



Tips #4intersex People and Allies Talking to Journalists and Media

We encourage all intersex people to share their stories. Allies will need to have knowledge and speak on intersex issues to educate others, too. Here are some tips for messaging and language when you speak with the media about intersex issues. See [interACT's guide for the media](#) for even more tips.

Center intersex human rights.

- a. Use every opportunity to name non-consensual medical interventions for what they are. For example, why *don't* institutions conceptualize intersex clitoral “normalizing” surgeries as illegal FGM surgeries?
- b. Leave no question what terms like “medically unnecessary” mean. We’re not talking about urinary function. We’re talking about cosmetic surgeries such as vaginoplasties, clitoral reductions, phalloplasties, and removal of healthy testes. Any surgeries that alter genital appearance (e.g. clitoral reductions) and/or affect future sexual ability (e.g. assuming penetrative intercourse is the patient’s desire) are not something a minor can or should be asked to consent to. In particular, vaginoplasty is a high risk, invasive procedure. Why would such an invasive option be suggested as a first choice for an infant or toddler? Surgeons have admitted that clitoral reductions, which are performed to make appearance socially “normal,” cannot be completely nerve sparing. 78% of patients receiving clitoral normalizing surgery as infants experienced difficulty feeling sensation as adults, compared to 20% of those who did not receive surgery.^[1] Do doctors tell parents this information? Are they themselves aware? Who is performing intersex surgeries, and what do they have to gain financially and otherwise?
- c. Redirect questions or anecdotes that stray from intersex human rights violations. For example, many people who have not heard of intersex issues will use the example of circumcision to bridge their understanding. While in a perfect world all individuals could consent to all genital surgeries at an appropriate age, this common practice is quite different than the forced sterilizations, genital reconstructions, and other intensely invasive procedures that systematically erase intersex existence to create “normal,” heterosexual bodies. Bring the

focus back to human rights organizations decrying this practice.

2. Emphasize the diversity of intersex experiences.

- a. Acknowledge that you are speaking from your personal experience. There are 30+ intersex variations and infinite ways to live as an intersex person. Privilege and background are always factors.
- b. Remember that some of us are LGBTQA+ and others are not. Some of us advocate for inclusion in the LGBTQIA acronym, and others don't. Advocates say that we have lots in common with LGBTQA identities, since we are all natural variations that were and are pathologized as disorders. We have plenty in common. Of course, LGBT affiliation can also be dangerous depending on one's background and country of origin. Always use discretion and speak on behalf of yourself.
- c. Remember that some folks want representation via a third gender option on birth certificates and legal documents, and others are against the idea for fear that a forced third category would create discrimination. It's all about individual choice.
- d. Remember that some people with diverse sex characteristics do not identify as intersex, and may prefer to simply be considered men or women with medical conditions. Respect this, too. Do not refer to someone as intersex unless they have used the term to describe themselves. Of course, regardless of terminology, everyone deserves bodily autonomy and the right to consent to medical interventions such as cosmetic genital surgery.

3. Create a personal connection, while preserving yourself.

- a. Remember that you are an expert in your own lived experience! No one can ever take that away from you. At the same time, acknowledge that no single person can speak for an entire community.
- b. Most people have no frame of reference for what it means to be "intersex." We've reached a point in our culture where many have a mental framework for what it means to be gay, or even transgender, but intersex remains largely unheard of. You may be the first intersex person anyone hears speak. Your personality, story, and delivery will undoubtedly influence their mental framework for "intersex."
- c. Also remember that you never have to answer personal questions. Sharing is always up to you. If you need to protect your energy by not sharing your personal story, that's okay! Redirect with phrases like "I

want to focus more on X here.” It’s always okay to push back against questions that are asked in an insensitive or sensationalizing way.

- d. If you don’t want to have to repeat your personal story, create it as a separate artifact, e.g. an article or video that people can experience on their own time, outside an interview.

4. Remember our friends in other communities.

- a. Don’t throw our transgender friends under the bus. Politely correct any language that could also isolate transgender people, e.g. “fe/male chromosomes,” “fe/male genitals,” or “born a girl/boy.” We can work together to rewrite the script.
- b. Protect against the notion that intersex people are more “valid” or deserve to be heard more than LGBTQ people because intersex differences can be physically observed or measured. Non-intersex trans, non-binary, and gender diverse people deserve respect. Let consenting adults access gender-affirming procedures. Protect intersex kids from nonconsensual gender-normalizing procedures.

5. Emphasize that intersex people thrive, too.

- a. Intersex people are not defined by trauma. Intersex people are not defined only by being intersex. We are in a constant process of reclaiming ourselves from medicalization. You are your whole self, not just your intersex self.
- b. End on a positive message. Intersex people live healthy, happy, fulfilling lives, especially when they can make their own choices about their bodies.

6. When it comes to language...

- a. Less is more. Make one point per sentence. Repeat your most important points throughout. If you’re preparing for an in-person or recorded interview, it helps to write an outline to whittle down points.
- b. You have the power to redirect the conversation. If a question takes the conversation away from a productive place, you can always course correct with statements like, “Well, the important thing to know is...” or “What I hope people will take away is....”
- c. Think carefully about using what could be confusing jargon. Those of us in intersex and/or LGBTQA communities are often fluent in sex and gender terminology. We’re very close to these issues, so we may not

realize when we're speaking in a way that those from other backgrounds will not understand. When in doubt, ask friends to proofread your materials. They will point out any terminology that may be obvious to you and not others.

- d. Do some research! It never hurts to review documents such as interACT's [guide for media](#), and the #4intersex [inclusive language tips document](#). It also helps to do some reading on intersex history, to know where current medical practice comes from and how individuals have been treated historically.
- e. Whenever possible, ask if you are able to review final text and headlines before publication. Intersex narratives have been botched and medicalized for so long, even by LGBTQ outlets that are more familiar with sex and gender issues, so this is an important part of reclaiming intersex voices. Even the most well-intended allies can accidentally write sensationalizing headlines. It's not necessarily a moral failing, it's just easy to miss when you're not a member of a group.
- f. Remember that journalists and media professionals are not friends or foes. Their job is to tell stories. Your job is to make sure those stories use accurate and sensitive language that does right by the intersex community.