



Intersex fact sheet:

- Intersex: formerly referred to as “hermaphrodite.” “A congenital anomaly of the reproductive and sexual system.” Intersex people are born with external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, and/or endocrine system that are different from most other people. There is no single “intersex body.” It encompasses a wide variety of conditions that may have nothing in common except they are deemed “abnormal” by society.*
- 1 in 500 babies in the world are born intersex.
- Intersex is not necessarily a “third sex.” Most intersex people identify as male or female; many don’t even know are intersex and don’t find out until adulthood, if at all. However, there is now a third sex category on birth certificates in Italy.
- Current medical protocol in the U.S. is to perform “corrective” surgery before the child is a year and a half old.
- Secrecy and Shame: One of the biggest problems with “corrective” treatment is that it sets in motion a lifelong pattern of secrecy, isolation, shame, and confusion. Adult intersex people’s stories often resemble those of individuals who survived childhood sexual abuse: violation of trust, lack of honest communication, and punishment for asking questions or telling the truth, etc. In some cases, the experiences are exactly like those of childhood sexual abuse survivors: when they surgically “create” a vagina on a child, the parent - usually the mother – is required to “dilate” the vagina with hard instruments (dilators) every day for months in order to ensure it doesn’t close off.*
- “Medical Display”: Many intersex people report trauma similar to that experienced by children who have been molested. This trauma comes from having their genitals on “medical display,” the practice of disrobing a child and displaying his/her genitals while numbers of doctors, nurses, and medical students examine them, touching and prodding. This focus on the genitals has a profound effect on a child’s psyche and sexual development.*
- Intersex groups, such as Intersex Society of North America, have been lobbying to stop the surgeries on infants and area asking the protocol be changed to allow the children to decide for themselves whether they want surgery. They suggest alternatively, raising the child under the best guess, and letting him/her decide what gender s/he identifies with.

- Surgeries to “correct” the genitalia of intersex babies leave scar tissue that can often interfere with sensation and sexual arousal.
- When “corrective” treatment (hormones and/or surgery) is used beginning in infancy, a child is robbed of the opportunity to develop naturally with the release of hormones that accompanies puberty. During puberty, the body changes and develops in ways that may help a child more clearly define how s/he identifies his/her gender.

* *Material adapted from Speaker’s Handbook for Intersex Activities & Allies, published by IPDX*

More resources on Intersex:

Websites:

www.ISNA.org – Intersex Society of North America

www.bodieslikeours.org – Bodies Like Ours

www.queerbodies.org –

www.lpdx.org – Intersex Initiative Portland