AN ALLY'S GUIDE TO

TERMINOLOGY



Talking About LGBT People & Equality

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INTRODUCTION

The words we use to talk about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and issues can have a powerful impact on our conversations. The right words can help open people's hearts and minds, while others can create distance or confusion. For example, the abbreviation "LGBT" is commonly used within the movement for lesbian, gay, bi and transgender equality, but it can be confusing and alienating to people who don't understand what it means (for many media and mainstream audiences, the term *gay and transgender* is more accessible without being overwhelming).

Designed for new allies who want to support LGBT Americans but often face an array of confusing terminology and language, this short guide offers an overview of essential vocabulary, terms to avoid, and a few key messages for talking about various issues. The **Talking About LGBT Issues** series, available online at www.lgbtmap.org/talking-about-lgbt-issues-series and www.glaad.org/talkingabout, provides additional recommendations and resources.

GAY, LESBIAN & BI

Terms to Use	Usage Examples	Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **gay** (adj.) • **lesbian** (n. or adj.) • **bi** (adj.) • **bisexual** (adj., if needed on first reference for clarity)	"gay people" "gay man/men" "lesbian couple" "bi men and women" "He is gay." / "She is a lesbian." / "He is bi."	• "homosexual" • "gay" (n.) (as in, "He is a gay.")	*Gay* is an adjective, not a noun; it is sometimes used as a shorthand term encompassing gay, lesbian and bisexual orientations (though not transgender people or gender identity). Also, while many lesbians may identify as gay, the term *lesbian(s)* is clearer when talking only about a woman or women. Anti-gay activists often use words like "homosexual" to stigmatize gay people by reducing their lives to purely sexual terms.
• **being gay**	"She talked about being gay."	• "homosexuality" • "lesbianism" • "That's so gay." (a hurtful slur)	Talking about a person's "homosexuality" can, in some cases, reduce the life of that person to purely sexual terms. Talk about *being gay* instead. The term "lesbianism" is considered pejorative.
• **orientation** • **sexual orientation** (on first reference, if needed for clarity)	"a person's orientation" "Sexual orientation can be a complex topic. A person's orientation is…"	• "sexual preference" • "gay lifestyle" • "homosexual lifestyle" • "same-sex attractions" • "sexual identity"	The term "sexual preference" is used by anti-gay activists to suggest that being gay is a choice, and therefore can be changed or "cured." Similarly, the term "gay lifestyle" is used to stigmatize gay people and suggest that their lives should be viewed only through a sexual lens. Just as one would not talk about a "straight lifestyle," don't talk about a "gay lifestyle."
• **gay and transgender** • **lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender** (if needed for clarity)	"laws that protect gay and transgender people"	• "LGBT" (when talking with those who are unfamiliar with the issues or not yet supportive)	Reference sexual orientation and gender identity when talking about issues pertaining to both. (See **Transgender** on the next page for more information.) The abbreviation "LGBT" can be confusing and alienating for those who are unfamiliar with the issues or not yet supportive—though it is essential when talking to LGBT and strongly supportive audiences. Use the term that allows your audience to stay focused on the message without creating confusion about your intended meaning.
• **openly gay**	"She is openly lesbian." / "He is openly bi."	• "admitted he was gay"	The term "admitted" suggests prior deception or that being gay is shameful.

TRANSGENDER

The term *transgender* refers to people whose gender identity (the sense of gender that every person feels inside) or gender expression is different from the sex that was assigned to them at birth. At some point in their lives, transgender people decide they must live their lives as the gender they have always known themselves to be, and often transition to living as that gender.

Terms to Use	Usage Examples	Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **transgender** (adj.)	"transgender person" "transgender advocate" "transgender inclusion"	• "transgendered" • "a transgender" (n.) • "transgenders" (n.) • "transvestite" • "tranny"	*Transgender* is an adjective, not a noun. Be careful not to call someone "a transgender." Do not add an unnecessary "-ed" to the term ("transgendered"), which connotes a condition of some kind. Never use the term "transvestite" to describe a transgender person. The shorthand *trans* is often used within the LGBT community, but may not be understood by general audiences. Always use a transgender person's chosen name. Also, a person who identifies as a certain gender should be referred to using pronouns consistent with that gender. When it isn't possible to ask what pronoun a person would prefer, use the pronoun that is consistent with the person's appearance and gender expression.
• **gender identity** • **gender expression**	"Everyone should be treated fairly, regardless of gender identity or expression."	• "sexual identity" (the correct term is *gender identity*) • "transgender identity" (use *gender identity* to refer to a person's internal sense of gender)	Not everyone who is transgender identifies that way; many transgender people simply identify as male or female. Also, note that *gender identity* (one's internal sense of gender) and *gender expression* (how a person outwardly expresses their gender) are not interchangeable terms.
• **transition**	"She began transitioning last year."	• "sex change" • "sex-change operation" • "pre-operative" / "post-operative" • "pre-op" / "post-op"	*Transition* is the accurate term that does not fixate on surgeries, which many transgender people do not or cannot undergo. Terms like "pre-op" or "post-op" unnecessarily fixate on a person's anatomy and should be avoided.

TALKING ABOUT MARRIAGE FOR SAME-SEX COUPLES

In conversations about marriage for same-sex couples, it is important to:

- **Focus on the values of marriage and what marriage is about: loving, committed couples who want to make a lifelong promise to take care of and be responsible for each other, for better and for worse.**
- **Help people understand and grapple with how same-sex couples are hurt when they are shut out of marriage—and help people think about how they would feel if someone told them that they couldn't marry the person they love.**
- **Remind people of how our shared beliefs—particularly in the Golden Rule, freedom, and not sitting in judgment of others—are at the heart of people's journeys toward supporting marriage.**
- **Don't be drawn into debating opponents' fear-based strategies. Instead, keep the conversation focused on why marriage matters—to you, and to the people you know and love.**

For more information, see An Ally's Guide to Talking About Marriage for Same-Sex Couples, available at www.lgbtmap.org, www.glaad.org and www.freedomtomarry.org.

Terms to Use	Usage Examples	Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **marriage** • **exclusion from marriage** • **denial of marriage**	"Denying someone the chance at happiness that comes with being married—just because they're gay—seems hurtful to me." "I believe in treating others the way I want to be treated. I wouldn't want anyone to tell me that I couldn't marry the person I love--and I don't want to do that to anyone else."	• "gay marriage" • "same-sex marriage"	Gay couples and straight couples want to marry for similar reasons, and they seek to join the institution of marriage as it currently exists. Just as it would be inappropriate to call the marriage of two older adults "elder marriage," it is inappropriate to call the marriage of a same-sex couple "gay marriage" or "same-sex marriage." If additional clarity is needed, use *marriage for same-sex* (or *gay/gay and lesbian*) *couples*. Also, while the term "marriage equality" can be helpful when talking with those who are supportive of marriage for same-sex couples, it can create confusion and barriers to understanding for other audiences. When possible, simply talk about *marriage*, without modifiers.
• **love, commitment, responsibility, promise** • **taking care of the one you love**	"Marriage is about loving, committed couples who want to make a lifelong promise to take care of and be responsible for each other, in good times and bad.	• "marriage rights" • "marriage benefits"	There is sometimes a misperception that gay couples only marry for "rights" and "benefits." To avoid this, focus on the values of love, commitment and responsibility that gay couples bring to marriage, and the importance of a couple being able to take care of and be there for each other. Also, focus on how gay and straight couples alike share similar hopes and dreams for marriage. But instead of taking shortcuts by using phrases like "exactly the same" or "just the same," spend time exploring the common ground and values (like commitment, responsibility and love) that we share.

Note: These approaches for talking about marriage can also be helpful in talking about other forms of relationship recognition, such as domestic partnerships or civil unions. However, note that in many states that allow domestic partnerships, same-sex couples have been barred from a dying partner's bedside and denied the ability to say goodbye to the person they love. That just doesn't happen when a couple is married, and it's one of the reasons why marriage matters to gay and straight couples alike.

TALKING ABOUT PARENTING & ADOPTION

When engaging in conversations about adoption and parenting:

- **Focus on the best interests of children, using the language of everyday family life.** Emphasize how caring LGBT parents can provide children with the love, stability, protection, security and guidance they need to succeed.
- **If talking about a proposed ban on adoption by gay parents, focus on three key points:**
  1. Adoption decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis based on what is in the best interests of the child.
  2. Experienced child health and social service authorities should make adoption decisions.
  3. All mainstream child authorities and peer-reviewed research on parenting support adoption by gay parents.
- **Remember that research shows that children of gay parents do just fine.** There's a large and growing body of peer-reviewed research that examines outcomes for children raised by gay parents. This research consistently concludes that being raised by gay or lesbian parents has no adverse effects on children, and that kids of gay parents are just as healthy and well-adjusted as other children. Also, nearly every credible authority on child health and social services (including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Child Welfare League of America) has determined that a person's orientation has nothing to do with the ability to be a good parent.

For more information, see Talking About Adoption & Gay Parents, available at www.lgbtmap.org and www.glaad.org.

✓ Terms to Use	Usage Examples	✗ Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **adoption by loving, caring parents** • **adoption by gay (or lesbian and gay) parents** • **two moms, two dads**	"We shouldn't prevent kids in need of forever homes from being adopted by loving, caring parents who happen to be gay."	• "gay adoption" • "adoption by gay/same-sex couples"	Always keep the focus on loving, caring parents. Talking about *parents* rather than "couples" helps emphasize what adoption means to kids—the chance to find a forever home with loving parents.
This is about: • **the best interests of children** • **taking care of and providing for children** • **providing children with love, security, stability, and loving, forever homes** • **making adoption decisions on a case-by-case basis based on the best interests of the child**	"This is about creating safe, stable homes for children. It's about making sure that they have the loving, nurturing environment that allows them to thrive and succeed."	• "rights" • "adoption rights"	Parenting and adoption are about providing security, love and protection for kids. Discussions about parenting and adoption should not focus on "rights"—but rather on how loving, caring LGBT parents can provide children with the love, stability, protection, security and guidance they need to thrive and succeed.

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is one in a series of documents on effectively talking about LGBT issues, also including: Overall Approaches, Inclusive Employment Protections, Inclusive Hate Crimes Laws, Adoption & Gay Parents, Suicide & LGBT Populations, Ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Talking About LGBT Equality with African Americans, Talking About LGBT Equality with Latinos, an Ally's Guide to Talking About Marriage, and an Ally's Guide to Talking About Transgender-Inclusive Non-Discrimination Laws. For downloadable versions, visit www.lgbtmap.org/talking-about-lgbt-issues-series or www.glaad.org/talkingabout. © 2012 Movement Advancement Project (MAP).

TALKING ABOUT



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