

what you

# NEED TO KNOW about...

## Gender Identity and Diversity

For many people, the sex we are born with (designated at birth) is a good match for how we see ourselves on the inside. But for others, the sex and gender identity don't match at all. This could mean that:

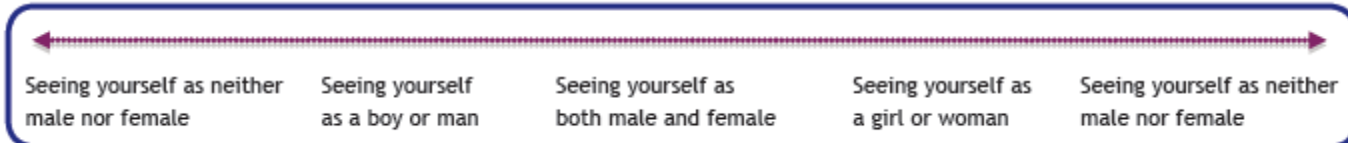
- A child who is born male at birth feels like a girl on the inside
- A child who is born female at birth feels like a boy on the inside
- A child or youth does not identify completely as either a boy or a girl

### Gender

While some people see gender as 'binary' (either you're male or female), others see it very differently. Another way to think about gender is as a *continuum* (a scale or a spectrum). The idea of a continuum is helpful because it includes people whose gender identity doesn't fall within the boundaries of either male or female.

**Remember:** sexual orientation (whom we're attracted to) is *not* the same thing as gender. For example, some transgender (trans) men are gay, and attracted to other men. Some trans women are lesbians, and are attracted to other women.

Someone's gender identity can be at any point along the continuum...



### Just to be clear, let's go over a few terms...

People who are transgender don't all feel the same way about themselves. Each person may feel a different level of comfort with their own feelings, or about the sex they were born with. Some people feel a lot of conflict, while others feel less. Some people have more difficulty with other people's reactions (social conflict) than with any conflict they feel inside. Others experience both social and internal conflict.

**Sex:** (or designated sex) is about how we understand our physical bodies at birth as being male or female (whether we're born with a penis or a vulva).

**Gender identity:** is the personal feeling of being, for example, a man or a woman. Some people don't identify as being either a man or a woman. They may feel that this 'either/or' system doesn't offer a complete description of who they are. Gender identity and sex usually 'match', but not always.



**"Sex is between the legs, while gender is between the ears."**

**Gender non-conforming (or Gender Queer):** describes a person who does not identify as a man or a woman.

**Transgender/Transsexual:** This describes people who don't conform or identify with the gender that goes with their sex at birth. It includes people who identify as transgender or transsexual. It also includes people who live *as the gender they feel inside*. They may alter their bodies with hormone therapy or surgery. This is so their bodies will match their gender identity. In this fact sheet, we'll use 'transgender' or 'TRANS' as umbrella terms.

**Two Spirit:** This is a reclaimed concept from First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. It refers to Aboriginal people who are born one sex, and fulfill roles across sex and gender lines including roles reserved for Two Spirit people. Some say they maintain balance by housing both the male and female spirit. Two Spirit people were considered to be a gift to the community. They were able to cross a range of genders, hold the balance, and were respected and honoured as visionaries, peacemakers and healers.

**Cross-Dresser (CD):** is someone who wears the clothing assigned by society to the "opposite" sex. People who are CD may or may not be transgender.

### How does gender identity develop?

Researchers have studied many possible ways gender identity develops, but there is no clear answer. The best answer we can give is that gender identity develops from many factors working together. You may be worried that your child's questions about gender are caused by something you did or didn't do. This is not the case. There is no evidence to suggest that parenting contributes to children becoming transgender (nor do other outside influences). Your child's gender identity is unique. He or she is just trying to express how they feel inside.

We don't choose our gender identity. Being transgendered or gender non-conforming is not a choice. But people's life situations can determine how free they feel to express their true gender identity.

### How common is it for people to be transgender or transsexual?

Older studies reported that transgender identities were rare, but recent studies show that they are more common. (Studies assess different things: for example, some report on the number of people who have completed gender reassignment surgery, while other studies report on the number of people who have changed the gender on their passport.) Telephone surveys in the US in 2010 indicated that 1 in 200 people were transgender. The numbers of transgender people appear to be increasing. It's not clear if this is because people are more comfortable coming forward, or if the increase is due to something else.

Unfortunately, people can experience discrimination and rejection if they are gender non-conforming, gender variant, or transgender. Much pain could be avoided if all transgender people were treated with the acceptance and respect that every person deserves.



## How do I know if my child or teen is transgendered?

Many boys and girls experiment with different gender behaviours as they are growing up. Some boys may try on girl's clothing, and girls may try on boy's clothing. Children and youth who are questioning their gender identity may experience mild to severe discomfort about the sex they were born with. Below is a list of feelings and behaviours that transgender children and youth may experience, to some degree.

### Boys who are transgender may:

- Express unhappiness at being a boy
- Express the wish "to be" a girl, and say they will grow up to be a woman
- Prefer dressing in girls' clothes (like frilly underwear, or a girl's bathing suit)
- Avoid undressing in public change rooms
- Avoid public washrooms
- Play "stereotypical" girls' games and hobbies (for example, playing with dolls)
- Be more comfortable in the company of girls
- Avoid "rough-and-tumble" play and competitive sports
- Have little interest in cars and trucks
- Insist on sitting to urinate
- Pretend not to have a penis by pushing it in between their legs
- Show confusion, or stress over their penis
- Choose a female avatar for computer games or a feminine email user name

On the other hand, some transgender boys work really hard to prove they are a boy. They may try to get involved in typically masculine activities, like rough sports.

### Girls who are transgender may:

- Want to be "male"
- Prefer boy's clothing and short hair, to the point where others may mistake the girl for a boy
- Prefer to be with boys and to play "boy's games"
- Show less interest in feminine activities
- Avoid undressing in public change rooms
- Avoid public washrooms
- Choose a male avatar for computer games, or a masculine email user name
- Show confusion or stress over her vulva or vagina (or breasts when they begin to develop)
- Insist that one day she will grow up to be a man

These behaviours do not always continue in very young boys or girls. If youth begin to or still are questioning their gender identity in the teen years, it is more likely that they will maintain a transgender identity. Or that they will remain gender non-conforming. Some children and youth may not be able to express their struggle in words, or feel safe or comfortable describing it. If youth do not feel supported by family, they may stop expressing their thoughts and feelings ('closeting' themselves).

**What should we do if we think our child or teen is questioning gender identity or is transgender?**

Many transgender children and youth hide their questions and feelings about their gender identity from family. They fear being rejected. They fear losing their family's love and support. Our society is not very accepting of transgender. This can contribute to emotional problems like depression, anxiety and feelings of isolation. Sometimes these feelings are signs that youth are struggling with transgender identity. Other signs may be behaviours like skipping school or problems in school.

If you think your child is struggling with gender identity, listen with care. Your child or teen needs your love and support more than ever. If you're finding this difficult, review the resources list at the end of this fact sheet. They will give more information about support.

**Why does 'Gender Identity Disorder' exist as a medical diagnosis?**

Being transgender or gender non-conforming is not a mental illness. However, Gender Identity Disorder (GID) is the medical term that describes those who struggle with or question their gender identity. It's officially 'in the books' as a mental disorder. Gender Identity Disorder may also be referred to as Gender Dysphoria, Gender Incongruence, or Transgenderism. We know that people who are gender non-conforming or transgender can live happy, healthy and productive lives if they have the love and support everyone needs.

Many people feel that having gender identity in the official manual of mental disorders implies that there is something wrong with being transgender. There is nothing wrong with being transgender or gender non-conforming. But right now, a diagnosis of GID allows access to medical treatments or surgery.

Treatment involves accepting a person's gender identity in a way that makes sense to that person. It might mean supportive counselling. This could help youth navigate their unique gender identity, and help their families accept it. This process lets people work through any messages they've internalized about what being transgender means. It's important to note that many of the struggles people have are the result of our society's transphobia. Transphobia has a large and negative impact on mental health. Treatment might also mean medical therapies to help a person's body match how they see themselves.

**How do we help gender non-conforming or transgendered children and youth?**

## 1. Support

If you have just recently learned that your child or teen is questioning gender identity, you may feel overwhelmed. You may be upset. You might not know what to do. Remember that your child or teen was likely very worried about how you would react. Your child needs your love and reassurance more than ever. Children and youth need to hear that being transgender does not make you love them any less.

It is important to use the name your child or teen prefers, as well as the preferred pronoun (he or she). This will mean a lot to your child or teen. You may need to get support for yourself. This can help you become a strong support for your child or teen.

## 2. Counselling

Children, youth and families can benefit from supportive counselling or psychotherapy. The goal of counselling is to support youth and their families as they adjust. Counselling can help guide youth and families along the journey of gender identity consolidation. It supports them as they face the challenges they are likely to encounter. Youth and families will also learn about the wide range of other treatment options. This helps them make well informed decisions.



## 3. Hormone therapies

Pediatric endocrinologists who are experienced in treating transgendered adolescents (up to age 18) may prescribe hormone blockers. These are medications that suppress the physical changes of puberty. This treatment is only given to adolescents who:

- Meet gender reassignment eligibility and readiness criteria
- Have started to show physical signs of puberty (confirmed by hormone blood tests)

Hormone blockers are safe. They have been well tested. The effects are temporary. This means that if the youth stops taking them, physical changes of puberty begin again.



At age 16, cross-sex hormone therapy can begin. The timing is important. It depends on the teen's readiness and support system. Unnecessary delays or moving ahead too soon should be avoided. They increase the chance of psychological or social problems later on. Physical outcomes may be less favourable if cross sex hormone therapy is delayed until adulthood. A pediatric endocrinologist should begin any hormone therapy for transgendered youth, and monitor them.

Surgeons do *not* perform gender reassignment surgeries on youth under 18. When youth reach adulthood, they can be referred to adult services.

### For adults

Many transgender men and women live as the gender with which they identify. Some, but not all, have medical treatments to change their bodies (to make them appear like the gender with which they identify). Some transgender people look *androgynous* (neither male nor female) all their lives. Some may not live full time as their identified gender. They may only express their identified gender when it's safe.

Transgendered adults can consider treatment options, like:

- Supportive counselling
- Hormone replacement therapy
- Sex reassignment surgery (to change the body to better match a person's gender identity)

**What happens to transgender children and youth when they grow older?**

Transgender children and youth are like any other children and youth. How they do in life depends on whether they are supported by family and friends, or rejected for who they are.

Transgender children and youth who are supported have the best chance of growing up to be happy, productive adults. People do far better when they are loved, supported and can express their true selves. On the other hand, transgender people are likely to have future problems if they stay "closeted" because of shame and fear of rejection. Transphobia can keep people in the closet. It keeps them from expressing their true selves.

Sometimes this can lead to depression, substance abuse and even suicide. People who come out can still experience these struggles.

## Gender Assignment in Canadian Law

To change the provincial gender marker you must:

- Have received sex reassignment surgery (SRS)
- Provide two letters of proof from doctors (or other qualified medical practitioners) confirming you have met standards for SRS
  - Ideally, one of the two is the surgeon who performed the surgery
- Have a revised birth certificate

To change your legal name you must:

- Be at least 19 years of age
  - If you are under 19, a parent or guardian must apply for you
- Have been born in Nova Scotia or lived there for at least one year
- Provide finger prints and a criminal records check

Note: Changing all legal documents to a new name and new gender is costly. If possible, try to change your name and gender marker at the same time. This way you will avoid paying all fees twice.

Visit [www.cdha.nshealth.ca/system/.../trans-health-guide-translegal.pdf](http://www.cdha.nshealth.ca/system/.../trans-health-guide-translegal.pdf) for more information on legal transition.

### Where to get support

- In a crisis? Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team, 902-429-8167 or toll-free, 1-888-429-8167
- To find a psychologist in Nova Scotia, Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia, 902-422-9183, [www.apns.ca](http://www.apns.ca)
- PFLAG Canada, [www.pflagcanada.ca](http://www.pflagcanada.ca)
- Transfamily Nova Scotia, 902-431-8506, or email [transfamily@eastlink.ca](mailto:transfamily@eastlink.ca)
- Nova Scotia Rainbow Action Project, [www.nsrp.ca](http://www.nsrp.ca)
- Pride Health, [www.cdha.nshealth.ca/pridehealth](http://www.cdha.nshealth.ca/pridehealth)
- Human Rights Campaign Foundation, [www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org)
- Youth Project, [www.youthproject.ns.ca](http://www.youthproject.ns.ca)
- Alter Heros, [www.alterheros.com](http://www.alterheros.com)
- MyGSA, [www.mygsa.ca](http://www.mygsa.ca)
- Gender Creative Kids, [www.gendercreativekids.ca](http://www.gendercreativekids.ca)
- Gender Spectrum, [www.genderspectrum.org](http://www.genderspectrum.org)

### Books

- Transitions of the Heart: Stories of Love, Struggle, and Acceptance by Mothers of Transgender and Gender Variant Children by Rachel Pepper, 2012
- The Boy with Pink Hair by Perez Hilton
- It's Okay to be Different by Todd Parr
- We're Different, We're the Same by Bobbi Kates & Joe Mathieu
- Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals by Stephanie A. Brill & Rachel Pepper, 2008
- Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Health Gender-Non Conforming Children by Diane Ehrensaft (2011)
- True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism - for Families, Friends, Coworkers, and Helping Professionals by Mildred Brown
- Why Don't You Tell Them I'm a Boy? Raising a Gender-Nonconforming Child. A mother's experience with raising a transgender (FtM) son. Available online at [www.safeschoolscoalition.org/whydoutyoutellthem.pdf](http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/whydoutyoutellthem.pdf)

### Children's Fiction

- Elena's Serenade by Campbell Geeslin
- The Only Boy in Ballet Class by Denise Gruska
- Are You a Boy or a Girl? by Karleen Pendleton Jiménez
- The Story of Ferdinand by Munro Leaf
- A Fire Engine for Ruthie by Leslea Newman

### Children's Non-Fiction

- No girls allowed: Tales of Daring Women Dressed as Men for Love, Freedom and Adventure by Susan Hughes
- Rough, Tough Charley by Verla Kay
- Mighty Jackie: The Strikeout Queen by Marissa Moss

### Children/Family Interest Videos

- No Dumb Questions: a Documentary Film by Melissa Regan, [www.newday.com](http://www.newday.com)

### Teen Fiction

- Boy2Girl by Terence Blacker (for younger teens)
- My Last Skirt: The Story of Jennie Hodgers, Union Soldier by Lynda Durrant (Age 12 and up)
- Fox Bunny Funny by Andy Hartzell
- Luna by Julie Anne Peters
- What Happened to Lani Garver by Carol Plum-Ucci

### Teen Non-Fiction

- Boy v. Girl? How Gender Shapes Who We Are, What We Want and How We Get Along by George Abrahams
- Becoming: Young Ideas on Gender, Identity and Sexuality by Diane Anderson-Minshall and Gina de Vries
- Hello, Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws by Kate Bornstein

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**Disclaimer:** Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.



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