



## Understanding gender & gender diversity

Exploring many aspects of identity is a natural part of child and adolescent development. If your child is expressing different feelings about their gender identity, or showing an interest in exploring their gender identity, you may wonder if this is something that will pass or evolve over time.

Feeling confused about what to do or say, is completely normal for parents in this situation. It can help to learn more about gender diversity – here's a brief guide to understanding gender and gender diversity. We have produced this information from evidence-based research. The quotes in this information sheet come from participants in our own research studies.

### What is gender?

'Gender' is generally based on the sex assigned to a baby at birth. It's then reinforced through societal expectations, categorising people into either 'boy' or 'girl' based upon their behaviours, roles and physical appearance. Traditionally, the dominant view in western cultures is that there are only two genders (male and female) but our understanding of gender is evolving over time to realise that, for some people, gender is a spectrum.

Gender is part of our identity. It shapes who we know ourselves to be, and how we present ourselves and interact with others. Gender is internal and personally defined by each individual alone. For some people, their gender identity does not match their sex assigned at birth and these people may identify as transgender, gender diverse or non-binary.

### How is gender different to sex?

The concepts of 'gender' and 'sex' have historically been used interchangeably, but sex and gender are different.

'Sex' is determined by some aspects of our physical bodies (e.g. genitals, hormones and chromosomes). It is recorded on our birth certificates when we're born based on external sex characteristics/genitals. 'Cisgender' peoples' gender identity matches their sex. But sex and gender are not always linked. Just as our fingerprints are unique, everybody has their own individual combination of sex, gender, and sexuality.

■ ■ *It was a real challenge for me to make that jump but the major penny that dropped was that difference between biological sex and gender. When I learnt that gender was in the brain, that was the biggest turning point. (Mother of male, 12)*



## What does 'gender diverse' or 'trans/transgender' mean?

Some people feel that their gender is different to their sex recorded at birth. Others feel they are a mix of genders, or no gender at all. 'Gender diverse', 'transgender/trans', and 'non-binary' are terms used to describe people who do not fit neatly into their society's expectations of what it is to be male or female.

A child or teen who prefers to wear clothing traditionally worn by the opposite sex may just feel more comfortable in them. Some children may just prefer to play with toys traditionally associated with the opposite gender or behave in ways that aren't typically masculine or feminine. But for some it can be a deeper and more important way for them to express their gender identity. Children or teens who consistently and persistently insist that they are not the sex assigned at birth and may feel ongoing distress about it could be transgender, gender diverse or non-binary and it might be helpful to seek professional guidance and support.

## Gender dysphoria

Feelings of discomfort or distress about one's physical body in people who are gender diverse. It occurs when a person feels that their physical features (e.g. chest) do not align with a typical body for someone of the gender they feel internally or they experience certain events (e.g. wearing gendered clothing that doesn't fit with their sense of their gender identity).

### Some handy definitions:

#### Sex

The physical parts of our bodies related to reproduction, body development and regulation. Primary sex characteristics include genitals, hormones and chromosomes. Secondary sex characteristics start at puberty and include the growth of certain body areas, voice pitch, and body hair.

#### Gender assigned at birth

When we're born, our sex is recorded as male or female. We're usually expected to assume this as our gender, take on its accompanying behaviours and roles and become attracted to the opposite sex as we grow.

#### Gender identity

A person's 'gender identity' is their internal experience of their gender. A person's gender identity can be the same or different from the sex they were assigned at birth and it can also change over time.

#### Gender expression

'Gender expression' is how a person chooses to express themselves externally to others, through clothing, name, behaviour, voice, hair, pronouns and more. Gender expression may not match up to traditional ideas of being masculine or feminine, and may or may not match a person's sex or gender identity.



## Sexuality

'Sexuality' and 'sexual orientation' are terms that describe a person's sexual attraction to other people. There are several sexualities such as straight, gay, bisexual, and asexual. Sex, gender and sexuality are also not always linked. Sexuality is completely different to gender.

**“** *I absolutely love myself and the life I am creating because I know myself so well now. I am happy being trans, it's the world in which I have been born into that makes it difficult.* (Young person, 24)

## Why family support is important

Gender diverse people can lead happy, fulfilling lives when they are supported. But negative experiences like discrimination, stigma, bullying and rejection can cause many gender diverse people to have poor mental health and decreased wellbeing.

If any child is not well supported it can affect their ability to thrive and fully participate in life. Research shows that when gender diverse young people aren't supported it can increase the risk of mental health challenges. For example, in Trans Pathways, the 65.8% of gender diverse participants who reported a lack of family support also had higher rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts, harming themselves, risky behaviours, and other mental health diagnoses such as anxiety and depression than those who did not experience a lack of family support. Strong family support, a supportive school environment, positive social connections and, if wanted, timely access to gender-affirming health care can all protect against the risk of poor mental health outcomes.

As a parent, carer or guardian it may feel overwhelming to learn about how to best support a young person, but support is available to you as well. Many parents of gender diverse children who access family support services report feeling much more confident about how to support their children.

**“** I have learned so much, and have become a much more understanding and open-minded person, with the added bonus of realising how much I love my child and seeing how very brave he is. (Mother of male, 18)

**“** They have taught me so much about acceptance and about diversity. I have greater admiration for their courage and integrity than ever. (Father of agender child, 17)