

# Talking with Children about Gender Identity

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## When do we talk to children about gender identity?

We probably started moments after their birth, with the first announcement of “it’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” By 2 to 3 years, children begin to label themselves as male or female. By 3 – 4 years, they start categorizing things as “boy things” or “girl things”. By 4, they may say “only boys can do that” or “girls never do that.” So, the conversation has already started. It may be time to pay attention to what you and their environment are *already* telling them about gender.

## What is gender? A few definitions:

**Biological Sex:** A person’s body parts / hormones. Can be categorized: male, female, intersex.

**Gender Identity:** A person’s *internal sense* of who they are. (No one else gets to define it.)

Many people are **cisgender** – their identity aligns with their biological sex. Around 1% are **transgender** – their identity does not line up with the sex assigned to them at birth. Others may identify as gender non-conforming, non-binary, genderqueer, or other variations.

**Gender Expression:** How a person chooses to dress, wear their hair, and behave.

**Gender Roles:** How other people expect you to act, or what they expect you to be interested in, based on their perceptions of your gender.

Many people who identify as female might express themselves as male (e.g. prefer male-style clothing) or have male gender roles (e.g. a career in a male dominated field) or vice versa.

All these aspects of gender are separate from **sexual orientation**. Gender is about who you are (or are perceived to be). Sexual orientation is about who you are attracted to.

## Defining Your Family Values about Gender

You are your child’s most important teacher. Your words and actions shape your child’s early perceptions. Spend time reflecting, and talking with other significant adults in your child’s life, to figure out what your family values *are*. Then, pay attention to how you manifest your values.

When buying clothes or toys for your child, do you choose things because your individual child will like them, or choose based on gender assumptions? When choosing activities or playmates, are you expanding or limiting their options based on gender? When you talk about people, do you make assumptions about gender? (Like assuming a child’s teacher is female.) If you hear your child make observations like “boys can’t do that”, do you ask them why they think that?

## What if your child is exploring gender roles or expression?

During preschool and early elementary years, many children explore what it means to be a boy or girl. Especially in pretend play, girls may try out being a dad, boys may try on “girly” clothes. This is a normal part of children’s play, and part of how they learn about their world and their culture. There is no need to discourage this. There’s also no need to *overly* encourage it.

Don’t make assumptions about a child’s long-term gender identity or sexual orientation based on short-term interests. Some children outgrow this. Some continue to explore gender expression and roles, such as a “tomboy” who dresses and acts like a boy but identifies as a girl. However your child wants to express themselves, you can help them feel safe and loved.

## What if a child tells you they are transgender?

Gender identity tends to be firmly established by age 4. If a child occasionally swaps gender roles in pretend play, or tells you once or twice, "I wish I was a boy, so I could do that", those are likely just short-term explorations. There's a big difference between that and a child *consistently* and *insistently* telling you their biological sex does not match their internal identity.

If a child says they are transgender, we don't need to know whether they will always identify that way. But, in that moment, we should listen to our children tell us about who they are, so we can provide the best possible support.

Transgender people often experience *gender dysphoria*, a distressing disconnect between the sex assigned them at birth, and their internal identity. Every time they look at their body, or every time someone refers to them by the wrong pronoun, it feels wrong to them. For some transgender people, this sensation is mild and manageable, but for many it is not. Transgender people have a high rate of self-harm behaviors – 41% have attempted suicide.

For a transgender person, family acceptance promotes higher self esteem, more social support, improved physical health and mental health, and a huge reduction in self-harm and suicide. How you can show your support (for your child or others that you know):

- Assure the child that they have your unconditional love and support
- Use the child's preferred pronouns and preferred name
- Ask that others respect the child's identity
- Some children will want to transition their gender expression (clothing and hair) to be more in line with their identity. Some ask for a medical transition (options such as hormone blockers to delay puberty, supplemental hormones, and gender-affirming surgeries). Find information at: [www.hrc.org/explore/topic/transgender-children-youth](http://www.hrc.org/explore/topic/transgender-children-youth)

## Interacting with a person who is (or may be) transgender

Young children are trying to make sense of their world, so they may ask you questions about gender, especially when they encounter someone who doesn't fit the "rules" they were just starting to figure out. Remember that if your child asks a question about something, they are trying to understand it, and they may also be asking you if you think that it's OK.

So, your child might say something like "that man is wearing makeup!" If you shush them, or avoid the topic, you imply to your child that what they have seen is bad or is a taboo subject. Try answering the question: "Yes, both men and women may wear makeup, and that's OK."

When interacting with someone who is (or may be) transgender: Use the language they use for themselves. If you don't know which pronouns to use, you can ask – or even better, share your own pronouns. If you make a mistake on pronouns, apologize briefly and move on.

Some transgender people choose to medically transition, or change their names, or change their appearance, but some don't. You (or your child) may be curious. Before asking questions, ask yourself "do I need to know this information to treat them respectfully?" and "Would I be comfortable if they asked me this question, or would I ask that question of any other person?"

## More Resources:

For a longer version of this article, and links to many resources, including recommended kids' books about gender identity, go to <http://gooddayswithkids.com/2018/05/02/gender-identity/> For more on gender: <https://bellevuetoddlers.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/gender.pdf>