

# Useful Language and Phrases For Professionals

GLBTQ youth have their own unique language. It sometimes makes adults uncomfortable, but they must overcome their discomfort to be effective in working with these youth. The key terms below will help you become familiar with the language GLBTQ youth use to define themselves.

**General usage for “gay” and “lesbian”:** The word gay can refer to both men and women, and some women accept and use the term. Other women, however, prefer the term lesbian because of its clear reference to women. It is best to use the word lesbian when referring specifically to homosexual women, and to use the words gay and lesbian when referring to both genders.

**Bisexual**—A person who is attracted to people of both sexes. Bisexuality is a normal variation of sexual orientation, but sometimes it is a transition period for people who are coming out. For example, some adolescents will identify themselves as bisexual before identifying themselves as gay or lesbian.

**Closeted or “In the Closet”**—Someone who, for personal reasons, hides his or her sexual orientation.

**Coming Out**—The process of recognizing and acknowledging that you’re gay or lesbian, and then revealing it to others. This process usually occurs in stages and not in a predictable way. For example, an individual may be “out” among some people, but not among others. Each person comes out at his or her own pace. (For an overview on how youth workers can support the coming out process, see *Lesbian and Gay Youth Issues: A Practical Guide for Youth Workers*, by Gerald P. Mallon, CWLA Press, Washington, DC.)

**Cross-dressing**—The practice of dressing in the clothing of the opposite sex. Not all gay males or lesbians engage in cross-dressing, nor does cross-dressing necessarily indicate one’s sexual orientation (e.g., the basketball player Dennis Rodman, who often wore women’s clothes).

**Gay**—A person, either a man or woman, of homosexual orientation. It is a popular alternative to “homosexual.” [see also *Queer*]

**GLBTQ**—A shorthand designation for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth.

**Heterosexual**—A person who is exclusively or primarily attracted to people of the opposite sex.

**Homophobia**—Fear, dislike, and hatred of homosexuals, often resulting in prejudice, discrimination, and hostile behavior toward homosexual people.

**Homosexual**—A person who is exclusively or primarily attracted to people of the same sex. Note: The word homosexual should not be used in conversation to describe individuals, though it is often used in print (as in this glossary). It’s dated and also has a clinical sound that many gay people do not like.

**Lesbian**—A woman of homosexual orientation. The word historically refers to the island of Lesbos, where the poet Sappho and her female followers lived during the 6th century BC.

**Queer**—A synonym for gay, lesbian, or homosexual, used most often by younger people and academics. Queer used to be a negative term, and some people still feel that it is. You may hear teens using this word among themselves or to describe themselves; since this is an “in-group word,” you should not use it yourself unless you are gay or lesbian.

**Questioning**—This word is often used to refer to young people in three distinct ways:

- 1** Although many gay and lesbian adolescents are certain about their orientation, others are not as sure and may take time to explore their identity. Some of these young people will ultimately identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; others will identify as heterosexual.
- 2** Youth who have been sexually abused and have not received treatment for their sexual abuse may question their sexual orientation. This is particularly true for youth who have experienced same-gender sexual abuse.
- 3** Youth with character disorders or severe psychiatric illness may, in an attempt to fit in, claim a gay or lesbian sexual identity that is not authentic.

**Sexual orientation**—Sexual orientation means who turns you on. It can be sexual or emotional or both. Heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality are all examples of sexual orientation. Some people use the term “sexual preference” instead of sexual orientation, but it’s not a good term because it implies that sexual attraction is a choice. For the vast majority of people, sexual attraction seems to be something they’re born with. Just as straight people don’t one day decide to “prefer” to be attracted to people of the opposite sex, neither do gay people sit down and decide that they’ll be attracted to people of the same sex. It just happens, and no one yet knows how.

**Transvestite**—A person who wears clothing of the opposite sex. Some gay men cross-dress in public; this is known as dressing “in drag” and these men are referred to as “drag queens.” Some, but not all, drag queens identify themselves as gay; many identify themselves as heterosexual.

**Transsexual/Transgender**—These terms refer to a wide variety of gender expression, including drag queens and kings, bigenders, crossdressers, transgenderists, and transsexuals. Some individuals find that the gender they identify with is in conflict with their

anatomy—they report feeling trapped in the wrong body. Some of these individuals eventually opt for a sex change operation. Most transsexuals identify themselves as heterosexual, not as gay or lesbian.