation, it may be too personal or triggering

6) Do not make the assumption that intersex is a medical condition.

- Some intersex individuals don’t use the words “condition,” “syndrome,” etc. when discussing their form of intersex.
 - e.g., Claudia’s form of intersex is CAIS. Medical sources indicate that this stands for Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, but to Claudia, it simply stands for Complete Androgen InSensitivity. Claudia feels her body is healthy, and doesn’t relate to the word “syndrome” in association with her body.
- Many intersex individuals use the term “intersex variations,” which doesn’t inherently medicalize intersex bodies.