



AuSM's highly trained, certified therapists have committed their careers to helping individuals with autism understand their diagnosis and address both the challenges and gifts that it can bring. The AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team sends out a monthly email to answer questions submitted by our community. Register to receive this monthly column via email at www.ausm.org.

Dear Therapist:

My teenage child has let me know that they are questioning their gender and sexuality. I've noticed that this is more common than it used to be: more young people are saying they aren't straight, or don't identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. I know these self-identity questions impact my child's mental health, but I'm also not familiar with the terminology and I find myself wondering if it's just a trend. How can I best support and guide my child through these questions?

Confused and Questioning

Dear Confused:

This is a great question and one that you're not alone in wondering about. You are 100% right that understanding self-identity does greatly impact mental health! As therapists, we regularly see people who question their sexuality or feel they don't fit the "norm."

For those dealing with these questions, the thoughts, feelings and judgments by themselves and others can be quite complex and challenging. LGBTQ+ people are more likely to be targeted for harassment – especially violent harassment – than their peers, and are more likely to experience depression.

When you find yourself worrying that this is a trend, you're probably noticing that it has been in the news a lot lately. There has been quite a bit of controversy about how to talk to children about LGBTQIA+ issues.



In some states, legislators and parents are trying to prevent children from talking about – and learning about – healthy LGBT relationships and sexuality. There are movements in some school districts to ban books on gender and sexuality, which can discourage healthy, open discussion around these issues.

Despite this backlash, many LGBTQ+ folks do feel support from their families, communities, and allies, and are standing up to assert their right to be who they are – and ask to be treated as equal human beings. Your child or children may or may not ultimately see themselves as part of this ongoing struggle.

The best way to support your child's mental health through these complexities is to encourage and participate in open, non-judgmental discussion around your teens' exploration of who they are. This goes for sexuality, gender, and other ways they may identify themselves.

It's a good idea for you as a parent to identify what your own biases may be, and be honest with yourself about those biases.

Do you think being transgender, gay, lesbian, or bisexual is wrong or problematic? Were you taught this but are now fighting against it? Are you scared about your child potentially facing discrimination or harassment? Sometimes these biases can be more subtle.

Maybe you believe in gay rights, but you feel uncertain about bisexuality (shouldn't they just pick one?). Or perhaps you haven't heard of some of the words your child is using (enby, asexual, demisexual...there's a lot of new vocabulary) and you find yourself feeling judgmental about all these new words that people didn't need when you were growing up.

All of us have biases. Take the time to reflect on your understanding of gender and sexuality so that you can be more open and thoughtful with your child.

Even with these biases, you can support your child's mental health by letting them know that however they identify themselves, you still love them and want to support their safety and wellbeing no matter what.



How one identifies their gender or sexuality is an important part of one's identity. When a young person engages in this process of figuring out who they are, they are undergoing a healthy and necessary part of human development.

If you try and discourage your child from engaging in this process, the more likely it will be that they will simply do it without you, as they're going to look for people who will support them regardless of how they identify their gender or sexuality.

It's important to know that sexuality and gender identity can be fluid. Many people who identify a certain way may turn out to identify differently later in life. Adults of all ages are still learning and figuring it out, just as we do with other aspects of our identity. However, just because a person's self-identity can change doesn't mean that it surely will – there's no way to predict this. But you can be sure that how your child feels right now needs and deserves to be validated and taken seriously.

It can be damaging to a young person's mental health and to the parent-child relationship if a parent insists that being gay, nonbinary, etc., is solely a phase and does not take it seriously.

While it's unlikely that your child is exploring their sexuality simply to fit in, it is possible that they may see friends come out as LGBTQ+ and recognize it is also true for them – similar to how many of our clients determine they may be autistic. It may look like they are “following the crowd” or “trend,” but they are trying to figure out themselves, their world, and their place in it.

Sometimes we find it hard to imagine something until we see it in others, which is part of why people who are around LGBTQ+ individuals may be more likely to question their own identity.

It's important to note that autistic people tend to identify as LGBTQ+ (especially trans/non-binary) more often than neurotypical populations. We're not sure why this connection exists, but it does. If you're interested in supporting mental health, we believe it's important to focus on how to help instead of the “why.”



On a final note, remember that the words and language that human beings use to describe ourselves and each other change over the years. This is normal and it happens every generation. It's ok if you don't feel "up to date" on the terminology as long as you listen, try your best to respect others, and don't lose your cool if your child corrects you or suggests you change your terminology.

You can even go a step further and do some light Googling to learn terms you're unfamiliar with. Someday, an even younger generation will challenge your kids, and they'll think back and remember how thoughtful and respectful you were and how much it helped. Below, we've included some resources that may help with further questions and exploration!

<https://riseandshine.childrensnational.org/the-intersection-of-autism-and-lgbtq-identities/>

<https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/autistic-individuals-are-more-likely-to-be-lgbtq>

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/stories/celebrating-pride-month-tom-moran>

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