

Gender identity

Gender identity refers to the deep and intimate feeling a person has of themselves. Children begin to understand and express their gender identity early in life.

This article discusses how gender identity typically develops and how parents and caregivers can promote healthy development of gender identity and expression in children. It's important to remember that each child is unique and may develop at a different pace.

What we mean by gender: Some useful definitions

Sex at birth: When children are born, sex is assigned based on external genitalia. A child who has a penis is said to be male. A child who has a vulva is said to be female. A child who is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the description of "female" or "male" is referred to as an intersex child.

Gender identity: Gender identity is "who you know yourself to be". It is important to know that gender identity exists on a spectrum. A person's gender identity can be masculine, feminine, non-binary (neither entirely male nor entirely female) or other.

Gender expression: This is how you portray your gender to others, whether through behaviour, clothing, hairstyle, the name you choose to go by, etc. Gender expression may or may not reflect gender identity.

Sexual orientation: This refers to physical or emotional attraction that one feels for another person.

Transgender: When a person's gender identity is not the same as the assigned sex at birth, the umbrella term "transgender" (often shortened to "trans") is used. For example, a child born with female genitalia may identify as a boy. A child may also say that they are not a boy or a girl, but just "themselves" because they don't want their sexual characteristics to define who they are.

Two-Spirit: Some cultures and Indigenous people use the term “Two-Spirit” to represent a person who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit. Two-Spiritedness can include cultural, spiritual, sexual and/or gender identity.

Gender dysphoria: Describes the level of discomfort or distress that can exist when there is a mismatch between a person’s experienced gender and their assigned sex at birth. Some transgender and gender-diverse children experience no distress about their bodies, while others may express significant discomfort. This distress may increase as puberty begins and the body starts to change.

How does gender identity develop?

Here is what you can typically expect at different ages:

2 to 3 years old:

- By 2 years old, children can often identify differences between boys and girls.
- By age 3, most children can identify themselves as a “boy” or “girl”. This term may or may not match their assigned sex at birth.

3 to 5 years old:

- Some children’s self-identified gender remains stable, while others may alternate between presenting themselves as a “boy” or a “girl” at different times (sometimes even in the same day). This exploration is normal and healthy.
- Children become more aware of gender expectations or stereotypes as they grow older. For example, they may think that certain toys are only for girls or boys.
- Some children may express their gender very strongly. For example, a child might go through a stage of insisting on wearing a dress every day or refusing to wear a dress even on special occasions.
- While many children at this age have a stable gender identity, gender identity may change later in life.

6 to 7 years old:

- Many children begin to reduce outward expressions of gender as they feel more confident that others recognize their gender. For example, a girl may not feel that she has to wear a dress every day because she knows that others see her as a girl no matter what she wears.

- Children who feel their gender identity is different from the assigned sex at birth may experience increased social anxiety because they want to be like their peers, but realize they don't feel the same way.

8 years old and up:

- Most children will continue to have a gender identity that matches the assigned sex at birth.
- Pre-teens and teens continue to develop their gender identity through personal reflection and with input from their social environment, like peers, family and friends.
- Some gender-stereotyped behaviours may appear. You may notice your pre-teen or teen making efforts to "play up" or "downplay" some of their body's physical changes.
- As puberty begins, some youth may realize that their experienced gender is different from their assigned sex at birth.
- Because some children's gender identification may change, especially around puberty, families are encouraged to keep options open for their child.

How do most children express their gender identity?

Younger children may express their gender very clearly. For example, they may say "I am a she, not a he!", "I am not your daughter, I am your son."

Children may also express their gender through their:

- Clothing or hairstyle
- Choice of toys, games, and sports
- Social relationships, including the gender of friends
- Preferred name or nickname

Remember: Gender *expression* is different from gender *identity*. You can't assume a child's gender identity based on their gender expression (for example, their choice of toys, clothing, or friends).

My boy likes to wear dresses. Should I let him?

Some children go through a period of resisting society's gender expectations. Remember that gender expression and gender identity are two different things. The way you express yourself does not necessarily define your gender.

Children do best when their parents or caregivers show them that they are loved and accepted for who they are. Discouraging your child from expressing their gender identity can make them feel ashamed. Give them unconditional support. In doing so, you are not framing a gender, but simply accepting who they are and how they are feeling.

For many children, this is part of normal exploration of gender identity. No one can tell you whether your child's gender identity or expression will change over time. What children need to know most is that you will love and accept them as they figure out their place in the world. In older children, you can also gently help prepare them for potential negative reactions from other children, for example, by role-playing how best to confidently respond to teasing.

What does gender-diverse mean?

Gender-diverse children express their gender differently from what society may expect. For example, a boy who wants to wear dresses might be considered gender-diverse. Society's expectations for gender constantly change and vary in different cultures and at different times in history.

I think my child may be gender-diverse. What should I do next?

Gender diversity is not a result of illness or parenting style. It isn't caused by letting your child play with dolls or trucks.

If your child is gender-diverse, they can live a happy and healthy life. Get support from other parents of gender-diverse children or talk to a mental health professional who specializes in the care of gender-diverse and transgender children (if available in your community). Indigenous families can talk to a Two-Spirit elder or leader. See additional resources listed below.

How can I support my child?

Parent support is key!

- Love your child for who they are.
- Talk with your child about gender identity. As soon as your child is able to say words like “girl” and “boy,” they are beginning to understand gender.
- Ask questions! This is a great way to hear your child’s ideas about gender.
- Read books with your child that talk about many different ways to be a boy, a girl, or having another gender identity.
- Don’t pressure your child to change who they are.
- Find opportunities to show your child that gender-diverse and transgender people exist and belong to many communities who appreciate and love them.
- Ask your child’s teachers how they support gender expression and what they teach about gender identity at school.
- Be aware that a child who is worrying about gender may show signs of depression, anxiety, and poor concentration. They may not want to go to school.
- Be aware of potentially negative issues that your child may face. Let your child know that you want to hear about any bullying or intimidation towards them.
- If you are concerned about your child’s emotional health, talk to your child’s family doctor, paediatrician, mental health provider, or other professionals that specialize in the care of gender-diverse and transgender children.
- Some parents have a hard time accepting that their child’s gender identity is different from the assigned sex at birth. If you are having difficulties, please seek additional help through websites, printed resources, support groups or mental health providers. See below for additional resources.

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Additional resources

- Gender Creative Kids
(<http://gendercreativekids.ca/>)
- Hi Sam: Sensitizing Youth Through Play (Gender Creative Kids)
(<https://gendercreativekids.com/upload/ressources/files/Hi-Sam-Pedagogical-Guide.pdf>)
- Gender identity (Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada)
(<https://www.sexandu.ca/lgbttq/gender-identity/>)
- Gender Identity Development in Children (American Academy of Pediatrics)
(<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Gender-Identity-and-Gender-Confusion-In-Children.aspx>)
- Gender Spectrum
(<https://www.genderspectrum.org/>)
- Bullying: What parents need to know (PrevNet)
(<https://www.prevnet.ca/bullying/parents/parents-of-lgbtq-youth>)
- Canadian Parents of Trans & Gender Diverse Kids (Facebook page)
(<https://www.facebook.com/canadianparentsoftranskids>)
- Gender and identity Learning Hub (AboutKidsHealth - SickKids)
(<https://teens.aboutkidshealth.ca/adolescenthealth?topic=gender>)
- Gender diversity clinic (CHU Sainte-Justine)
(<https://www.chusj.org/Soins-services/D/Diversite-de-genre.aspx>)

Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Community Paediatrics Committee
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