



## The tool to start the conversation with young people about sexuality and gender identity

### WHAT

The SexQ is a semi-structured interview to start the conversation about themes surrounding sexuality and gender identity. The SexQ has been created together with young people, practitioners and experts.

### WHY

Sexuality and gender identity are part of the life and development of young people. Young people with psychological complaints often face challenges in this area. While they want these topics to be discussed with them, practitioners seem unsure how to start respond.

### FOR WHOM

The interview is suited for a conversation with young people between 14 and 25 years old and an estimated IQ of over 85. Young people may be ready for it at different ages, the conversation can be adapted to their developmental level.

### BY WHOM

This tool was designed for youth in mental health care. When several practitioners work with a young person, you should agree on who will discuss the SexQ themes with them.



# How to use the SexQ?

The SexQ can be administered during a one-on-one conversation with the young person. The goal of the tool is to start the conversation. It does not represent a complete conversation. You can conduct the entire interview in one session or use parts relevant to the young person in question. You can also view and go through the tool together.

For more in-depth information about specific subjects, such as trauma, we refer to centers of expertise, such as CSG, Sense, Qpido and the Sexual Development Guideline.

The tool starts with a step-by-step guide to starting the conversation, followed by seven themes to discuss with the young person, with increasing intimacy levels.



Each theme consists of background information for the practitioner and literal sentences formulated by young people. Choose the sentences that suit you and the young person. Some themes include points of attention related to culture and religion.



**Background information** per theme



Literal **example questions**



Points of attention related to **culture**



Points of attention related to **religion**



## Crisis

During crises, such as suicidality, the following areas could be underlying: sex, relationships, sexual orientation and gender. In such cases, the SexQ does not have to be fully conducted. Also, if a short question surfaces, you can respond with:

May I ask you another question? We see that for some young people, problems with a relationship, something sexual, doubts about whom they are attracted to, or gender play a major role in how they feel. Could that be the case with you? Do you want to talk about this?

## Tips & Tricks

Be **open-minded**, understanding and non-judgmental. Be aware of your personal norms/values.

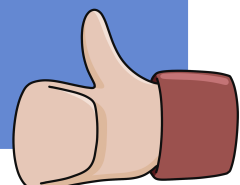
**Trust** between the young person and practitioner is important, so it helps when there is a connection.

Discuss these topics **without parents** in the room.

If necessary, **explain** the terms you use (e.g., sexually active, orientation). Ask the young person which terms they use and match them.

Use **inclusive language**. For example, don't assume someone has a girlfriend when they are a boy.

**Build up** topics to more intimate topics later in the conversation.



# Starting the conversation in five steps

1

## Provide information & ask for permission

Provide an explanation and introduction to the topic and then ask for permission to discuss it. To the side, three options are given to start the conversation.



### Generalising

I'd like to discuss something with you if it's okay. For many young people we see here, topics such as relationships and sexuality are important or complicated. I'd like to ask you some questions about them. Is that okay?

### Disorder-oriented

We regularly see that young people with (e.g., depression/ anxiety/feeling bad) also have trouble with relationships or struggle with whom they are attracted to. May I ask you something about that?

### Social context

We regularly see that your peers fall in love or get into a relationship. I would also like to discuss these themes with you. Do you mind talking about that?

2

## Offer an escape

Explain that a specific issue can be discussed but does not have to be so that the young person can decide whether to discuss it.

You don't have to discuss this with me but know it is always possible. Possibly you'd rather discuss it at a different moment or with a different colleague, which is also an option.

3

## Discuss privacy

Explain confidentiality, including your medical confidentiality and what will or will not be included in their file.

Everything you share here is part of the same medical confidentiality, meaning we don't share anything without your consent. We can discuss what will and will not be part of the file.

4

## Be trauma-sensitive

Some young people have experienced negative sexual encounters. You can allow space for this scenario at the start of the conversation (see page 10). Be alert to signals.

We encounter that some young people experience negative sexual encounters. If you want to talk about it, then that is possible. Would you like that?"

If yes: Do you want to discuss it now or later?

If no: That is fine. You choose if and when you want to talk about it. I asked you because we see that it can help to discuss these situations if they occur. However, you also rather not discuss the topic, which you can always say.

5

## Be culturally & religiously sensitive

Every culture and religion has specific norms, values and perceptions about sexuality and gender. There can also be major differences within a given group, so ask about the young person's background.

What is your connection with your culture/religion?

Are there certain topics in this area that are difficult or that you prefer not to discuss?

# Puberty



## Background information

Young people can experience difficulties during puberty with all the changes in hormones and their bodies. Therefore, they may want to know about hormones (e.g., during menstruation) and how they influence their feelings.

In girls,\* puberty starts on average at 10.5 years (9–12 years) and in boys\* at 11 years (9–13 years). Among adolescents, there is a difference in the timing of physical and psychosocial maturation, which can create insecurity. In 95% of young people, puberty is completed around 17–18, with acne problems potentially lasting longer.

In boys, hair distribution can change after facial/ chest hair.

\*Where the tool says boy/girl: it means “gender assigned at birth”, which can differ from what has been experienced.

Has puberty already started for you? How is it going? Do you have any questions or problems with it?

Have you received information about puberty and do you know where to find information?

We sometimes hear that young people can experience difficulties with the physical changes of puberty (e.g. sudden erections and menstruation) or general puberty. How are these for you?

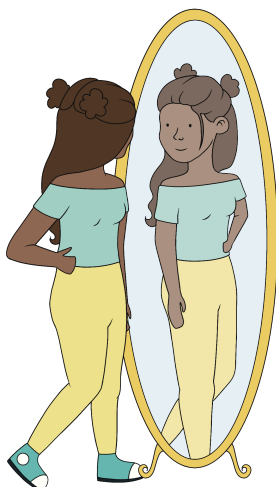
We regularly see that hormones can also influence how you feel. Have you noticed this, for example, around the time of your period?

# Body image



## Background information

Many young people are concerned with their body image. Insecurities about the body are common and can cause psychological complaints.



How comfortable do you feel within your body?

Which part of your body are you happy with?

Are you ever insecure about things about your body? How's that for you? Are you affected by this?

# Relationships & being in love



## Background information

Most young people have their first relationships during puberty. Starting, maintaining and losing a relationship can have a big impact. Some young people would like to have a relationship but face challenges, for example, due to difficulties in social contact (e.g. autism).

Many young people regard the term “relationship” as positive. However, terms are subject to time, so possibly ask what the young person uses as a term. For instance, do not ask if someone has a girlfriend or boyfriend. Instead, ask if they are in a relationship to include LGTBQ+ youth.

Have you ever been in love?  
Are you (currently) in a relationship?  
Are your friends or classmates in a relationship? What about you? Are you concerned about it?  
Have you ever struggled with it?

What are your family and friends' views on having a relationship?

(If someone doesn't have a relationship): Would you like to have a relationship? Do you have questions about it?



## Culture & Religion

In some cultures and religions, having a relationship before marriage is prohibited. When discussing this theme, it is important to hear what the young person's circle of influence thinks about it. Do not insist that the young person tells you about their influencers but see how you can support the young person.

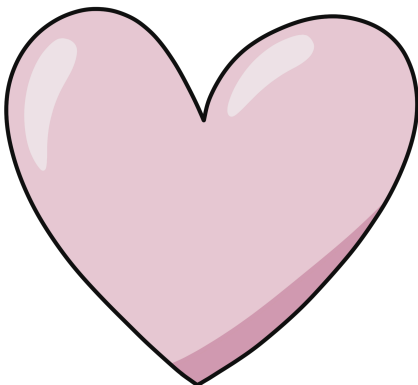
What do your family and friends think about having a relationship at your age? What do you think about it?

How would they react if they knew you were in a relationship? Would they accept it? If not, why not?

What would you need from your family and friends to support you in a relationship?

Concerning a secret relationship: Can you imagine keeping it secret? How can I help you with it?

How can you find support from your religion?



# Sexual orientation



## Background information

For many young people, puberty is when they discover their sexual orientation, which aligns with their identity development but can give rise to insecurities, doubts and shame. The reaction and support of their social environment can significantly impact their well-being.

Give the young person the opportunity to discuss the theme but with the option of escape.

You cannot see someone's sexual orientation from the outside. Therefore, always ask openly about it, even if someone "seems straight". Heterosexual youth that the question is appropriate if they understand why you are asking it.

Do you already know if you like guys/girls/both/whoever?  
Many young people are trying to find out whom they are attracted to. What about you?  
Do you already know whom you are attracted to?  
Have you ever had doubts about whom you are attracted to?

We often see that when young people are trying to figure it out, it can also give rise to doubts. Do you experience them?

What do your family and friends think about this? Is there someone close to you with whom you can discuss and share?

Not all young people are attracted to someone of the opposite sex. What do you think about it?

## ! Be alert

Research shows that LGBTQ+ youth have an increased risk of suicidality. Therefore, be alert to the signals and make the topic discussable if necessary.



## Culture & Religion

In some cultural and religious circles, "coming out" is impossible because young people can lose their families, friends, circles of influence and/or religious community. In some cases, "coming out" can even be unsafe. Therefore, discussing support options and peer contacts is important.

Confidentiality from practitioners with parents and the surrounding community is also critical. Never insist on "coming out", but see how you can support the young person.

What do your family and friends think about young people who are not straight but LGBTQ+?

How would they react if they knew this about you? Would they accept you? If not, why not?

What would you need from your family and friends to support you?

Is there someone in your surroundings with whom you can discuss/share this?

Concerning secrets: How can you manage to keep it a secret? How can I help you with it?

How can you find support from your religion?



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# Gender identity



## Background information

During puberty, many young people question their (general) identity about who they are and where they belong. Some young people doubt whether the gender assigned at birth completely suits them, which can be confusing.

However, this question doesn't automatically mean someone is transgender or has gender dysphoria. The search for identity can cause shame and symptoms.

Therefore, it is important as a professional to have an open attitude, not judge and not steer while following the young person's pace. Explain your reasoning for asking the question.

We sometimes see that young people doubt whether they feel like a boy, girl or something else. Have you ever experienced that?  
Do you feel aligned with the gender assigned at birth or like you're moving in a different direction?  
Do you feel more like a girl/boy or somewhere in between?  
How do you identify yourself? Do you ever feel different from how you were born?

Which pronouns do you use? How do you want to be addressed?

Do you know people in your surroundings who are questioning their gender identity?

## Be alert

Research has shown that youth with gender issues are at risk for suicide. Be alert to signals and make the topic discussable if necessary.



## Culture & Religion

In some cultures/religions, gender diversity is a sensitive topic. There are many families where this topic cannot be discussed and where a gender-diverse identity is not accepted. Inquire how the family views the issue, and investigate how the young person can be supported. Sometimes, there are family confidants. However, never force "coming out", which can result in a significant loss (family/religious community) but connect with the young person. Faith can often be a great support tool during the search for identity.

What do your family and friends think about young people questioning their gender identity?

How would they react if they knew this about you? Would they accept you? If not, why not?

What would you need from your family and friends to support you in this?

Is there someone in your surroundings with whom you can discuss/share this?

Concerning secrets: How can you manage to keep it a secret? How can I help you with it?

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# Sexuality



## Background information

For many young people, puberty is a phase with the first steps in sexuality, which can be solo (masturbating) or having sex with someone else.

According to young people, positive things about sexuality include feeling appreciated, producing “happy hormones” and distraction from problems. However, sexuality can also cause negative feelings, such as insecurity and lower self-esteem. Some use sex as a way to fill a feeling of emptiness.

Some young people have started with the first steps of their sexuality, which can be solo sex or sex with others (such as kissing). What about you?  
Have you had sexual experiences, like kissing or other things?  
What about your friends?  
Are you sexually active? What do you mean by sexually active?

You don't have to describe your specific experiences but know you can discuss them. Do you have questions about them? Do you want to discuss things?

Have you noticed that how you feel now (e.g. sad or anxious) also influences things like sex or the other way around?



## Background information

There are young people with sexual preferences, such as a fetish or paraphilia, where they are turned on by unusual thing that they themselves do not always like. These kinds of preferences are often seen as very shameful and can cause psychological complaints. It is particularly important to discuss privacy here.

We also sometimes see that young people sometimes have fantasies or thoughts they are ashamed of. If that is the case with you, you can safely discuss them here.



## Culture & Religion

Within some cultures and religions, sexual experiences, including solo sex (masturbation), are not allowed, which can result in problems and shame.

What do your family or friends think about having sexual experiences at your age?

How would they react if they knew this about you? Would they accept you? If not, why not?

What would you need from your family and friends to support you in this?

Concerning secrets: How can you manage to keep it a secret? How can I help you with it?





# Media



## Background information

Most young people spend much of their time online. They meet (new) friends and find intimate relationships. Many young people have sent nude images of themselves or others.

Do you have online friends? Have you had online relationships?

Have you ever sent footage of yourself to someone?

Have you ever seen or heard something that has impacted you?

Have you ever experienced something unpleasant online?  
Have you ever been bullied or hated online?

We know that many young people watch porn. Do you have questions about it, or is there something you want to discuss?



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# Desires & Boundaries



## Background information

For young people, expressing their wishes can positively affect their sexual experiences.

Many young people have experienced negative encounters with persons crossing their boundaries in some way, which is often difficult to discuss. However, young people indicated that this tool should address guarding boundaries.

Do you feel that you can dare to indicate your wishes about your sexuality?

Do you feel you can indicate your own boundaries? Do you know how to express your boundaries if you don't want something?



# Negative experiences



## Background information

Negative sexual experiences are common and are often only discussed later when there is more trust between the professional and the young person. The questions below can help start the conversation about them.

Ensure that the young person is in control. Don't push to talk about it now. Avoid victim blaming.

The young person's safety and privacy are imperative. If applicable, follow the domestic violence/child abuse codes and/or consult with the CSG (NL).

If the abuse has recently occurred, check with CSG for advice.

Have you ever experienced something sexual that you didn't want? For example, has someone said something or touched you? Do you want to talk to me about this now?

If no:

We know it can be difficult to discuss this. You can discuss it with me but don't have to. I can also ask about it another time, or you can discuss it with another colleague, whatever you prefer.

If yes:

I'm glad that you want to discuss this. Tell me, and I'll listen to you.

Is it still happening? Are you safe now?

Are there people around you with whom you have discussed this?

I stand next to you and will think along with you.

## Closing conversation

How you finish the conversation depends on the course. Options include summarizing the conversation, seeing if you want to continue another time and checking as a professional whether you have to take action. You can ask the young person what it was like to discuss and possibly thank them for their openness and trust.