

## **Brief Guidelines for Intersex Allies**

### **Intersex Basics**

#### **What is intersex?**

Intersex people are born with a mix of anatomical sex traits (chromosomes, genitals, and/or reproductive organs) that are traditionally considered to be both “male” and “female,” or atypical for either. Many forms of intersex exist, it is not a single category. Please see OII USA’s “Intersex Variations” for a comprehensive list: [http://oiiusa.org/intersex\\_variations](http://oiiusa.org/intersex_variations)

#### **How many intersex individuals are there?**

It is difficult to obtain precise statistics because accurate censuses of intersex births and adults are not recorded. The lowest popular statistic estimates intersex people account for .05% of the human population (1 in 2000 births), and the highest, 1.7%, making intersex individuals potentially as common as red-haired individuals (1-2% of the human population).

#### **Do intersex individuals need “treatment” by clinicians? Are they sick?**

There are very few instances when a child’s intersex variation poses health risks that require immediate medical attention. Rather, intersex people, like all people, have health issues. For example, being a female is not in and of itself a health problem, but there are health problems specific to being “female,” such as ovarian cancer.

#### **Does intersex have something to do with gender, sexual orientation, or sexual behavior?**

Intersex is a biological reality, but it gets confused with gender, sexual orientation, and behavior because there is a socio-cultural relationship *between* one’s body and all of these things. If someone is declared male at birth (has a “male body”), it’s assumed they’ll identify as a man, and they’ll be attracted to and have sex with women (and vice-versa for those assigned female at birth). Since intersex bodies cannot be easily categorized into one sex or another, the assumptions about how they’ll identify, and who they’ll be attracted to and have sex with, cannot be easily made, and the discomfort this gives some people enables medical attempts to eliminate human diversity by enforcing normative “male” and “female” standards on intersex bodies.

#### **Why are intersex individuals subjected to medical treatment?**

The majority of medical intervention is used to attempt to make intersex individuals’ bodies conform to “male” or “female” standards. However, studies have shown that medically unnecessary “normalizing” procedures such as irreversible genital surgeries, may be physically and emotionally harmful. In addition, they are problematic in that infants and young individuals cannot consent to them. Adolescents have reported feeling pressured, as late as high school, by their parents’ and/or doctors’ recommendations, and regret having succumbed to them.

# Intersex Basics Con't

## **Do all intersex individuals identify as either male or female?**

It depends on the individual: some intersex individuals identify as male, female, intersex, intersex males, intersex females, intersex women, intersex men, or as none of these.

## **Are intersex individuals hermaphrodites?**

Biologically speaking, no. Hermaphrodites are beings (e.g., some fish) with both fully functioning sets of “male” and “female” sex organs, and this is impossible in humans. The word was originally used because of the cultural idea - originating from the Greek myth of Hermaphroditus, who was both male and female - of having *elements* of both sexes. While some intersex people self-identify as hermaphrodites under this conceptual definition, it is considered stigmatizing by many and should only be used by intersex people themselves.

## **What is DSD? Is this the same as intersex?**

In 2006, the medical community replaced the term intersex with “disorders of sexual development” (DSD). DSD is problematic because it reinforces the idea that intersex is a medical condition in need of correction. Using DSD, individuals that identify as intersex have no choice but to identify as “disordered,” even though our natural bodies are most often healthy. Today, some intersex people – especially those taught DSD by their parents and/or doctors since the term’s inception – use the label; we recognize that, just as some gays and lesbians do not label themselves “gays” or “lesbians,” but view their sexual orientation as a psychological disorder in need of correction, intersex people are also free to use whichever labels they like. However, history demonstrates that civil rights are not attained by adopting stigmatizing labels imposed by those in power. Thus, the Organisation Intersex International (OII), the largest intersex advocacy group and organization of intersex people in the world, recommends using “intersex” for promoting equality for people born with atypical sex anatomy.

## **What are intersex activists’ goals?**

Intersex activists’ want to attain equal rights for intersex people by raising awareness that: 1) intersex is a naturally occurring variation; 2) hundreds of intersex individuals and several studies report that medically unnecessary genital surgeries, as well as hormone treatments, are harmful; and thus, 3) intersex individuals must be able to choose what is done to their bodies (excluding any situations where there are medical health risks involved).

## **Does the existence of intersex individuals invalidate the gender binary?**

While some intersex individuals may agree that sex and gender are not binary concepts, the goals of intersex activists are to raise awareness and to gain the right to consent to what is and is not done to our bodies. Intersex activists are not explicitly trying to bring down the binary.

## **Are intersex individuals part of the queer community?**

Like all people, some intersex individuals are LGBT and others are not. However, OII supports adding the “I” to the LGBT acronym since LGBT activism has fought for rights of people who fall outside expected binary sex and gender norms – which broadly falls in line with the goals of intersex activism and the reasons for discrimination against us.



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## **Brief Guidelines for Intersex Allies**

### **How to Be a Good Intersex Ally**

How can I raise awareness about intersex, even if I'm not intersex?

- 1) Start conversations about intersex, based on the Intersex Basics in these guidelines.  
Remember that most Intersex individuals prioritize discussing how to combat human rights abuses rather than being used as examples to explore concepts in sex and gender theory.
- 2) Be Intersex-inclusive = LGBTI
  - Use the LGBTI acronym, which includes the "I" for intersex, whenever possible in your speech, writing, and/or at your university or organization.
- 3) Make intersex more visible on social networking sites.
  - "Like" an intersex organization on Facebook, such as OII USA
  - Share an article, blog post, book, documentary, movie, YouTube clip, or presentation about intersex with others
  - Spread information using other resources, such as tumblr, blogs, etc.
- 4) Learn about intersex from intersex people.
  - Intersex people are the ones best qualified to relay our experiences and needs
  - Contact an intersex educator about speaking at your organization, university, or workplace. (OII USA has available speakers, contact us through our website.)
  - If unable to meet intersex people, view documentaries, interviews, etc. which feature intersex people telling their own story.
- 5) When speaking to intersex individuals:
  - Remember that being intersex may or may not be a part of their identity
  - Do not assume that it is their duty to discuss intersex at any time, or that they will be comfortable discussing all aspects: ask if it's okay first
  - Phrase questions to understand intersex broadly, not in ways that are too personal and thus invasive
    - e.g., You meet someone who has never heard of underwear before. "What kinds of underwear do people wear?" helps them broadly understand what underwear is. "What color underwear are you wearing right now?" does not help them broadly understand underwear, and may make the askee uncomfortable.

## How to Be a Good Intersex Ally Con't

### 5) When speaking to intersex individuals:

- Ensure questions do not serve to fetishize, stigmatize, or freakify intersex individuals
- If intersex individuals are not comfortable discussing certain topics:
  - They may wish to have this conversation another time
  - They may wish to have this conversation, but not publicly
  - They may wish to have a conversation about intersex broadly, not personally
  - They may wish to have this conversation, but aren't knowledgeable about all intersex issues and might point you toward good resources
  - They may not wish to have this conversation, it may be too personal or triggering

### 6) Do not make the assumption that intersex is a medical condition.

- Some intersex individuals don't use the words "condition," "syndrome," etc. when discussing their form of intersex.
  - e.g., Claudia's form of intersex is CAIS. Medical sources indicate that this stands for Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, but to Claudia, it simply stands for Complete Androgen InSensitivity. Claudia feels her body is healthy, and doesn't relate to the word "syndrome" in association with her body.
- Many intersex individuals use the term "intersex variations," which doesn't inherently medicalize intersex bodies.

## Some Resources to Get Started

### Organization Intersex International

USA chapter – <http://oiiinternational.com/oiiusa/>; <http://facebook.com/oiiusa>

*Note:* links to numerous intersex organizations provided on OII USA's site

Australia chapter – <http://oiiaustralia.com/>

### Blogs/Websites

*Full Frontal Activism: Intersex and Awesome* – <http://fullfrontalactivism.blogspot.com/>

*Intersex Roadshow* – <http://intersexroadshow.blogspot.com/>

*Hida Vilorio*, blog and website - [www.hidaviloria.com](http://www.hidaviloria.com)

### Books

*Fixing Sex: Intersex, Medical Authority, and Lived Experience*, by Katrina Karkazis

*Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex*, by Elizabeth Reis

### Documentaries

*Intersexion* (2012), *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* (2011), *I in 2000* (2006)

### Movies

*XXY* (2007)