

# INTERSEX 101

## Gender Revolution: A Journey With Katie Couric

### Intersex Viewing Guide



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**“Intersex” refers to people who are born with any of a range of characteristics that may not fit traditional conceptions about male or female bodies.**

The term **intersex** is an umbrella term that refers to people who have one or more of a range of variations in sex characteristics that fall outside of traditional conceptions of male or female bodies. For example, intersex people may have variations in their chromosomes, genitals, or internal organs like testes or ovaries. Some intersex characteristics are identified at birth, while other people may not discover they have intersex traits until puberty or later in life. People with intersex traits have always existed, but there is more awareness now about the diversity of human bodies. People with intersex bodies, like anyone who may be seen as different, sometimes face discrimination, including in healthcare settings (as early as infancy).

**People who are intersex are more common than you think!** Experts estimate that as many as 1.7% of people are born with intersex traits – that’s about the same number of people who are born with red hair. People with intersex traits aren’t all the same, and some people may not even know they are intersex unless they receive genetic testing (this may happen, for example, with athletes). Intersex people are not that uncommon — they just have been mostly invisible. But that is changing.

**Many intersex children undergo unnecessary and irreversible surgeries — without consent.**

For many years, the medical establishment has viewed babies born with atypical sex characteristics as having bodies that need to be “fixed.” As many as 1/2000 are faced with unnecessary medical intervention at an early age. Some intersex babies and older youth have undergone extensive, involuntary surgeries for no other reason than to make their bodies conform to traditional notions of what it means to be male or female. The vast majority of these surgeries are not medically necessary when performed on young children and could instead be delayed until the intersex individual can decide whether surgery is right for them. In some instances, intersex individuals grow up without ever having known about the medical procedures they underwent as children. Others report being told that surgery was necessary only to find out later that this was not the case.

Evidence is increasingly showing the harms of these surgeries when performed without informed consent, which can include physical pain, loss of genital sensitivity, scarring, and even sterilization, as well as significant psychological consequences and the risk that the sex assigned will not match the individual’s gender identity. Because of these risks, intersex genital surgeries are now considered human rights abuses by groups like the [United Nations](#), the [World Health Organization](#), and the [Gay and Lesbian Medical Association](#), the world’s largest and oldest association of LGBT healthcare professionals. While this has led some countries, such as Malta, to outlaw non-consensual medical interventions to modify sex anatomy, such procedures are not directly addressed by any law in the United States and are still performed by a small group of specialists across the country.

Intersex people should enjoy autonomy over their bodies. Unfortunately, parents may feel pressured into making irreversible decisions about their children’s bodies before the child can meaningfully participate and choose what, if any, medical procedures they desire.

**Most intersex people experience many different harms.** Many intersex youth and adults today talk about the consequences suffered as a result of unwanted surgeries, including poor self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and issues with trust and intimacy in relationships. While parents and doctors may act with the best intentions, rushing to "fix" a child's bodily difference most often does much more harm than good.

Most people think biological sex is either "male" or "female," but it can actually be more complicated. This misunderstanding makes intersex people feel alone and unnecessarily ashamed of their bodies.

### **Don't make assumptions and let people share their own stories.**

If you meet someone who you think may be intersex or who has shared they are intersex, let them share the information they wish to share. Don't ask about their bodies or what procedures they've undergone. Respect their privacy!

Intersex people may identify as men, women, genderfluid, no gender, multiple genders, and many more—and they may outwardly express their gender in different ways. Similarly, intersex people, like all people, may be straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, or identify in another way.

Some (but not all) intersex people may choose to use gender pronouns other than "he" or "she," like "they" or "zie." Always allow intersex people to identify what pronouns they'd like you to use.

### **Being intersex is not the same as being transgender.**

A person who is intersex was born with a variation in their internal or external sex characteristics; a person who is transgender identifies with a different gender than they were assumed to be at birth. Intersex people and transgender people may face similar barriers to accessing appropriate medical care and may experience similar discrimination based on their gender identity and expression. Both communities have a shared interest in autonomy and grapple with the loss of decision-making authority over their own bodies.

While intersex individuals are frequently forced to undergo unwanted and unnecessary surgeries during infancy, transgender individuals are often denied necessary medical treatment in adolescence and beyond. Transgender people may also be required to undergo surgery they *don't* want in order to update the gender marker on their identity documents.

By better understanding the similarities and differences between these communities, we can be better allies to both!

### **There are many ways to be an ally.**

- Helping educate friends and family about intersex people through social media. [Follow us on facebook for some shareable posts!](#)
- Opposing unnecessary and non-consensual surgeries on intersex babies and children.
- Supporting nondiscrimination protections that include intersex people.
- Opposing laws that make it illegal for people to use restrooms that don't match the gender marker on their birth certificate, which can create serious issues for intersex as well as transgender people.
- Supporting changing regulations and laws around identification so that not every adult intersex person has to choose a male or female gender marker.
- Treating intersex people with respect by not asking invasive questions and using their preferred pronouns.
- [Donating to interAct today!](#)



## **Gender Revolution: A Journey With Katie Couric** **Intersex Viewing Guide**

1. Brian, an adult intersex person, spoke about his experience as a young child and how his parents' decisions continue to affect his life today. What about Brian's story stood out to you? **Is there anything you think his parents or doctors should have done differently?**
2. The practice of imposing genital surgery on intersex children used to be incredibly widespread. Today it still occurs, but more and more parents are declining surgery for their children when there is no threat to the child's physical health. For example, the Lohmans decided to defer surgery for their daughter so that she can make the choice herself when she is older. Do the family and daughter seem happy to you? **How do you expect that her experience will differ from Brian's as she grows into an adult?**
3. During the film, you heard the perspectives of some intersex adults, parents of intersex children, and doctors who treat intersex children. **What do you think about if you put yourself in each of those positions?** For example, you might think about how we react or adjust to things that are unexpected or different; consider your thoughts on autonomy and which decisions you would be comfortable making for others; and how your body would feel if intimate aspects like your reproductive or sexual anatomy had been changed or removed.
4. **Imagine you are the parent of an intersex child.** What information would you want to know in order to make decisions about their medical treatment, including whether or not to perform genital surgery? What questions would you ask your child's doctors, and which factors do you think would be the most important to you?
5. Being intersex is not the same thing as being transgender, but both communities share some common needs and concerns. After hearing the stories of both intersex and transgender individuals, **what struggles can you identify that are the same or different between the two groups?** You may want to think about medical treatment, family and social relationships, legal protections, and cultural awareness as you answer.
6. If this was the first time you learned the term "intersex," did it change how you think about sex and gender? How so?
7. Intersex people represent nearly two percent of the population and approximately 1 in 2000 are born with visible intersex traits at birth. What would you do if you found out that you are intersex? How would you feel? **What would your advice to young intersex people be?**

