



Transgender and non-binary young people in digital spaces

A guide for professionals to consider terminology, risk assessment,
and safety planning in reference to online exploitation

**The
Children's
Society**

Why produce this resource?

In our continued commitment to equity and inclusion at the Prevention programme, we have an ambition to equip professionals with the best tools to prevent child exploitation, and to improve their responses when young people are at risk of being exploited.

Although we still lack data on the exploitation risks posed to trans young people, we do understand that there are particular aspects of their unique life experiences (and society's response to these) that may exacerbate the risks experienced by all young people in digital spaces.¹

This resource aims to provide professionals with a wider understanding of the experiences of trans and non-binary young people in digital spaces. Throughout the development of the resource, we have consulted with young people from the LGBTQ+ community.



What young people are telling us...

When consulted on this resource, LGBTQ+ young people told us that they wanted to emphasise that no professional or adult needs to feel the pressure to 'get it right'. Instead, they should remember that each young person's experience is unique, and that we will never truly be able to know how it feels to be them. We should simply be open to learning, listening and showing empathy.

¹ Austin A, Craig SL, Navega N, McInroy LB. It's my safe space: The life-saving role of the internet in the lives of transgender and gender diverse youth. *Int J Transgend Health*. 2020 Jan 6;21(1):33-44. doi: 10.1080/15532739.2019.1700202. PMID: 33015657; PMCID: PMC7430466.

Glossary of terms

- **Trans or transgender:** People may use the term 'trans' to describe themselves if their own sense of gender (their gender identity) does not match or sit easily with the gender they were assumed to have based on the sex they were assigned at birth. In this resource, we will be using the term 'trans' as an umbrella term to cover many identities, including non-binary ones.
- **Non-binary:** One of several terms people might use to describe the experience of having a gender that is neither male nor female, both male and female and/or between, beyond or unrelated to the binary categories of man and woman. Some people use it as an umbrella term, encompassing a spectrum of experiences such as those described under gender fluid and agender.
- **Cis or cisgender:** One of a number of terms people might use to describe the experience of having a gender that matches their sex assigned at birth. In other words, a man assigned male at birth, or a woman assigned female at birth.
- **Pronoun:** A word that stands in for a name. In English, some third person pronouns are commonly associated with gender ('he', 'she'), whereas first person ('I') and second person ('you') pronouns are gender-neutral. Singular 'they' is an example of a third person gender-neutral alternative. Some other commonly used gender neutral pronouns are: ze/hir and xe/xem. Some people may use multiple pronouns, such as 'she/they'. This list is not exhaustive – we cannot capture all of those pronouns in use across the UK or a full reflection of them in this document.
- **Digital spaces:** Virtual environments that are displayed on the screens of digital devices.

In this glossary, we are adhering to definitions as set out by trans-specialist organisation Gendered Intelligence. This is a condensed glossary, and we acknowledge that there are many other identities and experiences of gender. For more information on language in relation to this subject, please see Gendered Intelligence's [Trans Inclusion at Work Policy Glossary](#).

Searching for acceptance

All young people need a sense of belonging within a community in order to grow, develop and reach their full authentic self-identity. Trans young people have made it clear to us that safe spaces are crucially important for them to have somewhere where they can express their gender identity freely, without fear of discrimination, intimidation or being undermined. In our work to consult young people on their views of gender and exploitation, one young person highlighted how unsafe trans young people may be:

'Trans young people are at risk of experiencing discrimination and of being killed'

Young person, The Prevention Programme

There can be devastating consequences for trans young people's wellbeing if we neglect to provide safe spaces that are free of discrimination and judgement. Queer Futures research has indicated that in the UK trans children were twice as likely to have self-harmed than cis-gendered lesbian, gay and bisexual children, who already have higher rates of self-harm and suicide. Transphobia and being unable to talk to anyone about their identity were key factors for such young people.

If young people are experiencing forms of rejection and discrimination from wider society, and at times from their own families and carers, they are likely to seek out that acceptance from other spaces. For some trans young people, online spaces provide an opportunity to be themselves and feel accepted by a community that share similar experiences. Online spaces are especially important to some LGBTQ+ young people as a way of meeting and getting to know others away from local peer, family or faith groups, where they may experience less acceptance. In our consultation on gender and exploitation, young people pointed out the particular importance of online spaces when no other support is available to LGBTQ+ young people.

²McDermott, E. S., Hughes, E., & Rawlings, V. E. Queer Future Final Report: Understanding lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) adolescents' suicide, self-harm and help-seeking behaviour. 2016: 49-50 (2016). Available from: [Queer Futures](#)

Gender-affirming experiences

Young people who are trans may seek out relationships, support networks, forums, and communities where they can have gender-affirming experiences. A gender-affirming experience refers to an encounter that validates, enhances, or supports a young person's gender identity and leads to positive thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviours relating to their gender. Gender-affirming experiences can lead to a sense of gender euphoria, where trans and non-binary people feel a sense of happiness, confidence, pride, and joy from being affirmed and accepted in their gender identity.

Young people and LGBTQ+ specialist organisations have stressed that it is vital that you use the right pronouns when you are addressing a young person, but also when you are discussing them in meetings, or writing up notes in relation to the young person (unless they have asked for you to keep their gender identity private). The best way to make sure that you are getting this right is to simply ask the young person what their pronouns are, and how they would like you to use them in these circumstances: when you are referring to them in person, when you are communicating with their caregivers or other professionals, and when you write case notes about them. When in multi-agency settings, make sure that all partners are making a record of the young person's pronouns to avoid confusion and inefficient safeguarding responses. If you do make a mistake and use the wrong pronoun, simply apologise, correct yourself, and move on.

Perpetrators however sometimes use gender affirmation to groom trans young people into exploitation. At the Prevention programme, we have been seeking out expert knowledge and experience from specialist services that support trans and non-binary young people. While consulting these services, we heard about the ways in which trans young people seeking acceptance online can be targeted by perpetrators to groom these young people into exploitative situations. These services shared that trans young people can sometimes feel that they are inherently unattractive (due to the negative messaging they may have been fed about their own identities) and that they may be groomed by perpetrators who wish to exploit the child's desire to be seen as romantically appealing.

'Bullying of trans young people has increased'

Young person, The Prevention Programme

*'its more hard support wise, not taking us seriously, always asking if we're sure about it'
(meaning their gender identity)*

Young person, The Prevention Programme

Safety planning



Just because a young person identifies as trans or non-binary, this does not mean that they are inherently at risk in online spaces. However, if you do believe that a trans young person is at risk of harm, abuse or exploitation in an online context, you may want to consider how you approach safety planning for them. If they are accessing a space that benefits their emotional and mental wellbeing, it may be detrimental to limit their access to these spaces by either removing a device or limiting their access to safe LGBTQ+ forums. It is therefore best to take a holistic and proportionate view of the risks and benefits presented to trans young people online; taking care to consider each space they access individually. In the [Tackling Child Exploitation Practice Principles](#), we are reminded to take a strengths-based approach when we are responding to potential exploitation. In order to do this, you should clearly consider the benefits of the online spaces that a young person is accessing and how they may be providing them with a sense of safety. Online safety planning should be developed with the young person rather than done to them. This will help them feel a sense of ownership and help you understand the benefits they find in using these spaces and how risks can be mitigated.

What kinds of online spaces does the young person access?

How regularly do they access these spaces?

What would make me concerned about a young person in those digital spaces?

What is the young person's home life like?

In each individual online space, are there any in-built privacy or safety mechanisms that the young person is using?

Questions to consider

Is the young person 'out' to their caregivers, family or support network?

Do they have access to physical spaces where they can express their gender identity safely and freely?

How safe does the young person feel in their education setting?

Do they feel supported and accepted by their caregivers?

Do they have access to specialist support services for LGBTQ+ Youth?

Do they have peer friendships where they are accepted and supported in their gender identity?

If they have shared their gender identity, who have they shared it with and how was this received?

Conversation starters

This section is intended to support professionals to open a non-judgmental, empathetic conversation with a young person about their digital life. It's important to remember to engage your sense of professional curiosity and ask open-ended questions to avoid leading the young person to believe that they are going to be blamed for any harm, abuse or exploitation they may have experienced online. Remember, the response a young person gives will depend entirely on how safe and comfortable they feel with the person asking them.

Tell me what you like about...

Do you think you'll go on... again?

Why do you want to go on....

Have you learnt anything new on....

Tell me how you heard about....

How did you access....

Who tends to use...

Have you seen anything on.... that surprised you?

Have there been times when... made you uncomfortable?

How do you feel when you access....

Terminology

This section of the resource will provide you with a list of words that young people may use in relation to gender identity, gaming, subcultures, and online spaces. We have gathered these definitions from a range of sources including Gendered Intelligence, Urban Dictionary, Stonewall and from young people themselves. However, these are not all-encompassing and language is always changing and therefore risks becoming outdated easily. This section of the resource should therefore be read with that in mind.

When we consulted LGBTQ+ young people on this resource, they identified the terms that they felt were important for professionals to know. They also highlighted that being knowledgeable about various mental health conditions such as [Body Dysmorphia](#) would be valuable. You can learn about other mental health conditions [here](#).

Sexuality and Gender

- **Ally**: An ally is someone who actively supports and stands up for members of the LGBTQ+ community and equity. This is often a heterosexual and/or cisgender person, but they may also be a member of the LGBTQ+ community who stands up for another member of the LGBTQ+ community.
- **AFAB**: Assigned female at birth.
- **AMAB**: Assigned male at birth.
- **Baby gay**: A gay, lesbian or bisexual person who has recently come to identify as such, or is newly out.
- **Beard**: A person of a different sex who is used by a gay person as a fake heterosexual partner to hide their sexuality.
- **Binding**: Tight wrapping of the chest with special clothes or tape to minimise the size or appearance of breasts.
- **Birth gender**: Sometimes used by transgender people to refer to their gender prior to transitioning.
- **Bottom surgery**: Gender confirmation surgery relating to the bottom of the body, specifically the genitals.
- **Closet/Closeted**: A person who has not yet come out publicly as LGBTQ+, often used offensively.
- **Coming out**: When an LGBTQ+ person either identifies or comes to accept their own sexual orientation or gender identity, or the process of telling other people about their orientation or identity. Contrast with outing.
- **Deadname**: The birth name of a transgender person who has changed their name. Using this name is problematic and potentially triggering. It may also lead to indirectly 'outing' this person to others.
- **Enby**: Another name for non-binary.

- **FTM or F2M:** An outdated term for transgender people who have transitioned from female to male, sometimes considered offensive.
- **Gender fluid:** One of a number of terms people might use to describe the experience of having a gender that varies. This may be variation over time, or in another way (for example according to different environments and settings).
- **Gender-neutral:** Suitable for all genders. Can refer to words and expressions but also items and services or spaces
- **Gender dysphoria:** The discomfort felt when a person's assigned sex does not match with their gender identity. A diagnosis of gender dysphoria is often required before a trans person can access any form of medical transition. Also known as Gender Identity Disorder, previously known as transsexualism or transgenderism.
- **Gender non-conforming or GNC:** A person or act that defies traditional expectations of their gender or assigned sex.
- **Gender X:** A term used to refer to a gender other than male or female.
- **Genderqueer:** An identity that does not feature the gender binary, involving combinations of masculinity or femininity.
- **LGBTQIA+:** An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, and + (meaning anyone who is not listed in the acronym but still identifies as part of the community).
- **Misgendering:** The act of referring to someone as the wrong gender, often by using the wrong pronouns.
- **MTF or M2F:** An outdated term for transgender people who have transitioned from male to female, sometimes considered offensive.
- **Outing:** Publicly revealing someone's sexual orientation or gender identity without their consent.
- **Passing:** A transgender person's ability to be considered at a glance to be either a cisgender man or a cisgender woman, and the privilege they experience from this.
- **Skoliosexual:** A person who is sexually or romantically attracted to non-binary people, or those who do not identify as cisgender.
- **Social transition:** The part of a transgender person's transition seen by the people around them. This can feature coming out, changing a gender expression, and/or changing their name and/or pronouns.
- **TERF:** Stands for trans-exclusionary radical feminist, meaning a strand of feminism where people do not believe that trans women are women.
- **Top surgery:** Gender confirmation surgery relating to the top half of the body.
- **Transitioning:** The process of a transgender person presenting themselves as their gender identity. It is a very personal process, and will be unique to each trans person.
- **Tucking:** The practice of concealing a penis and testicles, practiced by some trans women who have not undergone gender confirmation surgery, as well as by drag artists.
- **Two spirited:** A pan-Indigenous, unifying term used by some Indigenous people from North American communities to describe people who identify as having both masculine and feminine traits.

Subcultures

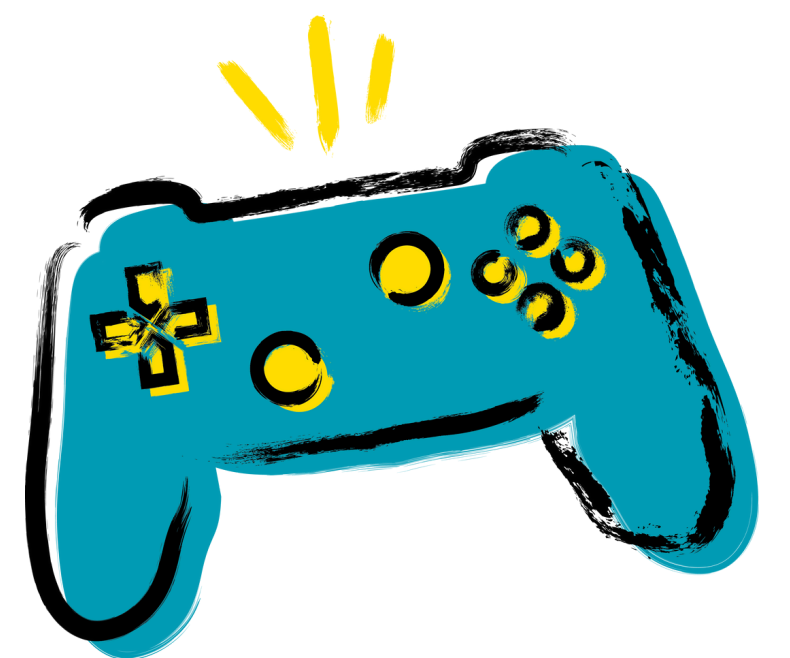
These subcultures were identified by LGBTQ+ young people during our consultation period as frequently encountered in online spaces

- **Furries:** Fans of media that features anthropomorphic animals; that is, animals who walk, talk, and do otherwise human things, often used as a form of creative play. 12.2% of furries self-identify as transgender or non-binary, a number more than 20 times higher than that typically observed in the general population.
- **Fursona:** A furry-themed avatar used to interact with other members of the furry fandom. Individual furries are free to create representations of themselves unbounded by reality. As such, they can reconceptualise themselves with regard to age, gender, personality, or physical characteristics.
- **Incel culture:** Short for 'involuntarily celibate', meaning people (mostly men) who define themselves as unable to have a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one. This subculture is a part of the 'manosphere' that is associated with extreme misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, biphobia, rape culture and expressions and acts of violence. Those that associate with this culture sometimes refer to themselves as having taken the 'red pill' (a reference to The Matrix film series) and are influenced by social media personalities. Those from the LGBTQ+ community can experience extreme hatred and violence from individuals that participate in this subculture.
- **Quadrobics:** A type of physical activity that involves moving on all fours, mimicking the gait and movements of quadrupedal animals.
- **Therian or therianthropy:** A person who experiences being and identifies as a non-human animal on an integral, personal level.

Terminology changes all the time

Text acronyms and slang

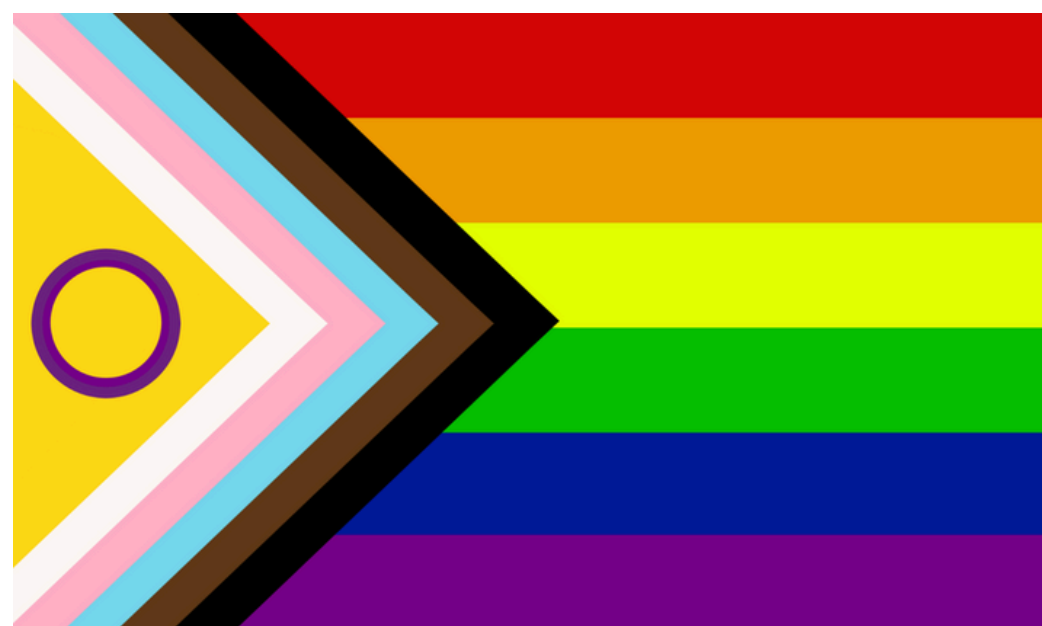
- **Body count:** The number of people someone has had sex with (in a gaming context, this can mean the amount of kills made by the player).
- **Chad:** A hyper-sexual young man (usually said in a derogatory way).
- **KMS:** Stands for 'Kill myself'.
- **KYS:** Stands for 'Kill yourself'.
- **LMIRL:** Stands for 'Let's meet in real life'.
- **No cap:** Used to indicate that someone is not lying (also the cap emoji).
- **Plug:** Sometimes, this term is used to refer to someone who can 'connect' you with drugs; a drug dealer.
- **PM:** Stands for 'private message'.
- **PMOYS:** Stands for 'put me on your Snapchat', a request to add someone on the Snapchat app.
- **POC:** Person of colour.
- **QTIPOC:** An acronym for queer, trans and intersex people of colour.
- **SH:** Stands for 'self-harm'.
- **Simp:** Somebody who tries very hard and does a lot for their crush.
- **SMH:** Stands for shaking my head (disapproval).
- **Stan:** An ardent fan of a particular celebrity.
- **WTTP:** Stands for 'Want to trade photos?'.



Gaming

- **Avatar:** The player's representation in the game world.
- **Discord:** A social media app for communities around common interests and is often used by gamers.
- **Loot or lootboxes:** Typically refers to in-game rewards granted to the player for completing certain tasks and is often associated with a certain amount of chance, but can also be purchased.
- **Noob:** Often stylised as 'n00b', 'neek', 'newb' or 'newbie', 'noob' is a shorthand for 'newcomer' and is often used as a derogatory term to mock inexperienced players, often in a multiplayer setting.

Additional resources and further reading



The young people who were consulted on this resource were keen for us to include the progress pride flag, and we do this as a call for a more inclusive society for all children and young people. Please [click here](#) to find out more about queer and trans inclusive flags and their symbolism.

[Abraham Maslow - Hierarchy of Needs: A Theory of Human Motivation \(1943\)](#)

[Between Gaming and Gambling - Children, Young People and Paid Reward Systems in Digital Games \(2022\)](#)

[The Brook Trust's report - Digital Romance: A research project exploring young people's use of technology in their romantic relationships and love lives](#)

[Bragg, S; Thomson, R; O'Riordan, K; \(2021\) Digital Intimacies and LGBT+ Youth: Celebration, Equity and Safety. University of Sussex: Brighton, UK.](#)

[Furscience - Research Findings on Sex, Gender and Gender Identity](#)

[Gendered Intelligence](#)

[LGBT+ People's Experiences Of Domestic Abuse: a report on Galop's domestic abuse advocacy service \(2021\)](#)

[McDermott, E. S., Hughes, E., & Rawlings, V. E. \(2016, Jun 30\). Queer Future Final Report: Understanding lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans \(LGBT\) adolescents' suicide, self-harm and help-seeking behaviour](#)

[TransActual's Trans lives survey 2021: Enduring the UK's hostile environment](#)

[What works for Children's social care - LGBTQ+ young people's experiences of residential social care in England \(2022\)](#)

Austin A, Craig SL, Navega N, McInroy LB. It's my safe space: The life-saving role of the internet in the lives of transgender and gender diverse youth. *Int J Transgend Health*. 2020 Jan 6;21(1):33-44. doi: 10.1080/15532739.2019.1700202. PMID: 33015657; PMCID: PMC7430466.

