eMentalHealth.ca

Gender Identity and Diversity: Information for Parents and Caregivers

Image credit: Adobe Stock

Summary: For many people, the sex we are born with (designated at birth) is a good match for how we see ourselves on the inside. But for some, the sex and gender identity don't match at all. This could mean 1) A child who is born male at birth, feels like a girl on the inside, or 2) A child who is born female at birth, feels like a boy on the inside, or 3) A child or youth does not identify completely as either a boy or a girl. If you have just recently learned that your child or teen is questioning gender identity, you might feel quite overwhelmed, upset, and not know what to do. Remember that your child or teen may have been very worried about how you would react. Your child needs your love and reassurance more than ever. Children and youth need to hear that being transgender does not make you love them any less. Transgender children and youth who are supported have the best chance of growing up to be happy, productive adults. People who are loved, supported and allowed to express their true selves, will do far better.

Introduction

For many people, the sex we are born with (designated at birth) is a good match for how we see ourselves on the inside. But for some, the sex and gender identity don't match at all. This could mean that:

- A child who is born male at birth, feels like a girl on the inside (i.e. gender assigned male, trans female).
- A child who is born female at birth, feels like a boy on the inside (i.e. gender assigned female, trans male).
- A child or youth does not identify completely as either a boy or a girl.

Gender

While some people see gender as 'binary' (either you're male or female), others see it very differently. Another way to think about gender is as a continuum, a scale or a spectrum. A continuum can be helpful because it includes people whose gender identity doesn't fall within the boundaries of either male or female.

Remember: sexual orientation (whom we're attracted to) is not the same thing as gender. For example, some trans men are gay, and attracted to other men. Some trans women are lesbians, and are attracted to other women.

Someone's gender identity can be at any point along the continuum:

- Seeing yourself as neither male nor female
- Seeing yourself as a boy or man
- Seeing yourself as both male and female
- Seeing yourself as a girl or woman
- Seeing yourself as neither male nor female

A Few Terms...

People who are transgender don't all feel the same kinds of discomfort about their inner feelings and the sex they were born with. Some people feel a lot of conflict, while others feel less. Some people have more difficulty with other people's reactions (social conflict) than with any conflict they feel inside. Others experience social as well as severe internal conflict.

Sex: (or designated sex) is about how we understand our bodies as male or female, including whether we're born with a penis or a vulva.

Gender identity: is the personal feeling of being a man, a woman. Some people don't identify as being either a man or a woman. They may feel that this 'either/or' system doesn't offer a complete description of who they are. Genderidentity and sex usually 'match', but not always.

"Sex is between the legs, while gender is between the ears."

Gender Non-conforming (or Gender Queer): Describes a person who does not identify as a man or a woman.

Transgender/Transsexual: This describes people who don't conform or identify with the gender expectations associated with their sex at birth. This can include people who live as the gender they feel inside, altering their bodies with hormone therapy and sometimes surgery so that their bodies match their gender identity. This also includes people who identify as transgender or transsexual. In this fact sheet, we'll use 'transgender' or 'TRANS' as umbrella terms.

Two Spirit: This is a reclaimed concept from First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. It refers to Indigenous people who are born one sex, and fulfill roles across sex and gender lines, including roles reserved for Two Spirit people. Some say they maintain balance by housing both the male and female spirit. Two Spirit people were considered to be a gift to the community. They were able to cross a range of genders, hold the balance and were respected and honoured as visionaries, peacemakers and healers.

Cross-Dresser (CD): is someone who wears the clothing assigned by society to the "opposite" sex. People who are CD may or may not be transgender.

How Does Gender Identity Develop?

Researchers have studied many possible ways gender identity develops, but there is no clear answer. The best answer we can give is that gender identity develops from many factors working together. You may be worried that the questions your child is having about gender is caused by something you did or didn't do. This is not the case, there is no evidence to suggest that parenting or any other outside exposure contributes to children becoming transgender. Your child's gender identity is unique, and he or she is just trying to express how they feel inside.

We don't choose our gender identity. Being transgender or gender nonconforming is not a choice. But people's life situations can determine how free they feel to express their true gender identity.

How Common Is It For People To Be Transgender Or Transsexual?

Older studies reported that transgender identities were quite rare, but more recent studies show that they are more common. And studies assess different things, for example, some report on the number of people who have completed gender reassignment surgery, while other studies report on the number of people who have changed the gender on their passport.

Telephone surveys in the US in 2010 indicated that 1 in 200 people were transgender. The numbers of transgender people appear to be increasing. It's not clear if this is because people are more comfortable coming forward, or if the increase is due to something else. Unfortunately, people who are gender non-conforming, gender variant or transgender can experience discrimination and rejection. Much pain could be avoided if all transgender people were treated with the acceptance and respect that every person deserves.

How Do I Know If My Child or Teen is Transgender?

Many boys and girls experiment with different gender behaviours as they are growing up. Many boys may try on girl's clothing, and many girls may try on boy's clothing.

Children and youth who are questioning their gender identity may experience mild to severe discomfort with the sex they were born with. Below is a list of feelings and behaviours that transgender children and youth may experience, to one degree or another.

For example, a boy (who is actually trans female) might:

- Express unhappiness at being a boy.
- Express the wish "to be" a girl, and say they will grow up to be a woman.
- Actively prefer dressing in clothes that typically girls would wear.
- Avoid undressing in public change rooms.
- Avoid public washrooms.
- Play "stereotypical" games and hobbies of girls (for example, playing with dolls).
- Be more comfortable in the company of other girls.
- Avoid "rough-and-tumble" play and competitive sports.
- Have little interest in cars and trucks.
- Insist on sitting to urinate.
- Pretend not to have a penis by pushing it in between their legs.
- Show confusion, or stress over their penis.
- Choose a female avatar for computer games or a feminine alias in email addresses.
- On the other hand, the person might work really hard to prove they are their assigned gender identity. They may get try to get involved in typically masculine activities, like rough sports.

For example, a girl (who is actually trans male) might:

- Want to be "male".
- Prefer boy's clothing and short-hair, to the point where others may mistake the girl for a boy.
- Prefer to be with boys and to play "boy's games".
- Show less interest in activities that typically other girls would engage in.
- Avoid undressing in public change rooms.
- Avoid public washrooms.
- Choose a male avatar for computer games, or a masculine alias in email addresses.
- May show confusion, or stress over her vulva or vagina (or breasts when they begin to develop).
- May insist that one day she will grow up to be a man.

It is possible that these behaviours in a very young boy or girl may not continue. If youth begin to or still are questioning their gender identity in the teen years, it is more likely that they will maintain a trans gender identity or remain gender non-conforming. Some children and youth may not be able to express in words, or feel safe or comfortable describing their struggle. If youth do not feel supported by family, they may stop expressing their thoughts and feelings ('closeting' themselves).

What Should We Do If We Think Our Child or Teen Is Questioning Gender Identity or is Transgender?

Many transgender children and youth hide their questions and feelings about their gender identity from their family. They are afraid of being rejected, of losing their family's love and support. Our society is not very understanding and accepting of transgender, and this can contribute to emotional difficulties like depression, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. Sometimes these feelings, or behaviours like skipping school or problems in school are the only signs that youth are struggling.

If you think your child is struggling with gender identity, listen with care. Your child or teen needs your love and

support more than ever. If you're finding this difficult, review the resources at the end of this fact sheet for more information and support.

Why Does 'Gender Identity Disorder' Exist as a Medical Diagnosis?

Being transgender or gender non-conforming is not a mental illness. However, Gender Identity Disorder (GID) is the medical term that describes struggles or questions with gender identity. It's officially 'in the books' as a mental disorder. Gender Identity Disorder may also be referred to as Gender Dysphoria, Gender Incongruence, or Transgenderism. We know that people who are gender non-conforming or transgender can live happy, healthy and productive lives if they have the love and support everyone needs.

Many people feel that having gender identity in the official manual of mental disorders implies that there is something wrong with being transgender. There is nothing wrong with being transgender or gender non-conforming. But right now, a diagnosis of GID allows access to medical treatments or surgery. Most hospitals are doing their best to provide respectful services within the limitations of this diagnosis requirement.

Treatment involves accepting a person's gender identity in a way that makes sense to that person. It might mean supportive counseling to help a person navigate his or her unique gender identity, and to help families accept this as well. This process allows people to work through all the messages they've internalized about what it means to be transgender. It's important to note that many of the struggles people have are the result of our society's transphobia. Transphobia has a large and negative impact on mental health. Treatment might also mean medical therapies to help a person's body match how they see themselves.

How Do We Help Gender Non-Conforming or Transgender Children and Youth?

- **Give your unconditional support, love and acceptance.**

  If you have just recently learned that your child or teen is questioning gender identity, you might feel quite overwhelmed, upset, and not know what to do. Remember that your child or teen may have been very worried about how you would react. Your child needs your love and reassurance more than ever. Children and youth need to hear that being transgender does not make you love them any less.

  It's important to use the name your child or teen prefers, as well as the preferred pronoun (he or she). This will mean a lot to your child or teen. You may need to get support for yourself, so you can be a strong support for your child or teen.

- **Counselling.**

  Children, youth and families can benefit from supportive counseling or psychotherapy. The goal of counseling is to support youth and their families as they adjust. Counseling can help guide youth and families along the journey of gender identity consolidation, and support them as they face the challenges they are likely to encounter. Youth and families can also learn about the wide range of other treatment options so they can make well informed decisions.

- **Hormone therapies.**

  Pediatric endocrinologists who are experienced in treating transgender adolescents (up to age 18) may prescribe medications that suppress the physical changes of puberty (also known as hormone blockers). This treatment is only given to adolescents who 1) Meet gender reassignment eligibility and readiness criteria and 2) Have started to show physical signs of puberty (confirmed by hormone blood tests).

  Hormone blockers are safe, and have been well tested. The effects are temporary, so that if a youth stops taking them, physical changes of puberty begin again.

  At age 16, cross-sex hormone therapy can begin. The timing can be important and depends on the teen's

readiness and support systems. Unnecessary delays or moving ahead too soon may increase the chance of psychological or social problems later on. Physical outcomes may be less favourable if cross sex hormone therapy is delayed until adulthood. A pediatric endocrinologist should initiate and monitor any hormone therapy in transgender youth.

Surgeons do not perform gender confirmation surgeries (previously known as gender reassignment surgery) on youth under 18. When youth reach adulthood, they can be referred to adult services.

For adults

Many transgender men and women live as the gender with which they identify. Some, but not all, have medical treatments to alter their bodies in order to appear more like the gender they identify with. Some might express an androgynous (neither male nor female) gender appearance all their lives. Some may not live full time as their gender, and only express their gender when it’s safe to do so.

Transgender adults can consider treatment options, like:

- Supportive counseling
- Hormone replacement therapy
- Sex reassignment surgeries. These are procedures that change the body to better match a person’s gender identity.

20 Things Your Transgender Youth Wants You To Know

1. Pronouns really matter: “I remember the first time you referred to me in my correct pronouns; it made me so happy and hopeful.”

2. Believe in me: “When you told me that this is just a phase, it made me stop trusting myself.”

3. I don’t want to lose you: “When I can’t talk to you about gender, I can’t talk to you about my life.”

4. Protect me at home: “I need you to stop my siblings from emotionally abusing me about my gender.”

5. Side with me: “It meant a lot to me when you refused to go to dinners at our extended family’s unless I was invited too.”

6. Protect me from discrimination: “I need you to be a shield between me and unsupportive extended family and community.”

7. Don’t under-react: “When I came out, you said you love and support me no matter what, yet you didn’t talk about it again and kept using the wrong pronouns. It felt like you didn’t take me seriously.”

8. Have faith in my process: “Trust me and my decisions. Let me make my own mistakes. Be behind me and beside me while I walk my own path.”

9. Show interest in me and in trans issues: “Not all trans people are the same. Learn about me. Ask me questions. Read books about trans people, and then check in with me about what I think and how I feel.”

10. Help me navigate systems: “I am overwhelmed, and I need your help with all the things I have to do, but I want to make the plan together.”

11. Reassure me: “Remind me that you love me and that everything is going to be ok.”

12. Protect me from your hard feelings: “ I feel really guilty, and I blame myself when you are upset about this.”

13. I look to you: “When you are calm, it helps me stay calm. If you don’t feel calm…try to fake it for me!”

14. Check up on me: “The medical stuff is not the only thing I am dealing with…when I get home from school or from being out, ask me ‘did anything bad happen today,’ so I can talk to you about what I’m going through.”

15. Support my gender expression: “Especially at first, I wanted your help to go shopping for clothing that looks good on me and reflects my gender identity.”

16. Help me come out….but respect my preferences: “There are so many people I need to tell who I am close to, and that is hard. It would take the pressure off if you told our extended family, neighbors and other people I don’t know well” On the other hand, “Don’t come out for me without checking how I want to be referred to and have my story told.”

17. Your words matter: “ I still hurt today when I think of the things you said to me when I came out to you last year.”

18. Be patient with me: “It took me a long time to get ready to go out at first – I spent hours in front of the mirror stressing out – I was worried about how others would respond to me. Please understand, and don’t be annoyed.”

19. Show me you’re proud of me: “I feel like you’re ashamed of me when you ask me to hide who I am or dress differently.”

20. Your support matters: “It changed everything when I felt like you accepted me - I use your support as a springboard to face the rest of my life.”

Special thanks to Central Toronto Youth Services (CTYS) and Supporting Our Children (SOS) for "20 Things Trans Youth Want You To Know".

What Happens To Transgender Children and Youth When They Grow Older?

Transgender children and youth are like any other children and youth. How they do in life depends on whether they are supported by family and friends, or whether they are rejected for who they are.

Transgender children and youth who are supported have the best chance of growing up to be happy, productive adults. People who are loved, supported and allowed to express their true selves, will do far better.

On the other hand, transgender people are much more likely to have future problems if they must stay “closeted” because of shame and fear of rejection. Transphobia can keep many people in the closet, and keep them from expressing their true selves. Sometimes this can lead to depression, substance abuse and even suicide. People who come out can still experience these struggles.

For More Information

Families in Transition Guide, 2nd edition
Created by Central Toronto Youth Services (CTYS), this is an incredible resource guide for families of transgender youth.
http://www.ctys.org

Gender Creative Kids Canada
http://www.gendercreativekids.ca

True Selves online support for Gen-X and Y youth and young adults.
http://www.trueselves.com

World Professional Association for Transgender Health, is a professional organization devoted to the understanding and treatment of gender identity disorders.
http://wpath.org

How to Respect a Transsexual Person
http://www.kisa.ca/respect.html

About this Document

Authors: Written by the Mental Health Information Committee of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) in Ottawa, Ontario and Dr. Paul Fedoroff, Director of the Sexual Behaviours Clinic, Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre. Special thanks to Dr. Margaret Lawson (CHEO), Dr. Steve Feder (CHEO), Marnie Potter (CHEO), Megan Green (Family Services à la famille Ottawa), Helma Seidl, Jake Pyne and the Gender Independent Children's Project Advisory Committee (Rainbow Health Ontario) and Ernie Gibbs (Centretown Community Health Centre).

Disclaimer

Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

Creative Commons License

Under a Creative Commons License. You are free to share, copy and distribute this work as in its entirety, with no alterations. This work may not be used for commercial purposes. View full license at http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/ca/