



Gender Identity

About gender identity and young people

People can often feel uncomfortable when talking about gender identity, sex and sexuality, and can get these terms confused. There is a vast vocabulary around gender identity, which is constantly growing. These include terms like gender fluid, gender dysphoria, non-binary, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans), cis, gender questioning, intersex, and many more.

What is the difference between gender and sex?

A person's 'sex' describes biological differences, i.e. the female or male sex. A child's sex is usually assigned at birth. These two physical distinctions are what we mean when we say 'binary'.

A person's 'gender' describes a person's internal sense of their identity. For example, you might identify as a girl, or a boy, or neither, or another variation. The first person to develop an awareness of their gender identity is most likely to be the child itself.

There is an increasing recognition that for some people, gender is a spectrum, and that people may express themselves in many different ways, as being at one end or the other, e.g. male or female, or in the middle (non-binary). For others where they are on this spectrum this may change or fluctuate at different times. People who identify as non-binary may also refer to themselves as 'gender fluid', or 'gender queer'.

A transgender person self identifies their gender as being different to the sex they were assigned at birth. It can be unhelpful to describe being transgender as a choice. Gender identity is a deep rooted, sense of self. Transgender people have been with us throughout the history of humankind.

We usually take gender for granted. Most people identify with either 'she' or 'he' pronouns but these labels are not by any means the sum total of anyone's identity. Having a sense of identity is really important because it helps us to be resilient.

If you are someone who doesn't feel certain about your gender, life can be very stressful, and there may be times when you feel that you don't fit in anywhere.

Pronouns

Pronouns are especially important for transgender people, and it can be very distressing for someone to be mis-gendered. Some transgender people will want to be addressed with 'he'/'him'/'his' pronouns or 'she'/'her'/'hers', or also they/ their/ them. 'Ze' is even used by some individuals. This can be something that parents and extended family members struggle with – especially if a young person varies between terms or pronouns. It can be hard to get it right, but you will get the hang of it in time, with practice and persistence – and we know it really matters to trans young people. The important thing is to ask your child how they want to be addressed, and be honest when you make a mistake, correct yourself or allow yourself to be corrected, and continue to try. Most young people will recognise you are making an effort, showing them respect, and doing your best to meet their preferences.

Gender Dysphoria

You may hear doctors referring to gender dysphoria, or gender identity disorder (GID), gender incongruence or transgenderism, when they are diagnosing your child. These terms all refer to someone who does not feel their gender matches their biological sex. Questions around gender identity can emerge at any time. There is a wide range of reported experiences. Some individuals know from childhood that they feel mis-gendered, while others might not recognise this until adulthood. It might also be apparent to the parents from an early age.

Tavistock Clinic

This is England's NHS clinic for children experiencing difficulties in the development of their gender identity. The Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) is England's only NHS service for children and young people experiencing difficulties in the development of their gender identity. The service has main clinics in London and Leeds, as well as satellite clinics elsewhere across England in places like Exeter.

GIDS has a staged approach to supporting young people. Every young person is different and will be treated as an individual. If your child is referred to GIDS, first they will have a full psychosocial assessment, which is usually three to six appointments with two experts. They will work with your child, and family, to explore your child's understanding of their gender identity, and to talk about how their feelings may have changed over time, and how they might change in future.

Depending on your child's age and the issues they want to explore, a meeting can be arranged with a paediatric endocrinologist either for possible hormone blocking treatment, or to help determine whether or not your child has started puberty.

Hormone blocking is a physically reversible intervention: if your child stops taking the blocker their body will continue to develop as it was previously. However, the full psychological effects of the blocker, or whether it changes the course of adolescent brain development, are not completely known. Blockers give young people time to consider their options and to continue to explore their developing gender identity before making decisions about irreversible forms of treatment.

In some cases, cross-sex hormones, (oestrogen or testosterone) might be considered, but these can only be prescribed from age 16, and after your child has spent a minimum of 12 months on hormone blockers. Cross-sex hormones will cause some irreversible changes to the body. For example, oestrogen will cause the growth of breast tissues, and testosterone will cause the voice to break. Any decisions to prescribe cross-sex hormones will not just take into account your child's gender identity, but also their emotional wellbeing and physical health.

Socialisation and Gender

Those who don't conform to gender norms can struggle with internalised unhappiness, isolation, violence and bullying.

The prevalence of young people with gender identity issues who self-harm or experience suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide is disproportionately higher than the general population. After puberty over 50% of young people with gender dysphoria have self-harmed or attempted suicide. But there are things you can do to support your child.

Transgender young people frequently face stigma and discrimination, and can often experience significant issues round acceptance by their immediate or extended families. One in four transgender people have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives (Stonewall: LGBT in Britain, 2018)

There has been a lot of discussion in the media in recent years about transgender issues, with divided views. Some of this can be helpful: in bringing issues to the fore, for awareness-raising, encouraging greater equality, challenging discrimination, and enabling young people to find and identify peers who can offer support. On the down side, sensationalist tabloid reporting can promote negative stereotypes, and give a platform to transphobia (fear or dislike of people who identify as trans).

Social media can be a huge source of support for young people who are trans. There is a vibrant online trans community - offering support and sharing experiences, in particular around transitioning - moving from their assigned to their identified gender (either with or without medical intervention or treatment, such as hormone blockers, cross hormones, and/ or gender re-assignment surgery). This can include information on chest binding, using make-up, finding gender-neutral hairdressers etc.

Sexuality and Gender

Gender identity, in particular being transgender, can be misinterpreted as a sexual orientation - but this is not the case. Gender identity is not about sexual orientation, or who you are attracted to. People may identify as transgender and gay, transgender and bisexual or transgender and pansexual. The latter term is where someone may be attracted to anyone of any gender, including being gender fluid (moving between gender identities) or being genderless (having no identified gender designation.)

Boundaries

What is okay to say or ask? It can be insensitive and uncomfortable to ask very personal, intimate or intrusive questions - so ask if it's okay to ask, and respect the answer. Think about how you might feel if your parent asked you something deeply personal or intrusive.

Changing names

As well as changing pronouns, many trans young people pick a new name. It is common for people to want to change their name legally by deed poll, and children can do this with their parents' consent. This can be a complex process and is done through the Queen's Bench at the Family Courts/ Royal Courts of Justice. For a child under 18, it is usual to need a letter of endorsement from a medical professional who is involved in the young person's care and treatment. This will allow them to have their new name in medical records and legal documents.

Currently, a person cannot change their legal gender marker until they are 18, although the government are currently consulting on simplifying procedures.

Terminology	
MTF; FTM	Transitioning from male to female; transitioning from female to male.
Passing	This relates to how a trans person is seen, accepted or recognised in their new gender identity. This can be especially important to young people and avoids the distress of mis-gendering (where they are referred to/addressed as their previously assigned gender).
Stealth	This is where a trans person chooses not to disclose his or her trans status to others.
Gender questioning	Where a person is in the process of exploring their gender identity
Intersex	A person whose genitalia, reproductive organs, chromosomal or hormonal makeup cannot be clearly defined as female or male and may have features of both
Cis	A cis person identifies as the same gender they were assigned at birth.
Non binary	Challenges the idea that there are only two genders which are opposites i.e. male and female
Gender dysphoria	The clinical diagnosis for transsexualism (transsexualism refers to transgender adults)
Gender queer	A person who has a gender identity other than male or female: it includes being both genders, neither gender, or something else
Gender fluid	This is where a person does not feel that their gender is a single, static thing; they may move between feeling male and female at different times, or feel that they have both/ all genders, or none.
Transitioning	Moving from an assigned gender identity to the opposite gender identity – see MTF; FTM

What can help? What to do next

These are some things that can make a difference:

1. Your acceptance and support is vital for your child if they are confused about, or coming to terms with their gender-identity. Fear of negative judgement and rejection can be huge obstacles in your child seeking support.
2. Find out as much as you can about the issues, including support in services, in school and in the community. You may need to be their advocate in talking to school, college or health professionals, if and when the time is right.
3. Your child may be gender questioning. This doesn't necessarily mean that they are trans, but they may be. It is a journey of discovery and expression; go at their pace and try to help them as much as you can.
4. Listen to your inner voice – parents often 'know' about their child's gender-identity before a discussion has ever been had.
5. Communication is everything; being open-minded is the best approach. They are still your child.
6. Be patient if they don't want to talk about it and be supportive when they are ready.
7. It's understandable to feel upset, anxious, scared and experience a sense of loss. Being honest about that is really important.
8. Share experiences with other families in the same situation. There are organisations who can help you with this.
9. You don't need to learn all the terms and language – your child will steer you, and it's a good opportunity to show your support in being receptive to what they say.
10. Be alert for signs of withdrawal, depression, self-harm or suicidal thoughts. If you notice any of these behaviours tell your child that you are there for them, and seek support from your GP.

"I just wanted to do all I could to help and support my son - and while at first I just didn't have the right words, I knew he needed me by his side. His journey hasn't been easy but we are finding our way. We waited a long time to access a gender identity service, more than two years to get onto hormone blockers, it's been harder than it needed to be." (parent)

"The most important thing is that we have been able to understand each other's point of view. He understands that this has been a big deal for me and I know it's been an even bigger deal for him. We help each other, we are both learning. To start with, he didn't want to go on this journey, but he's coming round to that, and he can see how far he has come. He's got a lot to be proud of" (parent)

Resources

All resources listed on this sheet are for information only. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, YoungMinds cannot accept responsibility for changes to details made by other organisations.

<p>Mermaids http://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk Support for young people (up to 19yrs) with gender identity issues, and their families. Teens Forum and Parents Forum via the website. Email: info@mermaidsuk.org.uk Phone: 0844 334 0550 (09:00 – 21:00) Mob only: 0344 334 0550 (09:00 – 21:00)</p>	<p>Pink Therapy www.pinktherapy.com UK's largest independent therapy organisation working with gender and sexual diversity clients</p>
<p>Gendered Intelligence www.genderedintelligence.co.uk Working with the trans community, particularly specialising in supporting young trans people aged 8-25. Includes resources for trans and gender questioning young people, and their families. Office: 0207 832 5848 (not a helpline)</p>	<p>Brook www.brook.org.uk Free, confidential information on sexual health for under 25s. Includes some information on gender identity Text service: 07717 989 023 (Mon-Fri 09:00 – 15:00)</p>
<p>Galop www.galop.co.uk LGBT and anti-violence charity, incl. trans advocacy service. National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline runs a tran specific service, staffed by trans members of the team. 0800 999 5428 Tuesdays 13:00 to 17:00</p>	<p>Stonewall www.youngstonewall.org.uk/ Information and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people. Helpline: 020 7593 1850 (Mon-Fri 09:30-17:30)</p>
<p> MindEd <i>e-learning to support young healthy minds</i> www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html MindEd for families is a website where you can hear about other parents' experiences and find clear, helpful guidance on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing</p>	<p>CRISIS TEXT LINE </p> <p>If you, or someone you are caring for, is experiencing a mental health crisis, you can text the YoungMinds Crisis Messenger for free, 24/7 support. Text YM to 85258. Texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus. This service is powered by our trusted partner, Crisis Text Line.</p>