

## Our school and sexual and gender diversity

**A model brochure for parents of a school**

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# A model brochure

This publication is intended as an example of a brochure that secondary schools can offer to parents of their students. With the brochure, schools can inform parents about how the school deals with sexual and gender diversity.

Of course, all schools think differently about this and have their own policy. In this publication we assume that schools want to offer LGBTIQ+ students - just like other students - a safe and pleasant learning environment, but that they feel the need to provide parents with more information about this if requested. The brochure is a model example in which the content is based on an ideal-typical policy and an average level of parental involvement.

The model brochure can work as a source of information for parents, but can also be a tool for the school to further consider their own approach and their tone towards parents. In practice, each school will have to adapt this model brochure to their own policy, approach and tone.

We assume that the brochure will only be provided to parents upon request. For strongly disapproving parents, the amount and tone of the information can cause resistance. The information is aimed at parents who are really interested.

We hope this example helps you get started!

# For who is this brochure?

This brochure is made for parents with questions about sexual and gender diversity and about how this relates to our school.

The basic text of this brochure has been written by GALE (the Global Alliance for LGBTIQ+ Education). It is based on international experiences and literature on how schools can make themselves safe and welcoming for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex students. Our school adapted this text to the specific situation of our school.

In the next chapter of this brochure we will go into what sexual and gender diversity exactly is and why our school needs to take some action on it.

In the third chapter we will describe how we view sexual and gender diversity and how we have developed school policy on it.

In the fourth and final chapter, we will describe how we want to connect to parents.

# What is sexual and gender diversity?

Many parents expect their children to grow up as a man, a woman and as someone who eventually will get married to somebody of the other sex. However, in some cases it will not happen like that. This has to do with how their sexual characteristics, gender identity and sexual orientation develop.

#### Sexual characteristics

Did you know that some children are born with biological characteristics that are neither male or female? For example, their body can have unclear or both male or female aspects, or their genetic code or their hormone levels may not be typical for males or females. These characteristics are called *intersex variations*. Some of these variations need to be surgically corrected, but most do not need a medical intervention. But because children are expected to be male *or* female, being born with an intersex variation can pose a *social* challenge. Parents and the child have to find solutions for how they can to deal with such social expectations.

#### Gender identity

Other children are born with biological characteristics that are totally male or female, but they still clearly *feel* different. There are unhappy with the body they got. When children are still very young, parents don’t know this and will raise such children according to the expectations related to their biological sex. This is called *cisgender*; to behave according to your biological sex at birth. But children who are raised cisgender while they feel different, may become confused or frustrated at a later age. Eventually they may decide that they want to change their body, or part of their body, to the gender they feel to belong to. This is called *transgender*: changing into the sex you feel to be.

#### Sexual orientation

Then, some children may discover during their adolescence that other young people feel attracted to the other sex (this is called *heterosexual*), but that they don’t. Maybe they feel only attracted to others of the same sex (this is called *homosexual*, or *gay* for boys and *lesbian* for girls) or sometimes to men and sometimes to women (this is called *bisexual*).

#### What does this have to do with our school?

Our school wants to be safe and welcoming for all students. We want to make sure that 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 can feel at home here and learn optimally.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender en intersex students (that’s a long phase, let’s use “***LGBTI***”) may have specific needs that we need to take into account.

Part of these needs are due to ***discrimination***. Some people feel uneasy with sexual or gender diversity or disapprove of it. This may cause them to treat LGBTI people in a negative way. In society, there may be discrimination. In school, we may see this as name-calling, bullying and leaving fellow students out of activities. Although we think that everybody is entitled to have their own feelings and opinions on sexual and gender diversity, our school does not condone hateful speech or violence. We have to make sure all students are safe. This is why we will give attention to social and emotional skills and respectful communication. We will also offer guidelines and lessons to prevent or correct negative behaviour like bulling or discrimination. Because some people may disapprove of sexual and gender diversity because they don’t have enough or incorrect information, we will also educate our students about the facts. We will discuss how society looks at diversity and encourage the students to form their own opinion.

Apart from discrimination, there are some other issues we need to take into account. These issues are usually more specific to each of the sexually or gender diverse groups. For example:

* Most people assume children will grow up to be cisgender (male *or* female) and heterosexual (attracted to the opposite sex). When children feel differently and announce this to their parents or others this is called ***coming-out***. A coming-out can be a difficult process for both the child and for others like their parents or their fellow students. To make this easier for lesbian, gay and bisexual students and for the people they come out to, the school needs to provide some help.
* Children usually become gradually aware they are ***transgender***, and when this has become more clear to them, they may want to start changing their gender towards the gender they really feel to be. This is a different type of coming-out that the school needs to provide help with. When a student changes gender, it raises some practical questions. Like: with toilets or changing rooms will they use, how will they participate in sports, what will be their name and gender on formal documents, like their diploma? Our school needs to make decisions on this and change some routines.
* When children have an ***intersex variation***, they may already know that since birth, but they also may only find out at a later stage during high school. When their intersex variation is visible in their body, the school needs to make the same kind of accommodations like for trans students. But intersex variations can also be genetic or hormonal and invisible. Such variations may cause students to feel uncomfortable and confused. We should take care not to treat such children as mentally ill, but to deal with their feelings as a normal part of their personal development.

So you see, this is a topic that concerns the school in different ways that we have to make some decisions on. In the next chapter we will tell you more about how we are thinking about this and what kind of things we intend to do to make the school safe and comfortable for all, including LGBTI students.

# Our school policy

As a school, we try to establish a safe and welcoming environment for LGBTI students. We are aware that some parents may criticize this. Of course, we are willing to have a dialogue with parents about this.

To be able to have mutual understanding and a constructive dialogue, we want to be clear about our view and what we intend to do.

#### Our general view

Our school wants to raise and train students to be successful members of society. To be able to take this role as future adults, they need to know themselves and how they can relate to others. Based on that, they can develop their own opinions and communicate in respectful and democratic ways about what they need.

We know that it is a natural phenomenon that people may feel uncomfortable or even get scared or angry when they are confronted with new people and situations that seems strange to them. In primary schools, we already teach children to count to ten to help them not to react too impulsively and violent. We tell them: *think before you act*. In adolescence, we need to keep developing this *emotional intelligence* of young people. They need the mental flexibility to deal with diversity and changing situations.

During high school, their bodies change, hormones create unexpected impulses, sexual attraction develops and adolescents gradually become more aware of who they are and who they want to be. Our school is not just an institute where students learn academic facts, but also a space to learn how they can deal with these physical, emotional and relational changes. We think that good citizenship education, health education and sexual education are important in learning this. And that support for such a personal development should also be part of our entire school culture.

Like all diversity, sexual and gender diversity are aspects of society students need to learn to deal with. So we are trying to integrate this without making it a special topic.

#### Our quality standards

We think 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 we could integrate attention for sexual and gender diversity in those four pillars.

***(1) Clear goals***

Our school regularly researches the well-being of students. In our future research, we will ask students not only about their biological sex, but also about their gender and sexual orientation. Then we can see if LGBTI students feel safe and have the same learning results as other students. This way we can make better school policy.

When it turns out that LGBTI students are not doing well, we will think how we improve their situation. In the first place we will think about ways to make the school more safe. In the second place we will be more clear in our view of “citizenship”. This concerns the entire range of social expectations, of being able to state your opinion in a reasonable way, to be able to hear other’s viewpoints without getting upset, positive social behaviour and democratic participation. In short: we will formulate a vision on how the school will encourage emotional intelligence of students by open en respectful communication about diversities in school.

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

We want our school to be safe for everybody. To make sure everyone agrees with the rules, we will make the rules *together with students*. We will discuss with students how they want to be treated by others, and discuss with them why it is important to treat everybody equal and friendly – including minorities. This way we involve students better in how we stop mean name-calling and prevent bullying. We will agree among the teachers and other staff to all implement the agreed rules consistently, so that personal opinions are not a risk for school safety. We will discuss with students how they can be part of this effort.

All students should be able to show who they are and what their opinion is. Likewise, LGBTIQ+ students should be able to express their identity and give their opinions without getting ridiculed for this.

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

We want to teach student the skill to be friendly and cooperative with other people. After all, as an adult you usually have to work in a team and even when you don’t like someone, you still have to work with them. We want our students to develop an open and cooperative attitude.

Sexual and relational education is about more personal issues, but just as important. We want our students to find good friends and partners. We want them to be happy in their relationships. To be happy, they need to communicate well with each other and respect each other. We want to avoid sexual intimidation. Sexual intimidation is not only boys being inconsiderate or violent against girls, but also harassment of fellow-LGBTI students. That is what we think good sexual and relational education is. Of course, students make own choices in this. If are homo- or bisexual and want to have a same-sex relationship, they may have other questions and experiences than in an other-sex (heterosexual) relationship. And students need to learn empathy for others; for example how it hurts when others tell them they can not have the relationship they want.

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

Our school has a system for student care. We keep an eye on how students are doing, and when there seems to be a problem, we talk with the students and their parents to see how we came overcome difficulties. One of such difficulties may be that students feel homosexual or transgender, or that their intersex variation causes social or learning challenges. We will inform and train our teachers and counsellors on how to support students and parents when this happens.

We will also counsel students who are unfriendly towards LGBTI fellow-students. We know that hateful speech or acts are often based on a kind of helplessness; such students just don’t know how to handle things they are not used to. We will help them to develop better “coping” skills.

We will try to involve students and parents in how we want to translate all these good intentions into practice.

#### The way we develop our policy

The quality standards we discussed in the previous paragraph are good intentions. We cannot introduce them all at the same time. For some students, teachers or parents, change is welcome while others don’t like change. This is why we will first develop ideas an then try out if the ideas work well. We will throw out bad ideas, keep good ideas and improve ideas that are relatively good but could be better. This process is guided by a working group.

# How we connect to parents

Our school thinks it is important to inform and cooperate with parents. In this chapter we will discuss how we do that.

#### Counselling

There may be parents who are concerned about their children. Maybe their children are LGBTI themselves, or the parents are LGBTI and are worried about how their children will be treated in school. Our school believes that we should try to solve these concerns in cooperation with parents and students. The well-being of students is our priority. Parents can help their children at home, the school can support them in school, and it would be best when these actions are aligned. If you have any questions or need for advice, please contact our counsellors or the class teacher/mentor.

#### The working group

The way we improve our school policy in this area is prepared by a working group. In this working group, a couple of teachers and other staff will do the actual work, while we will give space to students and parents to give advice or to cooperate in the try-outs. If you would like to be part of this group or when you want to be informed about what the group does, let the school know. We will contact you and discuss how you can help.

#### The decision procedure

The working group develops proposals but does not decide about them. The decisions about what the school will do, follows the regular decision procedure. The proposals by the working group will be put forward to the school management. After the school management approves them, advice or consent will be asked by the Student Council, the Parent’s Council and the Staff Council. Based on the discussions in these councils, the school management will make a final decision and the try-outs will take place.

When the try-outs are completed, the same procedure will be followed to decide which measures and interventions will become or part of the regular school routine and policy.

If you want to be part of this decision procedure, contact your representative in the Parent’s Council or put yourself forward as a candidate for the Council.

#### Constructive feedback for the school

You don’t have to be an elected member of the Parent’s Council to help in the development of this new policy. All parents who are interested can keep informed and provide the school with feedback. Remember, this works best when you have constructive feedback; that means that we will be able to cooperate better with you when you make concrete suggestions on how to resolve the challenges we see with inclusion and how to improve the policy.

#### When you have concerns

It may be that you have concerns about the school developing a policy on sexual and gender diversity. Or you may have concerns about some parts of this. We fully understand this.

We know there are many types of parents. There are parents who are accepting of sexual and gender diversity. There are LGBTI parents who may fear that their children will be teased because they have two mothers are two fathers. There are parents who have children that are LGBTI. There are parents who don’t know that much about sexual and gender diversity and are worried. They may have questions. And there may be parents who are disapproving of sexual and gender diversity because this is considered taboo or sinful in their community or religion.

As a school we are open to dialogue with all our parents. We will carefully listen to you and try to understand your concerns. Where possible, we will try to meet your needs. In some cases, this may not be completely possible. After all, our key mission is to make your school safe and welcoming for all students. But even in cases where we seem to face dilemmas, we will discuss with you how we can find a workable solution for your concerns.

#### When you want to complain

It may be that we cannot find a solution that is mutually satisfying. In such cases, parents can make use of our complaint procedure. Look at our website for how this works.

The basic steps are:

* Write down your complaint as concretely as possible, and include a request on how you want the situation to be resolved
* Send this letter to the school management. The management will decide and send you a response.
* If you don’t agree with the response, you can ask the judgment of an independent complaint committee. The complaint committee may want to have interviews with all the people concerned to be able to make a good judgment. After their consideration, the complaint committee will give a formal advice to the school management.
* Then the school management has another opportunity to agree with this formal advice or not.
* If the school management does not agree with the complaint or the request, the last possibility for appeal is to go to the school board.

A formal complaint and going through this procedure may take some time and may be painful for all parties concerned. It is always wise to try to come to a mutual agreement or compromise before resorting to a formal complaint. Still, nobody should feel inhibited against making use of their right to file a formal complaint.

# 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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