

Responding to Concerns: Teaching About Gender

1. ***Why should my child learn about gender at school?***

School is a place where children are taught to respect one another and to learn to work together regardless of their differences. Learning about gender diversity is part of that work. Creating a more tolerant, inclusive, and accepting school environment teaches all children to recognize and resist stereotypes. We teach children to stand up for others, to resist bullying, and to work together.

We also know that many children whose gender is seen as different than what is expected of them can face very difficult circumstances. Too often teasing, bullying and violence are a common experience for a gender expansive child. A growing number of school districts and states (17 as of 2014) specifically prohibit bullying and harassment of students based on gender expression or identity. Further, various federal-, state- and municipal-protections further protect these rights. In most cases, these protections call for proactive education and training to help students understand gender diversity more fully.

2. ***Isn't my child too young to be learning about gender?***

Children are already learning about it. Messages about gender are everywhere, and children receive very clear messages about the “rules” for boys and girls, as well as the consequences for violating them. By learning about the diversity of gender, children have an opportunity to explore a greater range of interests, ideas and activities. For all children, the pressure of “doing gender correctly,” is greatly reduced, creating more space for them to discover new talents and interests.

Whether in or out of school, children will encounter other children exhibiting wide ranges of gender expression. This is normal and, with a little reflection, we can all recognize it as something we encountered during our own childhoods. Tomboys or shy, sensitive boys, are commonly recognized examples of children who buck societal expectations of gender expression. These children, and all children, deserve a safe, supportive learning environment in which they can thrive and empower themselves.

3. ***If you are talking about gender, aren't you discussing reproduction and sexuality?***

The simple answer is no. When we discuss gender, we talk about what people like to wear, the activities they engage in, and how they feel about themselves. This is not sexuality. Sexuality involves physical intimacy and attraction. Gender is about self-identity. Gender identity is a person's internal sense of where they fit on the gender spectrum. This includes all kids, “typically” gendered or not.

If responding to questions that arise about physical sex, the discussion uses phrases such as “private parts,” and even if anatomical terms come up, nothing specific to human reproduction or sexuality is taught. For the most part, children are simply not raising these questions. While as adults, we struggle to separate the ideas of gender and sexuality (primarily because many were taught that they are one and the same), children have an ability to grasp the complexity of gender diversity because sexuality does not factor in to complicate their understanding.

4. ***Ideas about gender diversity go against the values we are instilling in my child at home. Are you trying to teach my child to reject these values?***

Absolutely not. Our children encounter people with different beliefs when they join any community. While one aim for learning about diversity is to become more accepting of those around us, not everyone is going to be best friends. That does not mean however, that they can't get along and learn together. The purpose of learning about gender diversity is to demonstrate that children are unique and that there is no single way to be a boy or a girl. If a child does not agree with or understand another student's gender identity or expression, they do not have to change how they feel inside about it. However, they also do not get to make fun, harass or harm someone either. Gender diversity education is about teaching students to live and work with others; it comes down to the simple agreement that all children must be treated with kindness and respect.

5. ***Won't my child get confused if we speak about more than two gender options?***

Studies show that, with enough information, children of any age are able to understand that there are more than the two gender categories currently recognized by our society. When it is explained to them in a simple, age appropriate manner, gender diversity is an easy concept for children to grasp.

When you discuss gender with your child, you may hear them exploring where they fit on the gender spectrum and why. This shows that they understand that everyone may have some variation of gender expression that fits outside of stereotypical norms. Their use of language or their personal placements along this spectrum may surprise you. We encourage all parents to approach these discussions with an air of openness and inquiry.

6. ***Don't gender-expansive kids have lots of problems? Is gender non-conformity a product of abuse, emotional problems, neglect, divorce, detached, or over-involved parents?***

No. While it is true that some transgender and gender nonconforming people do experience a tremendous amount of societal abuse and parental rejection, this is not the cause of their gender identity or expression. As a result, when not supported, children whose gender expression or identity is considered "atypical" often suffer from loneliness, lower self-esteem, and other negative feelings. Statistics reveal the devastating impact these young people face when placed into a non-supportive or hostile setting.

A gender-expansive child's emotional distress is a response to the mistreatment they have likely faced from those around them. It is not at all uncommon to see a gender-expansive or transgender child's distress greatly reduce or disappear when provided with a more positive environment.

7. ***Won't allowing children to express non-traditional genders cause them to be teased or harassed?***

While there is a great deal of data suggesting that gender-expansive young people do face teasing, there is a growing body of knowledge that points to the impact gender-expansive education can have on reducing that treatment. If children are being treated badly because of who they are, the answer is not to try and prevent them from being themselves. Rather, we should instead ask whether it is worth expanding students' understanding about stereotypes and limitations of self-expression to prevent possible teasing.

8. ***Won't discussing gender encourage my child to be transgender?***

Being transgender is not something that a person chooses. Studies show that although parents cannot make their child gay or transgender, they can deeply influence how their children feel about themselves. Parental pressure to enforce gender conformity can damage a child's self esteem and is a high predictor of negative health outcomes and risk-taking behaviors for youth. Transgender youth currently have an extremely high attempted suicide rate: some estimate it being as high as 50%. Discussing gender **will** have the effect of removing much of the pressure students face to fit into narrowly defined expectations that few if any can actually meet.

9. ***If transgender people are so 'normal', why are some families so private about it?***

A family with a transgender child will decide together how much they wish to share with others. Many children prefer to live their lives as the gender that reflects their internal gender identity and not adhere to what society expects based on their anatomy. In other words, a child who lets her parents know that she is a girl (even though she has 'male,' on her birth certificate) may choose to live her life as a female.

Some children and families are open and share this with everyone in their lives. Others choose to maintain a sense of complete privacy, while still others find a blend of these two approaches. In most families, this decision will be determined jointly by the child and guardian(s), often in collaboration with a medical, mental health, or other professionals experienced in this area. If a family honors their child's wish for privacy, this can have the appearance of secrecy. In reality, it may be an effort to avoid potential stigmatization or to simply keep a very personal topic private.

10. ***How can I correct or modify the impression I have already given my child about gender?***

It is powerful to share with children when we don't know the answer to something, and to let them know that adults as well as children are always learning. Having conversations with your children that reflect your growing understanding is wonderful. It does not undermine your parenting. If you were to discover that you had unknowingly taught your child another form of misinformation about other people, you would correct the impression you had mistakenly given them. With gender it is no different. Gender diversity is something that both society and science are just beginning to explore and understand.

11. ***I don't really feel like I know how to answer my child's questions.***

Once again, explain that you are learning about this, too. It is important, however, to monitor and understand your own feelings before you initiate this kind of conversation. Children can pick up on your feelings towards a subject. So, if you are still feeling uncomfortable about the concept of gender diversity, then consider taking additional time to increase your understanding. Read, talk to others, and further educate yourself. When you have a greater understanding and increased awareness, then you will likely feel more confident to talk with your children.

Answer children's questions simply, and let them take the lead in how deep the conversation goes. Most children are satisfied with this approach. They will guide the conversation from there and rarely ask the complex questions that occur to adults. You may be surprised at how simply children navigate this terrain. Some parents have found responses such as, "Hmmm, I am just learning about that myself. Let me tell you what I know, and then if you would like to learn more, maybe we could do that together," to be helpful in opening up pathways for further discussion.