

Diversity is Healthy

Tips for Creating An Intersex-Friendly Environment

Intersex people live in every facet of society, comprising an estimated 1.7% of the population, which is more common than being trans.

Yet the majority of us do not live openly as such due to social stigma against being anything other than male or female. This handout provides tips on how to make intersex people feel safe and welcome.

Inclusion matters

Marginalized communities benefit from visual cues that are welcoming. Display community pamphlets or signs to convey that it's safe for intersex people to be open about who we are.

Support diversity

Intersex is just a natural, healthy variation of sex, like male and female. Remind intersex people or their loved ones of this if they are struggling with stigma due to society's binary views on sex/gender, and direct them to educational, cultural, and/or support resources.

Be scientific, not subjective

Comments like, "Their genitals don't look right," or, "They have the wrong sex organs," convey negative messages and are subjective, not medical, opinions. Yet they're often made about intersex traits in health care settings and beyond. Stick with factual descriptions such as "genital variance," or the name of a body part, without gendering it, to avoid inadvertently insulting intersex people.

How would I feel if _____?

When in doubt, use this simple rule: If you wouldn't want it said about yourself, a loved one, or their/your sexual characteristics, don't say it about an intersex person.

AVOID:

1. "Disorders of Sex Development," or "DSD"

Intersex people oppose this term because it demeans healthy intersex variations. "Differences of Sex Development" is better, but still uses the same negative acronym.

2. Adjectives w/Negative Connotations, such as:

"abnormal," "defective," "deformed," "lacking," "wrong." These descriptions are harmful because, unlike other body parts, sex traits are linked to our sense of self as sexual human beings.

3. Assumptions About:

* Bodies

Intersex bodies can look exactly like, or different from, those of typical males or females.

* Gender identity or sexual orientation

Like all people, we don't know an intersex person's gender identity or sexual orientation unless/until they tell us. Respect intersex people's identity. Don't assume to know what they want, should want, or will want.

* Future Outcomes

People often assume being intersex is/will be a difficult "problem," but such predictions are unsubstantiated as intersex people can and have/do lead happy, thriving, healthy lives without medical treatments to "fix" them.

* Labels of choice

Some people born with variations of sex characteristics prefer to be described as, "women," "men," or "enbies" (non-binary people) rather than "intersex." Many also use "intersex man," "intersex woman," or "herm" (short for the reclaimed hermaphrodite). Be respectful: ask, don't assume.

USE:

Variation(s) of Sex Characteristics (VSC)

The preferred community term to describe the many different types of intersex. "They have a variation of sex characteristics called _____."

Objective Descriptions:

- * "small penis" rather than "micropenis"
- * "enlarged" or "large clitoris," rather than "grossly enlarged," or the clinical, "clitoromegaly"
- * "genital variance" rather than "ambiguous genitalia"
- * "testes" not "male gonads"; "ovaries" not "female gonads" (Why potentially insult someone's gender identity when it's unnecessary and avoidable?)
- * "didn't develop" rather than "failed to develop"
- * "has" or "doesn't have" rather than, "has the wrong..." "is incomplete," or, "is lacking"

Gender Neutral Terms

Due to the non-binary nature of intersex bodies, gendering is sometimes confusing. If unsure, use gender neutral terms until you are able to ask/the gender is known.

- * "they" rather than "he" / "she"
- * "phallus" rather than "clitoris" or "penis"

@Intersex Campaign for Equality (IC4E)