

Becoming You

Exploring sexuality and
disability for pre-teens



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The content of this book draws upon research evidence, lived experience and clinical expertise. To ensure that various viewpoints were included, this book was co-created with young adults with disabilities, parents and caregivers, educators, researchers and healthcare professionals. Additional feedback was sought from experts in sexual education across Canada.

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Welcome to this book on sexuality and disability!



Talking about sex can feel hard or funny sometimes, but it doesn't have to be. As you grow up, you might have some questions about who you are and how you feel about yourself and other people. Sometimes, having a disability makes figuring out sexuality feel a bit more complicated and it can be hard to find information that takes your disability into account. You deserve a safe space to ask questions and get answers!

When we were pre-teens, there weren't a lot of resources to answer our questions about sexuality while living with a disability. Although there is a lot more information available about sex and sexuality now, there are still not many resources aimed at young people with disabilities. We wanted to be part of creating a resource that we would have liked when we were younger, because everyone deserves a chance to figure out their own sexuality.

Our team combined the most recent and available information and their own expertise to create a fun and informative book for young people with disabilities. This book explains what sexuality is and how it can affect what you think about yourself and other people.



Nelson



Makumbu



Table of contents

- 3 Welcome to this book on sexuality and disability!
- 5 About this book
- 7 Everyone is different, which is good
- 9 Our many identities
- 11 Your body is part of who you are
- 13 Sex assigned at birth
- 14 Gender
- 17 Pronouns
- 19 Sexuality
- 20 Sexual attraction
- 23 Sexual attraction and identities
- 25 Exploring your sexuality
- 27 Other people's assumptions and expectations
- 29 Just the beginning!
- 31  **Important words**
- 35 Book creation team
- 36 Funding and acknowledgments

How to use this book

You can read this book online, or [↓ download](#) and save it.

You can also  [listen](#) to the book. You don't have to get through it all at once.

Click  on a title in the table of contents to take you to the information you want to read. You can also move from page to page by clicking on the  arrows at the bottom of each page. Words that are underlined in blue mean that you can click on them to get more information.



You may find words and ideas that you already know, and others that are new and leave you with other questions. When you see a word in **bold**, you can learn more about it in the  **Important Words** section at the end of the book.



Sexuality is something most people want to learn more about.



About this book

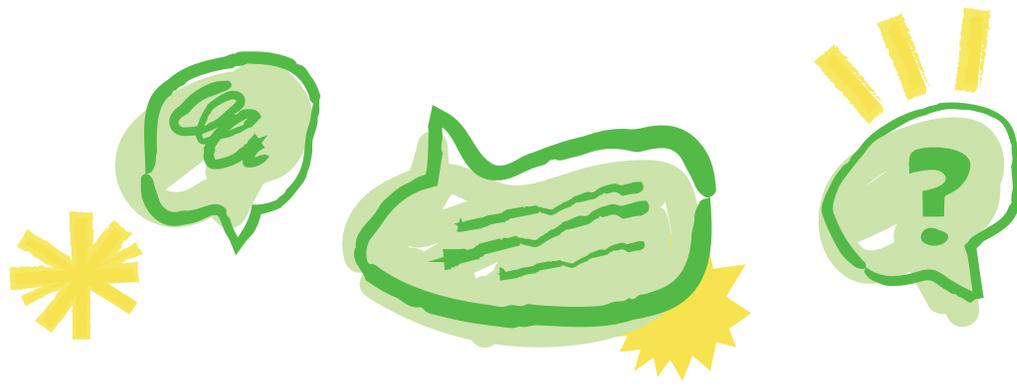
Learning about **sexuality** is an important part of growing up. The word 'sexuality' may or may not be new to you. It's a word with a lot of meanings, and people use it in different ways.

In this book sexuality includes things like:

- How you see yourself and other people
- How you feel about, and in, your body
- How you have relationships that feel good to you, including friendships

When you live with a disability you are often treated differently when it comes to sex and sexuality. This is an example of **ableism**.





In this book you will learn about how sexuality is part of who you are and the world you live in. Some of us are interested in learning more about sexuality, some of us aren't. That can change over time. But at some point, most of us have questions.

You will find information about:

- Things we have in common and things that make us different from each other, whether we notice those differences or not
- The gender and sex we are labeled with when we are born
- Sexuality
- Body image
- And more

All of these things are part of how we feel about ourselves and who we know ourselves to be.

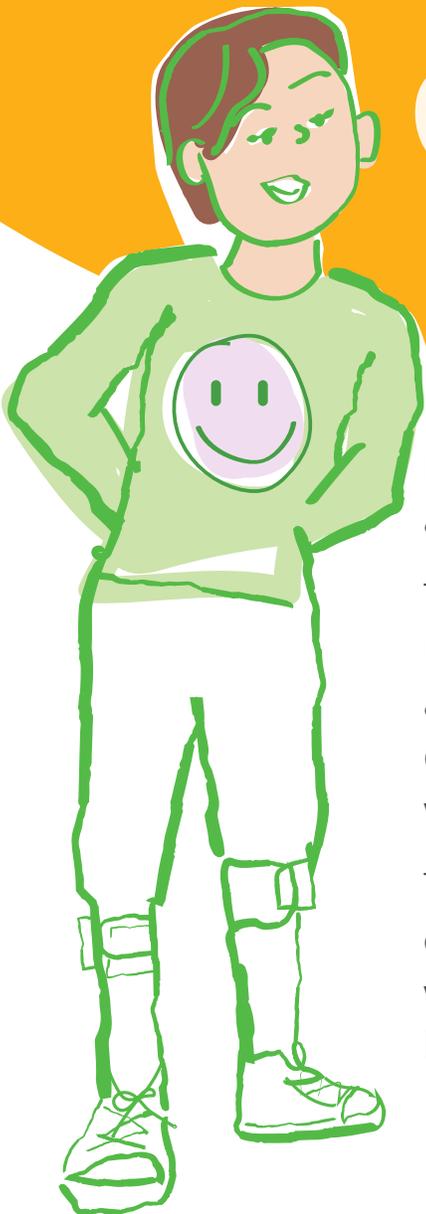
You have a right to information about sexuality and disability that reflects your life and experiences. This can help you make your own choices about your body and your life. We all deserve to have people we can trust in our lives and who can help us learn more about our sexuality.

You can read this book on your own and you can also ask other people like your parents, family, friends, and teachers if they would also like to read this book. By sharing this book, everyone can learn more about sexuality and disability.



Everyone is different,

which is good



Each body and every person is different. When you think about it, even identical twins are not exactly the same!

There are some differences we may notice right away. Most of us notice how bodies come in different shapes and sizes. We may notice different shades of skin colour, different hair colours and textures, and different ways our voices sound.

There are other differences we may not notice right away, or may never notice, like how we feel on the inside, how we have our own thoughts and beliefs, and how we all have different life experiences.





We all move through the world differently.

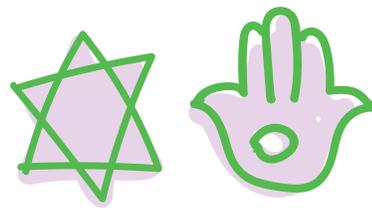
Some of us walk, some of us roll or use canes or crutches, some of us live a lot of our lives in bed.



We all think and learn differently too.

We all find ways to communicate. We may communicate by speaking with words, with our hands, or using other kinds of technology.

Our differences also come from our families and communities, including the places and cultures we are from.



The world can act like some differences are good and others are bad. But what makes us different does not make us bad. All of us are worthy and our differences are what make us who we are.

Our many identities

Our **identities** are the words we use to describe ourselves in relation to other people.

Our identities are different parts of who we are. Our identities come from our bodies and minds, from the land and places we grew up in, from the people who raised us, and even from the people who raised them.

We have identities that have to do with skin colour (like being Black, South Asian, White, and more). We have identities that have to do with our religion (like being Muslim, or Sikh, or Jewish). We have identities that have to do with how our bodies move, how we communicate and think (like being **neurodiverse**, disabled, and more).

We also choose identities that have to do with the things we are really interested in, like being a gamer, an artist, or a sports fan.



We all have more than one identity, and we're the only one who knows what it's like to have our combination of identities.

Our identities may make us different from some people and similar to other people. Sometimes it can feel good to be with people who share our identities. And sometimes it can feel good to be around people who do not.

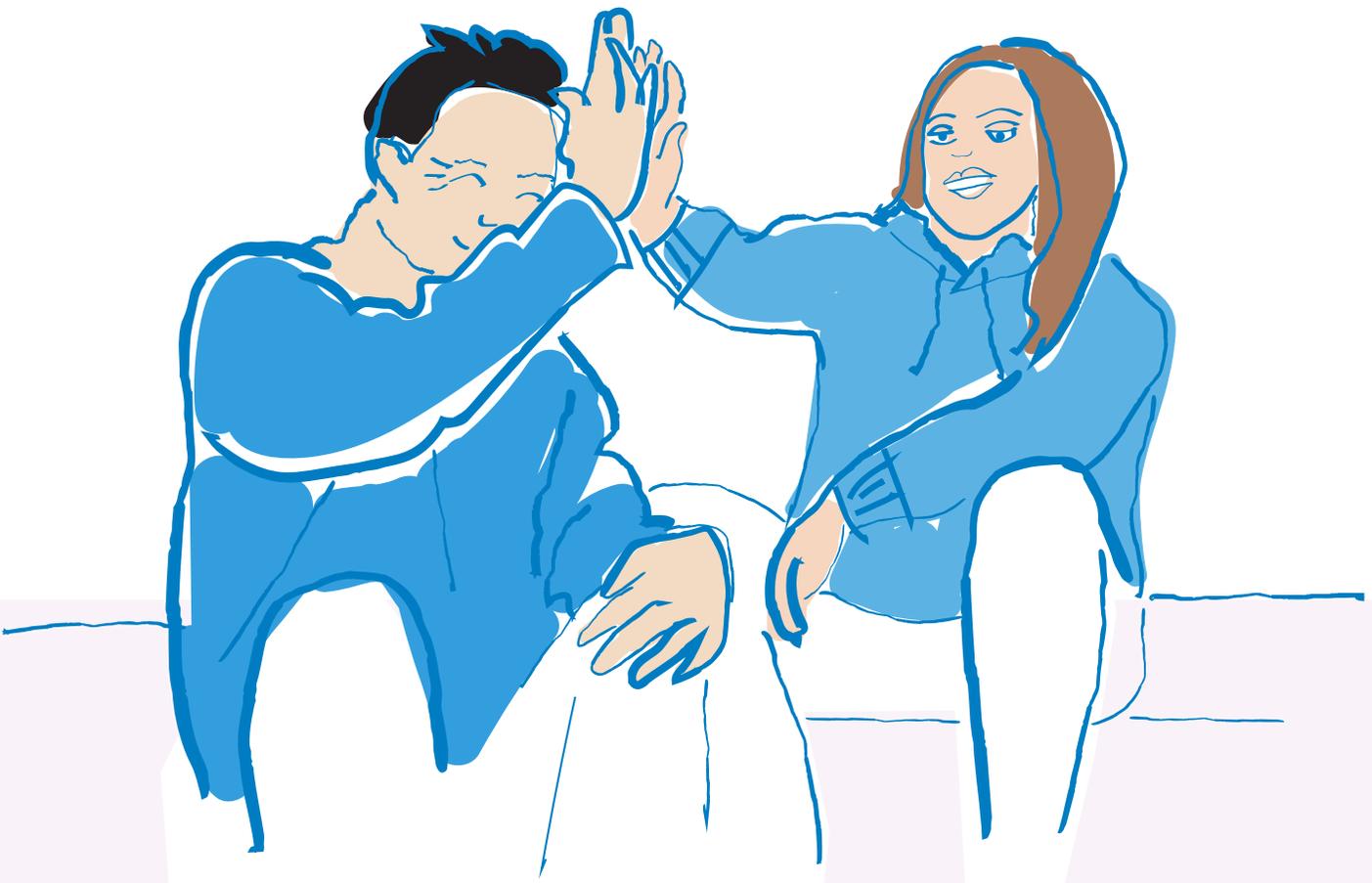


Other people may make **assumptions** about who we are based on the identities they think we have. They may assume things because we live with a disability, or they may assume things if our skin is lighter or darker in colour.

It's common to make assumptions. We all do it sometimes. But we should get to know people and learn about who they are, and not assume we know them because they look or act or talk a certain way.

Other people can respect us by asking us about who we are, listening to what we say, and using the words that we ask them to use when talking about us.

We can show respect for other people by doing the same.



Your body is part of who you are

Finding things you like and appreciate about your body, and learning to feel proud of your body, are two ways to feel good about who you are.

Your body isn't only a thing that you live in. It is part of who you are and part of your identity.

Sometimes you may feel really good about your body. Sometimes it can be hard to like your body. The images you see in the media can make you think or feel like we are all supposed to look one way. This is not true. Every body has power, every body has strength, every body has beauty.





All bodies have needs. Some of us need care workers to help us get dressed, an educational assistant to help us learn, or medication to help our bodies work. This is a part of who we are. Your needs might be different from someone else's needs.

Your body is what gets you through each and every day. Try thanking your body for all the great things it does for you. This may seem silly, but try it out sometime.

*Thank
★ You! ★*

We can all work on appreciating our bodies more.



Sex assigned at birth

When a baby is born, a doctor assigns the baby a **sex** based on the baby's **genitalia**. Genitalia can include body parts like the vulva, clitoris, penis, and scrotum.

If a doctor sees a penis, they call the baby male. If a doctor sees a vulva, they call the baby female. What they call us is our **sex assignment at birth**.

But bodies don't fit into one of two categories. Sometimes a baby is born and the doctor isn't sure if they are looking at a vulva or a scrotum. Sometimes they see a penis but no scrotum. Every body is different and that goes for our genitals too.



One word doctors use to describe bodies that don't fit into what they expect is **intersex**. If you want to learn more about intersex, the best way to do that is to learn from people who call themselves intersex. We've included some links in the  **Important Words** section at the back of the book if you want to learn more.

Gender

Gender is a word that describes many things, including:

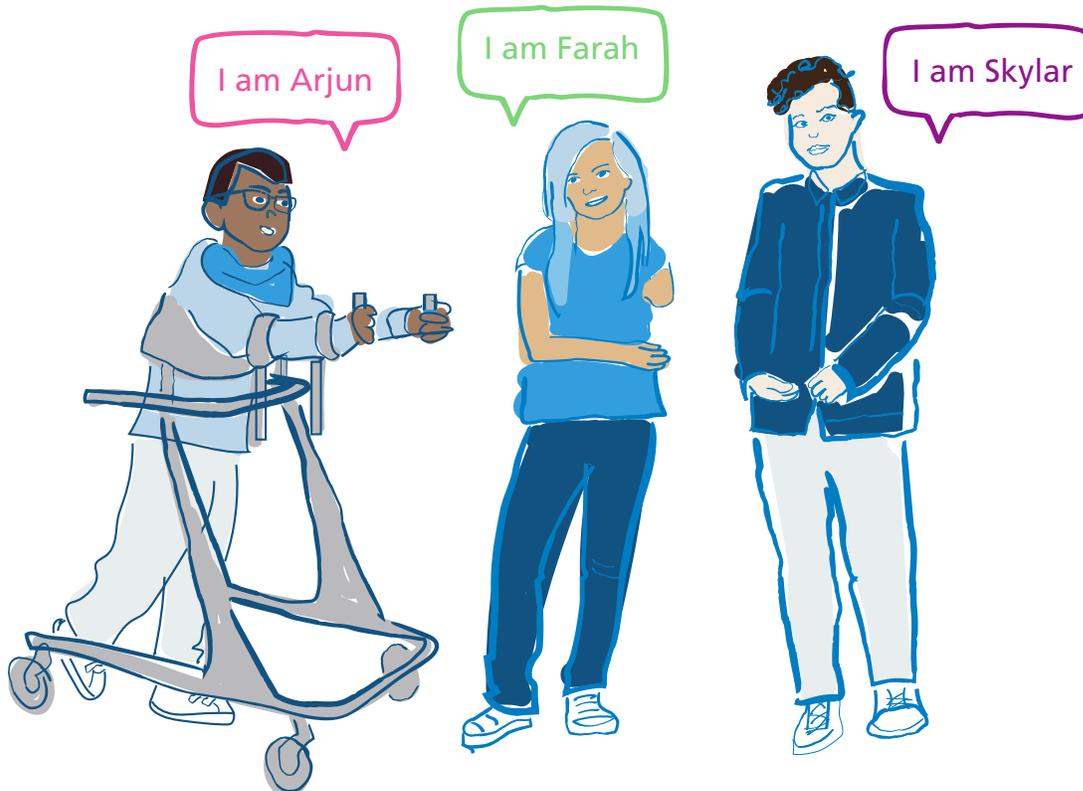
- how we feel on the inside
- who we know ourselves to be
- how we show ourselves to the world on the outside, like how we dress, what we do with our hair
- the things we choose to do and who we do them with

In the same way that bodies don't fit into one of two categories, our genders don't either. Some people identify as girls, some as boys.

Some people are **non-binary**, which is a way of saying that the boy/girl options don't fit for them.

Some people are **transgender**, which is a way of saying that what they were called when they were born doesn't fit, and they fit into a different identity.

Gender is different from sex assignment at birth, because it is something that comes from inside us, not something another person has decided for us.



There are a few more terms about gender that can be helpful to know.

Gender identity is a term that is used to describe how we feel on the inside and who we know ourselves to be. Boy, girl, trans, non-binary, **queer** are all examples of gender identities. Some of us have a gender identity and some of us are still finding the right words to describe how we feel. And how we feel can change!



Gender expression is a term for all the different ways we show our gender to others. Gender expression includes things like the clothes and colours we wear, what we do with our hair, our body language, the words we use to describe ourselves, and more. Some of us also express our gender through connecting to our culture, so gender expression may look different from one person to another.

You can choose and change how you want to show your gender to the world.

Gender expression can change over time, not just when you're young, but as you move through adulthood.

There is no right or wrong way to express our gender, as long as we get to make our own choices. You may feel like a girl or a boy. You may feel like both or neither. That is OK. Some people may not agree with this, but that doesn't mean they are right.



The most important thing is to respect others and ourselves by listening to the words people use to describe themselves and using those words, and trusting that each of us knows ourselves best.



Pronouns

Pronouns are words we use instead of saying a person or a thing's name. Here are some sentences with examples of pronouns underlined:



Arjun loves to play video games.
He plays them every chance he gets.



Farah signed up to volunteer at the animal shelter. She especially loves the cats.



Skylar is planning to hang out with friends after school. They are looking forward to it.



I left my laptop on my bed.
Can you go get it for me?



When we use pronouns for people, the pronoun can tell us something about a person's gender identity.

Pronouns we use a lot are:



If you don't know what a person's gender identity is, you can ask them what pronouns they use.

Changing pronouns is one way people show or express their gender. You may have always been called he/him, but you may feel like she/her or they/them are the pronouns that feel best for you. If you have pronouns that you want people to use for you, you can tell them.

We can all support each other by using the pronouns and names that people ask us to use for them. This is one way of showing respect for who people are.

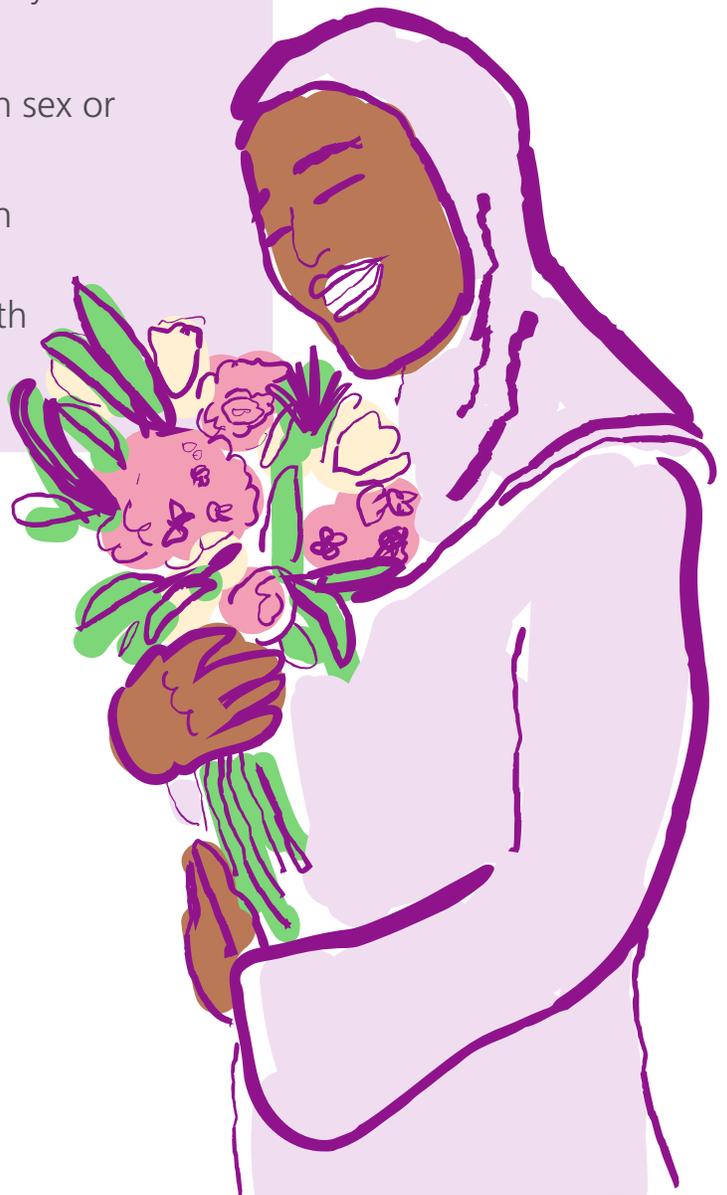


Sexuality

Sexuality includes the activities we do alone and with others that people call “having sex.” But, it can be a lot more than having sex, like:

- How you see yourself and others
- Whether you are attracted to other people, and who those people are
- How you feel about, and in, your body
- How you feel about your gender
- Whether or not you are interested in sex or attracted to people in a sexual way
- Whether or not you are interested in romantic relationships and who you want to have those relationships with
- And more

Sexuality is part of all our lives and how we experience it changes over time. It may change from day to day, week to week, and year to year.



Sexual attraction

One part of sexuality is attraction. **Sexual attraction** describes a feeling, like a want or a desire, to be close or connected with another person.

We can feel sexual attraction for people we've just met or for friends we've known for a long time. We can also feel sexual attraction for people we've never met, like a celebrity, or for people who don't even exist, like a character in a book or show.

There isn't one way to feel sexual attraction.

Some people have the feeling and then want to act on the feeling by doing sexual things.

Some people like the feeling of sexual attraction but don't want to act on it.

Some people don't feel sexual attraction at all. They may still want to have close friends and other relationships, but the sexual part isn't interesting to them.

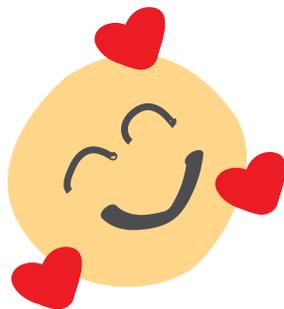




If you feel sexual attraction toward others, you may find that the people you are attracted to, and what you want to do with those feelings, changes over time. As you learn more about yourself and what you want in your relationships you may find that you have new feelings of attraction that you hadn't had before.



All of this is okay and if you have questions or want to talk about your thoughts and feelings about sexual attraction you deserve to have trustworthy people you can talk to.

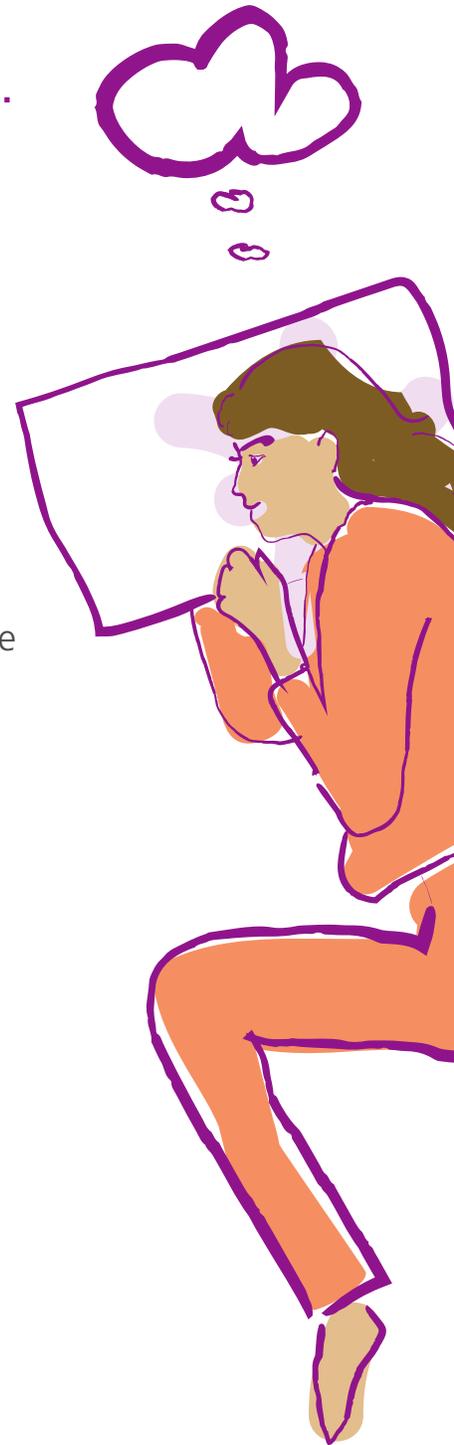
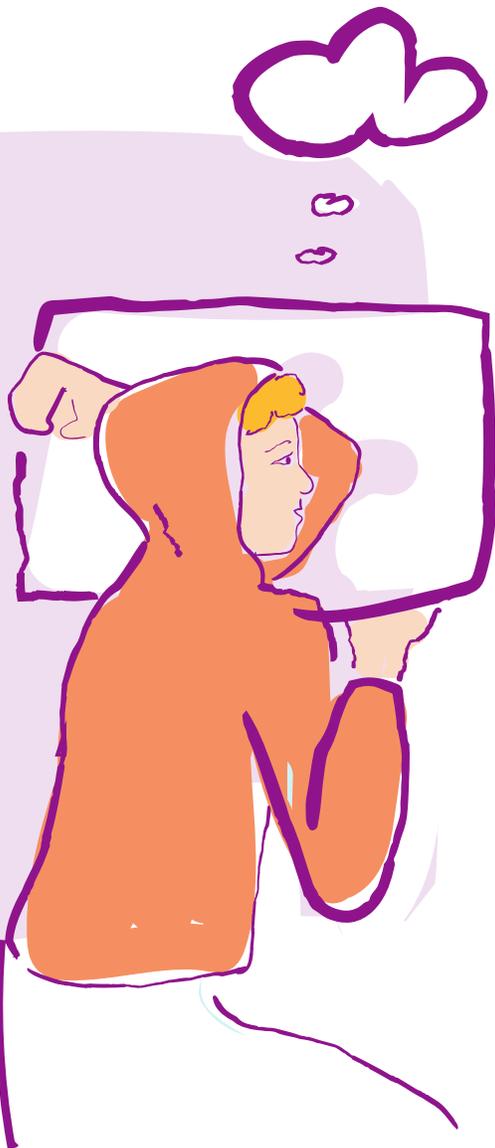


Some people are attracted to people of the same AND different genders than themselves.

These people may call themselves **bisexual**. Other people use the term **pansexual** to identify that they are attracted to people of any and all genders.

People who do not have sexual feelings or attractions to others may call themselves **asexual**. Some people who are asexual have romantic feelings, some do not.

These are just a few of the words people use to describe themselves and their sexual attractions and orientations. If you're interested in learning more, there is a whole world of words and attractions to explore.



Sexual attraction and identities

Sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, straight, asexual, and more) is a way of describing sexual attraction based on the gender identity of who we are attracted to.

But our sexual attraction may not be focused on gender identity. We may be attracted to people who share other identities we have. We may be attracted to people with very different identities from us. We may not feel sexual attraction for anyone, and still want to connect with them in other ways. You don't need to have a reason for why you feel the way you feel.



People in our lives, including our families may make assumptions about who we will or will not be attracted to, and who we should or should not be attracted to, based on our identities.

Maybe you've been told that you should only be attracted to someone who has a disability. Or someone who is "like you" in other ways, like someone who has the same religion or faith as you.

Or maybe you've been told the opposite - that you should only be attracted to someone who doesn't have a disability. Or someone who is different from you in other ways.

Who you are attracted to, who you might want to date and spend time with, should be about who you like and what kinds of relationships you want.

You are the person who knows, or will figure out, what is best for you.





Exploring your sexuality

Most people start exploring their sexuality by paying attention to and thinking about their sexual thoughts and feelings. And most of us do this on our own before sharing with others.

We can explore sexual feelings by paying attention to the kinds of sexual thoughts, daydreams, or fantasies we have. We can notice what it feels like in our bodies when we are thinking about sexual things.

We can explore our sexuality by doing things that make us feel sexy. The way we dress, the music we listen to, the TV and movies we watch, the books we read, all of these are ways to experience sexual feelings and thoughts.

When it comes to sexual touch, most people explore their own body first, before having sex with someone else. When we touch ourselves to feel good and learn about our sexual feelings, it's called **masturbation**.



Privacy

Because sexuality is thought of as something that is private, exploring it usually means needing some privacy too. This can be tricky when we rely on family members and others to support us with things like getting in and out of bed, getting dressed, and using the bathroom. But privacy is something we can always ask for, and the amount of privacy we have can change over time.

If you want more privacy so you can have time and space to explore your own body, you can always ask for it.

Support

We all need help with parts of sexual expression. Some of us need help understanding the rules of dating, or help choosing and dressing in the clothes that make us feel good. Some of us need help with how to go from being sexually attracted to someone to asking them out on a date or building a relationship with them. Some of us need someone else to position our bodies in ways so that we can explore our own body.

Sexuality is a part of who we are. We don't all get to explore and express our sexuality the way we want all the time, but we can all find ways to show and express parts of who we are.

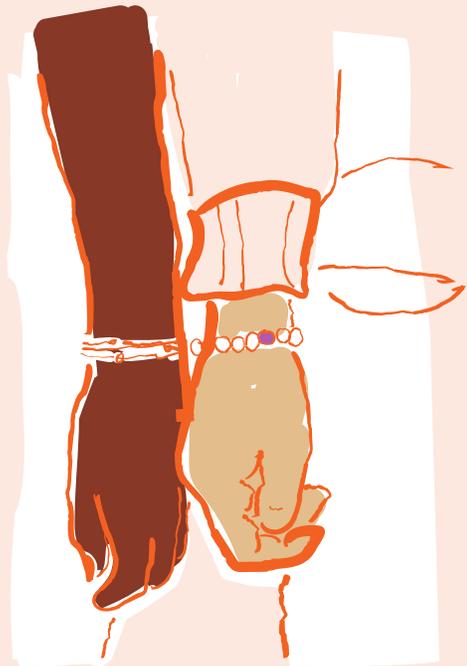


Other people's assumptions and expectations

Everyone has their own ideas and beliefs about sexuality. Some people think that there are only men and women in the world, and that men should only have sexual feelings for women, and women should only have those feelings for men. Some people think sex should only be for making babies. Some people think sexuality is a beautiful part of being human and as long as no one is getting hurt, people should be free to explore their sexuality as they choose.

The way we think about sex has a lot to do with the information we get growing up and with how the people who raise us and take care of us think about sex. The way we think about sex is also influenced by ableism in the world, that tells us which bodies are considered beautiful and sexy and which bodies are not.

If you are interested in exploring sexual thoughts, feelings, and being sexual with someone, you might want something different from what your family and community want for you. You might be interested in dating people of the same and different genders than you. Or you may not be interested in dating or relationships at all.



Adults can be uncomfortable when young people start exploring and showing their sexuality. They may not know how to talk about it, and they may want to protect young people from something they worry could be risky or dangerous.

You have the right to information about your body and sexuality so that you can make your own decisions. And you have the right to ask for the support you need. It may take time for the people around you to accept this, but you get to ask for information and support you need.



Just as some people get **bullied** because of how they look, move around, or communicate, we know that sometimes people bully or are mean to others because of how they show their sexuality or because of who they are attracted to. This is never okay. If this happens to you, or you know it is happening to someone else, try to talk to an adult who you trust. And if it feels safe to do so – speak up and out.



Your voice
is powerful



Just the beginning!

We've covered a lot in this book – bodies, gender, and sexuality. You may need time to let it all sink in.

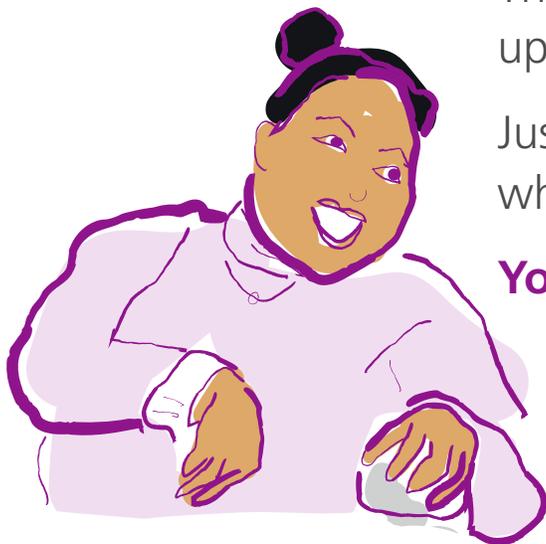
Growing up is a time of exploration and discovery, which can be fun and exciting. Growing up is also hard. Sometimes being in your body, or figuring out your gender or who you want to date can also be hard. And when other people are mean or unkind because we are curious, that can make us feel like we are alone. But we aren't. Lots of people feel this way when they start to explore their sexuality and who they are.

You are not alone. You can take all the time you need to explore and decide what feels right for you.



There are people who deserve your trust and can help you think through your questions and feelings.

- ✓ Find a friend who you can talk to who will keep your feelings and ideas to themselves (if you want it to be kept private for now).
- ✓ You can also talk to an adult who you can trust who may know a little more about these things, or may be willing to work with you to find answers you need. Ask them for help to get more information - maybe it's online or visiting a health clinic.



There is a whole world out there made up of people with different identities.

Just remember that our differences are what makes the world a better place.

You have a lot to offer the world –

just as you are.



Important words

All words change in meaning over time, and even today, different people have different definitions of the same word. The definitions below are not the only definitions, or the best ones. They are a place to start learning more.

2SLGBTQIA+ : These letters stand for, **Two-Spirit**, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and the “+” is for more. These are all different words that people use to describe themselves, their bodies, and their relationships. The term can be useful when describing ways that many of us are excluded and hurt by a world that expects us to all be more or less the same. But just because you use one of these words doesn’t mean you will have anything in common with others who use the same or different words in the list.

Ableism: The organization [Access Living](#) defines ableism this way:

“Ableism is the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. At its heart, ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require ‘fixing’ and defines people by their disability. Like racism and sexism, ableism classifies entire groups of people as ‘less than,’ and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations of people with disabilities.”

Asexual (also called ace): Not being attracted to other people in a sexual way. Someone who is asexual may or may not want romantic relationships including kissing and hugging.

Assumptions: Things we believe are true even when we have no proof. Making assumptions about other people means thinking things about them without knowing from them if it’s true.



Bisexual: Being attracted to people the same gender as yourself and other genders.

Bullying: When someone hurts, scares, teases or is mean to another person either in person or online. Bullying usually happens more than once, and is often done because of one or more of our identities.

Gay: Being attracted to someone of the same gender as you. When it is a girl/woman who is attracted to another girl/woman they may also use the term lesbian.

Gender: How people think and feel about themselves and what they call themselves in relation to masculine, feminine, in between, and beyond. Gender can include how you feel on the inside, how you show your gender on the outside, the things you do, and the people you want to be in relationships with.

Gender expression: The different ways we show our gender to others, such as the clothes and colours we wear and the words we use to describe ourselves. Gender expression may look different from one person to another.

Gender identity: Describes our gender inside and out. Gender identities include boy/man, girl/woman, transgender, queer, and more. Gender identities can change over time.

Genitalia: Sexual or reproductive organs that are on the outside of the body.

Homosexual: Being attracted to someone of the same gender (although, some people find the word homosexual offensive or hurtful). Also called gay or lesbian.

Identity: How a person sees themselves and the things that they feel make them who they are.



Intersex: There are not only two kinds of bodies (male/female). Intersex is one word that describes when someone is not given the label of male or female because of differences in their reproductive anatomy. Intersex people may be born with these differences or develop them in childhood. Learn more about Intersex here:

- InterACT: <https://interactadvocates.org/faq/>
- Intersex Justice Project: <https://www.intersexjusticeproject.org/>

Lesbian: When a girl/woman is attracted to another girl/woman.

Masturbation: A sexual activity we do with ourselves. It includes touching our genitals and other parts of our body that feel good to touch. It is different from other kinds of sexual activity because it is only for us and about what we want, and it is a private activity.

Neurodiverse: Refers to the many different ways that people experience and interact with the world, including the way they think, learn and behave. Neurodiversity refers to everyone's differences, but it is often used with developmental conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and/or Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Non-binary: A gender identity that describes not feeling like the binary choices of boy/man or girl/woman fit for you.

Pansexual: Being attracted to people of all genders.

Pronoun: Words we use instead of naming a person or a thing, for example she, he, they, and it.



Queer: Queer used to be an insult, a word used to hurt others who were considered different or odd. Some people still use this word as an insult today. But more people have started using the word queer with pride, to say that they are different, and that different is good. Queer might mean you are attracted to, and open to relationships with people of all genders and orientations. Using the word queer may also be a way of telling others that the gender and relationship rules and expectations of the world don't work for you.

Sex or sex assigned at birth: The label, usually male or female, that we are given when we are born, based on our genitals.

Sexual attraction: Being excited by or interested in someone.

Sexual orientation: How people describe who they are sexually attracted to, and who they want to have relationships with. Many sexual orientation labels are based on gender (like straight, gay, lesbian) and others are not (like asexual, pansexual, queer).

Sexuality: This looks and feels different for everyone and can include how you look at yourself and other people, how you feel about your body and how you have relationships that feel good to you, including friendships.

Straight/Heterosexual: Being attracted to someone of the opposite gender.

Transgender: A gender identity that people use when their sex assigned at birth doesn't feel like it fits their gender identity. Someone may have been assigned female and called a girl, but they know they are a boy. Someone may have been called a boy, but feel like they are a girl. Some people use transgender when they feel in between or both.

Two-Spirit: Someone who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit. It can be used by Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity.

All bodies
are great
bodies!



Book creation team

Team Leads

Amy McPherson, PhD, Senior Scientist, Bloorview Research Institute; Associate Professor, Dalla Lana School of Public Health and Rehabilitation Sciences Institute, University of Toronto

Christine Provvidenza, MSc, R.Kin., Knowledge Translation Lead, Evidence to Care, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

Team Members (listed alphabetically)

Alison Engel-Yan, Family Leader, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

Madison Giles, Research Assistant, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

Amanda Landry, Occupational Therapist, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

Makumbu Lumbu, Lived Experience Collaborator

Charise MacDonald, Occupational Therapist, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

Nelson Morgan, Lived Experience Collaborator

Cory Silverberg, Sex Educator and Author

Review Team (listed alphabetically)

Gabriella Carafa, Clinical Risk Specialist, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

Heather Cobb, Sexual Health Promotion Specialist, Alberta Health Services

Susan Cosgrove, Family Leader, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

Beth Dangerfield, Family Leader, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

Jessica Wood, Research Specialist, Sex Information & Education Council of Canada

Narrator

Wesley Magee-Saxton, Youth Leader, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital; Voice Actor



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