

Challenges young people are facing around sexuality and gender identity

This briefing uses insight from Childline counselling sessions and NSPCC Helpline contacts to highlight pressures young people face in relation to their sexuality and gender identity

March 2024

Key findings

- In 2022/23, Childline provided 3,397 counselling sessions to children wanting to talk about their sexuality or gender identity. The NSPCC Helpline handled 46 contacts from adults about these issues.
- Some young people who are LGBTQ+ will have supportive experiences as they explore their sexuality or gender identity. However, some young people face a range of pressures to change or suppress who they are.
- Some children felt dismissed by adults in their lives, who regarded them as too young to make decisions about their sexuality or gender identity.
- Some children described instances of emotional abuse in the family home, including constant shouting, hurtful comments, and threats of violence.

- Among contacts to the Helpline, there were reports of parents monitoring their child's phone or movements, and preventing them from being friends with certain individuals in their life.
- Some children had been threatened with, or had undergone, some form of conversion practice, intended to "cure" their sexuality or gender identity.
- Some children felt pressured to conform to gender stereotypes in school.
- Others felt under pressure to choose a label, in order to feel a sense of belonging and move on with their lives.

Introduction

Our Helplines Insight Briefings aim to raise awareness and increase understanding of different topics by sharing the voices of children and adults who are contacting the NSPCC with concerns about a child's welfare or wellbeing.

In 2022/23, Childline delivered over 195,000 counselling sessions. In just under 3,400 of these, children and young people wanted to talk to counsellors about their worries about sexuality or gender identity. This represents around 2% of all counselling sessions that year. During the same time period, the NSPCC Helpline handled almost 60,000 contacts from adults concerned about a child's welfare. Less than 1% of these contacts (46) were about a child's sexuality or gender identity.

An important part of growing up for young people is understanding their identity, working out who they are, who they want to be and how they want to be seen by others. For some young people this includes exploring their sexuality (who they feel attracted to) or gender identity (how they feel about their gender).

Some young people who are LGBTQ+ will have supportive experiences as they explore their sexuality or gender identity. However, some young people face a range of pressures to change or suppress who they are. Some young people tell us that family

members are not supportive. Some young people find it difficult to express their sexuality or gender with others. Some young people aren't comfortable with putting labels on who they are.

This briefing explores some of the pressures that children, young people and adults are talking to us about. It also highlights positive examples of how children and young people have felt supported after coming out and expressing their identity to others.

Terminology

A wide variety of terms are currently used in relation to sexual orientation or gender identity, and this language is constantly evolving. Wherever possible, this briefing uses terms that young people use themselves in their contacts to Childline and uses the acronym LGBTQ+ for identities within the LGBTQ+ community including lesbian, gay, bi, transgender, queer/questioning, non-binary, asexual, pansexual, intersex and more.

About our helplines

Childline is a free and confidential service where children and young people can talk about anything that's on their mind. Our counsellors provide support online and over the phone to children when they need it most. And the Childline website provides children with the information and advice they need to understand their problems, and the tools to express how they are feeling.

The NSPCC Helpline is a service for adults - both the public and professionals - who are worried about a child. The service provides advice, guidance and support and can take action if a child is being abused or at risk of abuse.

‘Coming out’ to the family

In Childline counselling sessions about sexuality or gender identity last year, one of the most commonly discussed topics was coming out¹; whether this was young people feeling scared or unsure about coming out, or young people who’d already come out and were dealing with the responses from others.

While some children and young people shared stories of positive support after coming out, they were more likely to speak to Childline about negative responses. This included parents refusing to accept what the young people were telling them, and young people talking about being emotionally abused in the family home.²

Dismissive attitudes

Some young people told us that they felt dismissed and invalidated by parents who told them that their sexuality or gender didn’t exist or wasn’t normal.

“I tried telling my dad I was trans, but he just brushed me off saying trans people don’t exist. Being deadnamed³ and misgendered by my folks all day every day makes me feel so disgusting and wrong, like I don’t belong.”

¹ Coming out was mentioned in more than two fifths (43%) of counselling sessions about sexuality or gender identity in 2022/23

² Emotional abuse, sometimes called psychological abuse, is any type of abuse that involves the continual emotional mistreatment of a child. It can involve deliberately trying to scare, humiliate, isolate or ignore a child. NSPCC (2023) **Emotional abuse**. London: NSPCC. [Accessed 29/11/2023].

³ Deadnaming is the act of referring to a transgender or non-binary person by a name they used prior to transitioning, such as their birth name. Deadnaming may be unintentional, or a deliberate attempt to deny, mock or invalidate a person's gender identity.

Transgender girl, aged 16, Childline

Young people spoke about being told that they were 'going through a phase', that they were following a 'trend', or they were 'too young' to know who they were. While it is not unusual for parents to want to explore these questions, young people in these situations told us it made them feel not listened to by the people they thought they could confide in.

"Mum believes that I must be an adult to know who I truly am. It's so stressful cos I know I'll still identify the same way in 6 years' time when apparently I'll be 'old enough' to make a decision. No one in my family gets it. I feel so alone right now."

Non-binary child, aged 12, Childline

"I am a closeted trans male and my family don't support me. When I try to explain it to them, they shut me down and say I am too young. Or they'll just carry on saying how I'm gonna be a 'brilliant wife to a man one day', even when they KNOW how I feel – they just refuse to accept it! Honestly, all I want is to be treated humanely and listened to, instead of being downtrodden by the people who are meant to love me no matter what."

Transgender boy, aged 17

Emotional abuse

For some young people, coming out about their sexuality or gender identity had resulted in them being teased, humiliated and/or shouted at by their parents or carers.

“My mum constantly misgenders me and whenever I try to correct her, she shouts back in my face, ‘YOU. ARE. A. GIRL!’. I feel so hurt and alone.”

Gender not specified, aged 18, Childline

“My father thinks being gay is wrong and said I can’t be doing anything sexual with boys in his house ever, or he’ll throw me out. He emotionally abuses me, calling me horrible slurs like ‘fag’ and he’s even encouraged my brother to do the same. I would do anything to get out of this toxic and homophobic household.”

Boy, aged 17, Childline

One parent contacted the Helpline as they were struggling to accept their son’s sexuality; the caller admitted to using ‘harsh’ language towards their son, and they recognised the impact these words had had on him.

“I said some pretty harsh things to him in the heat of the moment, which I regret. If I’m honest, it’s still hard for me to accept him being gay, as it goes against everything I was brought up to believe. My partner’s the same, in fact he’s flat out said it would be better my son didn’t exist than be gay – and now he refuses to even talk about it. I’m trying to mend things with my boy, but he doesn’t want anything to do with me right now - he spends most of his time locked in his room. I just needed someone to speak to about this.”

Parent, NSPCC Helpline

Some young people who weren't out to their parents were exposed to homophobic or transphobic attitudes in the home, making it more difficult for them to open up to their parents.

“My dad is transphobic and hates anything to do with LGBT. He says horrible things to me if I do anything remotely ‘feminine’, even something as little as having a pink phone cover. I only want to express myself, but he is so abusive to me every time I try. I’m scared what he might do if he finds out I’m trans.”

Transgender girl, aged 14, Childline

Some children and young people experienced threats from their parents or carers after coming out, including threats of homelessness and physical punishment. One member of the public contacted the NSPCC Helpline with concerns for a teenage boy, whose stepfather had threatened him with violence. This child had taken refuge at their friend's house, afraid of what awaited them back home.

“I’m calling about a 15-year-old boy in my daughter’s year, who has run away from home and is currently staying at our place. This boy doesn’t feel safe living with his parents after he recently came out to them, and the stepfather threatened to ‘beat the gayness out of him.’ The parents have now contacted the police, demanding for their son’s return. Needless to say, this boy is beyond scared - please can you help?”

Member of the public, NSPCC Helpline

Isolating or controlling behaviour

Our helplines also heard descriptions of parents trying to isolate their children by controlling what they could do or who they could have contact with. Living under these types of restrictions, some LGBTQ+ young people were denied the means to freely express who they were, and to seek support. This left some feeling angry and alone.

One person called the NSPCC Helpline about a transgender boy, who was friends with their daughter; they were worried about the way in which his parents appeared to be monitoring his everyday movements.

“From what I understand, Jack’s parents don’t accept the fact he’s transgender; apparently, they’ve forbidden him from leaving the house unaccompanied, and they’ve even placed a tracker on his phone so they can watch his every move. Jack has made it clear to my daughter that he doesn’t feel safe where he is and that his mental health is suffering as a result. I’d like some advice on how we can best support this child.”

Member of the Public, NSPCC Helpline

In contacts to Childline, children and young people shared similar stories of parents controlling what clothes they could wear, confiscating their phones and limiting access to the internet, and preventing them from socialising with their friends.

“My mum tries to control every single thing I do, all because of my sexuality. She tried to stop me seeing my friends cos a lot of them are LGBT and she thought they were ‘poisoning my mind.’ She also makes me hand in my electronics at a certain time each day. It’s infuriating.”

Non-binary child, aged 15, Childline

“This week, my parents found out I’m gay and now they’ve taken everything away from me, like my phone. They said I no longer have the right to any sort of freedom. It’s like I’m a prisoner in my own house!”

Boy, aged 14, Childline

Beliefs as barriers to young people coming out

There are many reasons why young people struggle to come out to or feel accepted by their parents. One of these reasons can be a family’s religion or traditional beliefs. Some children told us they’d been raised in households which viewed LGBTQ+ identities as ‘sinful’, something that would bring ‘shame’ to the family and wider community.

Some children told us that their parents had threatened to disown them, send them to another country, or force them into marriage unless they followed their family’s beliefs. Children in this position were sometimes faced with a decision of choosing between their family and their sense of self.

“My family is religious and they completely don’t agree with me being a lesbian, as they think it’s a choice. They are now making me choose between being straight and returning to a religion I don’t agree with, or I choose to be a lesbian and they cut me off completely. I don’t want to lose my family but I can’t bear forcing myself to be who I’m not.”

Girl, aged 16, Childline

“My parents have made it clear my opinions aren’t valid. They say they know what’s best for me, and that I should uphold the values of the house or find somewhere else to live. It’s like they don’t want to see the real me – they only care about who they want me to be.”

Gender not specified, age 18, Childline

One young person spoke of the shame within their community of being gay, and the abusive practices that could be used to protect the family honour.

“I’m from a very conservative family, where being gay is considered ‘haram’ (forbidden). In our religion, if someone is gay, they can do conversion therapy on them to get them back to being straight again. Or, if there is no hope for them, they can do something called an honour killing. I am terrified that I will be murdered to save the family honour!”

Boy, aged 14, Childline

Conversion practices

Another concern shared by some – albeit a minority⁴ - of the young people who contacted us related to conversion practices. While there is no universally agreed definition, the term has been used to describe "any treatment, practice or effort that aims to change, suppress and/or eliminate a person's sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression.

⁴ Less than 50 Childline case note records in 2022/23 mentioned ‘conversion therapy’ or any other related terms, including ‘reparative therapy’ and ‘gay cure therapy’.

(Source: Scottish Government, 2022)

Among the Childline counselling sessions where conversion practice was mentioned, this typically related to threats from parents or carers to send their child to so-called 'conversion therapy' or – if not mentioned by name – to a therapist, counsellor or facility that would make their child heterosexual or cisgender (the sex they were registered at birth).

For some of these children, the threat of being sent away was enough to make them comply with their parents' wishes, to repress their sexuality or gender identity.

"My parents hate the fact that I'm trans, it disgusts them. Any time I even try and express myself, I just get shouted at and threatened with being sent to conversion camp. It hurts inside that I'm not able to be who I am, but right now I don't feel I have any choice but to stay quiet."

Transgender girl, aged 15, Childline

"Mum told me that gay people are an insult to God and nature. She said if I ever decide to 'go down that route', we'll move to the other side of the world and I'll be sent to conversion therapy."

Gender not specified, aged 17, Childline

Some of the children who contacted us had already undergone some form of intervention, such as counselling or psychotherapy, under duress from their parents or carers; these young people told us how this experience had impacted them.

"Mum made me go to a therapist because she said I needed to be 'fixed'. Whenever I had dysphoric feelings, that my body didn't belong to me,

the therapist just said it was down to hormones cos of my period. The whole thing was so stressful and demeaning, I felt like I was constantly being judged.”

Transgender boy, aged 17, Childline

“When I was younger, I told my parents I thought I was bi and they sent me to a counsellor who tried to convince me I was straight, and that my desire to be ‘different’ was purely for attention. Even though that was years ago, the effects of the counselling are still ongoing. It’s left me with a lot of guilt and confusion around who I am and how I’m supposed to act around other people.”

Girl, aged 18, Childline

Some children and young people told us that their exposure to conversion practices like this, while painful, only reinforced how they felt about their sexuality or gender identity to begin with.

“At the time I wasn’t allowed to tell anyone about the counselling, not even my best friends, probably because my parents were scared of people hearing their daughter was gay. Well, I’m sure they’d be happy when they find out the counselling made me gayer!”

Girl, aged 15, Childline

Despite the fact that interventions hadn’t worked on these children as intended, some children pretended to their parents that they’d been ‘fixed’. “My parents got one of their religious leaders to do some kind of budget conversion therapy, and basically guilt-trip me into being

cis[gender]. It didn't work, but I acted like it had, just to get them off my back."

Non-binary child, aged 15, Childline

"I went along with the sessions and pretended as if I'd been 'fixed', but really I've just been repressing my true feelings and I can't take it anymore. I feel so trapped in my options right now and I don't know what to do."

Boy, aged 17, Childline

Young people considering conversion practices themselves

Some young people told Childline they weren't necessarily being pressured into conversion therapy, but they were considering this as an option themselves. Despite saying that they were opposed to such a practice, some felt it would relieve them of homophobic or transphobic abuse. Others believed or hoped it would improve their relationships with family or friends.

"I've lost a few friends since I came out, and I've had people say they'd rape me cos it would turn me straight. There was a point where I was considering conversion therapy, which is disgusting, and I hate that I ever thought that was an option, but it's just the culture around here. I don't feel accepted."

Girl, aged 18, Childline

"I'd be happier if everyone saw me as a man and I looked like one, but I'm not going to be on blockers or hormones any time soon. I keep

thinking a lot about conversion therapy. Even though deep down I don't want it, it would solve lots of things, like my relationship with my dad, money on surgery and transphobic abuse from others."

Transgender boy aged 15, Childline

Pressures at school

Some children and young people spoke of pressures in school to dress or behave in a way which was seen to conform to gender norms or stereotypes; this was evident in the sports offered during P.E. lessons.

"At my school, they make the boys do football and rugby in P.E., while the girls do gymnastics and netball. I want to do what the boys do and not the girls, but they don't let me and some of the pupils laugh at me when I ask."

Transgender boy, aged 12, Childline

"I have struggled with my gender identity and don't really know how to deal with it at school, like in P.E. when we're told to separate into boys' and girls' groups, when I don't identify as either! I'm too afraid to tell anyone cos most people don't understand"

Non-binary child, aged 12, Childline

School uniforms were a particular concern among socially transitioning children and young people (those who had changed their name, pronouns and/or clothing). One transgender boy came to Childline in distress after his school had forbidden him from

wearing an oversized shirt; he said this left him feeling exposed and unable to 'hide' parts of his body he was insecure about.

"I feel so uncomfortable in the school uniform and I just don't ever want to go back. I hate it so much. I'm trans so it's like I'm walking around in a body that isn't mine 24/7. I can't hide in that uniform; it's so tight and uncomfortable and shows off everything I hate about myself and try so desperately to hide."

Transgender male, aged 14, Childline

Some children and young people shared concerns about being bullied or excluded by their peers because of their gender identity or expression. Much like those facing pressures within the family, these children talked about feeling they needed to ignore their gender identity, and 'be like everyone else', to avoid being targeted.

"I find it hard to express myself, especially in an environment at school where it is not accepting towards people like me who aren't comfortable dressing like a boy or girl. There is a constant pressure to behave, dress and act like everyone else in order to not get harassed or bullied."

Gender not specified, aged 14, Childline

"Ever since I came out as trans at school, I started receiving comments all the time like 'you'll never be a real girl' or 'you're just pretending'. Hearing those words makes me feel so useless and unwanted – I wish I'd never come out to, be honest. At least before, I could just blend in, keep my head down and not get hurt."

Transgender girl, aged 16, Childline

Other social pressures

Some children who contact Childline have a clear idea of their sexuality and gender identity, but are struggling to get the acceptance and support they are seeking from other people in the lives. Other children are looking for information and support whilst they figure out who they are and what that means.

Guilt and self-acceptance

Children and young people sometimes contacted Childline to help them understand difficult and conflicting feelings they were having about their sexuality or gender identity, things they felt they couldn't tell anyone else. This included feelings of shame, guilt, and self-hatred.

"I don't want to be gay. I am supposed to be a real man and like girls, but I don't, and it makes me feel ashamed. It is scaring me because no matter what I do it just won't go away. I have tried speaking to CAMHS and reading self-help books. I even prayed which I had never done before - but nothing works. I just want to be normal."

Boy, aged 16, Childline

"I'm a trans guy (female to male) but I'm having trouble accepting myself as trans. It feels right when someone refers to me as a guy, and I feel like one, but there's still a part of me that knows it's wrong. How can I be accepted by other people if I can't even accept myself?"

Transgender boy, aged 14, Childline

One girl who contacted Childline believed they had picked up attitudes from people around them, and that this was holding her back from pursuing a relationship with another girl.

“I’ve had a secret crush on this girl for some time, but I’m not sure what to do about it. I’ve never been in a relationship before and I’m not even sure if I’m gay or not. I think I’ve become so used to hearing anti-LGBT stuff from friends and family that it’s caused some internalised homophobia in me. My guilt and confusion are getting in the way of letting me get close to this girl. I literally feel sick to my stomach.”

Girl, aged 15, Childline

Some children and young people told us they felt a pressure to fit with social expectations and what was seen as ‘normal’. One girl questioned whether their attraction to boys was genuine, or if this was a sign of what they called ‘compulsory heterosexuality’,⁵ or ‘comphet’ for short.

Pressure to blend in

A barrier to young people fully expressing their gender identity or sexuality was a fear of drawing attention to themselves and inviting confrontation, prejudice, and possible abuse from others. Young people told us they occasionally felt the need to hide or play down elements of their presentation – such as their clothing or speech pattern - in order to fit in, and appeal to more mainstream groups.

⁵ Compulsory heterosexuality is the theory that heterosexuality is assumed and enforced upon people by a patriarchal and heteronormative society. The term was popularized by Adrienne Rich in her 1980 essay titled Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.

“I’m not fully out yet, so I sometimes have to assimilate into whatever environment I’m in. Like, my dad and grandad, they’re quite masculine in a traditional sort of way, so I generally act similar around them. However, around my friends I tend to be more feminine, doing makeup and acting all flamboyant. There’s no way I can be like that with my dad, not that he’s anti-LGBT or anything, I just think it’ll put him off, and I can’t be doing with the hassle.”

Boy, aged 18, Childline

For one young person, the constant effort of presenting a false or diluted version of themselves in non-tolerant spaces was exhausting and hard to maintain, to the point that they were losing sight of who they really were.

“I don’t know what to do. I’ve hidden so much about myself from my family for years, they’ve created this false version of me in their heads. I just want them to love me and part of me wants to stay this ‘little girl’ persona so I don’t hurt them, but at the same time it is so tiring having to pretend like this. I’ve almost forgotten who I am.”

Girl, aged 17, Childline

Pressure to choose a label

As already highlighted, some young people talked to us about the distress they felt at being pressured to conform to a heterosexual or cisgender identity. But other young people who were still trying to figure out their sexuality or gender identity spoke about a pressure to define themselves using a label.

Childline heard from young people who were feeling an added time pressure to 'figure out' their sexuality or gender identity, with some saying they needed to decide by a certain age or milestone, such as going to university or pursuing a romantic relationship. These young people spoke of being in a limbo state, feeling unable to move forward until they had chosen a label.

"I'm really confused about my gender identity. I feel like I can't be with anyone until I've decided what I am. The whole thought of deciding on a label makes me feel uncomfortable. I think I'd be happy identifying as he/him but I'm not sure and I need time – but do I have time?"

Gender not specified, aged 15, Childline

"Every time I believe I've worked out my identity, something happens that makes me doubt myself which makes me feel horrible, as if I'm fooling people. I think a label will help me in knowing who I am. I want to belong and get supported by the queer community, but I need to be 100% certain I'm not straight before telling others."

Girl, aged 16, Childline

While some young people recognised that gender identity and sexuality can be fluid and subject to change, some told Childline they were hesitant to identify a certain way, fearing their decision would be 'final' and they wouldn't be able to change their mind. Childline provided these children with a safe and non-judgemental space in which to explore their concerns, letting them feel heard and supported. The following extract comes from a Childline counselling session with an 11-year-old girl, delivered via Personal Inbox (email).

"I'm confused about my sexuality cos it seems to change a lot. Like, a few months ago, I was a lesbian. I was happy and everyone I told was very accepting, but then I felt ashamed for some reason, so I told everyone I was straight again. Now I'm not sure what I am and I'm nervous to give myself a label. I don't know if this is the place to come for this question, but I hope you can help."

Girl, aged 11, Childline

Childline's response:

“ At Childline we're here to listen to anything that's on your mind, and you can definitely talk to us about your sexuality. It can be a difficult thing to talk about, but it isn't something you should be ashamed of, and you've done really well to explain it to us.

“ I can hear that you're unsure of how you identify, and that you feel that identity keeps changing. It's completely natural to feel that way. As you said, you're still working things out, and your identity doesn't have to be fixed.

“ Everyone experiences their sexuality differently, and for some people it can be fluid, meaning it changes over time. I think it's important to remember that labels are there to help you understand yourself and express that to others, but they're only helpful if you feel comfortable identifying within them, and if you don't then that's ok too. Understanding your sexuality takes time, and there's no right or wrong way to identify.

“ This section on the Childline website gives advice if you're confused about your sexuality, along with some definitions of how some LGBTQ+ people identify.

“ You also might find it helpful to have a look on the Childline message boards, where you can talk to others who may be in a similar situation. Alternatively, we're always here if you'd like to call us or talk to us over an online chat.”

Getting support

Analysing contacts to our helplines allows us to highlight not only the range of issues that children and adults are concerned about – including sexuality and gender identity – but also the kinds of support that they find most helpful.

Where young people have spoken to us about pressures around their sexuality or gender identity, some of the people and resources they'd been using to cope with their situation and feel heard include:

- Support from peers, including online
- Trusted adults, including parents or carers, extended family, and teachers
- Counselling, including Childline
- Online gaming
- LGBTQ school clubs
- LGBTQ online communities
- Information and advice on sexuality and gender identity, including **Childline**.

“I am non-binary and I want to tell my class, but every time I am close to doing it, I freeze up. I keep worrying about their reactions or if I’ll get bullied. Both my parents know. Dad didn’t understand it at first, but he’s slowly coming round to the idea, even if he still calls me ‘boy’ sometimes. Mum has been AMAZING! Like, she uses my pronouns with no fuss, and she’s even helped me to shop for gender-neutral clothing online. I just wish everyone at school feel the same as her. I don’t wanna be judged and looked down on.”

Non-binary child, aged 13, Childline

“I’m not ready to come out to my parents yet. Things are definitely better at school cos I’m out there. The teachers and my friends have all been amazing about it, and there’s also a lunch club for other LGBT students like me. I really want to tell my parents at some point – I just need help deciding what to say.”

Girl, aged 13, Childline

In addition to phone and online counselling, Childline also provides a range of information and advice services on its website. This includes our message boards, a moderated public forum where young people can share their experiences and get support from other young people in similar situations. All posts are moderated for harmful or inappropriate content, and to protect young people’s identity.

One young person posted a thread asking for advice about coming out as trans; they had tried telling their mother before, but they were told it was just a sign of puberty. Their post received the following reply from another young person:

“If you're truly sure you want to come out to your mum, you need her to understand that it's not just puberty or a 'trend'. You should never be pressured to come out! If they react negatively then that's their problem. If you're scared to come out, that's completely normal. If it's to the point where you think, 'hey this is scary, I'm going to be in the closet for a bit longer', that's also completely fine. Just go at your own pace and remember YOU ARE AWESOME!”

How parents or carers can support their children

Sometimes it can be hard for parents and carers when their child comes out, or if they're questioning their sexuality or gender identity. They may feel unsure how to help them, not know what to say or how to relate to what they're going through.

Some parents might find it hard to know how to talk to their child's school, or explain things to extended family. Some may feel uncomfortable or even shocked and upset.

Whatever they're feeling, it's important to remember that expressing their sexuality and gender identity can be a stressful, upsetting and lonely experience for some children and young people. They may feel like no one understands what it's like for them, worry about being accepted or about how their friends and family will react.

Simply listening to a child's feelings, without interruption, can be a great way of showing support. It can also help to learn about LGBTQ+ experiences and to talk to friends and family who are supportive or have similar experiences.

“I am calling about my 12-year-old son who recently disclosed to me that he wants to be a girl. He's always shown an interest in feminine things like dolls and make-up, which I've completely supported, but this is the first time he's used the 'trans' word. I'm just trying to get as much

information as possible about what transitioning entails. I love my child no matter what, but I don't want them to rush into anything."

Parent/carer, NSPCC Helpline

Conclusion

Every child deserves to be listened to and supported as they figure out who they are as a person. This is the reality for many children and young people, however, as the insights from our helplines have shown, some children who are LGBTQ+ don't feel they're being seen or heard for who they are, by their family or peers.

Childline heard from young people who were struggling to express their sexuality or gender identity at home. Some had positive responses from family but for some children who turned to Childline, this wasn't always the case. Children told us they felt dismissed and not listened to by their parents, while others had been subjected to hurtful comments, threats, isolation, or so-called 'conversion therapy' practices.

School could also be a difficult place to feel accepted for some young people. Some told us about being bullied because of their sexuality or gender identity, while others spoke of their discomfort around certain subjects and dress codes at their school.

Some young people who contacted Childline were wrestling with their own internal dilemmas over what label to call themselves, or whether their sexuality or gender identity would be considered 'normal' by society. This sense of confusion sometimes made it hard for these children to reach out for support, as they worried how others would react.

Young people told us that pressures like these had a negative impact on their mental wellbeing. For some, being told or made to feel that there was something 'wrong' or 'broken' about who they were evoked feelings of anger, loneliness, low self-esteem and even self-hatred. Some felt that they had to change or hide their LGBTQ+ identity in order to please others, or to avoid being picked on.

Our helplines are here to offer support and information

When faced with challenges around sexuality and gender identity, young people need and deserve a space to be listened to, somewhere where their feelings and sense of self can be freely expressed without judgement. Some of the children and young people we spoke with told us they already had a support network – including friends, family, teachers, and LGBTQ+ allies online - with whom they were able to be themselves, and talk openly about their feelings without being judged.

For those children who either weren't able or ready to open up to others, Childline counsellors were on hand to offer an empathetic ear, and to reassure them that they were not alone.

Childline will continue to be a vital source of support and information for all children and young people, regardless of whether they're heterosexual, cisgender or LGBTQ+. Whatever the child's concern, our trained counsellors are here to listen. Our NSPCC Helpline is here to support parents, professionals and the wider public who are worried about a child's welfare.

➤ **Visit the NSPCC website for further advice on how parents or carers can support their children**

Methodology

When children, young people and adults contact Childline and the NSPCC Helpline, the counsellors record what they tell us. This includes choosing a “main concern” from a predetermined list. For Childline counsellors, the main concern is the subject that the child talked about the most. For Helpline child protection specialists, the main concern is the subject that poses the most significant potential risk to the child’s safety or wellbeing, or the topic the adult contacting would like advice about. The insights in this briefing are taken from those Childline and Helpline contacts where the main concern recorded was sexuality or gender identity.

Our analysis involved reading through the relevant case notes in order to identify key themes that children, young people and adults were talking to us about.

Information drawn from Childline counselling sessions isn’t necessarily representative of the UK child population. Children typically contact Childline when there is something that they are worried about, so they are self-selecting groups coming to us in times of need.

Quotes are based on real Childline and Helpline contacts, but all names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of children and the individuals contacting the NSPCC.

References

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+ Further support and information



Children and young people can contact **Childline** for information and advice about anything that's worrying them.



Contact the **NSPCC Helpline** if you're worried about a child, or if you need support for something you experienced as a child.



Visit **NSPCC Learning** for more information about safeguarding and child protection.

