NOT TOO YOUNG TO BE MYSELF

VOICES ON BEING A CHILD AND LGBTQI

QUEER RIGHTS
ARE CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Rädda Barnens Ungdomsförbund
Rädda Barnen
Funded by the European Union

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– VOICES ON BEING A CHILD AND LGBTQI

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ABOUT SAVE THE CHILDREN YOUTH SWEDEN AND SAVE THE CHILDREN SWEDEN

Save the Children Youth Sweden (SCYS) is an association created by and for children and young people, which promotes children's rights and equality. With a queer-feminist, anti-racist perspective, we strive to ensure that all children have agency in their own lives and have their rights fulfilled. Through dedicated members and political lobbying, we fight to make children's rights heard and taken seriously—both now and in the future.

Save the Children is the world's largest independent children's rights org-anization. We've stood on the side of children for more than a century, and we work daily to ensure that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child becomes a reality for all children, in Sweden and around the world.

SCYS and Save the Children Sweden jointly manage the ***Queer Rights are Children's Rights*** (henceforth ***QRCR***) project, which aims to strengthen the rights of LGBTQI children, in part by raising awareness of the experiences of LGBTQI children. This report is a part of those efforts.

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»Haha whew! It's hard enough being a kid, and then being queer on top of that...«

– Participant in the co-creation groups

A MESSAGE FROM SCYS'S CHILD EXPERTS ON LGBTQI

Grown-ups have a lot of opinions about LGBTQI[1] kids, but they rarely listen to what we in that group have to say. It's not uncommon for grown-ups to question whether we really know anything about our gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation. But we LGBTQI kids exist—and our experiences are real. It's time for you to step into our shoes, so you can understand what it's like to be us.

In theory, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to all children, yet still many groups of children have their rights violated. LGBTQI children are one such group. We encounter major obstacles in terms of our right to protection, survival, and development. We face discrimination, violence, oppression, and violations of our integrity in many aspects of life—on a societal level, in school, in leisure activities, in healthcare, and sometimes in our own families.

So knowledge and understanding of LGBTQI experiences are important tools in the fight for every child's rights. We think these experiences have to come from LGBTQI children themselves—we're the ones who know our situation and needs best.

We think you should read SCYS's report to get an idea of how it feels to navigate the world as an LGBTQI kid. Gaining more knowledge and deeper understanding is a must to improve things for us and to safeguard every child's rights.

/SCYS's child experts on LGBTQI matters

SCYS's child experts on LGBTQI are children ages 13-17, identifying as LGBTQI. They are involved in the Queer Rights are Children's Rights project, contributing with their experiences, perspectives and knowledge as LGBTQI children.

1 LGBTQI is an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex people. The term is used for practical purposes as one of the most common terms and is meant to include all those with divergent sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).

Structure of the report

In this report, LGBTQI children have formulated their own problems and suggested solutions in relation to children's rights and LGBTQI concerns. Based on this, Save the Children Youth Sweden (SCYS) wrote a report that we hope will spread awareness and create a deeper understanding of LGBTQI children, and about the experiences, situations, challenges, and violations of their rights that these kids deal with. Thus, the report has a rights-based approach and a child perspective.

It is important to be aware that LGBTQI children have their rights violated for a variety of reasons, including disability, religion, ethnic background, skin color, or socio-economic status. In this particular report, we focus on age and sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics[2]. The report aims to:

- create deeper understanding of how LGBTQI children feel their rights are violated,
- convey demands and suggested solutions to strengthen the rights of LGBTQI children.

This report is primarily based on the opinions, experiences, and stories relayed by LGBTQI children in our consultation groups, which we've chosen to call co-creation groups. The opinions and demands stated herein, are of those participating in the co-creation groups. We sometimes supplement their voices with previous research on young LGBTQI people to show how they are part of a larger context, and compare them with elements from our *LGBTQI mapping of the Child Convention* to highlight the perspective of children's rights. First, we discuss the problems the participants in the group brought up, which fall into three general themes: *Age discrimination and LGBTQI; Hate and exclusion; and Pressure to change LGBTQI children's identity*. The second part is about the children's demands and suggested solutions to these themes.

How we made the report

Co-creation groups

To create this report, SCYS held co-creation groups with children who identify as LGBTQI, ages 10–17. The goal was to create a platform where children could share their experiences, perspectives, and solutions, that was kid-friendly and enabled ***genuine participation***. We see that LGBTQI children are often talked *about*, but that they rarely get to ***speak for themselves***. Even in cases where they do get to state their piece, the problems and issues have been defined in advance by grown-ups. Knowledge collection often becomes an »extraction« of knowledge instead of co-creation. Our aim was to have the children participate in formulating the problems and shaping the emerging conversations about what it is like to be young and LGBTQI. The overall questions that framed the group discussions were: What role does ***age*** play in relation to the rights violation on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and/or sex characteristics? What ***problems and challenges*** do LGBTQI children face? What ***demands and suggestions for solutions*** do LGBTQI children themselves have to strengthen their rights? The questions that guided the conversation throughout all the meetings were on a more general level about the participants' opinions on the situation of LGBTQI children's rights. Some of the stories are still clearly personal, since many people's opinions are based on their own experiences.

To arrange the groups, we collaborated with several meeting places in Sweden for LGBTQI children and young people. We hoped to arrange 2–4 get-togethers at each place and have each group define its own direction. The method would be kept open

2 Includes chromosomes, hormones or anatomy of the sex. People with intersex variations are born with physical, hormonal, or genetic sex characteristics that don't fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies.

to the participants' own ideas and initiatives. We also strove to make the meetings interesting and meaningful to the participants, so we combined the discussions with arts and crafts and snacks. In total, we arranged 15 get-togethers that lasted 2–3 hours each, in 6 different locations. The total number of participants across all the get-togethers was 100. To protect the participants' identities, no name lists were saved; only the total number of participants was noted. For this reason, we cannot say with certainty how many unique participants the groups had.

Although the participants we met are of varying ages and live in different places, they have one thing in common—they have already found or are starting to find a context where they feel safe. Given that we met them at a meeting place for young LGBTQI people, they also feel secure to some degree in their identities, and have some kind of support from their surroundings. It is important to point out that children who perhaps do not feel secure in their identities, who live too far away from the existing meeting places for LGBTQI youth, or who have not dared to go to them, might have many important perspectives that we were unable to spotlight in this report.

During the ***first get-together*** in the groups, the participants got to try their hand at expressing their opinions in a group, writing their own suggestions for themes, and voting on the themes they wanted to discuss. The get-togethers were also focused on getting to know the participants at the different meeting places.

All themes that were included in the votes are listed in the Methods appendix.

In the ***second get-together***, we talked about the problem description—how do LGBTQI children feel that their rights are violated? The discussion was pursued through conversational/discussion exercises, like *four corners*, *the hot seat*, and *finish the sentence*. The exercises and the questions were not predefined; they were adapted to the themes the group voted on in the first get-together.

The ***third get-together*** focused on writing, drawing, and talking about solutions, ideas, suggestions, and demands to strengthen LGBTQI children's rights.

In addition to the 15 get-togethers that were held to gather material for the report, we also arranged ***follow-up meetings,*** where we discussed the report and provided information on how the kids could stay involved in LGBTQI issues via SCYS.

In places where we were not able to make multiple trips, we held combined get-togethers. To read about the precise exercises that were done and the questions that were asked, see the Methods appendix of this report. You can find the appendix at our website, via the in the end of the report.

Get-together 1: Recruiting, information, and joint planning
Get-together 2: The problem description
Get-together 3: Ideas, suggestions, and demands
Get-together 4: Follow-up meeting

Although we cannot claim with certainty that the voices expressed are representative of the entire group of LGBTQI children, they create a deeper insight into and understanding of the particular challenges and oppression LGBTQI children might face.

Evaluation exercise on LGBTQI children's rights

As part of the co-creation groups, but in addition to the conversational exercises that were done, we conducted an evaluation exercise of a more quantitative nature, where the participants responded to statements on LGBTQI children's rights by selecting a number:

1 = Disagree completely
2 = Disagree somewhat
3 = Don't know
4 = Agree somewhat
5 = Agree completely

These were the statements that the participants responded to:

- Teachers listen to kids
- Parents listen to kids
- Grown-ups in power listen to kids
- Grown-ups understand the identities of LGBTQI kids
- It is easy to be open about my identity in school
- It is easy to be open about my identity in my free time
- It is easy to be open about my identity at home
- Everyone is free to choose who they want to date
- It is hard to be a kid and identify as LGBTQI

The exercise was a way for the participants to start thinking about LGBTQI children's rights for later discussions.

We conducted the evaluation exercise on 6 occasions and had a total of 39 unique participants, all children ages 10–17 who identify as LGBTQI. Because we did not do the exercise at all get-togethers, not all participants were included.

The results of the evaluation exercises are discussed in the report as a way of comparing individual participants' statements with the larger group.

Ethics, safety, and inclusion when gathering knowledge with children

The co-creation groups were carefully planned and followed stringent guidelines, including Save the Children's *Child-safeguarding Policy,* the Swedish Research Council's guidelines and Save the Children's *Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation*. This means that all activities were voluntary, and that nothing was done without the informed consent of the children and sometimes a trusted grown-up. After the get-togethers, the participants had the opportunity to continue as co-creators, with options such as being reference readers of the report and participating in SCYS's national members group *SCYS Queer*.

To ensure the participants' safety and anonymity, the names in the report have been replaced with fictitious names. You can read more about our child-friendly approach to informed consent, data handling and confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntariness in SCYS's *GUIDELINES: Ethics, safety, and inclusion when gathering knowledge with children* (to be found in the Appendix).

Previous research

To both obtain a deeper understanding of LGBTQI children's rights, as well as a bigger, overall picture, we have chosen to complement the children's voices with several major studies that have been conducted on the theme of LGBTQI young people's rights. The studies we have chosen are the most extensive thus far on the Swedish, Nordic, and European levels and include:

FRA–European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024: *LGBTIQ Equality at a Crossroads–Progress and Challenges*. FRA's survey is one of the biggest ones conducted on LGBTQI individuals' situation. It analyzes experiences from over 100 000 LGBTQI people with a variety of backgrounds, ages 15 up, living in the EU and EU-adjacent countries.

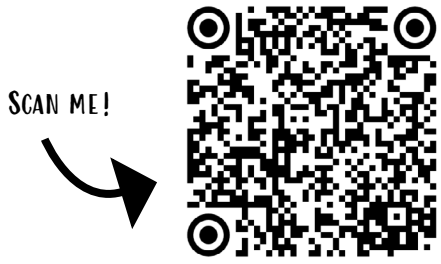
Forte–the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare, 2019: *The Health and Situation of Young LGBTQ People–What do we know and where is more research needed?* The report summarizes recent international research on the health and situations of young LGBTQ people (ages 13–25).

MUCF–the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society: *Olika verkligheter–Unga hbtq-personer om sina levnadsvillkor*, 2019 (*Different realities–Young LGBTQ people on their situation*), and *Jag är inte ensam, det finns andra som jag*, 2022 (*I am not alone, there are others like me*). These two reports investigate and document the health and situations of LGBTQI young people, and are based on MUCF's national youth surveys. The 2022 report also includes other surveys and interviews. The 2019 report includes ages 16–25 and the 2022 report includes ages 13–25.

It is important to remember that the studies do not focus solely on LGBTQI people under age 18. It is rare to make a distinction between children and young adults in studies, and it is a problem in itself that too little research is done on children.

LGBTQI children's protection under the Child Convention

SCYS and Save the Children Sweden have mapped out how the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, *the Child Convention*, safeguards the rights of LGBTQI children. In this report, we discuss parts of the mapping to show in what way the children's opinions and experiences are important children's rights issues. The entire assessment can be read here–feel free to use it as a complement to the report.



THE VOICES OF LGBTQI CHILDREN

1 AGE POWER STRUCTURE AND LGBTQI

A common theme in the stories and opinions expressed by the participants is how age impacts their lives and rights as LGBTQI. It is hard to be taken seriously and listened to when you are a child and LGBTQI. The participants point out a sort of power structure based on age—an age power structure.

The age power structure is often described as perceptions and norms about age in which children are viewed as immature, unstable, »in development«, and only needing protection. This diminishes them and denies them the opportunity to make decisions about their own lives.[3]

3 Sundhall, 2018.

»It's just a phase«
Being diminished and not listened to

In connection with LGBTQI issues, age power structure means that LGBTQI kids are diminished and robbed of agency and the power to define themselves.

Instead of being taken seriously and being met where they are, pretty much all children that SCYS talked to have been told that they are confused, young and foolish, or that their LGBTQI identity is just a phase. Bonny, 16, says, ***»you don't have as much influence and you often hear that ‹it's just a phase, you'll grow out of it› […]«***. It is also common for the participants to hear that they are too young to know anything about their gender identity, gender expression, or sexuality. Sara, 15, says, ***»[t]hey always say that we're ‹too young to take responsibility or to know how we want to express ourselves›«***. When Ana, 10, similarly expresses that ***»[e]veryone says I'm too young to know my identity«***, all the other participants agree, either nodding or saying, ***»yeah«*** and ***»same here«***.

Participants explain how they are not seen as complete humans as children; they are not human *beings*, only human *becomings*. Per, 17, says:

> ***I think it's important because kids are people too. I mean, they talk about kids as if they're potential people, like they say. ‹You should forgive kids if they're a bit rowdy in public because they're just learning how to be people.› That's the sentiment. But they're not learning to be people, they are people now, even the four, five, six, seven-year-olds, like they're a person with their own thoughts, their own identity, and they should be able to decide for themselves.***

Childhood researchers also criticize this understanding of children as future adults instead of children, where children and adults are seen as two different types of people—adults are treated as human beings and children are treated as human becomings. Because kids are not people here and now, just »becoming« people, we deny them their agency and usurp the right to make decisions for them.[4]

4 Sundhall, 2018.

Many of the participants also describe not having the freedom to define themselves. Grown-ups and other people usurp the right to do it for them. This includes the right to decide one's gender identity, gender expression, or sexuality. Mio, 11, is one of those who was contradicted when they came out with their gender identity.

> ***Mio: I came out as non-binary, but mom said I wasn't, I was just a different type of girl. So I sort of went back into the closet. And I was in a bad place until, like, last year.***
>
> ***Hanna (leader): Did you feel like you had to keep yourself secret again?***
>
> ***Mio: Yeah, it was like I had to come out all over again. Like, it wasn't enough that I came out once, I had to do it twice just to, like, show it was for real.***

Hanna (leader): So it took a long time for grown-ups to start taking you seriously?

Mio: It's like... just hearing a no from your parents. Like »no, you're not,« or something, it makes you feel so much less safe, and I felt so miserable, I just had to tell someone.

Other children also describe the horrible feeling of ***»[...] having to come out the first time and then having to come out repeatedly after that«***. In *QRCR*'s evaluation exercise, a majority (56%) disagreed on the statements about whether parents or teachers listen to kids.

Just like Mio, others describe the awful feeling that comes from not being respected in their LGBTQI identity just because they're a child. Rayan, 15, gives their thoughts about it:

Or why grown-ups, like, misgender you, why they say the wrong pronoun is because they maybe don't really believe that kids can choose or say that they're queer. I think they think it's a choice people make, and I think they think kids can't make that choice. I don't think they really understand that it's not a choice

Not being listened to also applies on a societal level. Hedda, 15, says that ***»[t]he political establishment is very reductive of children«***. Several bring up the issue of being talked about instead of talked *with*, Karl, 17, says:

There are so many preconceived notions about what it is to be trans or not trans. Like, there are tons of trans people who don't want surgery, but it feels like it's becoming a giant point in the media to use us like »scapegoats,« while totally leaving us out of the conversation. In particular, all the young trans people don't get any space at all to be heard about what it's actually like to be in our position.

Being diminished and robbed of their agency has a negative effect, especially on children's mental health and sense of security. Elsa, 14, and Bonny, 16, discuss this:

Elsa: And they say that ‹bisexuality is a phase›; fuck them all.

Bonny: They say you're ‹indecisive› and to just, like, ‹choose one›.

Luna (leader): How does that affect you, when you're not taken seriously?

Elsa: An awful lot, mentally, I'd say. I mean, you're just going to be miserable.

A lot of earlier research also confirms that young LGBTQI people generally have poorer mental health. Forte's study, for example, shows that young LGBTQI people have twice the risk of depression and anxiety.[5]

5 Forte, 2019.

Not being taken seriously also has other negative consequences for the participants, for example when they talk about bullying and insults they've been subjected to due to their LGBTQI identity. When Rayan told their teachers about repeated abuse from another pupil, nothing happened: ***»I've told a whole lot of teachers and they've, like, not done anything about it. But grown-ups see it, but they don't do anything even when they see what's happening«***.

Participants in *QRCR*'s evaluation exercise testify to teachers not listening enough and not doing anything to stop abusive treatment, harassment and discrimination. Not until other adults bring up the problems do they take them seriously, as one of the participants in the evaluation exercise said ***»only when my parents had a meeting with the teacher did it get better«***.

»I have no control over my own life«
Powerlessness in matters that affect you

Age discrimination diminishes children, which leads to them not being listened to or taken seriously, here in relation to experiences and thoughts about LGBTQI issues. In the long term, this leads to a limit on children's right to influence matters that affect them, and in some cases a complete violation of this right, for instance in relation to decisions about their own sexual orientation, relationships, gender identity, and gender expression. This also has consequences in the political sphere regarding LGBTQI concerns, for example decisions about sex education. Sara, 15, brings this up, saying that politicians do not listen to LGBTQI kids: ***»Absolutely not. For example, they want to eliminate sex education now when we've continuously asked for more«***.

The fact that adults in general and decision-makers in particular don't listen to LGBTQI kids also leads to decisions being made about the lives of LGBTQI children without considering their best interests or own needs. Karl, 17, puts it this way:

> ***It's so hard to converse with adults and even do anything at all about laws and things. It's almost impossible when the people who write the law and those who vote don't actually know what they're voting on or discussing.***

In *QRCR*'s evaluation exercise, 77% replied that they *do not* agree that adults in power listen to kids, while most of the others replied they didn't know.

Not being listened to and taken seriously means that LGBTQI children generally feel powerless, a feeling that they cannot exert any influence on issues that affect them. Per, 17, says:

> ***Like, when you want help from an adult but can't get it, it often makes you feel like the adults are in control. They're the ones who get to decide how I identify and how I can dress and like, how I live my life. Even if it isn't what's best for me, I have no control over my own life.***

In terms of identity in general, the participants once again describe it as a problem that adults have so much power over kids, because they might not have the same opinion as the child as to their gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation. Hedda, Sara and Sophie, 16, discuss this:

> ***Hedda: I mean, it's your identity. Why should someone else decide about your identity?***
>
> ***Sara: You're sort of powerless if you can't choose. You can't choose your name, you can't choose your gender, like you can't do anything. If you don't have one parent who feels the same as you, then you're just like, stuck as something you don't want to be. Until you're 18!***
>
> ***Sophie: Someone just decided, like, no, this is your name, this is your pronoun, you have to be like this. I mean, it's just super weird.***

Lack of influence can have a major impact on other rights as well, such as the individual's access to healthcare and health. One participant in the evaluation exercise talks about being a minor: ***»It's hard to get diagnoses as a minor, people generally don't believe you«***.

The powerlessness and lack of influence are also a consequence of systematic obstacles, such as legal obstacles. Lewis, 14, talks about how a child who is trans can feel extra powerless in relation to their body and health because of age minimums. Lewis talks about having influence in some things but not in others:

> ***It's bad at the doctor's when you have to wait so long. And that there are age limits for everything. When you're under 16, you get to make a lot of decisions, like about school, high school, grades. And those decisions affect you for the rest of your life. Why can't I also make decisions about my body when I'm under 16?***

Several participants bring up the systematic obstacles in relation to legal acknowledgement of their identity, name change, or gender-affirming care, and talk about the problem of age minimums. Monnie, 14, is one of those who bring up why it is a problem that parents have power over children in the healthcare system, with no knowledge or respect for the children's own opinions and right to influence: ***»Because there are those who don't understand LGBTQ+ and maybe for that reason they don't let their kid have the treatment they need«***.

Being LGBTQI and a child also means having less power over your social life, over what people you hang out with, and what spaces you move in. It is difficult when you go to a school, or live in a family, where you are not accepted. Several feel a need to make more decisions for themselves, be taken seriously, and have their best interests considered. Rayan, 15, explains why it is important for young people to have a certain degree of self-determination:

> ***There are a lot of things I think parents should decide for their kids, because, you know, kids can't make all the choices in their lives. But there are some things, like, me and my parents are still different people. They can't know what's going on in my head and that's a choice they can't really take away from me because they're not me. So they can't really have that decision […].***

§ IT'S ABOUT RIGHTS!

The participants' opinions, stories and experiences in the section on *Age power structure and LGBTQI* show that, among others, these rights of the children are being violated:

ARTICLE 12

Article 12 says that children have ***the right to express their views and participate in decisions in all matters affecting them***, for example in relation to their relationships, gender expression, and gender identity. Under Article 12, children also have the right to exercise influence in politics and on a societal level. Age and maturity are factors to consider when assessing what is said and expressed by the child, but should never be used as an excuse to exclude children from participating.[6]

ARTICLE 3

Article 3 states that ***the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in decisions affecting them***. Children's own interests should be a part of all decisions adults make that affect them—that is the child's right. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child takes up the child's identity, of which sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression are a part, as a key aspect to consider when assessing what is best for the child.[7] The Committee has also emphasized that the child's right to be heard and have their opinions considered (article 12) is a necessary condition for understanding what is best for the child.[8] The children's stories clearly show that adults in many cases take over the right to decide what is in the child's best interests, without asking or trying to understand the child, especially in relation to matters of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

ARTICLE 8

Article 8 gives the child ***the right to identity***. Identity is everything that makes up a person's self-perception, and everything that distinguishes that individual from others. Therefore, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation are obviously parts of one's identity. The children's voices make it clear that their right to express their opinion and participate in decisions regarding their identity are not respected. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has encouraged countries to review their legislation so that children, as their age and maturity increase, can have more right of determination and influence over their identity, for example in terms of name changes. This is viewed as a must to ensure the child's best interests.[9]

ARTICLE 5

Article 5 highlights children's ***right to have their parents or carers make sure that the child has the opportunity to develop and fully enjoy their rights***. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child states that the role of the guardian must always be balanced against the child's own right to influence and to develop their independence as defined in Article 12. In addition, the Committee emphasizes the importance of providing guidance to the child without curtailing their rights, and to support them to make decisions in keeping with their level of maturity.[10] The children's stories show that parents and guardians do not always know the rights of the child in relation to LGBTQI issues, and that the acceptance and openness to listen and understand is not always there. Instead, the children's rights are curtailed by adults close to them when they open up. For this reason, the fulfilment of Article 5 for LGBTQI children means giving parents and guardians the knowledge, advice, and support they need about LGBTQI issues.

6 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment no. 12, 2009, The right of the child to be heard, points 10, 28, 29, 30.
7 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment no. 14, 2013, On the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration, point 55.
8 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment no. 12, 2009, The right of the child to be heard, points 68, 70, 74.
9 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment no. 20, 2016, On the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, point 39.
10 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment no. 12, 2009, The right of the child to be heard, point 84.

HATE AND EXCLUSION

Hatred towards LGBTQI people is a recurring element in the experiences the children relate. The vast majority feel that it is very common to be treated badly because of their identity or perceived identity. In *QRCR*'s evaluation exercise, 74% of the participants agreed to the statement that it is hard to be a child and identify as LGBTQI; the rest replied that they didn't know.

MUCF has previously also shown that young LGBTQI people (ages 16–25) experience bullying, exclusion, threats, sexualized violence, exploitation, abuse or unfair treatment, and violation of integrity to a greater degree than young cishet individuals. Younger LGBTQ individuals (ages 16–20) experience bullying more than older young LGBTQ individuals (ages 21–25).[11]

11 MUCF, 2019; 2022.

Often, the children in the groups are fully aware that what they have experienced is specifically LGBTQIphobic*. Other times, they describe situations that are clearly homo, bi or transphobic, even if they do not specifically phrase it that way. Essentially all the children we meet describe being young and LGBTQI as a vulnerable position, especially because as children they are not free to choose what environments they are part of (school, home, the town they happen to live in).

***LGBTQIphobia**
You might have heard the phrases homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic? They are about negative, hostile attitudes, perceptions, and actions towards people who are LGBTQI, and they are an effect of heteronormativity and the cis norm.

Heteronormativity is the assumption that all people are attracted to and fall in love with only the opposite sex. The cis norm is the assumption that everyone identifies with and behaves like the gender they were assigned at birth. A collective word for homo, bi, or transphobia and hatred towards queer and intersex people is LGBTQIphobia.

LGBTQIphobia can be about words, glances, exclusion, or violence, and leads to people not always daring to be themselves. Sometimes LGBTQIphobia is hard to spot, especially if you are not one of the people targeted by it.

We often use the term LGBTQI hatred as a synonym of LGBTQIphobia, to show that it is not just about fear or prejudice against LGBTQI people, but also conscious or unconscious hatred that often takes violent forms of expression.

»You get, like, death threats«
Harassment and discrimination against LGBTQI kids

The participants had an awareness that they are especially vulnerable to harassment, discrimination, and hatred as LGBTQI children, and that this affects their everyday lives. Alisha, 15, says that ***»there's a major chance of being bullied. I'm terrified of being bullied again«***.

School is one of the most common places to be bullied—many have changed schools because of discrimination.

Vulnerability at school is consistent with the picture described at the EU level, where 67% of respondents to FRA's big LGBTQI survey stated that they had experienced bullying, ridicule, insults, or threats at school because of their LGBTQI identity.[12]

12 FRA, 2024.

Per, 17, says that at his old school there was a group of LGBTQI children whose meeting place had to be kept secret because other pupils came and disrupted and threatened them. Farida, 17, describes why many LGBTQI children keep their identity a secret in school.

> ***Because they just know they'll be harassed. They'll be oppressed. They'll be discriminated against. […] In some cases, it's almost dangerous to, like, be out, especially when you're young. I mean, who knows what can happen, there's… There are, like, really serious cases in schools where bullying because of your identity goes so far and no one takes it seriously. Like, ‹oh, they're just playing around›.***

Another experience of harassment is being outed by friends—having their sexual orientation or gender identity revealed/made public. Frankie, 17, says this in a discussion about being outed:

> ***It's actually really common. It's happened several times that I've been outed and it was so totally mortifying on so many levels because you don't really have a right to privacy, because it always gets so limiting and debated and discussed. And I don't think that's okay at all.***

Several of the participants talk about being subjected to hate crimes in the form of threats of violence because of their LGBTQI identity. Some have even had death threats. Martina, 15, talks about a classmate who wrote to them for months that they should kill themselves. Nora, 14, has a similar experience:

> ***For me, it's been classmates, and the thing is, the people in my class have sort of, I mean the guys in my class have some close friends who go to another school near us. And because they don't go to our school, they added me on social media and wrote death threats. Like, ‹I'm going to beat you to a pulp, bla bla bla› and things like***

that. That was the worst part for me, that they were all, ‹I'm gonna beat you to death›.

Others are subjected to hate online. Billie, 14, talks about the serious threats and sexual harassment that trans kids can experience online.

You get, like, death threats, and then there are people who say, like, ‹I'm gonna fuck you› and things like that. Like, ‹you're not a real man cuz you've got a cunt›.

In connection with questions about rights and societal development, the children state that they feel the climate around LGBTQI issues has grown more hateful. Some are basing it on their own real-life experiences, like Rayan, 15, who has recently been on the receiving end of offensive advances. ***»I think it's gotten worse in schools«***.

The big EU LGBTQI survey also showed an increase among LGBTQI people since 2019 of experiences of bullying, ridicule, insults, or threats at school because of their LGBTQI identity (from 46% to 67%).[13]

13 FRA, 2024.

Because they find school an unsafe place with a lot of LGBTQIphobia and LGBTQI hate, many feel forced to keep their identity a secret there. ***»There's a major chance of bullying«***, says one of the participants in the evaluation exercise to the question of why they keep their LGBTQI identity hidden at school. Just over 70% of participants in *QRCR*'s evaluation exercise reply that they do not agree that it is easy to be open about their identity at school. Josef, 14, says:

Luna (leader): So it's common that LGBTQI kids keep their identity secret?

Josef: Yeah, it's common. I do. At least at school, because, like, everyone at my school is an idiot. And they're so transphobic, homophobic, that they don't get what it means and what we're going through. They just think you're like, that you've got something wrong with your head or something, that it's a mental illness.

There is also a low level of trust that the adults at the school will act if the kids experience bullying or harassment. Rayan, 15, says that grown-ups do not protect LGBTQI children:

I also thought that because I came out when I was pretty little, I came out in like fifth or sixth grade, and so almost everyone in the whole school knew… There was a gay guy, but there were no trans people at school, so, like… I hadn't really seen homophobia or transphobia at my school, but I think if I had seen it… I think when the kids see that they're not, like, protected, like grown-ups don't want to help them, then they can get scared to come out, because they know… People won't do anything if they get hurt.

Fear of various kinds of punishment exists not only in school, but for some also at home, which is one of the reasons that they keep their identity secret at home. Nora, 15, reasons about this:

Hanna (leader): Why do you think it is that it can be so hard to be open about your identity at home?

Nora: I think some parents take it very personally, and if they're really homophobic, it can, like, escalate to a deadly situation at home for that kid. So if the parents really don't like it at all, things can get pretty bad.

»They don't understand how much it affects us«
Invisible violence

Lack of understanding, as well as prejudice and ignorance linked to LGBTQI people, are things these children often encounter in their lives, in the form of questioning, comments, erasure, and so on. When this happens often, it becomes a sort of invisible, but highly tangible, psychological violence. One example of this is being repeatedly misgendered or called the wrong name in a context. During the evaluation exercise, several of the participants say it has happened during leisure time and led to them quitting their leisure-time activities. One says that ***»I quit a sport because of misgendering, now I don't play any sports at all«***. Samu, 13, Killian, 16, and Alexandra, 16, talk about the stress and anxiety it causes when you are called the wrong name, your old name or deadname, and the relief of being called the right one:

Samu: Those who are, like, transgender, under the trans umbrella or non-binary umbrella, can still be called the name they want, like, because I've had a lot of anxiety when I go to the dentist or the hospital, and they're like, ‹Deadname, do we have a deadname here?›. And then I have to, like, ‹um, could you call me Samu?› Cuz it's really awful cuz it's like, ‹oh, thank you for reminding me I was born a girl, uuhhhggg…›

Killian: I feel you… When they ask in any situation at all. Someone asks for your name and you're just like, uhh, fuck. […] Yeahh, like, you just feel this sort of cringe…

Samu: Uh-huh, you just uhhh shit…

Alexandra: And then they say, ‹Alexandra›, and I'm like, ‹oooh, that's me!›

Rayan, 15, reasons about how kids learn behaviors from grown-ups, and about how it can impact a person to be called by the wrong pronoun:

I think probably the reason kids do that, it could also be that they just, like, forget, and that's fine. But why do they do it on purpose? Well, it's because kids are really mean, and they regurgitate things they hear around them from their parents […]. But I don't think they really understand how much they can impact another person. Cuz later they don't have to see that person again, after they leave school, or a person they see in town, but that person has to live with it for the rest of their life.

Many feel that school is largely characterized by ignorance, and erasure of LGBTQI people's existence in the school's teaching. Eden, 15, says that ***»in sex education, they say intersex doesn't exist«***. Per, 17, talks about how it can negatively affect your self-image when teachers say LGBTQIphobic things: ***»You can feel ashamed of your identity, even if you were really proud of it before, because it's pretty common to have transphobic teachers. I've had transphobic teachers«***.

Others have encountered this type of prejudice from parents. Monnie, 14, says:

My mom said to me, like, ‹you can't be trans, because you didn't have girly interests when you were little›. So I didn't want to ask her to book a doctor's appointment to get a gender dysphoria assessment.

The kids describe how the lack of understanding, the prejudice and ignorance don't just have a major impact on their mental health and self-image, but also on other parts of their lives—what kind of leisure time you have, how you feel at school, and in your relationships and friendships. One participant in the evaluation exercise says, ***»my parents think my friends are making me queer, so I'm not allowed to talk to them«***. Others have lost friends because of this type of prejudice. Farida, 17, talks about a situation she remembers:

All of a sudden I remembered when one of my friends' mom found out I was, like, queer, and she, like, forced my friend to stop being friends with me. Like... It's that serious to some people. I mean, you don't want your kid to hang out with that other kid cuz what, your kid's going to get sick? Huh? I mean, that doesn't happen.

This type of LGBTQIphobia also contributes to many feeling forced to keep parts of their lives secret, at home and elsewhere. Although opinions differ and many talk about being supported in their identity at home, several talk about their nuclear family and their broader family not being a safe place, and they feel they cannot be open about their LGBTQI identity. In *QRCR*'s evaluation exercise, 46% reply that they do not agree to the statement that it is easy to be open about their identity at home. Only 8% agree that adults understand LGBTQI kids' identity. Rio, 15, has parents that it is hard to be open with. To the statement that it is easy to be open with their LGBTQI identity at home, he says ***»it depends on what the parents are like, if they're, like, open or if they're more like mine. Or even worse«***.

Fear and uncertainty also lead to many not feeling that they can talk with their parents if something bad happens in relation to their LGBTQI identity.

MUCF's big assessment shows that just over half of young LGBTQ people refrain from talking with a parent or guardian, even though they want to. Among other young people, significantly fewer—three of ten—refrain from talking to a parent. In addition, it is more than twice as common among young LGBTQ individuals to want, but not dare, to talk to an adult outside the family. [14]

14 MUCF, 2019.

»Why don't I fit in«
Exclusion and alienation

Another type of LGBTQIphobia that the children describe is the type they experience through feelings of loneliness, exclusion, and alienation because of their LGBTQI identity. For one thing, it is difficult to find friends who think and feel the same way.

The children's experiences are confirmed by MUCF, which has shown that generally it is less common among LGBTQ young people to be satisfied with their relationships, for example with family and friends, and with life as a whole.[15]

15 MUCF, 2019.

Josef, 14, reflects on the fear of encountering hatred and the loneliness that can occur as a result:

Luna (leader): Do you keep it a secret because you're afraid of being bullied or harassed?

Josef: I mean, I'm the kid in class who, like, no one talks to and I don't talk to anyone because I, I get really nervous, especially in school, talking to others. So I don't want others to start conversations with me either, especially not if it comes from a place of hate.

Frankie, 17, and Elsa, 14, also feel that it is easy to feel alone and like an outsider as LGBTQI:

Frankie: I think it's very isolating, sometimes.

Luna (leader): In what way?

Frankie: It feels like you're the only person in the world who has these feelings and thoughts.

Elsa: Yeah.

Others feel a general sense of exclusion and alienation. In connection with this theme, Karl, 17, says, ***»it's not a hell of a lot of fun to be a minority in a country that hates you«***. When Karl shares this, the other participants emphatically agree.

They describe the consequences of feeling excluded from society as, among other things, uncertainty in one's identity, and mental illness. Nora, 15, and Billie, 14, reflect on not fitting in and not being like everyone else.

Nora: You don't know ‹why don't I fit in? Why am I not like the others?› And that leads to thoughts that make you want to, like, you wonder why? What's wrong with me?

Hanna (leader): How do you think that's related to being LGBTQI?

Nora: Because the majority of people aren't LGBTQI. And some people, I mean there's homophobia and that makes you, some people aren't so sure of themselves when they're LGBTQI.

Billie: Like, I also think it's sort of like what Nora said [...] personally, I think that... I mean, I'm bullied a little because I'm not like everyone else, and that also makes me feel worse about myself than I would have if that didn't happen.

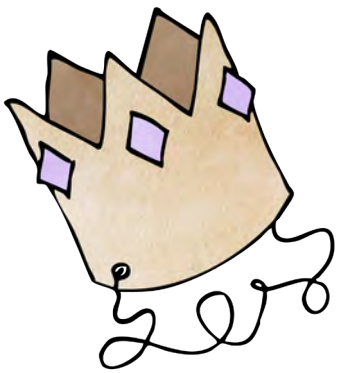
Another consequence of exclusionary norms is a fear of not being accepted, or that you do not accept yourself, which leads to feeling forced to keep your identity quiet. Killian, 16, reasons about how hetero- and cisnormative language, and LGBTQIphobic jokes, can make LGBTQI kids feel unsafe and lead to them having trouble accepting themselves.

Killian: That type of language exists and it can make people who are LGBTQ feel like, you know, this is sort of taboo. This is sort of wrong in the eyes of the general public, so I'm not going to come out. [...] And to protect themselves, like you know, if you hear people making those kind of jokes.

Sasha, 15, and Farida, 17, also state that it is difficult to be open because you feel different and don't know how others will react.

Sasha: Like, you're afraid because you're sort of... You feel like ‹I'm different from everyone else,› and maybe you don't know how the school is going to react. Yeah, and you don't know how your friends will react [...]. I just got comfortable last year when I started high school. When I saw, like, that it's more normal in my school to talk about it and be, like, LGBTQI. So I think it's usually because of how the school is and how society oppresses and like forces us to be oppressed, is my personal opinion.

Farida: It's hard to be out.



»I feel stressed, pressured, and alone«
Consequences of not being allowed to exist

Because of the LGBTQI-related hate and exclusion that permeates many parts of these children's lives, in combination with not being taken seriously because of their age, many participants feel that they have to keep their identity secret—that they are not allowed to exist.

At the EU level, about one in two LGBTQI people is often or always open about their identity in social contexts, which means that one in two rarely or never is.[16] However, it is not clear if it is more common among children to keep their identity secret. In relation to this, MUCF has shown that LGBTQ young people to a lesser degree feel safe, both at home and in public places.[17]

16 FRA, 2024.
17 MUCF, 2019.

There are many negative consequences to not being able to be open. Several bring up how it makes them feel stressed and pressured. Many describe the feeling of being forced to wear a mask, and to suppress themselves and their own feelings. Karl, 17, is one of them. He says:

> ***So there's a lot of this learning to hide your feelings. […] Like, I wouldn't be able to come out to people, I'd have to just be the world's worst woman, like, because that's what you think of me, and so I have to suppress everything I feel and be that for you, even if I don't feel that way at all. So you, like, swallow parts of yourself and when you lie to everyone you know, and like you said, Per… When you live in character, or behind a mask, you start to, like, you don't have any real relationships, and then you eventually start practically dying on the inside in a really weird way. It's almost impossible to explain to someone who hasn't experienced it, but it's really awful. And I don't think you should have to go through something like that when you're as young as we are.***

Others feel a strong sense of loneliness and alienation. Per, 17, talks about what he feels in relation to his parents:

> ***But still you feel alone and abandoned, I mean, if your parents don't, like, know you as you really are, they just know you like another version of you, for a lot of people gender is an important part of who they are. That other people, like, see you as another sex, it feels like that person doesn't really know you?***

§ IT'S ABOUT RIGHTS!

The participants' opinions, stories, and experiences in the section on *Hate and exclusion* show that among others, these rights of the children are being violated:

ARTICLE 2

The children's stories shows that they are not getting ***Article 2*** met; they often feel that they are treated differently because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or sex characteristics, sometimes every day. Article 2 is one of the core principles in *the Child Convention*, and it says that ***all children have the same rights and must be protected from discrimination in their access to their rights***, for example education, the best possible health, safety and protection, and the right to leisure time. All States Parties are to follow and strengthen the rights in the convention without discriminating on the basis of for example skin colour, gender, language, religion, national, ethnic or social origin, disability, or other status. Gender identity and sexual orientation are covered by the expression »other status«.[18]

ARTICLE 6

The testimonies from the children express also show that ***the right to life, survival, and development*** in ***Article 6*** is being violated for LGBTQI kids. To live and survive, LGBTQI kids need to have their most basic needs met, such as protection from violence and the best possible health. To develop, LGBTQI kids need, among other things, to have their identity affirmed, feel safe at school and in their leisure time, exercise influence in their own lives, and not be discriminated against.[19]

ARTICLE 19

The voices in this report also testify to LGBTQI hatred, expressed in various types of violence. ***Article 19*** says that children are to be ***protected from all forms of violence*** –physical and mental, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse. According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, States Parties must counteract discrimination towards vulnerable or marginalized groups, such as children who are lesbian, gay, and/or trans, and work preventively to ensure these children the right to protection.[20]

ARTICLE 28

Article 28 is about every child's ***right to accessible education***, and the opportunity to fully benefit from it. Being subjected to various types of discrimination, harassment and violations of integrity, as well as facing incomprehension and exclusion in school, are obstacles that make it more difficult to meet this right. The Committee has expressed concern at the discrimination that LGBTQI children are subjected to during teaching and other interactions with adults and pupils. According to the Committee, both open and subtle discrimination on any of the grounds stated in Article 2 can hamper or entirely prevent the child's opportunity to benefit from education.[21]

ARTICLE 29

Article 29 is about children's ***right to learn at school about their equal and inalienable rights***. The Committee on the Rights of the Child states that when significant incidents of LGBTQI hatred and other forms of intolerance have occurred that affect people under age 18, like the experiences brought up in this section, it means that the State has not done everything it can to promote the contents of the Convention, particularly not Article 29. Both education on children's human rights and the promotion of values that contribute to strengthening these rights, are necessary to fulfil Article 29, not just in schools, but also in society at large.[22]

18 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment no. 20, 2016, On the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, point 34.
19 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment no. 7, 2005, Implementing child rights in early childhood, point 10.
20 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment no. 13, 2011, The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence, point 72.
21 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment no. 1, 2001, The aims of education, point 10.
22 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment no. 1, 2001, The aims of education, points 19, 24.

PRESSURE TO CHANGE CHILDREN'S LGBTQI IDENTITY

When we speak of conversion practices, many think of its most extreme form, such as forced marriage or conversion therapy to force the children to change or hide their LGBTQI identity. But conversion practices can be viewed as all forms of force or pressure aiming to change or conceal someone's sexual orient-ation, gender identity, or gender expression. They exist on a scale from critical glances, comments, and questions, to more violent forms.

At the EU level, FRA shows that more than one in four (27%) LGBTQI children in the ages of 15–17 is subjected to some kind of conversion practice.[23]

23 FRA, 2024.

The participants talk about various kinds of pressures they've seen or experienced in relation to children's LGBTQI identity. In the evaluation exercise, one person comments that *»[o]ur friend is experiencing conversion attempts«* and another says *»[i]t's very common for kids to experience that«*. Elio, 15, points out that *»people see my sexuality as a challenge; they don't respect my sexuality, they want to change it«*. Similarly, Nora, 15, feels that as a girl she's been pressured all her life to not like girls.

> ***There are people who're not homophobic or questioning of others' identities, but the only people like that I've met are my own mom and people at queer events, so I've only experienced that people are like ‹but you can't like girls› my whole life...***

Below are examples of the ways these pressures can be expressed.

»Are you sure?«
Critical questions and calling into question

LGBTQI children feel themselves pressured regarding their identity through critical questions and people calling it into question. Rayan, 15, talks about what it's like to get questions from parents, teachers, and other pupils that are not specifically offensive, but that feel critical or questioning:

[T]here are several different ones, but things like, ‹are you sure?› Or just like a very, not very respectful attitude, so it can feel very pressuring to not be trans or gay.

Nora describes what it's like to have gotten critical questions from her parents when she came out:

Dad can ask questions about, like, when I told him I was bisexual. He was like, ‹Okay, why?› And I was just like, ‹I am, it's not like I can choose›. And he was like, ‹but how do you know you are?› He was, like, asking questions you're not really supposed to ask.

Even if one's parents don't question one directly, telling or asking the child to get psychiatric help can feel like questioning their identity, as if their identity is an illness. Samu, 13, feels that his parents view his gender identity as something that needs to be »treated«:

Samu: Like for example if you're my mom and I come out to you. If I come out to you and say I'm trans, don't say, ‹I think you should talk to a therapist.› Ban that!

Alexandra: Like… What's the therapist going to do?!

Samu: What will my therapist say? ‹Stop being trans!› Sorry, but that isn't going to work. Like, ‹Repent! Repent!›

Others talk about their parents criticizing their choice of name and having opinions on their gender expression; they share their experiences of being misgendered and deadnamed as a form of being called into question. Nora reasons that ***»[…] people who don't think it's okay, intentionally misgender you, because they think, like, it's wrong«***. Mio, 11, shares their view of how pressure on LGBTQI children can look:

Mio: There are tons of people who hate LGBTQ kids. Especially grown-ups.

Hanna (leader): How do they try to change your identity?

Mio: They try to give you things that are normal for people who are the gender they were assigned, and they use the wrong pronouns.

»They really want you to be scared«
Scare tactics and disinformation

Another way LGBTQI children feel that someone is trying to change their identity is by frightening them, or through disinformation and ignorance. Billie, 14, talks about how he feels it happens through threats and harassment, and that it's primarily classmates or people at school who try to change him:

> ***Some of them think maybe I'm lesbian or something, because I was a few years ago, and then some people know I'm bisexual, and sometimes they try to, like, bully me by like, trying to make me straight. […] They, like, try to make it so you don't want to be that way, like maybe they make a lot of threats. Yeah, like I haven't had any personally, or at least not really bad threats, but they can be things like, I've heard a few people were told, ‹Oh, I'm gonna kill your whole family,› I'll… like ‹Me and my friends are going to beat the hell out of you›. Stuff like that.***

Scare tactics also occur through the spread of disinformation or false rumors about LGBTQI people. Vincent, 17, thinks people try to influence LGBTQI children through scare tactics, for example through disinformation about gender-affirming care and treatment.

> ***I think they're starting to try to do it with questions like this. I don't know what to call them, like leading questions, maybe? Scare tactics. About operations and things. [T]hey really want you to be scared. […] Like my father, he talked a lot about how he's not just saying this to make me change my mind, it was also because he was actually worried about my health. But this thing about losing hair and stuff and getting osteoporosis if I took testosterone at a young age. I mean, we're talking about 17 years old, and he said, like, ‹you'll ruin your life and you might die, get depressed›. He said that he'd read a lot about it, but it doesn't feel like he's read that much about it […].***

When we talk about prejudices regarding children's right to trans healthcare, Josef, 14, brings up similar experiences:

> ***It almost feels like all grown-ups you talk to today, like my parents, are like, ‹oh, it's okay if you're trans and stuff. Just as long as you don't go under the knife›. They talk, like they use words like ‹mutilating yourself›.***

Others face ignorance about the LGBTQI community where they are told that ***»trans is a trend«***, or who have been questioned as trans people because they don't look masculine or feminine enough. Such behaviors and attitudes have led them to start doubting their gender identity and questioning themselves.

Some feel that decision-makers and parents do not actively try to change LGBTQI children's identities, but that it happens unconsciously due to prejudice and ignorance. Karl, 17, explains:

You have to have some kind of idea about what it is to be trans before you can contradict it. And for many parents and many adults, trans isn't a thing, it's just sort of like the old definition of transvestite that they're familiar with, and that's like what? ‹Man who likes wearing women's clothes›.

The fact that it is children being subjected to this type of critical questions, pressures, scare tactics and disinformation can be linked, in addition to age discrimination in general, to the fact that the relationship between LGBTQI and childhood is questioned. Researchers in age, gender, and sexuality talk about how childhood and LGBTQI identities incorrectly are conceptualized as a threat to children and counter to what is best for the child.[24]

24 Sotevik, 2018; Bengtsson, 2014.

»Am I a person who can't love?«
Consequences of pressures

Being subjected to this type of pressure or external influence leads to consequences for the participants. Several bring up how they think it has affected or is affecting their relationships with their bodies and with others negatively. Vincent says:

> ***You feel love for people, but when others say that you shouldn't, it feels like, ‹Am I a person who can't love?› And that's pretty exclusionary.***

Nora, 15, describes similar ideas:

> ***I also think that if there's a trans person who is identified as the opposite sex, when someone comes up and says, ‹You can't be this gender because you were born as…› and then their biological sex. That makes you really… I mean, it probably makes you uncomfortable in your own body, and I think, ‹I can't be, but I… but I want to›, like, you get uncomfortable in your own body.***

Another consequence of the pressures LGBTQI children are subjected to is the feeling of being forced to keep their identity a secret and not being able to open up to adults. The pressures can also mean that they feel a general alienation and avoid various contexts because they do not feel safe.

§ IT'S ABOUT RIGHTS!

The participants' opinions, stories, and experiences in the section on *Pressure to change children's LGBTQI identity* show that among others, these rights of the children are being violated:

ARTICLE 13

Article 13 says that LGBTQI children have ***the right to freedom of expression and freedom of information***. This includes the right to seek, receive and spread information and thoughts in relation to human rights, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Freedom of opinion and expression includes ways of expressing one's identity through language use, behavior, clothing, physical traits, choice of name, and more. Therefore, freedom of expression is threatened when LGBTQI children do not have the opportunity to express their identity.[25]

ARTICLE 16

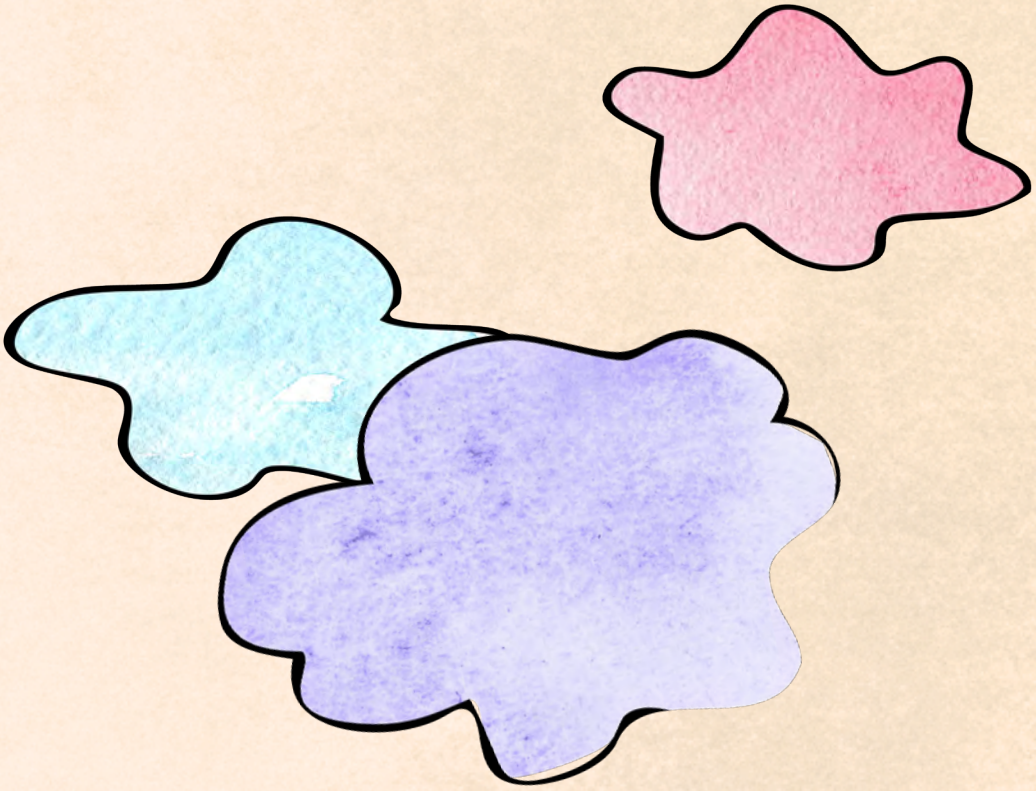
Article 16 gives LGBTQI children ***the right to protection of their privacy***. Decisions on one's gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation are a personal matter and therefore protected under Article 16.[26] Thus, the right to privacy is violated when others exert pressure on LGBTQI children's identity. This right includes the right to choose whether, how, and with whom one wants to be open about their gender identity and sexual orientation. Being outed or feeling that you cannot choose when to be open with your identity due to being a child, is thus also a violation of the right to protection of privacy.

ARTICLE 19

Article 19 protects LGBTQI children from all forms of violence. Conversion attempts or pressure about a child's sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and/or sex characteristics are a form of violence.[27]

25 FRA, 2024.
26 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment no. 20, 2016, On the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, point 34.
27 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment no. 20, 2016, On the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, point 34..

OUR OWN DEMANDS



HOW CAN WE STRENGHTEN LGBTQI CHILDREN'S RIGHTS?

Children who are LGBTQI are competent individuals with their own vital experiences and ideas. According to *the Child Convention*, they also have a right to be listened to in matters that concern them. Despite this, LGBTQI children are diminished and feel that they lack influence, while at the same time being subjected to several other severe rights violations. From the conversations we have had emerge thoughts and ideas about solutions and demands for how we can strengthen LGBTQI children's rights. It is time to listen to them now.

Respect our right to exist and be ourselves

Bonny, 16, says: ***»We are here, we are queer, deal with it«***. The children talk about **being accepted for who they are**. This is not just about tolerance, but also about **respect, safety, and the right to fully exist**. As described earlier, many LGBTQI children feel they are not allowed to exist or be who they are. This acceptance can be the difference between feeling alive or invisible, safe or threatened, dignified or questioned. Killian, 16, is one of those who bring up that **LGBTQI children should not have to censor themselves**, and the importance of being accepted and allowed to exist:

> ***I'm proud to be who I am, you know? I'm me, and I exist, and I shouldn't have to not exist or exist less just because someone thinks it's wrong.***

Another concrete demand in relation to this is to not be treated as »abnormal« or »sick«. Many of the children share situations where they have been treated that way, when what they really needed was to be affirmed and supported. Samu, 13, explains:

> ***Samu: [M]aybe we should ban sending LGBTQI people to therapy just to find out who they really are, or like, I get if they're having an ‹identity crisis›. But just because you say you're trans, the response shouldn't automatically be, ‹talk to a therapist›, because that's like, it sounds very homophobic, transphobic.***
>
> ***Luna (leader): Like it sounds like it's some kind of disease, when really it's...***
>
> ***Samu: Yeah. Being LGBTQI isn't a disease, it's not a mental illness, it's just how you're born, you know?***
>
> ***Luna (leader): So you'd rather be affirmed in who you are, somehow, and that it shouldn't be such a big deal, just to be affirmed and supported as you are.***

Being able to choose your name and pronouns yourself, and having **other people use the right name and pronouns**, is a clear demand. The participants give two law proposals about the right to exist and be oneself. They are about making **conversion attempts illegal**, punishable by fines and other penalties, and **introducing a third legal gender**.

> ***Killian: I would want to exist, like legally, by law.***
>
> ***Luna (leader): Are you talking about the third gender?***
>
> ***Killian: Yeah.***

THESE ARE THE ARGUMENTS FOR WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT!

Frankie, 17, emphasizes that **rights are not a matter of opinion**—that others do not have the right to limit LGBTQI children's rights, no matter what they think.

At the same time as I believe in freedom of speech, that you have the right to state your opinion, whatever you say, it shouldn't be at the expense of people's rights and the right to live and exist.

Having power over your own identity, the right to be yourself and be accepted for the person you are, the children say, is an important aspect of **mental health**. Ayan, 14, and Marina, 15, describe it as vital. Ayan says, ***»what's the point of being yourself otherwise? Being able to express yourself, use the pronouns and name you prefer, is vital«***, while Martina says ***»it's important because not having that can cause kids to take their own lives«***. Sophie, 16, and Hedda, 15, explain that this is about **basic respect**:

Luna (leader): And why is it important to be called by the right pronoun or the right name?

Sophie: Well, they'd be really pissed off if, like, if we say my teacher, who's a woman. If I just call her ‹him›, she'd be really pissed.

Hedda: You want to be who you are, you want to be accepted as who you are.

Sophie: Get back the respect you show them.

Several of the participants talk about positive instances, when they were addressed with the right name and pronouns, and how they were supported when they needed help from adults. The children describe being accepted, seen, and having power over your own identity, with the words ***»joyous«*** and ***»euphoric«***.

More and better support from adults

A recurring theme in the discussions is that adults around them do not sufficiently support LGBTQI children. They state that **more support from parents, teachers, youth leaders**, and so on would improve their vulnerable position. This applies, among other things, when LGBTQI kids experience bullying and hatred. Several participants request **clearer actions, positions, and boundaries when violations of integrity and harassment due to sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression** occur. In school, Alisha, 15, thinks there is a need for ***»[a] lot more help against bullying instead of just ignoring it or something, because a lot can happen in class both when teachers are there and when they aren't«***. Emilia, 13, thinks adults need to ***»[…] say something to those who don't respect others«***.

It's also about being affirmed and getting **support when you come out**. Participants in the evaluation exercise felt that it is particularly important not to hear negative comments or critical questions from adults, such as, ***»are you sure?«*** or ***»you'll never be a girl/boy«***. Most of them emphasized that the **support has to come from knowledge and understanding of LGBTQI issues**. Rio, 15, talked about the difference between the safe adults at meeting places for LGBTQI kids and other adults:

> ***Especially here, at, like, queer events, […] where I feel that the adults understand me because they've sort of taken a deeper look at the subject than, like, parents usually do. And guidance counsellors and things, you know, it also depends on whether they, like, know a lot about this topic, otherwise they'll think they're not much help. You know, maybe they'll say Rio instead of my deadname, and that's it.***

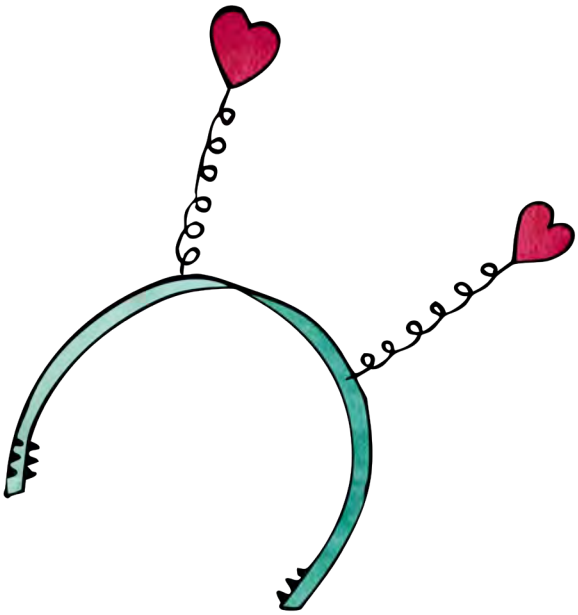
THESE ARE THE ARGUMENTS FOR WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT!

Adults must give more and better support so **LGBTQI children can feel safe and mentally healthy, and be able to be open with their identity** in different places. When LGBTQI children have the support of adults, **other rights are positively influenced**. Coco, 14, says, among other things, ***»trans kids need support and protection to get their right to the best possible health fulfilled«***.

More safe meeting places for LGBTQI children

Having a safe place to turn to when the world feels threatening and unsafe is important. Many want to have **more meeting places and groups** that are safe for LGBTQI kids, both at school and other locations, and for the ones that already exist to have **longer open hours**. Monnie, 14, wants the community to ***»[o]pen more safe spaces for LGBTQ people, like meeting places«***. While Alisha, 15, wants there to be ***»[m]ore places and times we can get together and talk with other LGBTQI+ kids and teens«***.

To the question of what makes a place safe, the children reply both that it is about **representation** and an **accepting climate**, and that sometimes it can be nice if it is **separatist**. For places that are not separatist, it is important that it is widely known that **people are accepted regardless of their identity**. Frankie emphasizes that: ***»[f]or LGBTQI kids, it's important to be in a non-judgemental environment«***. The presence of **adults who listen, understand, and take kids seriously** is another key point they bring up.



THESE ARE THE ARGUMENTS FOR WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT!

Many children choose to keep their identity secret out of fear of what will happen if they are open about it. At meeting places that are inclusive of LGBTQI children, kids can **be open with their identity, find friends, and get support** from each other. Martina, 15, says ***»kids often keep it quiet at school because it's dangerous. But that way, we miss each other. It would be nice to have a queer hangout at school so we can find each other«***.

Many LGBTQI children **do not feel safe at home**, or that they get enough support from their parents, which makes inclusive meeting places particularly important. Nora, 15, reflects on the importance of there being safe adults other than parents available to LGBTQI kids:

> ***Sometimes you can feel safer telling it to another adult, instead of your parents, because parents might not take it as seriously. While another grown-up that you might not know as well, maybe won't take it as a big joke, so they'll accept it and respect it instead.***

LGBTQI meeting places are pointed out as a place to **be free** in and several of the children **travel long distances** to get to the LGBTQI meeting places that exist now. MUCF has also confirmed this.[28] Emilia, 13, and Bonny, 16, talk about their situation living in a small town. Emilia lives far from the meeting place where we met:

> ***Bonny (to Emilia): You live just as far away as I do, but in a different direction.***
>
> ***Luna (leader): Nice! You came all this way just to hang out here?***
>
> ***Bonny: It's worth it.***
>
> ***Emilia: We found one, but you have to wait a really long time...***
>
> ***Luna (leader): Oh? Why, is it hard to get in or something?***
>
> ***Emilia: It's like, you have to sign up. And there's a long time between get-togethers.***

28 MUCF, 2022.

Improve the healthcare system for LGBTQI children

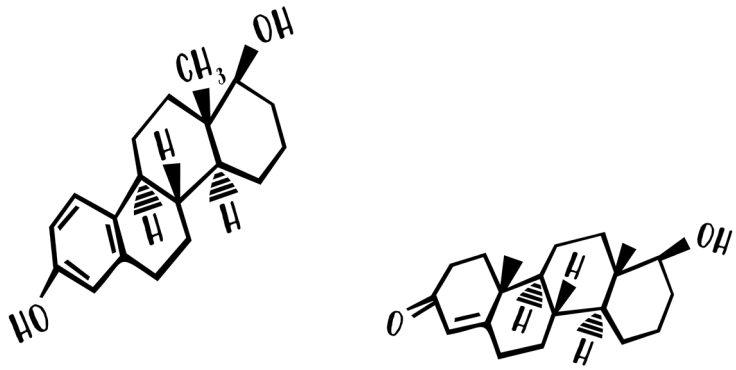
Many participants bring up the importance of making the healthcare system better and more accessible to LGBTQI kids, for example by **shortening queues**. Eden was one of the children who suggested this, saying she wants ***»shorter queues when you're starting assessments or need general psychological help«***. Frankie says ***»when I've been really miserable, I really could have used more easily accessible help. Everything is complicated and time-consuming«***.

Another way is making sure that the government further investigates a **lowering of the minimum age for gender-affirming care and treatment**. Lewis is one of the people who want the minimum age lowered: ***»Lower the minimum age for gender-affirming care«***. Bonny, 16, also brings it up: ***»[at] 15 you reach the age of consent, so why can't you make decisions about the rest of your body? That's a double standard!«*** Consent from guardians and minimum ages can be important in some contexts, because we cannot place undue responsibilities on children, but in some circumstances, this becomes problematic and the children themselves bring up the importance of this balance. In general, the participants want to see **a greater degree of rights to self-determination about healthcare**. They think we must weigh in the best interests of the child and the individual situation, and that **children themselves should be included in helping to improve healthcare for children**. Vincent explains: ***»I think kids should have more power over their own identities, and also that they deserve to have power to initiate an evaluation«***.

Children with intersex variations are highlighted as a group with particularly great needs to be able to **make decisions about their own body**. Bonny emphasizes that: ***»[t]he rights of intersex children are important because they should have the right to make decisions about their own bodies«***.

THESE ARE THE ARGUMENTS FOR WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT!

Making the healthcare system more easily accessible and inclusive of LGBTQI kids is a matter of ensuring **each child's right to the best possible health** and **right to life and development**, as well as securing the right to influence. Having **agency over one's own body and health** is important for everyone, and children often possess **vital knowledge about their own needs**.



Boost knowledge about LGBTQI among children and adults

Greater knowledge about LGBTQI is a recurring theme in the conversations, and is framed as a central part of the solutions to several problems. Several of the children think everyone should have **access to knowledge at an early age**.

For example, Emilia, 13, says that:

> ***I think it's an important subject in school. Especially for people who really don't understand and don't realize that we have rights, too, and that they need to respect our rights.***

It is also important that parents learn more about LGBTQI. Alisha, 15, thinks there is a need to ***»[t]each parents-to-be about LGBTQ+ and how nuanced it can be«***. Many also think **politicians should have better knowledge** of LGBTQI issues, and **knowledge that is based on LGBTQI individuals' own voices**, not just rumors, myths, or prejudices.

THESE ARE THE ARGUMENTS FOR WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT!

For Monnie and Bonny, greater knowledge among LGBTQI kids would **strengthen them** in several ways. For example, Monnie, 14, says it would contribute to LGBTQI kids gaining **influence in matters that affect them**. ***»To feel like I'm in charge of my own relationships and identity, I have to learn what that means, and be given a choice«.*** Bonny, 16, also describes greater knowledge as important so LGBTQI kids can **demand their rights**: ***»we need more knowledge about LGBTQI kids' rights, so LGBTQI kids know their rights and can use them against people who discriminate«***.

The children also feel that more knowledge can help **increase acceptance and support** for LGBTQI kids in society. Sophie, 16, explains that for children to **feel safe in and open with their LGBTQI identity at school**, ***»[...] grown-ups need to teach the kids about other identities and other differences, at a younger age, so it isn't completely foreign to them«***.

If politicians had better knowledge about LGBTQI matters and let LGBTQI kids have influence, they could make decisions that contribute to **enhancing LGBTQI people's rights**, and not contribute to spreading myths. Billie, 14, reflects on politicians this way:

> ***I don't think they should, like, jump to conclusions. They don't ask people who really, like, who this is happening to. It feels like they haven't talked to trans people or gay people about this. Like maybe they've heard something online, like trans people often commit suicide, and that's true. But it doesn't happen to all trans people. [...] But I think they should, like, talk to a trans person from their perspective.***

Give LGBTQI kids influence in issues that affect us—ask us, listen to us, and make sure our rights are met!

The section *Age power structure and LGBTQI* describes how important it is that LGBTQI kids are **listened to, and that we consider their thoughts and experiences, especially in matters that affect them**. Frankie, 17, summarizes the demand quite simply: ***»see us as people!«***.

One concrete demand in relation to this is to, as Ayan put it, ***»[m]ake it easier to change your legal name without your parents' permission«***. Per feels that his parents do not understand why he wants to change his legal name and will not give their consent:

> ***They say, like, I can do what I want when I turn 18. But they won't sign things to, like, let me change my legal name now, they see it as something you do when you're 18, and it's not.***

Another concrete proposal to increase LGBTQI kids' influence in issues that affect them is to review the ability to **change one's legal gender at a younger age**.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child does not mention any minimum age; it says to always consider what is best for the child in each individual case, and the child's opinion must be included in the assessment based on age and maturity, even before age 12.

Per and Josef explain their perspective on this:

> ***Per: You should be able to change your legal gender in your documents from age 13, without your parents getting involved.***
>
> ***Luna (leader): Why 13?***
>
> ***Per: Zero with parent involvement. Because you become a teenager at 13. That's the boundary for everything else.***
>
> ***Josef: I know a lot of my friends who are also trans say that ‹what does it say in your passport?› is a question they get a lot. And I just think you should be able to change it. That you should be able to change what it says. Like name and gender.***

THESE ARE THE ARGUMENTS FOR WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT!

Being listened to and having influence in issues that affect you is something the children view as a must, not only to **feel respected and seen**, but also to **gain access to their rights as children**. Karl, 17, expands on this:

> ***You have a right to exist, no matter how old you are or who you are. I think it's super-important and it comes before all other arguments, because no matter who it is you're discussing, it's a person you're discussing, and it's our identity and it's how we live our lives, and we're not living tomorrow, we're living today, and the things that are said about us affect us pretty directly.***

Nora, 15, talks about the importance of children being supported by adults in order to **demand their rights**, and be able to be who they are:

> ***Kids should have more, like, rights, and parents should support kids in what they want. Because kids should decide for themselves who they are. Some of them can't even come out until they move away from home. Because they don't have any power themselves.***

Märta wrote that it is important to listen to LGBTQI kids' thoughts and experiences because ***»[t]hey know best about themselves and how they feel«***, while Bonny, 16, pointed out that ***»[t]hey know better than grown-ups who don't have any knowledge«***. If politicians and other adults had better knowledge about LGBTQI matters and let LGBTQI kids have influence, they could **make decisions that contribute to enhancing LGBTQI people's rights**.

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Appendix with method and ethical guidelines is to be found at our webpage. Scan the qr-code to get there!

NOT TOO YOUNG TO BE MYSELF
– VOICES ON BEING A CHILD AND LGBTQI

Grown-ups have a lot of opinions about LGBTQI kids, but they rarely listen to what we in that group have to say. It's not uncommon for grown-ups to question whether we really know anything about our gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation. But we LGBTQI kids exist–and our experiences are real. It's time for you to step into our shoes, so you can understand what it's like to be us.

We think you should read SCYS's report to get an idea of how it feels to navigate the world as an LGBTQI kid. Gaining more knowledge and deeper understanding is a must to ensure every child's rights.

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