

## Connect with parents on sexual and gender diversity

**A manual on how schools can reach out and work with parents**

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## Executive summary

In this manual, we describe how schools can connect and work with parents on sexual and gender diversity. Because this is a sensitive topic, we attempt to give guidelines and suggestions to avoid conflict and to work with parents in a constructive way. We know that schools have different ways in how to involve parents, and that parents may be accepting, processing that their child is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer or related (LGBTIQ+), or that parents may be disapproving of sexual and gender diversity.

We also know that parents may be cisgender heterosexual, but can also be LGBTIQ+ themselves or have LGBTIQ+ children. We have attempted to provide schools with some background information about the diversity of a these parents and their needs. In the end of the manual we offer some views on how schools with low, intermediate and high connections to parents can develop less or more intensive cooperation strategies with parents.

This manual is the first product of a series of three. The other products are a brochure that schools can hand out to interested parents about the school view on sexual and gender diversity and a shorter leaflet on sexual and gender diversity for parents in general.

# Introduction

As a school, you try to establish a safe and welcoming environment for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ+) students. But this is not always easy. There are tolerant and progressive people, but there also conservative people who think sexual and gender diversity are problematic - maybe even a threat for society. Young people themselves are usually still quite curious. With sensitivity, you can handle their potential surprise or adverse reactions, especially when your teachers are trained well. But for many schools, the attitude and reactions of parents may be seen as more problematic. As adults, there attitudes and opinions have already been formed and are more difficult to change. They may think that your care for LGBTIQ+ students is inappropriate and constitutes brainwashing their children with undesirable ideas about diversity.

## About this guide

Because this is a challenge that occurs regularly, the My-ID partnership decided to develop a specific guide to support schools in connecting with parents and some supporting products for parents themselves. This guide is the first of three publications. In this guide for schools, we outline what schools can do and how they can best connect to parents.

**Chapter 2: the fundament of a sound school vision**

When we look at conflicts that may arise between schools and parents on the theme of sexual and gender diversity, we often see that schools have not considered their position securely enough. Being insecure about their position, they may quickly become overwhelmed and scared when some parents use strong language or even make threats. Therefore we advise that schools need to be very clear about why and how they want to engage with sexual and gender diversity. If the school has such a clear and well formulated vision, it is less easy for people who are angry to misuse their emotion and vocal criticism to overwhelm the school. With a clear standpoint, it is easier to not get scared, to try to understand which emotions may lead a parent to be angry, and to try to truly connect with them. This is why the second chapter of this manual is about school policy on sexual and gender diversity, which helps you to formulate such a vision. A good vision is a sound starting point for connection.

**Chapter 3: the wide range of parents**

In the third chapter, we will go into the different types of parents you may have. We take the view that parents and caretakers may represent all viewpoints available in society. We don’t see want to see parents as troublemakers who predominantly have problems with diversity. In most European countries, parents who disapprove of sexual and gender diversity are a 5%-20% minority. Some of these parents may be very vocal and rude, which amplifies the challenge for schools. But we should not forget that the majority of parents are not “disapprovers” but “processors” (who need to process new information and new views before they can accept them) and “acceptors” (who in principal accept that children can be LGBTIQ+, but still may not always know how to support them in practice). In the third chapter we will go deeper into this to help schools connect to different types of parents.

**Chapter 4: different levels and ways to connect to parents**

When the school is implementing attention for LGBTIQ+ issues in school, it is not obvious when or how schools should connect to parents about this specific topic. After all, most school would not inform parents or ask permission about the content of mathematics or of history lessons. Connecting to parents about sexuality education and about sexual and gender equality and diversity should not be necessary when the information is neutral, balanced and therefore non-controversial. But in communities where sexuality is taboo and not conforming to standards of gender role behaviour is strongly rejected, support for such diversities can appear to be controversial to some parents. Still, the school does not inform parents about all “controversial” issues they deal with, because most of the time they will fully inform students and leave the formation of an opinion up to the students themselves without indoctrinating them. But at the same time most schools will aim to hep students to develop a basic attitude of tolerance and respect, which is one of the core pillars of European values, of the universal human rights framework and a necessity to be able to function in a profession and in work teams. In the fourth chapter we will discuss how schools with different levels of cooperation with parents can integrate sexual and gender diversity in these less or more intensive connections.

This guide is based on a needs assessment by doing focus groups interviews with parents of the participating schools in the My-ID project and on a literature review of good practices in connecting to parents and sexual and gender diversity.

## About the other publications

In addition to this guide, we have made two other publications. The first is a template for a brochure specifically written for parents of a school. It gives information about what sexual and gender diversity is, how it is relevant for the school, and what the school intends to do to create a safe and welcoming environment for sexual and gender diverse students. The school can edit this brochure and add a short chapter on the concrete actions the school is undertaking and the possibilities for parents to connect to the school or to cooperate in the policy. It also can offer a reference to the complaint procedure in case parents object to some parts of the policy.

The second is a short leaflet written for parents in general. This leaflet shortly explains what sexual and gender diversity is and reassures that parents can have different reactions to such diversities. Then it proceeds to into the feelings parents may have as acceptors, processors or disapprovers and it gives some general suggestions on what to do in these situations.

## Terminology used in this guide

In this guide, we are focussing on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Sexual Characteristics. “Sexual Orientation” refers to heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality and other more nuanced labels for sexual attraction. “Gender Identity” refers to cisgender[[1]](#footnote-1) man or woman, non-binary[[2]](#footnote-2) and transgender[[3]](#footnote-3) self-identifications. “Sexual Characteristics” refers to biological aspects of a person’s sex, like male, intersex[[4]](#footnote-4) or female. In scientific or political literature this is often abbreviated as SOGIESC, but in this manual we try to avoid too many abbreviations. This is why we chose the more colloquial term “sexual and gender diversity”.

Often, people who are *not* cisgender heterosexual are often called Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer or related labels (“LGBTIQ+”). The LGBTIQ+ movements consider such acronyms important because it gives them a sense of representation in a world that often has ignored them. However, from an educational point of view, labelling people can be problematic because it can strengthen stereotypes rather than minimize them. Moreover, using such acronyms may lead to focus support only on people who “come out” and label themselves as LGBTIQ+, while neglecting young people who are not yet ready for self-labelling or who make a conscious choice to not self-label at all. Still, using this acronym can be helpful in expressing explicit support for marginalized minorities. So it is a bit of a dilemma how to properly refer to these marginalized groups.

GALE coined the more inclusive acronym “[DESPOGI](https://www.gale.info/en/right-to-education/despogi)” (Disadvantaged because of their Expression of Sexual Preference Or Gendered Identity), but this term is not yet widely known. Therefore we prefer to use “sexual and gender diversity” in this manual when we talk about the topic in general, and we will use the more well-known acronym “LGBTIQ+” when we refer to the target groups. But note that in this publication we consider “LGBTIQ+” to include students who are marginalized, bullied or discriminated because of their non-conforming gender or sexual behaviour, even when they think of themselves or present themselves as cisgender heterosexual.

# School policy

As a school, you try to establish a safe and welcoming environment for LGBTIQ+ students. Such an effort may be criticized by parents. With the current social and political movements that condemn diversity in general and which often specifically try to censure and forbid sexual and gender diversity, differences in opinion on sexual and gender diversity may derail into conflict and even into politicized hate campaigns. Our experience teaches us that school managers often get scared of such threats and try to minimize the ‘damage too their school’s image’ by turning their backs to their principles and by giving in to discriminatory demands.

To be able to avoid such a pitfall, the school needs a well-formulated philosophy and school vision and a connecting concrete school policy. This vision and policy should be clear to parents and students before they register for the school. This is the most important starting point when schools want to handle potential conflicts successfully.

Of course, even when a school has a clear policy, shifting social and political circumstances can reduce the support for diversity and it can confuse parents. This means that schools need to take care of various ways of parent involvement, a way to connect with parents when they have doubts, and in the event of serious conflict to have a transparent and independent complaint procedure.

In the background reader for the My-ID teacher training we explained that a good school policy to secure such an environment is based both on criteria relating to the content of school policy *and* to the way such a policy is gradually implemented to make sure the innovation is accepted by the entire school population. In the next two paragraphs we will go into this.

## The four pillars of school policy

According to most school quality standards, a good school policy has for pillars: (1) clear goals and plans, (2) a safe school environment, (3) a good curriculum that is taught well, and (4) good student care. We will describe how this could be translated to integrated support for sexual and gender diversity.

Of course, each school will adapt these kind of general criteria to their specific situation. A school that is proud of promoting academic results and intelligence may want to emphasize that true intelligence means “mental flexibility”, including tolerance, respect and curiosity for various forms of diversity. A school that prides itself on it sports program may want to emphasize that true sportsmanship is not only about competition and winning, but also about fair play and teamwork, which includes working together with a wide diversity of team members. A religious school may want to emphasize that their religion is not only about rote learning religious texts, but also about community, mutual care and compassion, which includes embracing the diversity God has created. So we intend the following criteria not to be meant as coercive and rigid, but as input and inspiration for developing a tailored welcoming and supportive school policy for all students and their families.

***(1) Clear goals***

**1. Monitoring.** The school regularly researches and reports on the well-being of students, including LGBTIQ+ students. Such research is necessary to make evidence-based policy. Leaving out questions about LGBTIQ+ students will result in invisibility and the impossibility to tailor the school policy properly.

**2. Vision on safety.** Based on the monitoring, the school formulates a vision on how to diminish teasing and bullying and to eradicate discrimination, including when these are based on sexual and gender diversity. Note that a lot of homophobic and transphobic bullying and discrimination, like racism and sexism, are often disguised in schools as ‘teasing’ and normalized as ‘innocent banter’. A safe and welcoming school culture is characterized by students and teachers having a predominant friendly attitude to each other. Teasing may happen, but is fun and does not contain denigrating put-downs. True school safety is more than a set of rules for acceptable behaviour and punishment for transgression of such rules.

**3. Vision on citizenship.** The school formulates an explicit vision on how they view “citizenship”. Under “citizenship” we understand the entire range of social expectations of personal empowerment to be able to state your opinion in a reasonable way, to be able to hear other’s viewpoints without getting upset, (pro)social and group behaviour and to democratic participation. The relationship with sexual and gender diversity is that all students, including LGBTIQ+ students, should be able to express their sexual or gender identity or to talk about their sexual and social development without getting denigrated or ridiculed for this.

***(2) Safe school environment***

**4. Rules about prosocial behaviour.** The school makes explicit agreements with students about prosocial behaviour, including behaviour towards minority students, like LGBTIQ+. Research shows that the single most effective measure to create a safe environment in school is when rules about behaviour are agreed upon by teachers and students together within the first 3 months of the academic year. A dictate of acceptable behavioural rules by teachers to students is not effective and can only maintained by regular punishment.

**5. Consistent maintenance of safety.** The school is consistent in dealing with negative behaviour, including to minority (including LGBTIQ+) students. In many schools, teachers are rather autonomous and may have different ways of promoting prosocial behaviour and handling negative behaviour. An inconsistency among teachers encourages students to try out ‘how far they can go’ with each teacher and creates the image that the school as a whole is not safe. Another aspect of the needed consistency is how and when the school administers ‘punishment’. Research shows that punishment is not an effective tool to regulate social behaviour and that it mainly leads to avoidance of punishment by moving the negative behaviour to places where school staff does not notice it. This is why LGBTIQ+ students experience unsafety more in the hallways, toilets and bicycle sheds than in the classroom. Better forms of safety maintenance are to facilitate supportive group formation, teaching ways of non-violent communication, encouraging supportive social control and being an “upstander” when bullying occurs.

**6. Self-expression.** The school encourages and supports self-expression at school, including non-traditional expressions of sexual orientations and gender identities. This includes a general atmosphere of openness and interest in others rather than a school culture in which subgroups of students form cliques which reject ‘outsiders’, with processes of competition and no restorative system to revolve conflicts.

***(3) Good teaching and the curriculum***

**7. Skills for prosocial behaviour and citizenship.** The school teaches skills for prosocial behaviour and citizenship, which includes how to treat LGBTIQ+ people and people with other diversities. It is not enough if the school just has a vision on this; a vision needs to be clearly translated into aligned action. Students have different backgrounds and come from different elementary schools. They may not have basic skills to recognize their emotions, to express their feelings, to communicate in a non-violent way, to make respectful requests or to deal with conflict without fighting or aggression. Even when these skills were already taught by parents and in elementary schools, hormonal developments and group processes in adolescence may make it challenging for high school students to apply what they’ve learned before. The school needs to work out a concrete curriculum to teach these skills.

**8. Sexual education.** The schools offers both biological and social attention for sexual and gender diversity throughout a spiral curriculum. High school students are in a phase where sexual attraction and dating are playing important roles. For students who did not have age-appropriate sexual education before high school – either by their parents or by their elementary school - a few lessons on the technical aspects of sexuality may be frightening and are not enough to help them to develop a happy and satisfying relational and sexual life. This means that sexual education needs to be *comprehensive* (going beyond technical information and dealing with emotional and social aspects), come back on different levels with different topics throughout the high school period. It is also more consistent when sexual education is not only taught as a topic within the subject biology or health, but also in other subjects like history, geography, literature and physical education (sports). Sex and relationships are a matter of life, and it should be understood that this is not only about cisgender heterosexual relationships but also about sexual and gender diversity. LGBTIQ+ topics should not be a separate chapter of sexual education; this will signal that it is perceived by the school as a special, and maybe even problematic topic.

***(4) Good student care***

**9. Systematic student care.** The school has an adequate system for student care. Many schools have such a system, but it often only focuses on students with learning of behavioural challenges. We suggest that LGBTIQ+ students are also included in such systems. This means that schools have ways to support students who have doubts about their sexual orientation or gender identity, and ways to support their self-expression and coming-out. This approach is not left to individual interests of skills of individual friendly teachers or counsellors. To be consistent and to take risks into account, the school needs to think about their relationship with the community. Parts of the community may not always be supportive. We also suggest that the school includes students who behave in a sexist, homophobic or transphobic way in the care system. As noted before, punishment of such students is not an adequate strategy to change their attitude or behaviour. Sexist, homophobic and transphobic behaviour is often rooted in condemnation by communities and in more personal social or traumatic experiences, which compel students to act out in less adequate ways. It is best to offer such students guidance and ‘care’ to help them develop more adequate coping behaviour in the face of diversity.

**10. Participation.** As a follow-up of the school’s view on citizenship, it is necessary that the school not only promotes democracy in theory but also in its own practice. The school should involves students (including LGBTIQ+ students) in the strategy to enhance the school quality on all four pillars. In some schools, LGBTIQ+ students and their friends start a Gay/Straight Alliance group, or a Gender & Sexuality Alliance. Such groups can provide a safe meeting place, but also develop into an advisory group which can give the school feedback on all the previously mentioned criteria and plans.

## A gradual innovation process

A good school policy cannot be implemented overnight. Students, teachers, other school staff and parents may have different views and possibly resistance against the change of the school into a more supportive environment for LGBTIQ+ students. To win over not only the minds but also the hearts of all people connected to the school, the school management needs to develop a approach to gradually create more commitment to the innovation (inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in school).

The expert on organizational innovation processes Everett Rogers distinguished different ‘groups’ in an organization who have different attitudes towards change. To promote successful innovation, Rogers advises to *not* involve all groups at once and in the same way. This could create too much resistance of the minority that are naturally inclined to resist change. GALE experimented in schools with the model of Rogers and has adopted the model slightly to fit the experience of and terminology in schools.

Rogers distinguished five groups that are common to every organization: innovators, trendsetters, benevolent people, conservative people and laggards. The main strategy of a successful innovation is to *gradually* and step-by-step involve these groups, until the organization’s commitment for the new routine is complete and the routine can be anchored.

1. **Innovators** : are always enthusiastic about innovation. Rogers found that most organizations commonly only have a few real innovators. In schools, these may be teachers who are always into try out something new. It may also be parents or students who propose novel school activities. Innovators do not care very much about whether their ideas may work on the long term or not; the fun of trying out something new is already enough reward for them and often they assume that their initial ideas are so good that they will work out anyway.

In the case of sexual and gender diversity, innovators could be students who come out publicly about being bisexual, who change their name or ask the school management if the students can choke a rainbow crossing in front of the school during Pride Week. Or it could be a teacher volunteering for the My-ID project and coming up with their own classroom activities. It could be a lesbian parent asking if the school could invite the local LGBTIQ+ association to do a panel session in classes, or offering to do such a panel session herself.

School managers should be grateful for and enthusiastic to innovators and try to see how their ideas can be implemented. But at the same time, school managers need to protect overly eager innovators against backlash and help them to implement activities with enough care and to tailor new interventions to the audience they want to reach and the other users (like other teachers, or fellow parents) if the interventions turn out to be successful.

1. **Trendsetters** : follow the (successful) innovators and set the tone for others. Rogers calls these *early adopters*. Rogers found an organization commonly has about 10-15% trendsetters in its population. Like innovators, trendsetters are interested in innovation and in trying out new things, but they rather follow innovations that seem promising or already have proven success. Trendsetters also have a good status among the other staff, students and parents in school, which makes their opinion and advice valuable for others - this is why we call them trendsetters.

In the case of sexual and gender diversity, trendsetters can be progressive and active teachers who take part in a try-out project working group. Or they can be progressive school managers and coordinators who help initiate and coordinate the integration of sensitivity for sexual and gender diversity in their school.

School managers should recognize the importance of their trendsetters. These are the people that are the key persons in a working group that develops a vision and plan, involve other people to try out classroom activities or other initiatives, and who review which interventions were successful and which need to be adapted to be more effective or acceptable to new users. It also helps enormously when the stories of trendsetters are shared in teacher meetings, meetings with parents and in publications of the school. Such stories do not need to be only commercials. Stories will be even more effective in convincing others by showing that the trendsetters initially had some doubts or that they had to overcome some problems when trying out interventions, but that they have overcome these challenges and that they now advise how the tried-out practices can become new successful routines of the school.

1. **Benevolents**: join the innovation if it seems successful and feasible. Roger divides the large ‘middle’ group in schools in two sections: the *early majority* and the *late majority*. Rogers found that both the early and late majority each cover about 34% of the population, so together they form the majority. Here we prefer to nickname the early majority the *benevolents:* although this part of the school population is not eager to start innovations themselves, they are benevolent enough to follow the trendsetters. This is the group of teachers and students that looks around for examples of interesting practices that they can adopt. They are rather open and curious and feel relatively little resistance to change, at least, when the invasion seems reasonable and potentially fun or effective.

In relation to sexual and gender diversity, the benevolents are the staff, students and parents who have not really thought about sexual and gender diversity before, but have no objection to consider how to improve their well-being. They are open for suggestions and to try out things to make the school better.

The school management should take care to involve not only innovators and trendsetters in the early phases of the innovation, but also involve at least some of the benevolent teachers and parents. Their experiences with trying out some interventions will be valuable because they represent a part of the school population that is willing but not overly enthusiastic. Their stories and experiences will help to convince the more conservative part of the school population to go along with the innovation when it turns out to be successful.

1. **Conservatives** : the *late majority* is more conservative than the early majority. They are more conservative and don’t really like change. When other people proposed change, they often have questions and arguments which doubt the necessity of changing traditions, current practices and routines. They tend to see the extra efforts that are necessary to develop change as burdens and as threats for stability. Even when advantages of an innovation are pointed out, they will still feel emotional resistance. So trying to rationally convince them to go along with an innovation is usually not an effective strategy; it can even trigger more resistance.

For example they may wonder why the school needs to give ‘special’ attention to sexual and gender diversity, and whether such attention to (for them) uncommon kinds of behaviour really need to have a place in school. Some may even feel that diversity other than cisgender heterosexuality is be a threat to traditional marriage and the very fabric of society. Conservative views may be supported by social, religious and political organizations who choose for maintaining traditions while neglecting the pain and discrimination some traditions may cause to marginalized groups. Schools need to connect to conservative parents (and staff and students) but not bow to dysfunctional traditions and demands.

Conservatives can accept change, but will resist it initially. Their reason to accept change is when the benevolent school staff and students have accepted the innovation and when the integrated attention for sexual and gender diversity has become a school routine. In essence, the conservatives follow the norm and routines of the school when these have become normal and unavoidable.

1. **Laggards** : in all organizations, there is a group of about 5-15% of the population that remains resistant to any change. These are the laggards, or the conservatives who are so set in their ways that they cannot cope with innovation.

Relating to sexual and gender diversity, laggards could be teachers or parents with an orthodox religious background, who live in communities that would not accept a more tolerant attitude towards sexual and gender diversity. Their reason to be laggards could be personal and emotional, but it could also be related to social pressure of their church, community or political party. Agreeing to go along with change may confront them with real risks, like loss of their position in such communities. Depending on their own emotion or experienced risk, they may be more or less vocal and contentious.

For school managers, laggards pose a dilemma in how to deal with them. Do you involve them and to what extent, or do you ignore them or… what else? Because laggards are not likely to along with the innovation, it is not wise to involve them too much in the beginning or middle phases of the innovation. It is always good to hear their criticism, but if laggards don’t offer feasible alternatives to be tolerant or supportive for LGBTIQ+ students, they will just build roadblocks for any innovation in this area. During the try-out phase of introducing a safe and welcoming environment for LGBTIQ+ students, some schools may choose to not involve laggards, or to give them a temporary exceptional position. At a later stage, when a supportive atmosphere for LGBTIQ+ students has become more common, there will be more consensus in the school about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour on this topic. For example, if a school has agreed to offer inclusive sex education, and a ‘laggard’ teacher refuses to give sex education the school will have no other option than to take the measures that they would take towards any malfunctioning staff. In the end, the school management has to make a judgement call based on the standards for school quality. Inclusion of sexual and gender diversity should not become a matter which is dependent on personal convictions.

A key task of school managers is to guide the change towards an LGBTIQ+ inclusive school climate is such a way that the minds and hearts of the school population is gradually won over. In practice this starts with school managers listening to innovators on how to improve the inclusivity of the school.

The school management then can proceed to set up a working group in which the innovators get space to experiment, but are also joined by trendsetters. These will be able to promote the change among the rest of the school population when the experiments are successful. Such a working group could also be joined by one or two benevolent teachers, students or/and parents, who could provide critical and constructive feedback. This feedback will useful to win over the hearts of the parts of the school population that may be more ambiguous or conservative towards sexual and gender diversity.

Throughout the process of building commitment, the school management has to take care that very conservative laggards do not block the innovation. The management needs to be prepared for potential resistance in any phase of the innovation, and needs to know what to do when objections are raised or when staff, students or parents do not comply with updated quality standards.

# About parents and their needs

Parents are a cross-section of society as a whole and therefore have different ways to view sexuality and gender roles. Parents have different starting points and needs depending on the background. In this chapter will go into the differences among cisgender heterosexual parents, but also into the needs of LGBTIQ+ parents and considerations for the school on how to connect or involve parents.

## Acceptors, processors and disapprovers

Cisgender heterosexual parents (probably the majority of all parents) are not a single consistent group. De Dutch researchers Jaap Geerlof and Rob Tielman found three subgroups in how they can relate to sexual and gender diversity.

There are parents who have experience with diversity in society and a mindset that helps them to be better prepared to accept such differences. Maybe they already know about sexual characteristics, gender identity and sexual orientations, but maybe they don’t. For them this doesn’t matter, they are the *acceptors* and are open to differences and appreciate diversity. Their main question will be: what can I do to support your child?

There are also parents who don’t know what to think of sexual and gender diversity. On one hand they want to support their children no matter what, but on the other hand they feel ambiguous and insecure. They have many questions like: will others accept my children? Will they be discriminated and have less chances in society? And what about venereal diseases? These parents need to process a lot of feelings and new information. This is why Geerlof and Tielman called them the *processors*. Processors are interested in information, education and suggestions. Information could be about prejudices and stereotypes, but processors mainly need reassurance that they child will be alright when their parents love and support them.

Then there are parents who agree with traditional social expectations that you are either strictly male or female and that you should be heterosexual. Such parents may have great difficulty accepting their children feel different. Geerlof and Tielman nicknamed these parents the “rejecters”. We think this term sounds too negative and have decided to call this group of parents here the *disapprovers*. Disapprovers are rarely totally negative parents rejecting their children because of their convictions. They may experience a mix of negative emotions, images and social pressure which makes it difficult for them to allow their child to make own choices. If disapproving parents do not want to break completely with their child, they need to embark on a journey during which they navigate the needs of their community, themselves and their child. They may find a way in which they do not loose their community and convictions, but at the same time keep the connection with their child. Parents and their children who succeed in such a precarious arrangement have been nicknamed “double binders” (Dankmeijer, 2007).

## LGBTIQ+ parents

There is an increasing number of parents who are in a same-sex relationship and/or who are LGBTIQ+ themselves. This ‘group’ is very varied. For example, LGBTIQ+ parents may be:

* A lesbian couple
* A gay couple
* A co-parenting unit of a gay and a lesbian couple
* A cisgender heterosexual married couple, with one partner who came out to be gay, bisexual or lesbian at a later age, but the couple still decided to remain married
* A couple in which one or both parents transitioned their gender
* A couple in which one or both parents have intersex variations
* Single LGBTIQ+ parent or single caretaker families
* Parents who keep their sexual orientation or gender identity hidden, consider it private, or are ‘out’, proud of what they have gone though, or activist
* Parents who lead a heteronormative life (that is: they follow gender roles, relationship- and sexual customs like cisgender heterosexuals do) or they lead a more diverse life (that is: they don’t always conform to cisgender or heterosexual expectations)

In the LGBTIQ+ movement, such families and their children are often called “rainbow families”.

One challenge for school staff is not to make assumptions about the situation and background of LGBTIQ+ parents. When trying to connect to LGBTIQ+ parents, it is wise to keep an open mind, to be inquisitive but at the same time not insensitively curious.

A basic need for LGBTIQ+ parents is to secure that the school of their children provides a safe and welcoming learning environment. Research shows that children in rainbow families are regularly teased and bullied by other students or treated insensitively by school staff. When LGBTIQ+ parents can choose the school themselves, they will scan the school website for information about school safety and visible signs of how they deal with diversity. They may come to school to inquire about this before they register their child. In the Netherlands, four teacher training students did research into what LGBTIQ+ parents want from schools. Based on the results, they developed two brochures: [one for parents](https://www.gale.info/doc/Europe/netherlands/GALE-2014-Visible-but-not-in-the-spotlight.pdf) (on what questions to ask to schools) and [one for schools](https://www.gale.info/doc/Europe/netherlands/GALE-2014-Rainbow-families-and-school-choice.pdf) (on what to answer LGBTIQ+ parents). These brochures discuss four questions LGBTIQ+ parents may ask the school:

* What does your school want to offer rainbow families?
* How safe is your school for rainbow families?
* How do you discuss sexual and gender diversity in your lessons?
* How do you arrange your counselling and care for LGBTIQ+ students?

These brochures were developed for primary schools, but can also be useful to inspire high schools.

## Parents of LGB+ children

In more accepting countries, most lesbian, gay, and bisexual children and children who choose another label start to think about such labels and about coming-out in their early adolescence. In countries with a more conservative population, this process of reflection and self-development may be postponed because of social pressure to conform to cisgender heterosexual expectations. In more restrictive countries, young adults may postpone choices for an LGB+ life and a possible coming-out until they can live on their own and then face less consequences in the case of expulsion by their family.

In practice this means that most parents only notice that their potential LGB+ children are somehow not fitting in with the (cisgender heterosexual) ‘normal’ pattern of getting interested in the other sex and experiments with dating. Or they may be confronted with a sudden “coming-out” when their child feels unable to suppress or hide their feelings anymore. In many families, mothers are more close to their children and already started to sense there was something “different” about their child. The experience shows that fathers are often more oblivious to such things, and may therefore be more shocked by a coming-out. When they are not prepared for such a revelation, they may be upset and react in an angry and rejecting way. LGB+ children sense that fathers may be more inflexible; research shows that they tend to confide their LGB+ feelings in the first place with their mother. Often they leave it to their mother to inform and pacify their father.

When schools get into contact with parents of LGB+ children, they need to be sensitive in inquiring about the possible home situations. Talking to only a mother or a father may give a distorted view of what is happening in a family. Parents may have different types of questions and demands of schools, depending their background and whether each of them are accepting, processing or disapproving. Especially in cases where the schools’ ethos on inclusion does not align with the views of specific parents, the school needs to be prepared to make a choice for the well-being of the student. It should be a good practice to not make any decisions without consulting the affected student themselves in advance.

While mothers are often the first person an LGB+ child comes out to, in some cases, an LGB+ student may confide first with fellow students or with the school counsellor or with a friendly teacher. In such cases, the school becomes aware of a coming-out before the family does. The school then may have to deal with the potential tension between securing safety for the student in school and the responsibility of the parents for their parenting at home. While most organizational “child protection policies” have a rule that the organization should *always* contact parents first in times of crisis or potential threat to the child’s safety, this is not automatically warranted in the case of LGB+ children. Research shows that the location with most harassment and violence towards LGB+ children is their family (the second location is the school). Schools need to reflect on this and make a conscious decision about how they would act in the interest of the student when conflicts with parental rights are in play. Here again, discussing this with the student first should be a good practice. In the discussions with a student about how to relate to parents, the school does not have to blindly follow what the student initially wants. In the early phases of coming out, a student may be overly afraid of rejection or overly self-assured while not taking all risks into account. It is wise to use these discussions with an LGB+ students to explore the pros and cons of different ways to come out, the risks and what to do when the worst risks (like violence and expulsion) turn out to become a reality. The school also needs to decide which role they are going to take in worst-case scenarios, like expulsion by the family. Will they continue to support the student, even when this goes beyond the formal school responsibilities? This could involve helping the student to find an alternative place to live and look for financial sustainability. The school should be clear about their possibilities and limits to the student, in order to create realistic expectations.

## Parents of trans+ children

While some trans+ children may become aware of their transgender feelings in adolescence, many already become aware of this well before high school. They probably have indicated such feelings to their parents before. In a friendly supportive family, it may be that the child was already able to experiment with living as their desired gender privately at home, for example by wearing appropriate clothing and using makeup or binders[[5]](#footnote-5). It may be that the family then decides that their child will also start to live according to their desired gender in public starting with the transition from elementary to high school.

This may pose several challenges for the high school.

In the first place, other students may know the transitioning student because they know them from elementary school. When they were not aware of the transgender feelings of their fellow student, this may be a shock to them, especially when there were raised with rigid views of sex and gender. In such cases the school needs to cooperate with parents and the student to facilitate the transition and the social interaction between students by organizing an adequate introduction process in the beginning of the academic year and supportive education for the other students. It would be very beneficial if the transitioning student could be part of this education process, because it would make the education more personal and role modelling. But whether this is possible depends on the willingness and empowerment of the student themselves.

In the second place there will be a number of practical arrangements to consider in cooperation with the parents and the student.

**Toilets**

If the toilets in school are gendered (separate toilets for boys and girls), the school needs to decide which toilet will be used by the transitioning student and how the safety of the student in these locations will be secured. It would be best when the student can use the toilet of their chosen gender, or by making one, a few or all toilets gender-neutral. In some cases, schools feel they cannot handle potential controversy on this issue or secure the safety for the transitioning student, and choose for assigning a teacher toilet to the student. This is not an optimal solution because it makes the transitioning student a ‘special’ case, while it would be better to treat sexual and gender diversity as normal, and to make sure toilets are always clean and safe for all students.

**Physical education and changing rooms**

Another practical arrangement is how to participate in physical education and the use of changing rooms. This includes how the transitioning student will take part in sports competitions. Here too, the considered choice of the student could be leading. The school should have a response ready for students or parents who may object to the decisions taken in this matter. This may be especially sensitive for competition sports (of which disapprovers will falsely claim that trans-male students have an unfair advantage) and for changing rooms (because adolescents in transition still have the biological characteristics of their birth sex, which may be perceived as threatening or offensive by cisgender heterosexuals).

**Administration and certificates**

Most schools are compelled by the government to register a student as male or female. This may cause insensitive and offensive aspects in the communication of the school to the student, when the school database automatically generates the biological sex rather than the chosen gender in official letters and other communications. It becomes an even greater problem when the exam certificates need to be issued. If the school issues an exam certificate with the birth name and birth sex for a transgender student, this will cause discriminatory challenges for the rest of their lives. The school therefore needs to amend the school administration to prevent such offensive mistakes. If the government does not allow the school to make such amends, schools should take the political responsibility to protest such insensitivity and combat the social and economic discriminatory consequences for their students.

**Addressing students**

Especially when students transition later during their high school career, they may change their name and pronouns during the process. This can be challenging for others when they are not used to changing names and gender. This is even more challenging when students behave or label themselves as non-binary. Some other students or even teachers may refuse to use the new chosen names and pronouns. The school needs to reflect on how it will deal with such insensitive situations. It would be good to discuss with the parents and the trans student what ‘protocol’ will be used the report and react to such situations.

## Parents of a child with an intersex variation

Parents of a child with an intersex variation may already know that their child has an intersex variation when it was discovered at birth, or the intersex variation may be less visible and not detected yet.

When physical intersex variations were detected at birth, in conservative countries there may have been attempts to medically change the sex of the child to what the parents or physicians perceived to be an ‘acceptable’ gender. Such medical interventions can cause ongoing physical and mental problems for young people with intersex variations. Some students need repeated updated operations. Such operations may be planned in vacation times, out of shame or to diminish the time of the student out of school. But missing vacations also has negative consequences on the well-being of the student.

When intersex variations are less visible but located for example in genetics or hormones, this may cause confusion of the student in how to relate to their feelings of gender. They may feel not to have appropriate feelings according to their ascribed sex/gender and this can cause insecurity and learning challenges.

For some parents, having a child with intersex variations may be a source of shame. Others will not consider it shameful, but it still can con sider it to be a private issue. However, some of the adaptations we signalled for trans students may also be needed to accommodate students with intersex variations, like changing rooms and participation in sports. Whatever the case, it would be good when the school considers intersex variations as a possibility and a potentially challenging aspect of the child’s identity and behaviour. By neutrally and openly communicating to parents about this, this could create an opening to have a dialogue on how to support the student in an optimal way.

# Suggestions to connect

In this chapter we offer a few concrete suggestions on how to connect with parents. Because high schools have existing different levels of involvement of parents, we will divide our suggestions in tree paragraphs: low connection, intermediate connection and high connection (Goodall, 2022). With *low connection* we refer to schools that only inform parents about the academic results of students and have short individual sessions with parents when students have learning or behavioural problems in school. With *intermediate connection* we refer to schools that try to involve parents as much as possible and necessary for the social and academic goals of the school. With *high connection* we refer to schools that continually see involve parents on all levels of school policy and in the learning of students in the school and at home.

## Ask parents to agree with the vision

Regardless of the level of connection to parents, we advise all schools to explain to parents what the general vision of the school is when parents and students come to school to register.

One of the good practices we found is that a school can formulate a mission statement which students and parents need to sign when they register. The statement says the school is welcoming all students, including of all religions, beliefs, political affiliations, races, genders, nationalities and sexual orientations and regardless of the economic of marital status of their parents; and that the registered students and their parents sign to agree with this. Normally, all parents will sign such a general statement without question. But when objections arise later on, the further dialogue can not be about agreement or not any more, but needs to focus on *how* the school and parents deal with such diversity.

## How to inform parents

It may be that schools feel the need to inform and educate parents about sexual and gender diversity. The thought behind this is often that misunderstandings and prejudice are rooted in a lack of information, and the expectation that giving *more* and *correct* information will change the attitude of parents. However, informational approaches can be risky.

Research shows that negative attitudes are fed by negative emotions like insecurity, fear and anger and not by information. Information is just the label that covers up the underlying attitudes and emotions. Trying to educate parents with information may therefore miss the point, or even increase resistance. We especially would caution against giving too much or too complicated (academic) information. There is a risk that parents with lower levels of schooling will not properly understand. In addition, parents may perceive too elaborate information as an attempt to defend something indefensible, or as pushing a “woke” view on them. This does not mean information is always a bad thing. But we advise to keep information short and neutral and to devote sessions with parents more to dialogue rather than to presentations. Give parents space to talk about their experiences, their doubts and fears. If they have questions, these can be answered on the spot in simple, neutral and reassuring language.

In a brochure for school parents and a leaflet for parents in general we have given examples of how we think that neutral information can be combined with a reassuring, connecting tone of communication.

## Low connection

In a school that has a low connection with parents, it is not common to inform parents about specific guidelines for social behaviour or about the content of the curriculum. Parents may be involved through a Parent’s Counsel, but commonly such parents don’t have much contact with the community base and mainly represent themselves.

If the school considers sexual and gender diversity a topic that needs to be normalized and integrated in a way like any other topic in the school, in low connection situations it is not advisable to inform our involve parents beforehand in the decisions or in the content of this particular aspect of the school policy. If the integration of sexual and gender diversity is part of a larger change that the school deems necessary to enlist parental support for (like a major change in behavioural rules for students or the first-time proposal to start with sexual education), the general outline of the change could be put forward in a memo for endorsement by the Parent’s Counsel. Like any other topic, any amendment to such proposal should remain general and leave the school space to professionally tailor it to specific school circumstances.

We advise against specifically informing parents of schools with low connection about the first time integration specifically of sexual and gender diversity in school policy and the curriculum. This will signal to disapproving parents that this is a controversial and special subject that is open for discussion and censorship.

At the same time we would like to caution against the stereotypical view of parents as potential opponents in a low connection situation. Even when the school has little contact with parents, it is always wise to keep the communication channels open and fair. By using non-violent communication and taking the emotions and needs of parents serious, it is easier to listen to them, not condemn them, and finding a mutually acceptable solution for perceived problems without the school abandoning their vision.

In situations where there is a low connection with parents, it may occur that parents hear something about what is happening in the school on the topic of sexuality and gender and come to school to complain. They often only have a partial or biased view of what actually happens in school. School representatives should be aware that such objections and complaints can be based on different reasons or triggers:

* parents may simply be emotional about something that triggered their fight or flight impulse
* parents may hold long-term attitudes based on traditional community or religious values and feel that the inclusive policy of the school is a threat to these
* parents may be under the influence of social, religious or political factions which encourage them to raise their voice against inclusion, such factions may even threaten to harm the social status of the family
* parents may think that sexual and gender diversity is bad or sinful, but they may be uninformed and have superficial stereotypical images of diversity
* parents may fear that their own child is LGBTIQ+ or that information about sexual and gender diversity may somehow ‘seduce’ them to a non-conforming or dangerous lifestyle

For the school, it is important to find out which reasons or triggers are in play, and which underlying needs need to be fulfilled. In some cases this could just be emotional reassurance. In other cases, some education may be warranted. Education or information needs to be tailored to the needs and emotions of parents. When connecting to parents who are principally disapproving of sexual and gender diversity, the school may need to have a non-violent dialogue with them about how parents can find ways to combine their strongly held beliefs with the need to be welcoming and inclusive. It may be that the school can tailor its own policy to some extent to be more inclusive of the more extreme conservative for religious beliefs, as long as that does not negate the core of the inclusivity of their policy. For example, a school can be more explicit in lessons about more and less strong feelings people have about their religion and discuss this with students, while at the same time stressing that violence and hate speech are not acceptable ways to voice disagreement.

## Intermediate connection

In a school that has an intermediate connection with parents, there is much more effort to inform and involve parents. We will describe some key areas of how schools could shape their intermediate connection with parents, and how these areas of cooperation can include sexual and gender diversity.

**Information**

The school has easy to find information about the goals and procedures of the school on the website, and it has a dedicated area for parents. The school has a regular newsletter for parents (this could be a general newsletter for parents, students and staff) which is regular attention for topics that are specific to parents. These news channels do not only have information about academic learning but also about social activities, and parents are invited to participate in a range of the school’s social events.

The website of the school can have a sensitive images of and attention to sexual and gender diversity by referring to LGBTIQ+ parents, and to social activities that celebrate diversity. The school can choose to take part in annual LGBTIQ+ events like Pride (June, celebrating LGBTIQ+ diversity), Coming-out Day (October, promoting the right to be yourself) or IDAHOT (May, attention for how mainstream organizations integrate sexual and gender diversity in their own ways). Such events can be added to other feasts celebrated at school like local/regional cultural feasts, Christmas and celebration days of other religions (like the Muslim Sugar Feast and the Hindu Feast of Lights Divali).

**Homework**

Schools with an intermediate connection to parents try to involve parents in different ways in the learning process of their children. This could be simple communications like asking them to reserve a quiet time and a separate room for the homework of their children, but it can also be giving students homework in which they have to involve the parents or the community. For example, students can be asked to interview their parents, family members or others about family history, social issues, political viewpoints and so on. Parents can also be asked to come to school and view the products of assignments of their children. A more intensive way to involve parents is to ask them to co-review the homework of their children.

Sexual and gender diversity, and sexuality and relationships in general can be part of the homework effort by asking students to interview their parents on how they met, why they decided to get married or cohabitate, what kind of sexual education they got from their parents and from their school and on how sex, gender and sexual orientation were part of this. Such homework assignments also opens up the opportunity for LGBTIQ+ students to explore how their parents think about sexual and gender diversity, which allows them to better understand the potential opportunities to come out or the risks they may face. In projects related to sexual and gender diversity at school, products or a theatre performance can be made, which parents are invited to watch. Such student products or performances do not represent the opinion of the school but of the students themselves, and offer an opportunity to have a dialogue with parents about how to deal with different views on diversity.

**On-going communication**

Schools with an intermediate connection to parents attempt to keep the communication with parents open at all times. This may happen through online communication, through a helpdesk, or through more direct contact with counsellors and teachers.

Such ongoing communication also provides an opportunity to get to know the family situations better and to create more space to communicate about the possible doubts students may have about their sexual orientation or gender identity. They may also open up space to discuss name-calling, bullying or ostracization in school or at home.

An increasing number of schools recognise that the community is of key importance for the school culture and well-being of students. If sexual and gender related bullying is taking place in the school, schools may choose to organize a [Restorative Justice Conference](https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/184738.pdf). In such a meeting all stakeholders around bullying are invited, which includes both the victim(s) and the perpetrator(s) and their families - and possibly others. The goal of restorative justice is to reconcile the needs of victims and perpetrators with the needs of the community. Unlike retributive justice, which is primarily concerned with punishing negative behaviour, restorative justice focuses on repairing the injury that such behaviour inflicts. But the principles of restorative justice can also be applied to smaller-scale meetings between victims, perpetrators and parents. In relation to sexual and gender diversity, Restorative Justice Conferences can provide a forum for a sensitive dialogue which helps people to recognize that sexist, homophobic and transphobic hate speech and hate acts are not helpful for the community.

**Decision-making**

In schools with a an intermediate connection with parents, not only the few parents in the Parent’s Council are involved in decision-making, but a larger number of interested parents are involved. When the curriculum is reviewed, or when social rules are being adapted, representatives of specific groups of parents are invited to attend focus groups and voice their views and opinions. This provides the school with valuable feedback on how to tailor their policies and interventions.

The school can choose to organize focus groups or collect information through surveys about how parents relate to diversity and sexuality. For example, the My-ID project based her products on a needs assessment survey among teachers and students and focus group interviews with parents. In such efforts, it is wise to approach the topic initially in a general way (like social respect, inclusion or sexuality in general) and then gradually proceed to more specific details or opinions about sexual and gender diversity. Slowly zooming in on the potentially more ‘controversial’ aspects will make the step towards sexual and gender diversity more gradual and acceptable. It also allows the school to change terminology or even stop the interview when the topic seems to become too sensitive.

Because schools with an intermediate connection with parents do not have a reliable overview of the entire range of attitudes and opinions among the parents, strategies to connect on sexual and gender diversity should be chosen and developed with care. Ultimately, there will be minority opinions for and against any proposal. It is essential that the school has a clear and transparent decision procedure. The position of parents in the process should be clearly outlined and the decision power of the school management or board should be paramount. The management or board should take care not to yield too much influence to extreme viewpoints and guard the safety and inclusion of all students.

## High connection

In schools with a high connection to parents, parents are seen as partners and co-producers of learning. Parents are engaged in co-designing educational activities and homework, and are active stakeholders in proposing, developing and implementing school activities. Parents may continually be updated about the progress and situation of their children through a database that may be accessible not only for school staff but also for parents and students. Parents are actively asked to provide feedback on school policies and concrete activities and the school reports back on how they follow up on such feedback.

In relation to sexual and gender diversity, such an open and cooperative relationship with parents creates such level of social trust and safety, that information about the child’s gender expression and sexual attractions can be shared more openly - with permission of the student of course. Teasing, bullying and marginalization occur less in such schools because the social connection is so strong that negative behaviour is disapproved of and more quickly resolved through informal and non-violent communication. “Non-violent” communication is the norm in schools with high mutual connections. Non-violent communication is characterized by listening, dialogues between people who assume an equal status in communication, a willingness to not judge or condemn and an eagerness to find common solutions that fulfil everybody’s needs.

Nonviolent communication dialogues commonly go like this:

* Ask the person you address to tell you about their *feelings.*
* Listen without interrupting and when the other is ready, you can ask what they *need*. Needs are deeper than feelings or emotions. They are things like security, acceptance or a sense of belonging. Needs are things you want, but they are abstract and not concrete objects or acts.
* After knowing more about their deeper needs, ask your communication partner what possibilities they see of how such needs could be fulfilled. This is the question for strategies. In this part of the dialogue you can ask for pros and cons of different ways to fulfil the needs. Don’t try to give your own opinion or assessment, superimposing your own judgments is likely to disturb the equality in the dialogue and your communication partner may not welcome it.
* Finally you can ask your communication partner what you can do to help them to fulfil their needs. As a response, the other can make a concrete and feasible *request*. Do not offer help that is not solicited. This may also be felt as pushing, oppressive and unhelpful.

# List of abbreviations

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Acronym | Description |
|  |  |
| LGBTIQ+ | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and other non-cisgende4r-heteronormative people. This acronym is used in current international language. It refers to people who identify with these and other labels. In this publication, we use this acronym when we refer to self-labelling students. When we refer to related topics, we often prefer to use the acronym “SOGIESC”. |
| SOGIESC | Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Sexual Characteristics. “Sexual Orientation” refers to heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality and other more nuanced labels for sexual attraction. “Gender Identity” refers to cisgender, non-binary and transgender identifications of self. “Sexual Characteristics” refers to biological aspects of a persons sex, like male, intersex or female. We use the acronym “SOGIESC” to avoid the impression that school policy should only be relevant for students and staff who “label” themselves as “LGBTIQ+”. |
|  |  |

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# Summary of the Project

The My-ID project was a cooperation with 8 organizations from 4 European countries. Five schools were involved in developing and trying out the activities. The project ran from November 2021 until November 2023.

The project developed an educational approach which is not just about informing students, teachers and parents about sexual and gender diversity, but also to give attention to the emotional aspects that play a role when schools want to secure tolerance for, acceptance of and even appreciation of diversity. The "My-ID" approach wants to integrate such supportive attention for sexual and gender diversity based on emotional intelligence in high schools in a sustainable way.

The project employed three key strategies to support high schools in implementing the My-ID method: (1) we developed concrete activities that teacher could do with students in class, (2) we developed training to empower teachers to use the classroom activities, and (3) we developed guidance on how to inform and connect to parents.

### Erasmus+

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Dankmeijer, Peter (2023). *Connect with parents on sexual and gender diversity. A manual on how schools can reach out and work with parents*. Amsterdam: GALE (November 2023)



1. Cisgender: to behave according to your biological sex at birth [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Non-binary: people who don’t feel they can/want to identity as a man or woman [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Transgender: people who feel different from the sex they were at birth, and would like to change their body to the sex they feel to be (or who have already transitioned) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Intersex variations: people who are born with genetic characteristics that are neither (completely) male or female [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A breast band that helps a trans boy to hide his breasts until a mastectomy (operational removal of breasts) is possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)