

Understanding Trans and Gender Diverse Identities and Gender Expressions

“If you’re not yourself, then it kind of gets sad and depressing. I’m glad that I told everybody.” (Wren Kauffman, quoted in Purdy)

It is important that all educators, school and divisional personnel, students, and parents/guardians have an understanding of the meaning of and distinctions between trans and gender diverse identities and gender expressions. A brief overview of this essential information is provided below in the form of summarized responses to frequently asked questions.* (For further definitions of terms, see the [Glossary](#), and for additional information, refer to the list of annotated resources in [Appendix B: Selected Print and Online Resources](#).)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the difference between biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression?

The terms *sex* and *gender* are often used interchangeably, but there are very important distinctions between the two:

- *Sex* refers to one’s genitals and reproductive organs and other biological characteristics such as chromosomes and hormone prevalence. These anatomical details are thought to define a person’s biological status as male or female and are generally assigned at birth. (It is important to note that various conditions may lead to atypical development of physical sex characteristics in some children that are collectively referred to as *intersex conditions*.)
- *Gender* is generally understood to refer to one’s sense of gender identity, meaning one’s internal sense of self, regardless of biology. Gender identity is not the same as sexual orientation. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), gender is a social and cultural construct that refers to the roles, behaviours, activities, and characteristics that a given society or cultural group considers “appropriate” for females or males. These concepts or constructs of gender have a great influence on the ways people act, interact, and feel about themselves. While the aspects of what constitutes biological sex are similar across different societies and cultures, concepts of gender may differ significantly (APA, *Answers* 1).

* **Source:** Some responses to these questions are drawn from the following source:

American Psychological Association. *Answers to Your Questions about Transgender People, Gender Identity and Gender Expression*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011, 2014. Available online at www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/transgender.aspx (3 May 2016). Copyright © 2011 American Psychological Association. Updated in 2014.



Everyone has a *gender identity*, which is described as one’s personal, internal, or intrinsic sense of being one in a spectrum of gender identities, such as male, female, transgender, two-spirit, genderqueer, bigender, gender fluid, transsexual, gender creative, pangender, transmen, transwomen, gender independent, agender, male-to-female (MTF), female-to-male (FTM), intersex, and/or something else. (See the [Glossary](#) for definitions of some of these identities.)

Gender expression refers to the way a person communicates, demonstrates, or “expresses” their personal concept of gender identity to others through behaviours, dress, grooming, voice, or body characteristics (APA, *Questions 1*). Some researchers suggest that a person’s gender identity is set by age 3 (Ryan, *Supportive Families*). For many individuals, gender identity and gender expression are consistent with their biological/anatomical sex (cisgender) and/or the societal expectations for being/acting male or female. For others, however, gender identity does not reflect their anatomical/biological sex.

Personal Pronouns

In this document, the terms *they*, *their*, and *them* are used as singular, gender-inclusive pronouns to refer to persons of diverse gender identities and expressions.

Gender, like sexual orientation, is diverse and includes multiple gender identities. Therefore, gender may be seen as being related to the following three aspects (Gender Spectrum):

- biology/anatomy
- sense of self (gender identity)
- presentation of self through dress and action (gender expression)

What is the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation?

Sexual orientation refers to a person’s “enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to another person” (APA, *Answers 2*). In contrast, *gender identity* refers to how one sees oneself; it is one’s personal or inner sense of being one in a spectrum of gender identities (as discussed earlier).

Transgender people, like cisgender people, vary in their sexual orientation. They may be heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or asexual. APA addresses the question about the relationship between gender identity and sexual orientation:

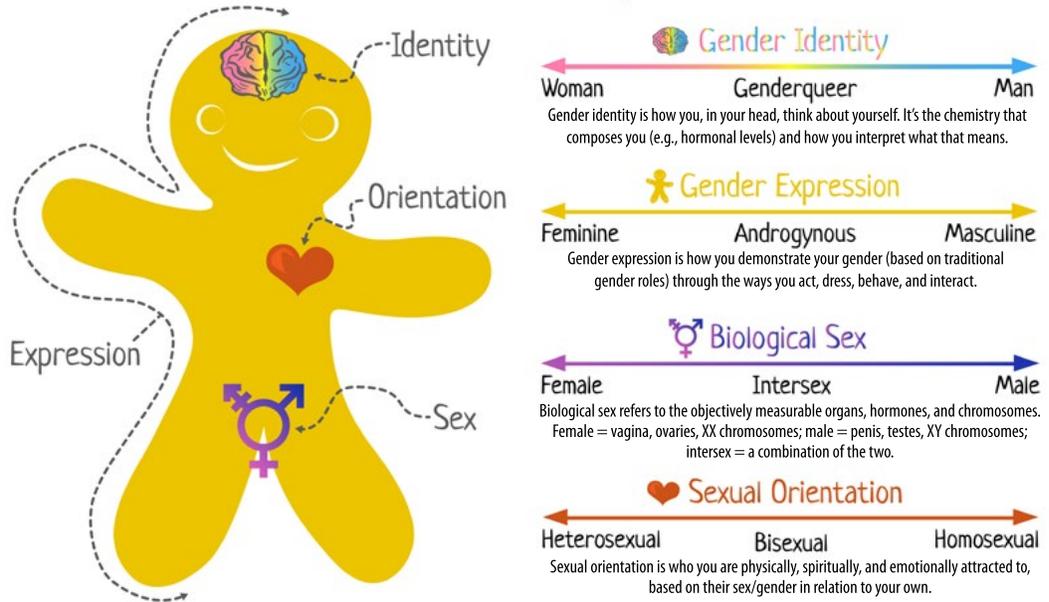
Some recent research has shown that a change or a new exploration period in partner attraction may occur during the process of transition. However, transgender people usually remain as attached to loved ones after transition as they were before transition. Transgender people usually label their sexual orientation using their gender as a reference. For example, a transgender woman, or a person who is assigned male at birth and transitions to female, who is attracted to other women would be identified as a lesbian or gay woman. Likewise, a transgender man, or a person who is assigned female at birth and transitions to male, who is attracted to other men would be identified as a gay man. (APA, *Answers 2*)



The following Genderbread Person* summarizes the distinctions between gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation, and the spectrum of possibilities for each aspect.

The Genderbread Person

by www.ItsPronouncedMetrosexual.com



Sex (Biology/Body)	Gender (Culture)	Sexual Orientation (Attractions/Relationships)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chromosomes, genitals, reproductive organs, secondary sex characteristics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender expression Gender identity Gender roles Cisgender/transgender 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gay, lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, etc.

* **Source:** Killermann, Sam. *It's Pronounced Metrosexual*. <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/01/the-genderbread-person/> (26 May 2016). Public Domain.



What does transgender mean?

Transgender (or *trans*) is an umbrella term used for persons whose gender identity and/or gender expression does not conform to that typically (socially and culturally) associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth (the sex listed on their birth certificates) (APA, *Answers 1*). Diverse gender identities fall under the umbrella term *transgender*, such as male, female, two-spirit, genderqueer, bigender, gender fluid, transsexual, gender creative, pangender, transmen, transwomen, gender independent, agender, male-to-female (MTF), female-to-male (FTM), intersex, and/or something else.

The concept of transgender is not new; historically, “transgender persons have been documented in many Indigenous, Western, and Eastern cultures and societies from antiquity to the present day. However, the meaning of gender nonconformity may vary [over time and] from culture to culture” (APA, *Answers 1*).

Many traditional cultures and peoples have embraced gender diversity in North America and in other parts of the world. Some of these cultures had names for multiple forms of gender beyond the male-female binary. Historically, individuals who had access to both the masculine and feminine, or exhibited multiple expressions of gender, often had special roles within the community. They were highly revered and respected in their communities, and were leaders, medicine people, or shamans.

How and when does one know one is transgender?

In addressing the question of how individuals know they are transgender, APA states:

Transgender people experience their transgender identity in a variety of ways and may become aware of their transgender identity at any age. Some can trace their transgender identities and feelings back to their earliest memories. They may have vague feelings of “not fitting in” with people of their assigned sex or specific wishes to be something other than their assigned sex. Others become aware of their transgender identities or begin to explore and experience gender-nonconforming attitudes and behaviors during adolescence or much later in life. Some embrace their transgender feelings, while others struggle with feelings of shame or confusion. Those who transition later in life may have struggled to fit in adequately as their assigned sex only to later face dissatisfaction with their lives. Some transgender people, transsexuals in particular, experience intense dissatisfaction with their sex assigned at birth, physical sex characteristics, or the gender role associated with that sex. These individuals often seek gender-affirming treatments. (APA, *Answers 2*)

Gender diversity in any person, whether a child or an adult, may be experienced along a continuum from none, where the individual’s gender identity and biological/assigned sex match, to intense, where the individual experiences extreme emotional pain due to the mismatch or conflict between



their biological/assigned sex and their gender identity. Some youth report feeling like they are *neither* male nor female, while others report they feel like *both* male and female.

Of all the youth who are gender diverse, relatively few experience intense feelings or emotions of distress with respect to their identity. However, youth who do experience a high intensity of dissatisfaction and feelings of distress are often at the greatest risk in schools.

“My daughter is transgender. She’s out and she’s proud . . . The community loves her. Her school loves her and the other students love her” (parent, quoted in Paul).

What is gender dysphoria?

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) in *Standards of Care (SOC) for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender-Nonconforming People, Version 7* (Coleman et al.) and the American Psychiatric Association in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* both speak to the meaning of gender dysphoria. Both documents stress that being transgender or gender diverse is a matter of human diversity, not pathology. *Gender dysphoria* may be diagnosed when individuals experience intense, persistent gender *incongruence* and significant “discomfort or distress that is caused by the discrepancy between a person’s gender identity and that person’s assigned sex at birth (and the associated gender role and/or primary and secondary sex characteristics)” (Coleman et al. 5).

Many obstacles may affect the well-being of transgender persons and may lead to distress, including a lack of acceptance within society, direct or systemic discrimination, or assault. As a result of these negative experiences, many transgender persons suffer from anxiety, depression, or related disorders at higher rates than cisgender persons.

“For many transgender persons, their gender identity is not distressing or disabling, and identifying as transgender does not constitute a mental/psychological disorder” (APA, *Answers* 3).



Educators should be aware that not all children who display gender creative or diverse behaviours will choose to transition. Research in clinical settings found that “gender dysphoria and cross-gender identification persisted into adulthood in up to 27% of cases, with people assigned female at birth being more likely to persist than those of a male natal sex” (Meier and Harris 1).

Implications for Educators

Educators need to recognize that childhood and adolescence are critical periods of identity formation in which gender and sexuality are understood as fluid, and their related expressions may change frequently as children and youth develop and grow. Fluidity of gender identity should not be perceived as a problem, nor should the evolving nature of gender expression. The problem or significant and pressing issue is the strict nature of gender roles and sex role stereotyping in society that imposes limits on a child’s natural gender expression.

Therefore, the more educators seek to break down sex role stereotypes and gender regulation behaviours, the more inclusive their classrooms will become for all students who are questioning their gender and exploring facets of their identity (Luecke). Challenging and eradicating stereotypes to release students from their gender “straightjackets” is critical for creating inclusive schools. In this way, educators can open and create space for all students, including those who live outside cultural and social norms, to find support and to be valued for who they are and not for what society tells them they ought to be.

Diversity of behaviour and gender expression in young children is quite common, with gender diverse behaviour reported for about 23% of boys and 39% of girls. To this point, research indicates that diversity of gender behaviour and expression in young children does not mean they will become transgender adults. However, studies do indicate that some children who exhibit diversity of gender expression and behaviour do grow up to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Several studies have revealed associations between early gender diverse behaviour and later same-sex attraction. Regardless, children are at a high risk for adverse health outcomes if they are not provided with supportive and affirming environments. While professionals and parents can influence or pressure youth to change the way they express their external presentation of gender, ultimately, they cannot change a young person’s internal sense of self, and lack of affirmation and pressure to change one’s sense of gender identity and expression lead to significant negative mental health consequences, including high rates of suicidal ideation (Sherer et al. 16).

