

Family Guide: Gender and Gender Identity

Gender development is a normal process for all children. Some children will exhibit variations—similar to all areas of human health and behavior. However, all children need support, love, and care from family, school, and society, which fosters growth into happy and healthy adults (Healthy Children).

Parents can support healthy gender identity development by loving and accepting their children through their developmental stages. Unconditional support will reduce the feelings of shame that may occur when a child isn't able to express their gender identity.

Important Terms

Sex at birth: When children are born, sex is assigned based on external genitalia. A child who has a penis is said to be male. A child who has a vulva is said to be female.

Gender identity: Gender identity is “who you know yourself to be.” It is important to know that gender identity exists on a spectrum. A person’s gender identity can be masculine, feminine, or other.

Gender expression: This is how you express your gender to others, whether through behavior, clothing, hairstyle, the name you choose to go by, etc.



Gender Identity Development at Each Age

Infancy

- Children observe messages about gender from adults’ appearances, activities, and behaviors.

18 to 24 Months

- Toddlers begin to define gender, using messages from many sources. As they develop a sense of self, toddlers look for patterns in their homes and early care settings. Gender is one way to understand group belonging, which is important for secure development. ([Office of Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center](#))

Two to three years old

- At around two years old, children are aware of differences between boys and girls.
- Most children can identify themselves as a “boy” or “girl.” This term may or may not match the assigned sex at birth.
- Some children’s gender identity remains stable over their life, while others may alternate between identifying themselves as “boy” or “girl,” or even assume other gender identities at different times (sometimes even in the same day). This is normal and healthy. ([Caring for Kids](#))



Four to five years old

- Children become more aware of gender expectations or stereotypes as they grow older. For example, they may think that certain toys are only for girls or boys.
- Some children may express their gender very strongly. For example, a child might go through a stage of insisting on wearing a dress every day, or refusing to wear a dress even on special occasions.

(Caring for Kids)

Six to seven years old

- Many children begin to reduce outward expressions of gender as they feel more confident that others recognize their gender. For example, a girl may not feel that she has to wear a dress every day because she knows that others see her as a girl no matter what she wears.
- Children who feel their gender identity is different from the assigned sex at birth may experience increased social anxiety because they want to be like their peers, but realize they don't feel the same way.

(Caring for Kids)

Eight years old and older

- Pre-teens and teens continue to develop their gender identity through personal reflection and with input from their social environment, like peers, family, and friends.
- Some gender stereotype behaviors may appear. You may notice your teen or pre-teen making efforts to "play up" or "downplay" some of their body's physical changes.
- As puberty begins, some youth may realize that their gender identity is different from their assigned sex at birth.
- Because some children's gender identification may change, especially around puberty, families are encouraged to keep options open for their child.

(Caring for Kids)

Ways to Be Supportive

There are a variety of ways that parents can support their child through development, and engage them in healthy, developmentally appropriate ways about their gender expression and identity.

- Talk with your child about gender identity. As soon as your child is able to say words like “girl” and “boy,” they are beginning to understand gender.
- Ask questions! This is a great way to hear your child’s ideas about gender.
- Ask your child’s teachers how they support gender expression and what they teach about gender identity at school.
- Read books with your child that talk about many different ways to be a boy, a girl, or having another gender identity.
- If accessible, provide a variety of toys for your child to choose from, including baby dolls, toy vehicles, action figures, blocks, etc. Utilize books, puppets, and other toys to think through, act out, and challenge gender norms.
- Don’t pressure your child to change who they are.
- Be aware that a child who is worrying about gender may show signs of depression, anxiety, and poor concentration. They may not want to go to school. If you are concerned about your child’s emotional health, talk to your child’s family doctor, pediatrician, or other mental health professionals.
- Assuming your child’s gender expression is a form of rebellion or defiance can be harmful to them and to your relationship. Listen to them and ask questions about how they are feeling.
- Focus on what brings your child joy and security. A child living with supportive parents and caregivers is likely to be a happier child. Don’t try to shame or punish your child for their gender expression or identity.
- Connect with other families who have a gender-diverse child. This can help reduce any isolation you and your child might be experiencing. Look for an in-person or online support group.

- Don’t belittle or ridicule your child’s gender expression or allow others in your family to do so. Don’t prevent your child from expressing gender in public or at family activities to avoid it making you or someone else uncomfortable.
- Speak positively about your child to your child and to others. Show your admiration for your child’s identity and expression of it. (**Mayo Clinic**)

Resources

Local Resources

Dreams of Hope

www.dreamsofhope.org

Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation

hughlane.org

PERSAD Center

www.persadcenter.org

PFLAG Pittsburgh

pflagpgh.org

Pittsburgh Equality Center (Formerly GLCC)

www.pghequalitycenter.org

Project Silk

projectsilk.org

Proud Haven

www.proudhaven.org/resources

National Resources

GSA Network

gsanetwork.org

LGBT National Youth Talkline

www.glbthotline.org/youth-talkline

The Trevor Project

www.glbthotline.org/youth-talkline.html

To learn more, visit: tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources

