



## **Policy Platform: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and/or Intersex Young People**

### **Youth Coalition of the ACT**

The Youth Coalition recognises the right of all people to define and be supported in decisions about their own sexuality, gender and sex. Some young people questioning their sexuality, gender or sex during adolescence may find this experience particularly isolating due to the prevalence of heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia in society. This is particularly a result of presumptions in society of heterosexuality and the cis gender binary (male or female).<sup>1</sup>

In a 2009 study of secondary students, 9% of students reported a non-exclusive heterosexual attraction. 1% reported being attracted exclusively to people of the same sex, 6% reported attraction to both male and females, and 2% were unsure of their sexual attraction.<sup>2</sup>

There is limited data pertaining to the number of people who identify as transgender (those who identify with a different gender to which they were born) or intersex (those with chromosomes/genitalia which is neither exclusively male or female). Research suggests that 1 in 500 people identify as transgender (including individuals who do not seek surgery).<sup>3</sup> Consensus on the rates of babies born intersex varies from 0.3% to 4% of the population.<sup>4</sup> The Youth Coalition notes that limited data available on transgender and intersex populations in Australia may be indicative of the stigma and discrimination often experienced by these communities.

While a 2005 report showed an increase in young people disclosing their sexuality (compared with six years earlier), and in feeling positive about their sexuality; the same report still highlights a number of concerning issues. These include: experiences of homophobia and discrimination (with school remaining the most common site for these occurrences), higher rates of self harm, higher rates of alcohol and other drug use, and higher rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections,<sup>5</sup> Along with these factors, research indicates that experiences of homophobic or transphobic abuse also increases the likelihood of depression, disengagement from education, and homelessness.<sup>6</sup>

Exclusion, poor treatment and discrimination can be driven by a complex set of drivers including fear, lack of understanding or assumptions. Many young people who are sex and gender diverse may experience isolation due to their identity. Youth mental health services in the ACT have also reported an increase in the number of young people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex (GLBTI) seeking mental health support. Targeted services need to be available for these young members of our community.

The Victorian Government has undertaken significant work to progress supports for people, including young people, who identify as GLBTI. This includes the development of guidelines for health and human services,<sup>7</sup> a Health and Wellbeing Action Plan<sup>8</sup>, and school resources (such as gender identity resources,<sup>9</sup> and

supporting sex and sexual diversity in schools<sup>10</sup>). The Youth Coalition encourages the ACT Government to build upon the work of other jurisdictions, including Victoria, to identify and implement supports for GLBTI young people in the ACT. The Youth Coalition also notes that young people have highlighted limited access to social and recreational opportunities for young people under the age of 18 who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and/or intersex.

Of the young people who completed the Youth Coalition's 2012 *Rate Canberra* survey, 12% identified as Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual. Sex and relationships was included in the top 5 issues most frequently identified as 'very important' for young people who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual. This issue was not rated as highly by other survey respondents.<sup>11</sup>

Puberty is a key time when people may discover that they are intersex. 9% of secondary students report attractions that are not exclusively heterosexual or based on the cis gender binary. Given this the Youth Coalition believes that sexual health promotion and education programs need to be inclusive of diverse genders, sexes and sexual orientations. This will help to ensure that young people have access to appropriate, relevant, non-judgmental and evidence based material on these topics.

Issues affecting young people who are transgender or intersex may differ from those who are gay, lesbian or bisexual. Assumptions about the sexuality of those who are transgender and intersex may misrepresent the actual beliefs of young people. This highlights the importance of young people's sexual, sex and gender orientations to be defined by them and not imposed upon them or presumed by others. These assumptions highlight the misunderstandings of intersex and transgender people. Intersex young people may also experience barriers to expressing identity through male and female binaries, which are not inclusive of other understandings and constructions of gender and sex identity.

The Youth Coalition highlights that all those who work with young people should be understanding of young people's individual construction of identity and work to ensure that these are always actively supported and included through their interactions with young people. This helps to recognise that some young people may have had ongoing negative experiences with service provision and it is not enough for such services to merely state that they are inclusive in order to support meaningful engagement and participation.

## **Commitments**

1. Advocating for the development of policies that enable equitable access for young people, regardless of their sexuality or gender identity.
2. Advocating for the development of policies by both government and the community sector which respect young people's sexuality and gender identity.
3. Advocating for schools to address homophobia, transphobia, hetero-normative cultures and gender binary that lead to bullying, discrimination and isolation in schools.
4. Supporting groups and organisations that advocate against homophobia, transphobia and other forms of discrimination including through education and community awareness raising.

5. Supporting groups and organisations who provide inclusive social and other supportive opportunities for young people who identify as GLBTI.
6. Supporting sexual health and relationship education in schools that is inclusive of intersex, diverse genders and sexual orientations.
7. Advocating for the active provision of inclusive comprehensive health services for the diversity of young people in our community.
8. Advocating for the adequate funding of mental health services that support young people, particularly those with an early intervention and prevention focus.
9. Advocating for the active involvement of all young people in designing, planning and evaluating youth policy and service delivery frameworks.
10. Advocating for the active and supported participation of young people in their own lives, individual care planning and case management.

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<sup>1</sup> Youth Action and Policy Association NSW and the Nepean Access Project Reference Group (2006) *Opening the Doors*, NSW Department of Community Services, NSW.

<sup>2</sup> Smith A, Agius P, Mitchell A, Barrett, C, Pitts M. *Secondary (2009) 4th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2009: Report of the findings from the 4th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health*, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

<sup>3</sup> Sinnot, V (2005) *Best Practice Models for the Assessment, Treatment and Care of Transgender People and People with Transexualism: A Discussion Paper for Victoria*, Victoria

<sup>4</sup> Department of Human Services (2009) *Discussion Paper to review treatment of children born with intersex conditions*, Victoria

<sup>5</sup> Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (2005) *Writing Themselves in Again: 6 Years On, 2<sup>nd</sup> National Report on Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing of Same-Sex Attracted Young People in Australia*, La Trobe University, Victoria

<sup>6</sup> youthbeyondblue (2009) *Fact Sheet 22: Depression and Anxiety in Young People who are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender or Intersex (GLBTI)*, Beyond Blue, Victoria <online> <http://www.youthbeyondblue.com/factsheets-and-info/fact-sheet-22-depression-and-anxiety-in-glbti-young-people/> Accessed 19 April 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Health and Wellbeing (2009) *Well Proud: A Guide to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Inclusive Practice for Health and Human Services*, Victorian Government, Victoria

<sup>8</sup> Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health (2003) *Health and Sexual Diversity: A Health and Wellbeing Action Plan for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (GLBTI) Victorians*, Victorian Government, Victoria

<sup>9</sup> Victorian Government (2009) *Gender Identity Policy Schools Reference Guide*, Victoria

<sup>10</sup> Victorian Government (2008) *Supporting Sexual Diversity in School*, Victoria

<sup>11</sup> Youth Coalition of the ACT (2012) *Rate Canberra 2012: Findings from the Survey of Young People aged 12-25 in the ACT*, Canberra, p. 52,55.