

Gender as a Spectrum

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In the first moments of a child's life, we announce "It's a boy!" or "It's a girl!" But it turns out that gender is more complex than just that simple label based on visible body parts.

What is gender? A few definitions:

Biological Sex: Can be categorized: male, female, intersex. (Biology isn't clear cut, as external genitals, internal organs, hormones, and chromosomes don't always line up as expected.)

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

Most people are **cisgender** – their identity aligns with their biological sex. One percent (or more) are **transgender** – their identity does not line up with the sex assigned to them at birth.

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.

Often these don't all line up in the stereotypical way. For example, a "tomboy" can be a child who is biologically female and identifies as a girl but likes to dress (express herself) in male styled clothing, and play in ways that line up with gender roles for boys.

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. The way you talk about gender, and your actions, will shape your child's early perceptions. So, spend time reflecting, and talking with the other significant adults in your child's life, to figure out what your family values are about gender identity, expression or roles. Then, pay attention to how you're manifesting these values.

For example, when talking about people, do you make assumptions about their gender? (Like assuming someone's teacher is female.) When greeting children, do you tend to compliment the girls on what they are wearing, and the boys on what they are doing? Do you respond to emotion in ways that carry gender assumptions – like: "you're a big boy. Big boys don't cry."

When buying clothes or toys for your child, or choosing activities to sign them up for, ask yourself: does this choice expand or limit their choices and expectations about gender? Many parents attempt to create a gender neutral environment – buying dolls for their boys and trucks for their girls, and dressing children in neutral colors. But biological differences can mean that boys and girls play with the same toys differently, and cultural influences on gender are strong. By age 3, most children will say things like "that's a toy for girls" or "boys don't do that."

We can use these as "teachable moments" to talk about gender stereotypes. We can let our children know that they can play with whichever toys they prefer, regardless of gender.

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, and they may try out different roles. 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 immediately jump in with both feet and *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 and move on to gender expressions and roles that line up with their biological sex. Some continue to explore gender expression and roles. However your child wants to express themselves, you can help them feel safe and loved.

If children want to make non-stereotypical choices, some parents choose to inform them about what reactions they might encounter: “it’s fine to have a sparkly pink backpack, but some kids think that only girls like sparkly pink, so they might tease you.” Then if the child still chooses that, at least they had the information to prepare themselves for the response.

What if your child tells you they are transgender?

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 *repeatedly* saying their biological sex does not match their internal identity. Transgender kids are: consistent, insistent, and persistent. They consistently identify as one gender, they don’t waffle back and forth. They’re insistent about that identity and get upset when mis-identified. They identify this way over a long period of time.

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, it feels wrong. Every time someone refers to them by the wrong pronoun, they squirm inside. For some transgender people, this sensation is mild and manageable, but for many it is not. Transgender girls may talk about a desire to cut their penises off. Transgender boys may begin self-harming as their breasts begin to grow. 41% of transgender people will attempt suicide.

If a child says they are transgender, we don’t need to know whether they will always identify that way. But, listening and respecting them in that moment allows us to provide the best possible support. Family acceptance promotes higher self esteem, more social support, improved health and mental health, with reduced anxiety and depression, and a huge reduction in suicide attempts.

You can show your support for a child by: assuring them that they have your unconditional love and support, using their preferred pronouns and preferred name, and asking that others respect the child’s identity. If a child asks to transition gender expression, or begin a medical transition, seek out more information and support. Find resources at: hrc.org/explore/topic/transgender-children-youth

Links to More Resources

<http://gooddayswithkids.com/2018/05/02/gender-identity/>

Recommended Kids’ Books about Gender as a Spectrum:

www.welcomingschools.org/pages/looking-at-gender-identity-with-childrens-books/

www.mothing.com/articles/20-picture-books-strong-girls-sensitive-boys/

<https://humaneeducation.org/blog/2012/12-childrens-picture-books-that-challenge-traditional-gender-roles/>