

# Talking with Children about Gender Identity

Janelle Durham, Parent Educator, Bellevue College. GoodDaysWithKids.com, InventorsOfTomorrow.com

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

You probably started moments after their birth, with the first announcement of “it’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” The conversation already started. It may be time to pay attention to what you/their environment are *already* telling them about gender. 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, it is helpful to be having conversations with your child now that reflect your family values.

## 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 can define this for them.)

Many people are **cisgender** – their identity aligns with their biological sex. Perhaps 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, walk, talk, and behave.

**Gender Roles:** How other people expect someone to act, or what they expect someone to be interested in, based on their perceptions of that person’s 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.

Some examples: 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 limiting their options based on gender? (Assuming they will only want to be friends with people of the same 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” or “all girls do this”, do you ask them why they think that and share your thoughts?

## 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. They might also pretend to be puppies or to be astronauts. All this roleplaying 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. Just let it play out naturally.

Your child may go through phases where they only play with boys or only play with girls. There may be a superhero phase then a princess phase. A soccer phase or a ballet phase.

Don't make assumptions about a child's long-term gender identity or sexual orientation based on short-term interests. For some children, it's a phase they outgrow. Some continue to explore gender expression and roles, such as a "tomboy" who always wants to dress and act like a boy but identifies as a girl. Or a boy who loves activities that are traditionally dominated by girls, like dance or gymnastics. 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 or 5. 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* and *persistently* 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, you can: assure the child that they have your unconditional love and support, use the pronouns and name the child asks you to use, and ask that others do the same. If they want to shift their gender expression (clothing and hair) to be more in line with their identity, you can support that. Learn more at <https://www.hrc.org/resources/transgender-children-and-youth-understanding-the-basics>

Transgender people often experience *gender dysphoria*. Every time they look at their body, or every time someone refers to them by the wrong pronoun, it feels wrong. For some, this sensation is mild and manageable, but for many it is not. Transgender people have a high rate of self-harm. Acceptance and support from family and friends promotes higher self esteem, more social support, improved physical health and mental health, and a significant reduction in self-harm and suicide.

If it turns out that questioning their gender was a short term thing, there is no harm in having supported that phase. If they truly are transgender, this early support can have a huge impact.

## Interacting with someone who is (or may be) transgender/genderqueer

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

So, your child might say something like "is that a man or a woman?" or "that man is wearing makeup!" If you shush them, or avoid the topic, you imply that what they have seen is bad or is a taboo subject. Try answering questions matter-of-factly: "Yes, anyone who likes makeup may choose to wear it."

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? Would I be comfortable if they asked me this question? Would I ask that question of any other person?" If not, don't ask.

## 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 differences: <https://bellevuetoddlers.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/gender.pdf>