



## Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

### WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

“Intersex” is a term describing ~2% of the population born with a wide range of sex characteristics\* (e.g., genitals, hormones) that don’t adhere to false binary notions of male or female bodies. Being intersex simply refers to a status (whether someone *is* intersex or not). Some intersex traits are identifiable at birth, some at puberty or later, and some people never learn they’re intersex. Intersex people can be any gender (e.g., man, woman, non-binary) or sexual orientation (e.g., straight, bi+). Note: Intersex people can also be transgender, but the two are separate and shouldn’t be conflated.

### HERE'S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Intersex people currently have no representation on TV. This total erasure contributes to a misunderstanding of and stigma against intersex people, perpetuating lies that they aren’t real or that they need to be medically “fixed.” This has harmful consequences. Intersex people (usually babies) are often subjected to non-consensual, unnecessary surgeries\* on their genitals to make them fit the male/female binary. Some intersex people have their medical history hidden from them or are told to hide it (by doctors and/or parents), causing feelings of shame and isolation. Intersex people are also subjected to constant body policing (e.g., athletes disqualified over hormones). Mindful portrayals can educate society on the intersex experience and promote equality, protections, and autonomy for intersex people.

**NOTE ON LANGUAGE:** Not all people born with intersex characteristics choose to identify as “intersex.” As TV writers, we should be intentional about the language our characters use to identify themselves

## INTERSEX PEOPLE

### OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

- **Medicalization:** Storylines with doctors “correcting” or looking to “fix” an intersex person’s body to fit the false male/female binary with surgery, hormones, and procedures (e.g., doctors encouraging parents to “pick” their intersex baby’s gender).
- **Disclosure Twists:** Characters whose intersex status is only revealed for a big twist that shocks an endosex\* character (e.g., before having sex, changing in a locker room, birth portrayed as shocking). These depictions are highly problematic because they paint intersex people as lying and deceitful, reduce intersex people to their genitals and bodies, and tell intersex stories through endosex characters’ POVs.
- **Freaks:** Making fun of intersex people or traits (e.g., calling a character “it” or “he/she”). This includes intersex people being interrogated about their bodies, genitals, and/or medical history *and* endosex people being paranoid that someone is intersex (e.g., spreading rumors about their genitals). This behavior is offensive and fuels the falsehood that there’s something wrong with being intersex.
- **Unsupportive Family:** Stories about parents and relatives ashamed of their intersex family member, who treat their diagnosis as a burden and/or who hide their medical history from them to “protect” them. Treating intersex people as if any part of them should be kept a secret is a damaging message for all viewers to internalize.
- **Offensive Language:** “Hermaphrodite” is an outdated, medically inaccurate, and derogatory term. The term “Disorders of Sex Development” (DSD) is controversial and pathologizing. Neither should be used to describe an intersex person, even in medical settings. (“Differences of Sex Development” is a more acceptable synonym for intersex.)

### THINGS WE'D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF

- **Intro to Intersex:** Characters and storylines with accurate and thoughtful explanations of what being intersex really means.
- **Reframed POV:** Intersex protagonists with their own arcs told from their own POVs. Give them stories focused on more than *just* their intersex status (e.g., friendships, relationships, careers, hobbies).
- **Varied Experiences:** Nuanced characters of all kinds (e.g., BIPOC, disabled, older) with a variety of intersex traits and experiences. No intersex person is the same as another, all have different experiences, bodies, medical histories, and feelings about being intersex (e.g., little impact to life-altering).
- **Joy:** Joyful, carefree, and hopeful stories about intersex people.
- **Affirming Healthcare:** Show healthcare providers treating intersex people with dignity (e.g., providing resources like therapy and support groups; not questioning intersex traits for unrelated issues like a cold; not pushing for unnecessary procedures) and being knowledgeable on intersex issues. Show intersex people, families, and providers making informed and *consensual* care choices without shame or secrecy (e.g., parents waiting for children to be old enough to choose the procedures they desire, if any).
- **Dating & Relationships:** Characters (of all sexual orientations) in relationships and having a variety of romantic and sexual experiences with people who are respectful of their intersex status.
- **Activists:** Intersex and endosex characters engaged in intersex activism (e.g., protesting non-consensual surgeries, supporting bills and laws that protect intersex people).
- **Impact of Ignorance:** Stories that examine the long-term effects of a misinformed, unaccepting society toward intersex people (e.g., depression, anxiety, more vulnerable to abuse, scrutiny in sports) and of non-consensual, unnecessary intersex surgeries (e.g., pain, infertility, poor mental health).

\*Denotes a term in the glossary

## QUICK FACTS

- ~150 million people are born with intersex traits, comparable to the number of genetic redheads or the population of Russia.
- Only 1 intersex series regular character has ever been featured on television despite making up ~2% of the total population.
- Non-consensual intersex genital surgeries on children are considered human rights violations by the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and many human rights organizations.
- There are over 35 variations of intersex traits (e.g., Klinefelter syndrome, androgen insensitivity syndrome, hypospadias), all presenting in different ways (e.g., some intersex people are infertile, others aren't).

## ONLINE REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

- The Conversation: [“Ten ethical flaws in the Caster Semenya decision on intersex in sport”](#)
- GLAAD: [“not invisible: debunking 10 intersex myths”](#)  
[“why we need to keep the “i” a part of the lgbtqia conversation in politics”](#)
- Human Rights Campaign: [“Understanding the Intersex Community”](#)
- InterACT: [“FAQ: Intersex, Gender, and LGBTQIA+”](#)  
[“FAQ: What is intersex?”](#)  
[“InterACT Media Guide”](#)  
[“Intersex Definitions”](#)
- Intersex Campaign for Equality: [“How Intersex People Identify”](#)
- Intersex Justice Project
- LGBTQ&A Podcast: [“Hilda Vioria: Born Both, An Intersex Life”](#)
- The New York Times: [“This Intersex Runner Had Surgery to Compete. It Has Not Gone Well.”](#)
- TED Talk: [“The way we think about biological sex is wrong”](#)
- United Nations Free & Equal Campaign: [“Intersex Awareness”](#)
- WGA West: [“Invisible No More: The Need for Intersex Stories”](#)

## GLOSSARY

### Endosex:

The opposite of intersex; someone who possesses innate physical sex characteristics that align with binary concepts of female or male bodies.

### Sex Characteristics:

Biological traits such as genitals, gonads (i.e., ovaries, testes), hormone production, hormone response, chromosomes, and reproductive organs. Secondary sex characteristics are features that may appear during puberty or exposure to hormones, including breast growth, facial hair, and body hair.

### Unnecessary Intersex Surgeries:

Some intersex children and babies undergo unnecessary, irreversible surgeries without their consent for no other reason than to make their bodies conform to traditional notions of what it means to be male or female. The vast majority of these surgeries are not medically necessary, lead to complications (e.g., physical pain, loss of genital sensitivity, poor mental health), and could instead be delayed until the intersex person can decide whether surgery is right for them.

Please visit our [Expanded Glossary](#) for in-depth definitions of the above terms and definitions of additional terms: **gender binary, ipso gender, minority stress, and transgender.**

In-kind support and materials for this factsheet were provided by the following partner organizations. Please contact them for additional information, story guidance, and in-room consultations.



[InterACTAdvocates.org](http://InterACTAdvocates.org)



[GLAAD.org](http://GLAAD.org)

Storyline|Partners|

[StorylinePartners.com](http://StorylinePartners.com)



[SeeJane.org](http://SeeJane.org)



[HRC.org](http://HRC.org)

SRC Partners<sup>o</sup>

[SRC-Partners.com](http://SRC-Partners.com)

INDIVIDUAL CONSULTANT: [Kimberly Zieselmann, JD](#)

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A list of the most up-to-date contact information for all of our partner organizations can be found on our website:  
[WriteInclusion.org/factsheets](http://WriteInclusion.org/factsheets)

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY:

