

rotary
youth
exchange



DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN ROTARY YOUTH EXCHANGE:

SUPPORTING LGBTQ+ STUDENTS

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Rotary values diversity and celebrates the contributions of people of all backgrounds, regardless of their age, ethnicity, race, color, disability, learning style, religion, faith, socioeconomic status, culture, marital status, languages spoken, sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Aligning with our core values of service, fellowship, diversity, integrity, and leadership, we strive to cultivate a diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture in which people from underrepresented groups have more opportunities to participate in Rotary Youth Exchange.

The primary goals of Youth Exchange are to provide young people with opportunities to experience an exchange as well as to develop as leaders who promote peace and social justice around the world. To achieve this, everyone involved in the exchange — from students to volunteers — needs to be open-minded, tolerant, and supportive of one another.

Beliefs, customs, laws, and even terms related to gender identity and the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning) community vary greatly around the world. This means an LGBTQ+ student's sense of safety and support may also vary during an exchange. The information in this guide will help you support all students (regardless of their gender identity) and help you create programs that support them.

Remember that language about LGBTQ+ identities is constantly evolving and can change depending on the cultural context.



**READ MORE ABOUT ROTARY'S COMMITMENT
TO DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION**

KEY TERMS AND WORDS YOU'LL FIND IN THIS DOCUMENT:

(Adapted from the definitions used by the U.S.-based [Human Rights Campaign](#))

Cisgender (cis) — A term for people whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth (i.e., not trans)

Gender — Part of how a person understands who they are and how they interact with others. Many people identify as female or male, while others identify as a combination or as neither. Gender can be expressed through behavior, appearance, or other means.

Gender-affirming language — Wording that reinforces and supports a person's gender identity

Plus or + — An addition to the frequently used abbreviation LGBTQ that includes other sexual orientations or gender identities

Pronouns — Words or phrases that substitute for a noun or noun phrase, such as he/him/his, she/her/hers, or they/them/theirs. Because pronouns in many languages can be gendered, some people use alternate pronouns to reflect their identity.

Sex assigned at birth — The classification of someone as male, female, or intersex based on the physical or biological characteristics they're born with

Sexual orientation — A person's physical, romantic, emotional, or aesthetic attraction to others. It's unrelated to gender identity. It's also the attraction, not a person's sexual activity, that defines their orientation.

Transgender (trans) — A term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth (i.e., not cis)

You'll find many more helpful terms in a list at the end of the guide.

ADDED CHALLENGES FOR LGBTQ+ STUDENTS WHO TAKE PART IN YOUTH EXCHANGE

LGBTQ+ students who decide to go on an exchange often face even bigger challenges than other people their age. Not only are they immersing themselves in a new culture, but personal factors can greatly affect the ways in which they are seen and treated by others.

For example, students who have disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity to people in their home country may have to do so again during their exchange. But this time, students are in an unfamiliar country and may be in a culture that is less accepting or understanding. Sharing this information when they are unsure of how people will react can cause stress or anxiety.

Because of this, they may wait to share the information until they have more trust in their new relationships, and they may choose not to do so at all. Students don't have to disclose any part of their gender identity or sexual orientation. But if they choose to do so, it's important that you keep the information confidential unless the student gives you definite permission to share it with specific people.

Students who have decided not to share their sexual orientation or gender identity may face other pressures, including concerns about how they are perceived by their host families and new communities or that someone else may disclose this information. It's also not uncommon for a student to acknowledge their sexual orientation or gender identity for the first time during their exchange, because students in the program are at an important age for self-discovery.



In addition to the stress any exchange student may face, LGBTQ+ students may have other concerns:

- Will my host family find out about my sexual orientation or gender identity?
- Will my sexual orientation or gender identity be disclosed to others?
- Will I be accepted?
- Will I be safe?
- Will people use my correct pronouns or other gender-affirming language?
- Will I be asked about my sexual orientation or gender identity?
- Will I be able to express myself to others?
- Will I feel comfortable with my host family?
- Will they feel comfortable with me?
- Will any religious beliefs in my new community affect how I am viewed?
- Will I be safe in my host school?
- Will my host school support me?
- Will I experience discrimination?
- Will I be a target for crime because of my sexual orientation or gender identity?
- Will I face additional dangers using public transit?
- Will I face additional dangers using public toilets?
- Will I have support from my host district?
- Does my district offer any specific LGBTQ+ resources?

CREATING A SAFE AND WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL STUDENTS

We want to create environments that allow students to express their identity, whether that's on the application form, at an interview, or during inbound or outbound orientations. By doing so, you're showing that you care about them and fostering an environment where they can feel comfortable sharing information that will help you determine what specific support they'll need. Here are some specific ways to do this:

- **Don't assume that a student is heterosexual or identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth.** Also avoid assumptions about their gender identity based on the way that they dress or present themselves. In general, it's best to avoid any kind of presumptions about sexuality or gender identity.
- **Address LGBTQ+ topics with all students and volunteers.** Make it a habit to be inclusive regardless of the audience. You'll be supporting LGBTQ+ students while also building knowledge among their peers, volunteers, and allies. And you'll be showing that Rotary supports LGBTQ+ students in all of our programs.
- **Respect how much or how little information LGBTQ+ students want to share.** Allow students to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity when they're comfortable doing so, if they decide to say anything. If students do share this information, understand that they may not want to share it with others, including their family or representatives of the sponsor district. Make sure you have reviewed this guide and done other research so that if a student does talk to you about this, you can respond appropriately and avoid asking questions that may make them uncomfortable. Don't ask about their anatomy, sexual activity, or anything you wouldn't ask a new member in your club.



Use gender-neutral language when possible.

An easy way to be inclusive is to simply avoid using gendered language, especially when you don't know someone's pronouns or gender identity. Try to use terms that would include all people. You can say "you all" instead of "you guys," use "they" instead of "he or she," or greet people with "good evening, everyone" instead of "good evening, ladies and gentlemen."



- **Be aware of the potential for disclosing a student's sexual orientation or gender identity.** It's critical to support the student's wishes and avoid sharing that information with fellow volunteers, host families, and other students. Be especially careful when you communicate with the student's parents. Ask the student what wording they want you to use when you communicate with their host family. For example, a student may tell you that they are transgender and they want you to refer to them using a specific name and pronouns — but that they want you to use a different name and pronouns when you talk with their parents.
- **Understand how to use pronouns and gender-affirming language.** Don't try to guess which words people use to describe themselves or how they want to be described by others. Some pronouns are gendered (he/him/his, she/her/hers), while some are gender-neutral (they/them/theirs). Asking and correctly using someone's pronouns or other gender-affirming language is a basic way to show your respect for them. Referring to someone with the wrong pronouns can make them feel invalidated or alienated, or have other harmful effects.
- **Let students themselves tell you how they identify.** Remember that our goal is to make students feel safe and comfortable. It's not about how difficult it might be for you. At in-person meetings, use name tags that allow students to indicate their name and pronouns. You can also include your own pronouns when you introduce yourself and let students follow your example. This way, you begin the conversation by disclosing some information about yourself, and also show that you aren't going to assume what pronouns they use based on their appearance. If you make a mistake (it happens), it's OK — just apologize and move forward.

Gender-neutral words for groups:

- Guests
- Members
- Rotarians
- Rotaractors
- Interactors
- Volunteers
- Students
- Friends
- Everyone
- You all
- Folks

Example:

At an orientation or meeting:
"Welcome friends! It's so nice to see so many students and volunteers today."

Gender-neutral words for an individual (other than their name):

- They
- Student
- Person

Example:

After a club meeting: "We're going to have some ice cream. Does Morgan want to join us? Can someone ask them?"



Make an inclusive introduction:

- Hi! My name is ___ and I use [she, they] pronouns. What about you?
- What pronouns do you all use?
- Let's introduce ourselves! Tell us your name, your pronouns, and your favorite food.

- **Be honest about your knowledge (or lack thereof) of LGBTQ+ topics.** We all have varying levels of understanding, so it's OK if you don't have all the answers. If you don't know something, tell students this and ask or refer them to someone who does. It's also better to educate yourself about gender identity and sexuality yourself before asking someone to explain their identity to you. If you did research and still have questions, you can ask, "What does that mean to you?" This gives the student a chance to say how or why they identify with a term or identity. For example, not identifying with a gender binary may mean one thing to one student and something different to another.
- **Connect them with other LGBTQ+ people, clubs, or programs in your community.** Being with others who share at least part of their identity can help LGBTQ+ youth feel safer and more understood. Share information with all students about any LGBTQ+ youth clubs or other resources in your area so anyone who wants to can get involved.
- **Most importantly, be kind.** Regardless of our knowledge or experience with LGBTQ+ topics, being kind and open-minded creates opportunities for growth and to make progress toward our goal of a more tolerant and understanding world.



Ask thoughtful questions

Help students understand the LGBTQ+ environment of a country by suggesting that they research:

- What is the attitude toward gender in the country?
- What are the typical gender roles in the community?
- What are the expectations for men, women, and transgender people?
- What perceptions do people in that country have about people who don't identify with a gender binary?
- What are the stereotypes of my culture or home country?
- Are there differences in political and social power based on gender?
- Are there any laws or regulations about sexual orientation or gender identity?
- How do my values compare with common attitudes about gender roles in that country?

Additional resources are listed at the end of this guide.

SPONSOR DISTRICT CONSIDERATIONS

As a sponsor district, you're responsible for preparing your outbound students for their exchanges and all the opportunities and challenges ahead. Whether you're working with prospective Youth Exchange students and families or those who have already been accepted into the program, here are a few ways you can do that:

- **Allow students to make informed decisions.** Giving students the resources to help them understand the cultural perspective toward LGBTQ+ people in a potential host community is essential. But don't limit their list of possible host countries, unless being in that country would put them in danger or in conflict with the country's laws. Instead, encourage students to ask thoughtful questions that will help them decide which countries might be best for them.
- **Engage with LGBTQ+ alumni of Youth Exchange.** Alumni are valuable resources for students, and LGBTQ+ alumni in particular may be able to provide additional insight to students who are deciding whether to go abroad. The [LGBT+ Fellowship](#) is a group you can connect students to.
- **Be honest and transparent.** It's essential to be straightforward with students about the challenges they may face. Don't minimize or avoid certain details that could make the difference in their understanding the reality of these challenges. Honest communication between district partners about a student's needs is also essential for a successful exchange. This sets everyone's expectations from the start and can ensure that any necessary support is in place before a student leaves — potentially avoiding serious challenges later for volunteers and your student. You can do this without disclosing details about a specific student's identity by establishing general policies that include diverse identities.

- **Discuss medical treatment and other essential needs.**

Help students determine what their medical needs may be during their exchange, and work with your partners to determine a placement where they can get that care. When possible, connect the student with facilities that are competent in working with LGBTQ+ youth. Ask students to think about how their support structure, especially in terms of medical or mental health care, might differ from what they have at home.

- **Ensure that your students will have lots of support at home and abroad.** Confirm that students will have and be connected to the resources they need to successfully navigate the challenges of an exchange. Talk to your student about their needs and ask your partners about any aspects of the exchange that could affect the safety and well-being of your outbound student.

- **Develop an inclusive orientation for returning students.**

The orientation you offer after an exchange should be as inclusive as the training before students depart. Many students may have trouble adjusting when they return, but be sensitive to the specific challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students. After learning to navigate their identity abroad, their return home may mean adjusting all over again.



Ask your host district partners:

- Will the student be placed in a school that accepts their identity?
- Will the student be placed in a community that is accepting?
- Does your district have LGBTQ+ members, leaders, or host families?
- Does your district provide or require training that teaches volunteers how to accept and support LGBTQ+ young people?
- Is their host family accepting and open to supporting them?
- Will they be assigned a counselor who understands — or who is willing to learn about — the challenges an LGBTQ+ student might face?



Before hosting an LGBTQ+ student, assess if your district has:

- Comprehensive health care that the student might need
- LGBTQ+ members, leaders, or host families
- Laws that protect LGBTQ+ people
- An LGBTQ+ community and social groups
- Inclusive school policies
- Access to gender-neutral toilet facilities
- Training to teach volunteers how to be supportive
- Social flexibility in gender roles
- Policies about using inclusive language

HOST DISTRICT CONSIDERATIONS

Students and their families depend on you, as the host district, to provide support and care during the exchange. Here are some ways your district can do that:

- **Be honest and straightforward.** Talk candidly with your district partners and to students about their host environment — especially if there are any possible risks related to their safety. For example, in some countries, social attitudes toward a group of people may differ from the law. Even if the cultural environment doesn't reflect your personal beliefs, be honest about it so students can make an informed decision about choosing your country and prepare for the year ahead.
- **Talk with your inbound student before their exchange.** Help ease a student's concerns by communicating with them directly about their questions before they arrive. Whether the host family or host counselor makes contact, make sure to establish a supportive relationship early on. If the student asks to use a different name than the one in your records, change the information so that everyone who interacts with the student has the correct name.
- **Choose your volunteers carefully, and then support them.** A successful exchange requires supporting your student. To do that, your volunteers — including host families, counselors, school staff, and others — also need your full support. Connect them with local resources and other families who have hosted an LGBTQ+ student so that they have a strong network. Encourage them to learn about gender identity, sexual orientation, LGBTQ+ services, and community resources before the student arrives.

- **Engage local organizations.** If you can, invite a local LGBTQ+ organization to speak at your orientations, and talk about the resources available to both students and volunteers during an exchange. And if one exists, include a LGBTQ+ crisis hotline in the standard list of emergency contacts that your district gives to students when they arrive.
- **Build a network of support around your students.** Invite LGBTQ+ alumni to your orientations or ask them to serve as mentors to your inbound students. They can help students navigate the exchange and share knowledge about the local community.



You shouldn't host an LGBTQ+ student if:

- Local laws target LGBTQ+ people
- Political unrest in your country or community involves gender or sexual orientation
- Social groups advocate hatred or violence toward LGBTQ+ people
- Your community has rigid gender roles



Alex's story

Alex had not yet told his family he was transgender when he applied to be a Rotary Youth Exchange student in 2016 with District 6900 and was selected to go on an exchange. It was late during his preparatory year that Alex told his family and his Rotary district officers, and disclosed the intention to begin his transition while on the exchange.

Like any exchange experience, Alex's year had its share of challenges. Being a transgender exchange student requires even more resilience, tolerance, and dedication. But Alex is proof that with the proper communication, collaboration, planning, and dedication, a transgender student can have an extraordinary experience with Rotary Youth Exchange.

— Mike Parks, District 6900 Youth Exchange chair

HOST FAMILY CONSIDERATIONS

As a host family, you're responsible for making the student feel safe and supported, both within your home and throughout their exchange. This is especially important for LGBTQ+ youth. Here are some ways you can do that:

- Assure your student that if they face any judgment, discrimination, or other issues based on their identity, they can tell you and ask for support. Don't wait until there's a potential problem at school or in the community. Remind your student often that they can talk to you if they feel hurt, unsafe, or are having other challenges, and that you'll do your best to help them or connect them with other people or resources.
- Correct others when they make a mistake, whether or not it's intentional. For example, if someone refers to your student using the wrong gender, gently remind them of the name or gender-affirming language that your student uses. It may help to restate a sentence correctly so that the person has an example of how to talk to or about the student.
- Avoid gendered assumptions about your student. This includes things like not delegating chores, assuming which toilet facilities they use, or which clothes, supplies, or presents they prefer based on gender.

- If your student is transgender or doesn't identify with a gender binary, ask them how comfortable they are using public toilets. A private, gender-neutral facility is typically the safest one for these students. Gendered facilities can be a safety risk for these students, who might be harassed or assaulted based on their appearance. If the student is concerned, suggest that they ask someone they trust to accompany them. Having an ally there decreases the likelihood that they may be harassed.
- Be flexible. Some students may still be going through the process of understanding their gender identity or sexual orientation. A student may decide to present themselves in different ways, and this is OK. Assure your student that your home is a safe place for them to explore their identity and expression.



Supporting LGBTQ+ students in Youth Exchange is an integral part of how we help all young people in the program feel safe so that they can learn about a different culture and develop their independence. How to best support LGBTQ+ students is also a learning process for everyone else involved. If you have done something that worked well or have a story to share, write to youthexchange@rotary.org.

RI RESOURCES

For more ideas about making Youth Exchange inclusive for all, review [the diversity and inclusion presentation](#) from the 2019 Youth Exchange Officers Preconvention.

RI has also identified districts that have necessary supports in place to host students who identify as LGBTQ+. If you want to find districts that can support your prospective outbound students, write to youthexchange@rotary.org.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

You may also find the resources below to be helpful. Note that they are intended only to provide ideas and aren't produced or endorsed by RI. Many other resources may be available.

Florida International University Libraries
[LGBTQ International Policies](#)

Human Rights Campaign
[Glossary of Terms](#)
[Tools for Equality and Inclusion](#)

[Human Rights Watch](#)

Institute for Study Abroad
[IFSAs Student Stories](#), filter for LGBTQ+ under Select Category

IES Abroad
[Country-Specific Diversity Resources \(English\)](#)
[LGBTQ+ & Ally Resources](#)

ILGA World
[Maps — Sexual Orientation Laws](#)

NAFSA: Association of International Educators
[Rainbow Special Interest Group](#)
[Supporting LGBT International Students](#)

OutRight Action International
[Country Overviews](#)

The Religious Institute
[Global LGBTQ Justice Organizations & Initiatives](#)

United Nations
[Effective inclusion of LGBT persons](#)

Free & Equal: [Definitions](#)

Free & Equal: [Factsheets](#) about the human rights challenges

Free & Equal: [How you can be a better ally](#)

The Washington Post

[“A guide to how gender-neutral language is developing around the world”](#)

MORE TERMS TO KNOW

Understanding these additional terms can help you feel more comfortable having conversations about sexual orientation and gender identity. This list isn't comprehensive, and it's worthwhile for you to learn more about the words used in your own culture to help foster inclusive, caring, and respectful communication among your volunteers, students, and their families.

(Adapted from the definitions used by the U.S.-based [Human Rights Campaign](#))

- **Affirmed gender** — A person's authentic gender identity
- **Coming out** — The process of a person acknowledging their sexual orientation or gender identity and sharing that information with others. It can be a continual process depending on how people engage with different communities and individuals.
- **Deadnaming** — Using someone's birth name after they have changed their name, often as part of a trans person's social or legal transition
- **Gender neutral** — Something that's not gendered, such as places (like toilet facilities) or identities (being nonbinary). Gender-neutral language, such as pronouns, avoids bias towards a particular sex or gender.
- **Misgendering** — When someone intentionally or unintentionally refers to a person in a way that doesn't align with that person's gender identity
- **Nonbinary** — People who identify their gender as neither exclusively male nor female
- **Out** — A term used to describe people who openly identify as LGBTQ+ in their social or professional lives
- **Outing** — The act of disclosing a LGBTQ+ person's sexual orientation or gender identity without that person's consent. This is not only invasive, but also can expose someone to unwanted questions, derogatory comments, potential discrimination, or even physical danger.
- **Queer** — A term used by some people who aren't heterosexual or cisgender. It has been and may still be used as a slur, but is sometimes used by people as a label of pride. Use it only when people refer to themselves this way.
- **Questioning** — A term used to describe people who are in the process of understanding their sexual orientation or gender identity
- **Transition or affirmation** — The process during which a person changes their sex or gender, whether that's socially (altering their name, clothing, or pronouns) or medically (using hormones or having surgery). Some transgender people medically transition and others don't.



Together we can make a difference

Valuing people's differences, embracing a variety of perspectives, and ensuring equitable opportunities for students in Rotary creates an environment where students and their families feel welcome and provides young people with incredible opportunities for learning and growth.

As leaders in Rotary's youth programs, you can make a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion that is critical to developing young people into leaders who will be catalysts for peace and understanding in a world of increasingly complex challenges. By making these principles a priority in your programs, you'll inspire others to see diversity as a source of strength and enrichment — in their own communities and throughout the world.

Thank you for the support you provide to Rotary's young people and for your efforts to create a more inclusive organization that benefits us all.